

Why women hate snakes

By Kevin Lewis, Globe Correspondent | September 13, 2009

One of the classic stereotypes about women is that they're acutely terrified by snakes and spiders. Indeed, it has been found that women are four times more likely to suffer from these phobias, but there is ostensibly no gender difference for phobias related to modern-day life (e.g., injections, flying). What is the origin of this disparity? To find out, a psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University conducted experiments on 11-month-old infants. Although infants of both genders looked at isolated pictures of snakes, spiders, flowers, or mushrooms for about the same amount of time, girls looked at a picture of a snake or spider much longer than boys after first seeing a picture of a snake or spider paired with a picture of a fearful face. Because there was no such effect with pictures of flowers or mushrooms, the authors suggest that females are born with a "perceptual template that specifies the structure of snakes as well as spiders," and speculate that it is a disposition that may have evolved to safeguard offspring.

Rakison, D., "Does Women's Greater Fear of Snakes and Spiders Originate in Infancy?" Evolution and Human Behavior (forthcoming).

Worse than fired

No one wants to be laid off. It can be hard to find another job, especially with comparable wages and benefits and especially in the midst of a recession. Worse, economists have now shown that layoffs not only impact your earnings but also bring a significantly higher risk of death. Using unemployment insurance records from Pennsylvania and mortality records from the Social Security Administration, the economists tracked the employment, earnings, and longevity of men who had worked for the same employer during the 1970s, only to find themselves laid off in the early-to-mid-1980s. Compared with men who weren't laid off, the men who had been laid off experienced a 50 to 100 percent increase in the risk of death in the years immediately after being laid off. This effect tailed off over time but was significant enough that a middle-aged man saw his expected lifespan drop by 1 to 1 ½ years.

Sullivan, D. & von Wachter, T., "Job Displacement and Mortality: An Analysis Using Administrative Data," Quarterly Journal of Economics (August 2009).

Rich, thin, and snacking away

Snacking is widely assumed to be a bad habit, but a new analysis by an economist at the University of Texas suggests that it's more characteristic of the well-to-do. Although most people say that they don't snack much, it's more common in people who work, earn a higher hourly wage, and are more educated. Moreover, people who spread out their food consumption and eating time over more meals and/or snacking sessions are less overweight, report better health, and spend less on food. So perhaps the best nutrition advice is simply to eat healthy food, and not to worry about how often you eat it.

Hamermesh, D., "Grazing, Goods and Girth: Determinants and Effects," National Bureau of Economic Research (August 2009).

How recessions shape beliefs

One legacy of the current recession is that we may spend decades digging out from under a mountain of debt. Another legacy that may endure for decades is psychological. Economists have found that the economic conditions that people experienced in early adulthood - when beliefs are most malleable - have an influence on attitudes later in life. Looking at survey data going back to the 1970s, the researchers found that people who experienced recessions in early adulthood are more likely to believe that luck determines success and to support government intervention. At the same time, though, they are less confident in institutions. The interesting thing about this last result is that it ended up canceling any effect on people's overall political affiliation: people were pushed to the left on economic policy but were pushed to the right because of greater mistrust of government.

Giuliano, P. & Spilimbergo, A., "Growing Up in a Recession: Beliefs and the Macroeconomy," National Bureau of Economic Research (September 2009).

Do you have a tough-guy face?

You can tell if a man is aggressive just by looking at his face. That's the conclusion of research by psychologists, who found that men with a higher ratio of face width to height were more likely to be aggressive. In addition, people who were shown pictures of these faces appear to be subconsciously aware of this association, because they rated such faces as more aggressive, even after seeing the faces for only a split second. This may be why people lower their brow and raise their upper lip to express anger - essentially amplifying the facial width-to-height ratio. Of course, just because a man has a more aggressive-looking face doesn't necessarily mean he is aggressive, just that it is more likely. One intriguing twist: men with aggressive-looking faces may be conditioned to be more aggressive if everyone prejudices them, and acts accordingly.

Carré, J. et al., "Facial Structure Is a Reliable Cue of Aggressive Behavior," Psychological Science (forthcoming).

Kevin Lewis is an Ideas columnist. He can be reached at kevin.lewis.ideas@gmail.com. ■

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