

familiarity breeds empathy?

Judging by the tough new measures adopted across the country to crack down on homeless people, it seems that the more Americans have to deal with the homeless the more they lose empathy for them. But Barrett A. Lee, Chad R. Farrell and Bruce G. Link (*American Sociological Review*, February 2004) show just the opposite: more contact leads to more positive feelings.



A pedestrian stops on a busy city street to chat with a homeless woman. People who regularly encounter the homeless express greater compassion for them than do people with more limited contact.

The researchers conducted a national telephone survey of 1,507 adults and found that the more often a respondent had been exposed to homeless people—even when the encounters were negative—the more positive were their attitudes toward the homeless. Lee and his colleagues measured different kinds of exposure, including media coverage of homelessness, personal observation of homeless individuals, and direct encounters such as being panhandled. Respondents who had more contact with homeless people were more likely to believe that homelessness is caused by social and economic factors rather than individual laziness or incompetence. More exposure also was linked to less apprehension that homeless people are dangerous. The researchers found such

positive effects of exposure even when they isolated negative encounters. Respondents who had been panhandled or witnessed disturbing behavior by homeless people reported a greater willingness to make personal sacrifices, such as paying higher taxes or volunteering, in order to help the homeless. Perhaps the public is more willing to solve the problem of homelessness than local politicians typically believe.

color of justice

Incidents that raise charges of “racial profiling” have led researchers to ask whether police are racially selective when they make arrests. Using a new database that links information victims provide about a crime—including the race of the perpetrator—to whether the case was “cleared by arrest,” Stewart J. D’Alessio and Lisa Stolzenberg (*Social Forces*, June 2003) find that whites are just as likely as blacks, if not more so, to get arrested. They analyzed nearly 10,000 rapes, 12,000 robberies, and hundreds of thousands of assaults that occurred in 17 states in 1999 and found, contrary to their expectations, that white assailants were likelier to get arrested than black assailants in assaults and robberies, and equally likely to get arrested for rapes.

The researchers double-checked their findings by statistically adjusting the data for other characteristics of the crime, such as the race and gender of the victim, how badly injured the victim was, the state where the crime occurred, and whether the assailant seemed to be drunk or drug-affected. (For example, perpetrators who were reported to be “under the influence” were more likely to be arrested.) Even taking into account such circumstances, crimes in which victims reported white assailants were about 20 percent more likely to result in arrest if the crime was robbery, 10 percent more likely in cases of assault, and equally likely in cases of rape. Nonetheless, D’Alessio and Stolzenberg contend that higher arrest rates for white assailants are consistent with findings of anti-black discrimination in the justice system. The fewer black arrests, they suggest, result from black witnesses’ suspicion of police and their consequent unwillingness to cooperate with investigations.

george w. bush's best friend?

After the 2000 Presidential election, many Democrats furiously blamed the campaign of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader for Al Gore's loss in the Electoral College. Nader and his defenders turned the tables and faulted Gore and the Democratic establishment for running an unconvincing campaign.



Photo by Paul Kienitz

A Green Party parade float touts Ralph Nader for president over both Al Gore and George Bush in 2000. A new study confirms Democrats' worst fears: in a two-candidate election enough Nader voters would have voted for Gore to give him the presidency.

Christopher Magee (*Social Science Quarterly*, September 2003) tries to shed some light on this heated argument. He draws on two public opinion surveys in which Nader voters were asked whether they had a second-choice candidate, or which person they would have voted for in a two-way race between Bush and Gore. Their answers allow Magee to make an educated guess about what the outcome of a simple Bush vs. Gore election would have been. He finds it to be between 98 and 100 percent likely that Gore would have won Florida, and thus the Presidency, in an uncluttered, two-way election.

The Green argument that a stronger campaign by Gore could have won him the election even with Nader in the race is plausible though harder to prove. But one thing is clear: Nader's presence on the ballot was decisive. George W. Bush should write him a thank-you note.

money and medicine

Part of the turmoil besetting the American medical system is the conversion of many facilities from non-profit to for-profit management. It was thought that market discipline could bring health care out of the red. However, a summary of two decades of research suggests that the transition may be low-

ering quality with no gain in efficiency. Pauline Vaillancourt Rosenau and Stephen H. Linder (*Social Science Quarterly*, June 2003) gathered 150 studies conducted over the past 20 years that compared the records of non-profit and for-profit health facilities. About half of the studies were of medical hospitals; the rest included nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals and other public health care facilities.

A clear majority of the studies showed that non-profits delivered higher quality care, as indicated by, among other things, lower mortality rates, fewer "adverse events," fewer violations of regulations, and a greater variety of services. Most studies also showed that the non-profit facilities provided more charity care, and a plurality of studies concluded that non-profits offered wider access. To the surprise of the authors, most studies also concluded that non-profit facilities were at least as cheap or as cost-efficient as for-profit facilities. Whatever the reason for the American health care system's tribulations, it does not look like they can be stopped by introducing profit motives.

bring home the bacon

With widening concern for time-pressed Americans, a recent study shows that most American workers want to change the number of hours they work. But Jeremy Reynolds (*Social Forces*, June 2003) finds those who want to cut back are the people who already have the fewest family responsibilities, while those with the most are most likely to wish for more hours. Why? The money.

