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The science of the self

William of Ockham stated in his razor that 'entities must not be unnecessarily multiplied'. Roughly translated, this means 'the simplest theory that fits the facts corresponds most closely to reality'.

I used to like this idea. Now, having examined a huge amount of research evidence in trying to work out if life is getting better or worse, I'm not so sure. When dealing with complex systems like human societies, comprising many entities that often interact in multiple, weak, diffuse and non-linear ways. I've learned that we have to 'multiply entities' beyond what seems at first to be necessary.

Take the case of youth suicide, which has risen in Australia and most other developed nations over the past fifty or so years. It has been a specific interest of mine. A colleague Keith Dear and I recently analysed youth suicide rates across rich countries and found a strong positive correlation between male rates and several measures of individualism. Correlations between female rates and individualism were also positive but weaker. In other words, youth suicide rates were highest in the most individualistic countries; the more personal freedom and control over their lives young people felt they had, for example, the higher the suicide rate. Male youth suicide was also positively associated with subjective measures of health, optimism and trust, while individualism was positively associated with both these and other quality-of-life variables, including happiness and life satisfaction.

Now, the simplest explanation of the association between suicide and individualism is that the greater the sense of personal freedom the more likely people are to choose to die. Indeed, suicide might well be regarded as an ultimate expression of individual freedom of choice and control over one's life. But the results suggest there is more to our findings. They present an internally consistent pattern that raises intriguing questions.

On the face of it, they indicate that rising youth suicide is associated with not just freer youth, but happier, healthier, and more optimistic youth, so suggesting that youth suicide rises as social conditions and personal prospects improve. Or is there another explanation, linking higher suicide with greater social adversity, which seems intuitively more likely? Put another way, are the suicidal 'an island of misery in an ocean of happiness', or 'the tip of an iceberg of suffering'?

Other studies appear to support the ‘island of misery’ argument, and researchers have offered three possible explanations: first, as life improves, people have fewer outside sources on which to blame their unhappiness so are more likely to blame themselves; second, the greater happiness of most increases the misery of the few; and third, that something like increasing freedom is good for the majority but bad for a minority which can’t handle it.

These explanations certainly fit the ‘facts’ of this research, but there are two principal reasons for challenging the ‘island of misery’ interpretation. The first is that the association of higher suicide rates with higher quality of life may result from cultural differences between countries in how people respond to questions about life. It is possible, for example, that compared to collectivist societies, people in individualistic societies rate their wellbeing higher because it is more important to consider themselves happy, health and optimistic - in other words, to be a winner.

The second reason is that the ‘island of misery’ hypothesis can only hold true if the evidence shows that the suicidal are indeed part of a small, distinct minority within a population of young people who are thriving and whose wellbeing has improved over recent decades. But the evidence does not do this. Instead, the facts, when we cast the net of evidence much wider, support the ‘tip of the iceberg’ hypothesis. They show that rising suicide represents one end of a spectrum or gradient of distress and suffering that, in less severe forms, affect a much larger proportion of young people and which have also become more common.

The ‘tip of the iceberg’ hypothesis is consistent – while the ‘island of misery’ hypothesis is not – with the observation of the British epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose that diseases or disorders and their causes are rarely binary – people have them or they don’t – but are distributed along a continuum - how much does a person have? As he demonstrated, there is a relation between the mean of a characteristic in a population and the prevalence of ‘deviance’. Rose even uses the ‘iceberg’ metaphor to describe this relationship, making specific reference to mental illness: ‘The visible part of the iceberg (prevalence) is a function of its total mass (the population average)’.

Rose also observed that the causes of individual differences in disease or disorder – for example, why one person and not another commits suicide - may be different from the causes of differences between populations - what explains patterns and trends in suicide rates. That is, causes of cases may differ from causes of incidence. For example, it may be, as other research suggests, that individuals with a high sense of freedom of choice and control over their lives are less likely to be suicidal. But at the population or societal level this individualistic orientation may reduce social cohesion and support, leading to more personal isolation and alienation, and so to higher suicide rates.

Another possibility, however, is that the indicators of individualism that Dear and I used in our analysis, including the perception of freedom of choice and control over life, are measuring not real autonomy or control but independence or separateness, which is not the same thing, and may even reduce personal control. This brings our population-level findings into line with the individual-level results. It sounds hard to believe. After all, isn't this just what individualism is intended to do: free us to live the lives we want? But it makes sense - especially in unstable, uncertain times - that the lack of clear cultural frames of reference that characterises highly individualistic societies does reduce people's sense of control over their lives. Let me explore this proposition in more detail.

