

A Middle Term Needed

Deaths of Despair?

What have I learned from living in a Pacific Island society all these years? Many things, I can proudly report: for instance, the need to watch as well as listen if you want to pick up the real message, the critical role of personal support in everyone's life, the great attention paid to seeing ourselves as we are reflected in other people. Overall, I'd like to think that this long experience makes it easier for me to sniff out weak social analysis, especially when there's something missing in the equation that is being used. Not just in the social analysis of island societies, but of American society as well, I suspect. So, let me test that instinct here.

Young Americans today, especially those who do not have a college degree, are not likely to do as well financially as their parents, we are told. Since 1980 real wages have held steady or even dropped for most workers. Unemployment is very low (or *was*, before the Covid crisis), but the jobs available today seem to be low-end jobs without good medical and retirement benefits.

The prognosis is that the lower end of the white middle class spectrum can perhaps get by, but they will be forced to twist and turn in the future to do so. The financial security that their parents may have enjoyed will not be theirs, as they are already beginning to realize. Even those who have a college diploma in hand will face their own problems. They may have a better chance of finding a decent-paying job, of course, but many have a considerable college loan to pay back.

But their financial woes are not the end of the sad story. Columnists and others today point out that these underachievers are at risk for all sorts of other things: obesity, spouse abuse and alcoholism among them. Their death rate is much higher than might be expected of this relatively young cohort. The real threat, however, is what the authors of one recent book call "deaths of despair:" suicide and self-poisoning (especially through the addictive use of opioids).

Perhaps, as the authors of this book (*Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* by Anne Case and Angus Deaton) suggest, financial insecurity and the fear that it engenders do correlate with the rise of suicide and addiction among white Americans. Does this mean that those who are popping the pills or pulling the trigger have nothing other than dismal bottom-line dollar figures before their eyes when they're doing the deed?

If the higher death rates among such people is so big a concern and the self-inflicted death rates even more worrisome, what is responsible? Is it really pessimism about their financial future? Or is it driven by something other than the cash itself?

Or could it be more about what the inadequate salary (and the job that provides it) represents: the failure of the person to "make it" in the eyes of his family and friends? Could this failure to meet the expectations of others diminish the sense of self-importance? In other words, is it the psychological and/or social perception that low income represents, more than poverty itself, that puts this class of Americans into the funk they're in?

The Social Cushion

My own long island experience, I must confess, has made me highly suspicious of trying to establish a direct causal link between financial distress and “deaths of despair.” There is good reason for my skepticism. For forty years I tried to gain an understanding of the rapidly rising suicide rates in Micronesia, beginning in the mid-1960s—something that others might call “deaths of despair.” The problem is that this surge in suicide occurred at a time that jobs and average income throughout the islands was greatly increasing, not falling. How can these two trends possibly be related? That was the issue that I found so compelling.

A direct and unmediated link between the economy and suicide and that other behaviors that kill (even slowly, as by overeating and obesity) always make my nose twitch. There has to be a social or psychological middle term involved somewhere. Our distant ancestors don’t take their own lives simply because they experienced a scarcity of food; they intensified their hunt for sustenance, begging or stealing if need be. I’d like to believe that this instinct for self-preservation has been passed on to us today—Micronesians and middle-aged white Americans included. Hunger is real, and poverty hurts; but neither kills (normally). The fear of hunger and want drive us to take bold measures, but they don’t drive us to suicide—certainly not in Micronesia, not in the US, and not anywhere else in the world.

Well then, let’s take this a step further. The person who takes his own life (and so defies the natural instinct for self-preservation) has failed, we sometimes say. He has not achieved what he had hoped for; he has not become the person expected. The person has simply been a failure. And there the conversation ends—prematurely, I believe. There may be a few individuals for whom failure is self-defined, but I don’t think most of mankind works that way. “Failure” is socially (and culturally) defined. To argue otherwise, I feel, is to embrace an individualism gone mad. Failure always implies something else: failure in the eyes of others, whoever they might be—the family, the community, the social network on-line. There are lots of possibilities, depending on the culture and the times.

What may drive us to extremes, then, are what might be called “people problems”—the failure to achieve the standards that are socially embedded, the loss of respect from others in our social network, what might be termed loss of social standing and status. What people think of us does make a difference, we all know.

