

Books of The Times

On the Survival of the Not-So-Fit Risk Takers

By DANIEL GOLEMAN

Consider the predicament of Melvin Konner, who confesses to guzzling coffee and gobbling Oreo cookies as he sits writing a book. That book, "The Paleolithic Prescription," urged its readers to take better care of themselves by following a health regimen modeled on that of prehistoric man.

"I could almost feel the fat from the cookies sinking into the arteries of my brain, the coffee laying the groundwork for future cardiac arrhythmias," he writes in "Why the Reckless Survive," a collection of Dr. Konner's enchanting essays on the vagaries of human nature.

In this essay, he ponders just why we can't follow our own good advice, and why as a species we are so often muddled in our thinking about risks, ignoring some and exaggerating others. For example, we worry over the possibility of a nuclear accident or a plane crash yet blithely ride a bicycle helmetless, an act that mortality statistics show to be far more life-threatening. Likewise, those who tremble at lightning but calmly light a cigarette ignore the odds: The chances of being struck by lightning are less than one in a million, while deaths linked to cigarettes amount to three jumbo jets crashing day after day. And most of those troubled by the rising rate of urban homicide are among the least likely to be slain.

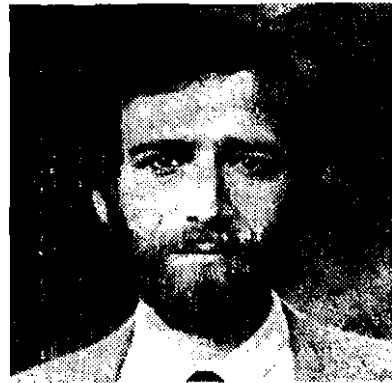
The point is that people seem largely oblivious to the actual hierarchy of dangers, substituting an emotional reading of risk for a rational one.

In tackling the question, Dr. Konner brings a sensibility informed by

Why the Reckless Survive

And Other Secrets of Human Nature

By Melvin Konner
306 pages. Viking, \$18.95.



Marjorie Shostak/Viking

his background as an anthropologist, with fieldwork among the !Kung San Bushmen of Africa, and as a psychiatrist with a keen understanding of neuroanatomy. Characteristically, Dr. Konner frames the puzzle in Darwinian terms: How can evolution have preserved a species that makes such poor decisions about its own survival?

Posing the question in these terms bespeaks a key assumption woven through these essays, whether they deal with the mystique of the noble savage, the ideal human diet, the nursing of infants or chemical clues to suicide. Dr. Konner, in the tradition of sociobiology, seeks to divine the secrets of human nature from clues

to our evolutionary past. His premise is that our brain and fixed behavior patterns were shaped during the roughly 98 percent of the human past when we Homo sapiens scratched out a living as hunters and gatherers. The most recent 10,000 to 20,000 years or so, which we think of as human history, are a mere postscript to the millions when our genetic heritage was shaped.

The things that have survived in our genetic program, the evolutionary argument goes, are habits and tendencies that have proved useful in fostering progeny. As Konner puts it, "To die, in Darwinian terms, is not to lose the game," so long as one's genes are passed on. By these rules, even sacrificing one's life for one's kin is a winning move, so long as one's relatives live to multiply.

What, then, is the evolutionary advantage of poor judgment about risk? Konner proposes that our rationality evolved in a world where seat-of-the-pants problem-solving sufficed. If you made it past the saber-toothed tiger safely and found a bush of ripe berries, you had done well. These "good-enough" decision-making genes have been passed on to arrive in an age in which we have far more information available than was ever needed to survive until the next dawn on the savannah.

Beyond that, the human gene pool is peppered with the legacy of risk-takers, "people who wouldn't hesitate to snatch a child from a pack of wild dogs," and so helped along the group, even at the cost of their own lives. The net result is a mental apparatus that tends to focus on immediate results, neglecting more far-reaching consequences. Thus, Dr. Konner knows well the dangers of Oreos but surren-

ders to another biological imperative: "We overdo it on fats and sweets because our ancestors were rewarded for such excesses with that inch of insulation needed to carry them through shortages. Death by atherosclerosis may be a pervasive threat today, but for most of the past three million years it was a consummation devoutly to be wished."

These essays push beyond the data to thoughtful speculation. Most will be familiar to readers of Dr. Konner's column in *The Sciences*, the maga-

How can a species with such poor judgment avoid natural selection?

zine of the New York Academy of Sciences, where all but two appeared. Dr. Konner, a professor of anthropology and of psychiatry at Emory University, has also been a frequent contributor to *The New York Times Magazine*, though "Why The Reckless Survive" contains none of that work.

A gifted essayist, Dr. Konner weaves disarming personal anecdotes with anthropology's wide view of behavior and psychiatry's deep understanding of brain mechanisms. Whether pondering the evolutionary usefulness of the smile or the link between an infant's fear of strangers and social prejudice, Dr. Konner's prose entrances as it informs.