

What your driving behaviour says about you

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FULL TEXT

HOST: Marci Ien

GUEST: Tom Vanderbilt, Author, "Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do"

IEN: Most of us do it every day without even thinking about it: we get behind the wheel of our car, make our way across town to our destination. But it's what happens when we're on the road that is the topic of a new book. "Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do" is written by Tom Vanderbilt. And Tom joins us now in studio this morning. You travelled the world, talking to driving experts, traffic engineers. What surprised you most?

VANDERBILT: Oh jeez, everything. But the one thing that sticks with me is that most of us think we're better than average drivers. If you do surveys, 90 percent of people will say "I'm a better than average driver", which is mathematically impossible. And there's just so much we don't know about driving. We take it for granted that it's very easy, but it's just one of the most complex things we do.

IEN: You know, here are some of the things I found interesting. Most car accidents happen close to home. Usually the day is sunny, bright, one of those days that you wouldn't think that an accident would happen.

VANDERBILT: Exactly. And some of that is because that's just the most driving we do. We do most of our driving close to home. Most days are actually clear, and we drive more during the day.

But there's another thing going on there that I think has been called "risk compensation": we think it's safe so we kind of let our guard down a little bit.

IEN: That's right.

VANDERBILT: And studies have even shown that we pay less attention to traffic signs in our own neighbourhood than when we're in a new place. So, we become a little bit too familiar, I think.

IEN: It makes sense, we're cautious as we drive through new places. And how many of us really start to take off our seatbelts before we even drive into our driveway?

VANDERBILT: Exactly.

IEN: That kind of thing. Most people are killed legally crossing at crosswalks. More so than jaywalking. I was surprised by that.

VANDERBILT: Well, this was in New York City which has the most pedestrian fatalities of any place in the US. It also has the most pedestrians. But this is a strange thing, where you think you've got the right to walk and it's not quite as safe as you think.

And, again, it's that risk compensation thing, arguably, also happening there. You know, sometimes an alert jaywalker can actually be safer than a sort of overconfident, law-abiding pedestrian.

IEN: You know, there is a real psychology behind all of this. But explain the people who in parking lots will drive around and around and around, in order to find a spot. And also those who protect the spot, people who get out and physically stand in a spot so that the person that they're driving with can get it before anybody else does.

VANDERBILT: Well, psychologists have identified -- and these are people who stand with clipboards in parking lots

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IEN: Yeah, it's serious business.

VANDERBILT: Serious research. And women tend to do this strategy more often: they cycle, looking for the best spot. Men tend to do what is called "pick a row, closest space". They grab the first spot they can. And they end up

usually spending less time actually getting into the store. So, it's one of those ways we sort of trick ourselves. About waiting for a spot, there's a whole school of psychology that says once you have something you're less likely to want to give it up. Even if you didn't really care about getting it to begin with. Just having that parking spot, we are a little bit reluctant.

People spend longer to exit when they know someone is waiting -- another thing that has been shown by people with those clipboards in parking lots.

IEN: Yeah, yeah.

Speaking of gender, and I'm going to go there with this question. I mean, you've talked to people. Who is better behind the wheel -- men or women?

VANDERBILT: That's a sensitive question. Statistically, women are slightly over-involved in minor, nonfatal crashes. Men are definitely involved in more fatal crashes. So, men may think they're the better drivers but they drive in such a way to perhaps prove that, that it ends up being more dangerous.

So, that's the line I'll take on that.

IEN: Ah, you don't want to go there! You're treading very carefully, my friend.

VANDERBILT: [laughter] I don't want to alienate any potential readers here, you know.

IEN: You won't at all. It's a most interesting book. Congratulations on it, Tom.

VANDERBILT: Thank you.

DETAILS

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