Yet, we are also aware that individuals can sometimes lose face and topple on the status ladder without fatally injuring themselves, provided they have a strong social safety net. That is, a strong family or good friends to catch them when they fall—to reassure them, to provide the friendship and support they need to maintain their so-so lives. When the safety net is torn or absent altogether, then we expect to witness the deadly consequences of the fall.

The Vanishing Support System

But things have been happening to weaken this support system over time. At the risk of repeating the usual litany of woes, let’s review some of the big changes that have taken place.

There was a time when Americans had a wide variety of organizations to choose from. Youngsters could join the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. When they got older they might apply for membership in the Rotary Club or the Kiwanas or, if they were Catholic, the Knights of Columbus. Let's not forget the Masonic Lodge or the secret societies with their pledges and handshakes. Clubs and organizations offering membership, along with the bonds to other members and the meals to celebrate special events, were available everywhere. Then there were the other meetings, like the PTA meetings, parents were expected to attend. This isn't to mention the bowling leagues and the softball leagues for older men that were common in that day. But for those with no athletic interests, there was always the neighborhood bar with its familiar clientele and good conversation for an hour or two at the end of the workday. It was easy to find an excuse to get out of the house and spend time with a wider social circle in those days.

But that era has passed, as Robert Putnam points out in his landmark book, *Bowling Alone*. After World War II, the organizations that everyone once found so attractive began to disappear—not all of them, of course, but many. So did lots of the informal groups that used to pull people together on a weekly or monthly basis—the bowling leagues, the book clubs, the canasta or bridge circles. Whether this was because of the new attraction to the TV set, that was just then becoming popular, is hard to say. What we do know, however, is that people began spending more of their time in their own living room, and when they did occasionally go out to bowl, for instance, they often did so alone.

On top of this came the decline of the old neighborhood. The neighborhood in which people might relax in their porch chairs, exchanging greetings with their next-door neighbors or people walking down the street, eyes on the street as they urged the children not to be too rough as they played. This was the neighborhood in which people came to one another's houses to borrow cups of sugar or flour. It was a community of sorts in which anyone could point to a house and tell you how many kids the family had, where they all went to school, and perhaps a scandalous story or two about its members.

Then something strange happened to the old neighborhood. Perhaps it had to do with new housing architecture with the disappearance of the front porch and its emphasis on the fenced in yard and the barbecue pit in the back. Maybe it was the uprooting of the population as people moved from their old homes to distant places for work—something that was now much easier because of the new interstate highway system. Whatever happened, the neighbors grew increasingly isolated from one another and the neighborhood could no longer claim to be the functional community it had once been.

The general pattern affected the family as well. Even if families did not live together as multi-generational units as they had much earlier in the last century and even more in the century before that, relatives did gather frequently for meals. For some families (especially Italian) this could mean weekly dinners with grandparents and aunts and uncles. For others such dinners might happen only on holidays and holydays. Besides the meals, there were also the drop-in visits that aunts and uncles would make from time to time. But the extended family, too, seems to have unraveled in recent years.

So we are left with the nuclear family—minus the watchful eyes of the neighborhood and without the support that it would have received from aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents not so long ago. Is it any surprise, then, that we can see and feel the cracks even in the small family, exposed as it is to any number of problems, new and old, but without the protection it once enjoyed? The results of these problems might be higher rates of domestic violence, an increase in divorce, and more single-parent families.

Finally, we must face the growing isolation of the individual, even from his family, thanks to the cell-phone and all the apps it offers to put our on-line culture within easy reach. Even the family dinner, once so important an element in daily home life, has faded from the scene.

Hence, the individual today has to do without the extensive social network, with all its personal contact and support, that past Americans could enjoy. Organization and clubs have greatly declined in number and importance, the neighborhood is less a community than formerly, the extended family gathers much less frequently, and even the nuclear family seems to spend less time together than formerly. None of these elements have vanished entirely, let me add, but they have all very clearly declined. All of which suggests that the accountability system that once kept a person on the straight and narrow, and the safety net that caught him if he fell are not nearly as strong as they once were.

