Who Takes Risks?

July 25, 2011

It’s a common belief that women take fewer risks than men, and that adolescents always plunge in headlong without considering the consequences. But the reality of who takes risks when is actually a bit more complicated, according to the authors of a new paper which will be published in the August issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. Adolescents can be as cool-headed as anyone, and in some realms, women take more risks than men.

A lot of what psychologists know about risk-taking comes from lab studies where people are asked to choose between a guaranteed amount of money or a gamble for a larger amount. But that kind of decision isn’t the same as deciding whether you’re going to speed on the way home from work, wear a condom, or go bungee jumping. Research in the last 10 years or so has found that the way people choose to take risks in one domain doesn’t necessarily hold in other domains.

“The typical view is that women take less risks than men, that it starts early in childhood, in all cultures, and so on,” says Bernd Figner of Columbia University and the University of Amsterdam, who cowrote the paper with Elke Weber of Columbia University. The truth is more complicated. Men are willing to take more risks in finances. But women take more social risks—a category that includes things like starting a new career in your mid-thirties or speaking your mind about an unpopular issue in a meeting at work.

It seems that this difference is because men and women perceive risks differently. That difference in perception may be partly because of how familiar they are with different situations, Figner says. “If you have more experience with a risky situation, you may perceive it as less risky.” Differences in how boys and girls encounter the world as they’re growing up may make them more comfortable with different kinds of risks.

Adolescents are known for risky behavior. But in lab tests, when they’re called on to think coolly about a situation, psychological scientists have found that adolescents are just as cautious as adults and children. The difference between the lab and the real world, Figner says, is partly the extent to which they involve emotion. In an experiment where adolescents’ emotions got triggered strongly (with a gambling task in which they made stepwise decisions of increasing risk and got immediate feedback on how good or bad they were doing, a situation much closer to real-world incremental or dynamic risk decisions), they looked very different from children and adults and took bigger risks, just as observed in real world settings.

Emotion can affect decisions about risk-taking in all age groups, not just adolescents, Figner says. And the emotion doesn’t necessarily have to be triggered from the decision situation itself even, for example. if you’re angry about an argument, you might later drive too fast on the highway.

“Ultimately we would like to provide knowledge with our research that people can use to make decisions that are more beneficial for them in the long term," Figner says. The goal isn't to avoid risk, of course—stepping out the front door in the morning increases your chance of getting run over by a bus. But by understanding when and how people decide to take risks, he hopes to help people make risky decisions that they won't regret, either immediately after they have made them, or years later.