

# **Risk Perception**

**Dr Simon Gerrard**

Centre for Environmental Risk,  
University of East Anglia, Norwich

This presentation will report on a detailed empirical study on how public attitudes towards science, risk and forms of governance interact. A major quantitative UK national survey (n=1,547) was conducted in summer 2002 jointly by the University of East Anglia and MORI as part of the Programme on Understanding Risk funded by the Leverhulme Trust and the ESRC.

The Programme on Understanding Risk focuses on five key areas: climate change, radioactive waste, GM food, genetic testing and information technology. Within the national survey the information technology element focused specifically on mobile phones. This presentation will focus primarily on responses from the subset (n=319) of participants asked detailed questions about their attitudes towards mobile telecommunications technologies. However, where appropriate, comparisons will be made to the other cases.

The study provides evidence on public trust in science and scientific procedures as well as reporting on perceptions of governmental competence. In the context of mobile phones these issues are particularly relevant as scientific uncertainty about potential health effects remains high and the technology roll-out continues apace.

Preliminary results show that health is a major concern for most people. Although not the top of participants' concerns, not surprisingly people expressed negative feelings towards the potential health impacts of radiation from mobile phones. However, participants were able to recognise the benefits of the technology which somewhat influenced their judgements on the overall acceptability of the risks from mobile phones. In this case there was clear evidence of mixed, rather than indifferent, feelings.

The survey also explored the public's attitude to risk regulation. As with all the risks investigated, confidence in government's ability to regulate risks from mobile phones is low and people expressed a desire to see organisations independent from government and industry regulating the risks.

There is also evidence that the government's efforts to communicate risk are perceived as not wholly successful. This raises important questions for government about its strategies for designing, delivering and evaluating risk communication about mobile phones and base stations.