Some psychologists have observed that, in discussing individualism and related issues, many researchers confuse autonomy, which is good for wellbeing, with independence, which is bad. Autonomy is a matter of volition, the ability to act according to our internalised values and desires. Its opposite is not dependence, but heteronomy, where we feel our actions are controlled by external forces regardless of our own values and interests.

It follows from this, I think, that a fundamental flaw in modern, individualistic, Western culture is that it, too, confuses autonomy with independence, or separateness, affecting other qualities important to wellbeing such as relatedness or belonging - and, ultimately, autonomy itself. In other words, autonomy is culturally expressed as independence. The Macquarie Dictionary, for example, defines autonomy as 'independence, self-sufficiency, self-regulation'.

This is a bold move. Other societies, past and present, have made a point of binding the individual to society. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim observed in his seminal study of suicide over a century ago that a crucial function of social institutions such as the family and religion was to keep 'a firmer grip' on individuals and to draw them out of their 'state of moral isolation'. 'Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs', Durkheim wrote. 'To free him from all social pressure is to abandon him to himself and demoralise him.'

Interpreting autonomy as independence might 'work' up to a point, but beyond this point individualism could well lead to less autonomy, not more, because there is less perceived congruence or connection between the self and others, between our values and theirs. The more narrowly and separately the self is defined, the greater the likelihood that the social forces acting on us are experienced as external and alien. This could be a major dynamic in modern life, impacting on everything from citizenship and social trust, cohesion and engagement, to the intimacy of friendships and the quality of family life.

There is also another way that individualism could have this effect. The independent self requires high self-esteem to function, and psychologists have noted that a lack of control can be part of a defensive strategy to maintain self-esteem. In other words, one way to prop up our self-esteem is to believe that the things that threaten it are beyond our control.

So - to summarise - we have two possible, and related, mechanisms by which increased individualism might reduce our control over life: it encourages a perception that we are separate from others and the environment in which we live, and so from the very things that influence our lives; and, secondly, independent individuals require high self-esteem, which diminished control helps to maintain.

We can glimpse in these psychological changes how individualism came to represent, not authentic autonomy, but self-centredness: the satisfaction of personal wants, a pre-occupation with entitlements, an abrogation of responsibilities and a withering of collective effort. Broadly speaking, it would seem that increasing individualism, together with other cultural trends like rising materialism or consumerism, have created a 'separate' self: socially and historically disconnected, discontented, insecure; pursuing constant gratification and external affirmation; prone to addiction, obsession and excess. We observe all these things in modern Western societies. The icons of the 'separate self' are the Hollywood-style celebrities, whose glamour, fame and wealth so often hide deep insecurities, addictions and self-absorption.

These cultural effects are subtle and complex. In a culture that promotes personal freedom, we will seek this freedom and feel better when we have it – yet also sense that something is missing. We can strive for independence and, at the same time, crave for belonging and intimacy. We can be lonely in company or in relationships; out of regard for 'privacy' – our own and others' - we may fail to seek support when we need it, or hesitate to offer it to others when we should.

We confront the paradox that the more we make the individual the focus of our culture, the more impotent and insecure we feel; and the more diminished we feel as individuals the more precious we become in the face of slights and insults and the more stridently we defend our personal 'rights' – to happiness, a risk-free life, compensation for the wrongs that befall us.

I want to emphasise that I am not talking about a deviation from the one way of life that optimises wellbeing. How we seek and find happiness depends on our culture; there may be many paths we can follow in meeting human psychological needs. This is the source of our extraordinary diversity and versatility, but it is also a source of danger: we can lose the path altogether, run off the rails.

Cultures impart order and meaning to our lives. It is important that they do this in ways that meet human needs and reflect social realities. Modern western culture, with its focus on materialism and individualism, does neither of these things. This amounts to a form of cultural fraudulence, an extreme consequence of which is an existential despair that leads to suicide.

The good news is that some recent research suggests we are waking up to this fraud and reacting against its influence. Many of us are uncomfortably aware of the gap between our values and lifestyles, between what we believe and how we live; more of us are exploring ways to close that gap and to live lives that express our values more clearly. We are trying to be more genuinely autonomous.

What makes our times so confusing - and research findings often contradictory or ambiguous - is that we are seeing parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic struggle as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human strive for definition and acceptance. But this is another story.

So... you can see we've come a fair distance from youth suicide in trying to explain it. The facts fit, but the explanation isn't so simple. I wonder what William of Ockham would make of it?

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