

Do men take too many risks in relation to the environment and covid-19?

Opinion / Social psychology / Health psychology

Written By John Barry



I had a conversation with someone a few months ago about men's relative reluctance, compared to women, to take part in environmental activities such as [recycling](#). She said that two explanations could be toxic masculinity and male privilege:

"Some guys say recycling makes them look gay, so they don't recycle" she told me.

"Right..." I said, my heart sinking like an oil tanker. "Well that sounds like something only a fairly young guy would say, and I would suggest that this opinion doesn't generalise to all men. At all".

I'm not sure how convinced she was by anything I said, but in this article I suggest a few of the reasons men might be inclined to take more risks than women.

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Men have evolved to deal with risk

There is a range of [evidence](#) that humans have evolved gender differences in risk taking, such as that men avoid conflict and danger less than women do, and develop fewer threat-based clinical conditions, such as phobias. Whereas it makes sense in evolutionary terms for women to adopt a [“staying alive”](#) strategy to keep safe during pregnancy and childcare years, male risk-taking makes sense in terms of the evolved [male gender role](#).

According to this evolutionary hypothesis, men have evolved to be more tolerant of risk because of the imperatives to protect their family and community, which entail a risk of combat. Secondly, being the provider means incurring the risk of hunting or other dangerous work. Thirdly, men need to be able to control feelings of anxiety during any of the risky processes of protecting and providing. Men who are better at handling risk have a better chance of success in mating competition, even though they reduce their own personal survival because of risky behaviour.

Young men are more likely to take risks in general, but this doesn't mean they will take stupid risks for no reason, even if the reason (e.g. impressing peers, 'shits and giggles', etc) seems trivial to those outside their peer group.

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Estimating risk is risky business

You might think that estimating risk is just a matter of statistical computations of probabilities, base rates etc. But this type of assessment is [not as objective](#) as you might think, as evidenced by the fact that two sets of experts can look at the same data and completely [disagree about the level of risk](#) implied.

So let's make risk estimates a bit more simple. Imagine that we knew that a stray planet was going to collide with us in a year's time, and people could look up at the sky every day and see the planet getting bigger and bigger as it approached the Earth. Most likely, risk estimates would converge. How many climate sceptics would suddenly believe in saving the Earth?

By the same token, nobody wants their environment to be polluted and nobody wants to see wildlife on the planet Earth die, yet there seems to be an assumption that anyone who doesn't believe in environmentalism is [in denial](#) that risks to the environment exist. But perhaps the problem isn't denial, it's that not everyone is convinced of the arguments. In the absence of a stray planet growing bigger each day in the sky, a pretty convincing case needs to be made by the environmentalists - definitely something better than 'male privilege is destroying the rain forests'.

I would suggest too that offering concrete (no pun intended) solutions might help, so that people can see the actual results of their actions. My guess is that if a canal was filled with trash, you could mobilise a group of local men to help clean it out without too much trouble. But trying to convince someone that they need to stop driving their car in order to prevent the death of penguins who live 10 thousand miles away... that's a harder case to sell.

Men on average tend to be more [solution-focused](#) than women, and it will help to make a convincing case that there is a problem, and a convincing case for how to fix it. For example, if a man takes the view that [climate change is not man-made](#), then he might be less convinced that solutions are under the control of mankind. Or if he sees the problems as man-made but caused mainly by pollution from other countries, this will also be a disincentive to direct action, though might lead to voting for political action against the polluting behaviour from those countries.

But risk-taking is even more complex than estimating the risk correctly and knowing what to do about it. Let's say we are sure we have made the correct estimate of risk; now if we tell others that something is very risky, they are less likely to do it, correct? Not necessarily: a recent study found that informing men about covid risk can in some cases backfire and [increase their tendency to take risks](#). That's confusing, but is the explanation toxic masculinity?

Men have been accused for the past two years of taking too many risks when it comes to protection against covid-19, and – predictably – [‘toxic masculinity’ is suggested as the cause](#).

Is shaming men the best way to motivate them?

There are lots of turn-offs for men when it comes to discussions about health and environmental behaviour. For a start, there is often a lot of moralising, along the lines of ‘people who don't agree with me are bad / stupid / toxic’ etc. But [toxic masculinity](#) and [male privilege](#) are insulting terms, perhaps the equivalent of calling a woman ‘hysterical’ for worrying too much about an issue. It could also be that because [women tend to be more ‘agreeable’](#) than men are, they are more likely to go along with ideas that most people seem to support, such as environmentalism.

My guess is that a lot of men just stop listening when the patronising gender-based accusations start flying in from those occupying the moral high ground. When a question of risk becomes a moral issue, then rationality goes out the window, and compliance grabs his car keys and walks out the door to go for a long drive.

But really it is difficult for any of us to know what the true risk of something is, and we are often relying on others for information. The information might be too complex to understand, and it might also be [misleading](#). Men have been accused for the past two years of [taking too many risks](#) when it comes to protection against covid-19, and – predictably – [‘toxic masculinity’ is suggested as the cause](#). But we are now starting to find out that maybe [covid-19 wasn't such a fatal risk](#) after all, in which case, perhaps men weren't so terribly wrong to be more tolerant of such risk.

Time will tell, but perhaps those of us who are taking vaccines which were developed at “warp speed”, and those [advocating tough lockdowns](#) which have significant consequences for [mental health](#) and the economy, are the ones who are taking the greatest potential risks. In a complex world, consequences of actions – even those motivated by the best of intentions – are not easy to predict. For example, there is some evidence that [boys aged 12-15 are at increased risk](#) of adverse reactions from the Pfizer/BioNTech covid vaccine, and who among us can predict other unintended consequences in the longer term of attempts to reduce risk.

A few days ago an environmental scientist said on the *Good Morning Britain* TV show that people shouldn't use conservatories because they contribute to global warming. This might be good advice, but she delivered it on TV live from the comfort of [her conservatory](#). This could be the best example of ‘people in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones’ you will ever find, and a good opportunity to consider that we all should be careful when we advise others about the risks we think they are taking, because we might be taking even greater risks ourselves.

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