Finding the Social Element

This doesn't mean that we are doomed to live as isolated individuals these days. Human beings are able to reconstitute the social circles they need for support. Even if it is a little more difficult to do so these days without the ready-made social networks from an earlier day.

But back to the original point. Let's agree that when we attempt to understand the rise in "death and despair," it's not enough to lock in solely on economic or employment downturns. Surely somewhere in the mix there is a social factor that can help us better understand the problem. This is essential not just to help our analysis of the problem but, even more importantly, to find ways to resolve it. We may not be able to do much about the economic factors at stake—the low salaries and scant benefits of available jobs or the crushing debt of college loans—but we can consider the possibility of doing something to repair the safety net. We need not fix everything—just those parts of it that are especially critical in the problem at hand. So let's sharpen our focus a bit and suggest that some relationships are much more important than others, depending on the culture. The job is to identify them and work to repair them. Perhaps a few examples might help here.

In Micronesia, where suicide rates have been extremely high, a struggling individual would turn to his extended family for assurance that he was still a respected member of that family, regardless of the other problems he might have. As the extended family, or lineage, was weakened (through the growing earning power of parents), the struggling young man had no one but his father to go to for this assurance, since the uncle who headed the lineage no longer had the authority he once possessed. If his father withheld his approval, that left the troubled young man without others he could turn to for this reassurance, and the suicide rate skyrocketed.

In Japan, a man who faced bankruptcy might pack his family into the car and drive them off a bridge to their death, as happened more than once during an economic crisis some years ago. Or a young man who fails the all-important national standard exam for college might take his own life. Why? Because of the bankruptcy of the family man or the loss of future opportunity that the exam failure represents? Not very likely. It's much more likely due to the shame the victim feels for not having met the expectations of others—his family, friends and others he knows.

Can't we suggest that the same might even apply to young Americans today, even if they don't recognize the same social network that we older people once did? Why do young people react so strongly, even to the point of suicide, to nasty comments or a lurid photo of them being posted on the faceless internet? Is it because their followers on the electronic media now constitute the social system—in lieu of the family or community—that is expected to support them? Clearly, shame remains a strong motivating factor for such acts even in this age of individualism.

In other words, there appears to be a social element in desperate acts (or “deaths of despair,” if you will), whether they are committed in America, Micronesia or Japan. Exactly what the desperate individuals who take their own lives are responding to may vary from one culture to another, but in all cases there is a personal factor involved.

The Takeaway

Throughout this essay we've been urging the importance of finding a third term to help us understand how under-employment and poverty are linked to the rise of “deaths of despair” (notably drugs and suicide) in present-day America. The third term, as we have presented it here, is a social term—something that relates to people. The term might focus on how others perceive me in my reduced circumstances, or it might focus on how reliable the personal support system is when a person going through bad times needs reassurance. This missing element—the social element—may help us understand why Hispanics and Blacks don't seem to be nearly as prone to resort to desperate measures as Whites when faced with the same economic hardships.

“Deaths of despair” may have been the subject of our discussion here, but our argument for the importance of the third term goes far beyond that. How do we explain the considerable variation between divorce rate and age group (generation), for instance, unless we find a social factor that helps us fill out the picture? Or why is it that persons from some religious groups seem to suffer less from heart and respiratory disease than others?

The social component plays a very significant role in preventing and cushioning the problems we encounter in life. Yet, with the fading of the old social networks at different levels, our support system has been weakened greatly over the past few generations—not just in the US but in island societies as well. The weakened condition of the old safety net should be of major concern for us as we try to assess the impact of today's momentous changes on our lives.

Individualism, a concept that has been honored in the West for a long time, appears to have gained new currency today. Not just as a statement of who we are (“I'm my own man”), but as a way of downplaying the social forces that go into determining who we are. Yet, as we gaze a bit deeper into ourselves, we are sure to find the strong imprint of others there, the traces of ties that

remain vital in our lives. Perhaps we should be cautious about placing too much hope in the strength of the individual, concentrating instead on exploring ways in which the support system might be strengthened. “No man is an island” still stands even in our day.

In the end, we would do well to develop an understanding of that third term—the social network so critical in our lives—that holds us to the standards that define us.

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