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Abstract. This article describes some of the psychological factors that might attenuate unadaptive anxieties about the threat of bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

Recent journalistic reports from Europe describe individual anxieties towards bovine spongiform encephalopathy-- aka mad cow disease--alone and as a precursor for Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. These anxieties may have adaptive features leading to prudent measures such as the employment of valid diagnostic procedures for animals; culling from herds; proscriptions and prescriptions for animal feed; and accountability for government officials to develop, implement, and evaluate relevant policies. However, these anxieties also can lead to social panic with unadaptive features that can significantly harm beef and beef-related industries, unreasonably restrict diets, and lead to unnecessary distrust of governments and weakening of the rule of law.

Psychological research on judgment of uncertainty and social cognition of threat provide some suggestions for public affairs officers and media consultants seeking to minimize unadaptive anxieties related to mad cow disease. Greening and Chandler (1997) have found that publicly providing higher or lower estimates of threat base rates may have comparable effects on estimates of risk from the threat. They also have found that belief in having some degree of control over the threat becoming actualized and in having skill in effecting that which results in control over the threat may decrease estimates of risk from the threat. Judgments about the alternatives affording control may be psychologically stressful themselves, however (cf. Morrison, Neufeld & Lefebvre, 1989). Keren and Gerritsen (1999) have found that the avoidance of ambiguity is a motivating factor in developing estimates of the risk from a threat--even in situations wherein ambiguity would lead to superior consequences for the people involved. They also have found that the perceived informativeness of information will be a significant factor in perceptions of ambiguity that will, in turn, affect estimates of risk. Afifi and Burgoon (2000) have found that perceptions of the attractiveness of violators--in the context of the present article, farmers or government officials who are believed to have violated the general welfare by contributing to consequences furthering mad cow disease--are dependent on how congruent the violations are with expectations about the violators before the violations occurred. Tversky and Fox (1995) have found that individuals tend to overweigh low probabilities and underweigh high probabilities of threat in choices about risk. In choices about uncertainty, individuals will be more affected by information that seems to turn impossibility to possibility or possibility into certainty than just making a possibility more or less likely. McKenzie (1998) has shown how perceptions of alternatives to deal with threat can be modified based on how the threat itself is represented through information imparted by others. Finally, Brase, Comides, and Tooby (1998) have shown that individuals systematically upgrade or degrade accurate estimates under uncertainty when focused on the frequency of an event instead of that event's probability.

So, there is much data over which to mull, analyze, and develop information management policies. In fact, psychologists can not only help inform public officials about how to portray threat, but also be informed by systematically analyzing "natural experiments" such as those involving information management activities and consequences concerning mad cow disease in Europe. (See Afifi, W.A., &

Burgoon, J.K. (2000). The impact of violations on uncertainty and the consequences for attractiveness. Human Communication Research, 26, 203-2233; Brase, G.L., Cosmides, L., & Tooby, J. (1998). Individuation, counting, and statistical inference: The role of frequency and whole-object representations in judgment under uncertainty. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 127, 3-21; Daley, S. (December 1, 2000). Mad cow disease panicking Europe as incidents rise. The New York Times, pp. A1; A10; Greening, L., & Chandler, C.C. (1997). Why it can't happen to me: The base rate matters, but overestimating skill leads to underestimated risk. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 27, 760-780; Keren, G., & Gerritsen, L.E.M. (1999). On the robustness and possible accounts of ambiguity aversion. Acta Psychologica, 103, 149-172; McKenzie, C.R.M. (1998). Taking into account the strength of an alternative hypothesis. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 24, 771-792; Morrison, M.S., Neufeld, R.W., & Lefebvre, L.A. (1989). "The economy of probabilistic stress: Interplay of controlling activity and threat reduction": Erratum. British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology, 42, 280; Tversky, A., & Fox, C.R. (1995). Weighing risk and uncertainty. Psychological Review, 102, 269-283.) (Keywords: Mad Cow Disease, Threat, Uncertainty.)