Reynolds used a national survey that asked respondents which activities they would want to spend less, more or the same amount of time on. Studying several hundred employees who took the survey in 1997, Reynolds finds that just 42 percent were content with the hours they worked, 37 percent wanted fewer hours, and 22 percent wanted more. Those who wanted to work fewer hours tended to be people without children. People looking for more work, not less, cared about having a higher income. They tended to be the workers with children, who had more mouths to feed.

the values of kids these days

Through expanding technology and travel, today's youth are exposed to more international cultures, media, and technology, and have a wider range of beliefs to choose from than ever before. Seth Ovardia recently found (*Sociological Perspectives*, June, 2003) that far from having few moral values—as might be expected—contemporary youth have many values and hold them more strongly than did their predeces-

sors. Ovadia analyzed responses to an annual survey of high school seniors conducted from 1976-1996. He compared students' responses to questions about how important they felt certain goals were, such as: "having a good marriage and family life," "making a contribution to society," "having lots of money" and "finding purpose and meaning in my life." Over the two decades, students' ratings increased for all but one of the life goals. Ovadia argues that these findings confirm what some social scientists have claimed for years. As we become saturated with more information, technology, and cultural exposure, we hold a variety of values more dear. Correspondingly, in this widening pluralism, we place less value on universalistic ideals, such as "finding purpose and meaning in life," the one response which today's youth valued less.



Photo courtesy of Alyssa Wagner

High school seniors dress up for "70s and '80s day" in November, 2003. Contemporary youth hold a wider variety of ideals than young people did 20 years ago.

different paths to americanism

Church doctrines can influence how immigrants learn to adapt to American society. Cecilia Menjivar (*Sociology of Religion*, Spring 2003) studied Salvadoran communities in San Francisco, Phoenix and Washington, D.C. and found that the source of differing approaches to integration was not the type of city in which they lived (or, for example, its availability of jobs), but the church to which the immigrants belonged.

Catholic churches press for group solutions. They organize formal programs to help Salvadorans and other immigrants fill out documents, make legal claims, and deal with gangs and drugs in their neighborhoods. Immigrants learn about the wider society from the priests and the many organizations lay members lead. In contrast, Evangelical churches emphasize individual spiritual conversion, ritual and prayer. Their pastors provide intensely personal ministry to the homogenous, tightly-knit,

religiously devout congregations. The Evangelical churches have no "programs," because they view individual acceptance of Christ as the only way to change communities. The communitarian approach of the Catholic church may foster pan-ethnic (e.g., "Latino") coalitions and encourage members to seek political solutions to problems. The Evangelical church forges strong in-group ties among adherents, church leaders and members of the ethnic community. Both churches help immigrants to participate in American life, but in very different ways.

a good death

Many people express the wish to die quickly rather than become a burden to their family. But Deborah Carr (*Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, June 2003) finds that elderly people who give intense long-term care to their dying spouses experience no more or less distress afterward than those whose spouses die suddenly.

Using survey data on more than 200 widowed people interviewed six months after their spouse's death, Carr also finds that being with one's spouse at the time of death, getting along well with him or her near the end of life, and believing that he or she received adequate medical care, each make it less likely the surviving spouse will suffer depression, anxiety, anger or other symptoms of psychological distress. These findings might explain why spouses who are burdened by caring for their dying partners do not suffer long-term negative effects. For example, the anxiety produced by care-giving responsibilities may be balanced by intimacy with the dying spouse. So, it seems a strong marital relationship continues to bring comfort to those left behind, no matter how slowly or suddenly their spouses passed away.

life becomes yet more priceless

Policymakers must often make decisions based on placing an implicit, if not explicit, monetary value on people's lives. For example, if officials spend an additional \$1 billion on pollution controls to save 1,000 lives but do not spend the same billion to save just 100 lives, they must assume that an American life is worth more than \$1 million but less than \$10 million. One way economists estimate what people generally think their own lives are worth is to look at how high wages are for life-endangering jobs. Other factors—such as technical job qualifications—being equal, they assume the larger the number of workers who die on the job, the more employers have to pay to attract enough workers. When workers take such jobs, they are implicitly saying what the value of their life is, those wages calculated against odds of being killed.

Applying such computations to jobs with known death rates and wages, Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn (*American Economic Review*, May 2003) calculate that Americans valued life far more highly in 1980 than in 1940—\$7 million versus about \$1 million a life, measured in 2002 dollars. They further estimate that in the year 2000, Americans valued a life at about \$12 million. Even as more people are living longer lives, Americans seem to be valuing life much more. Among the implications is that people will put greater pressure on policy-makers to spend those life-saving dollars.



Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Miners relocate their equipment in the Homestake gold mine, Lead, South Dakota, 1945. Based on wages paid for life-endangering jobs, Americans valued life much more highly now than in 1940.

everybody's doing it

Social science research has spawned “social norms marketing:” campaigns that play on individuals’ desire to conform to their community. College administrators have used them as an alternative to scare tactics to control risky behavior such as binge drinking. For example, they promote messages like “most students don’t drink” rather than the warning: “you’ll die if you drink.” But new research by Henry Wechsler and colleagues (*Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, July 2003) suggests that these campaigns may be ineffective.

Using surveys from 98 universities and colleges, the researchers compared the success of anti-alcohol programs at schools that did and did not use social norms-based campaigns. They found that drinking had not declined at the colleges using social norms; in fact, the percentages of students who had either one drink or more than 20 drinks in the previous month actually increased. By contrast, there was no significant change at schools that did not use social norms marketing. Overall, drinking at schools using social norms

campaigns was higher than that at other schools, even after several years of the norms campaigns.

According to Wechsler and his colleagues, the problem may be more in the marketing implementation than in the social norms premise. For instance, one representative ad read: “Seven out of 10 New Paltz students have 0 to 4 drinks per week. Join the majority.” Because such campaigns clearly establish that the average student drinks, they may have the unintended effect of convincing students who might not otherwise drink that they should increase their alcohol intake to be “normal.”

dispatch from the culture wars

Continuing concern about fragmentation and polarization in American culture have led researchers to look closely at changes in public opinion over the last 30 years. What they have found is that, for the most part, the general public is *not* dividing into warring camps, but the politically active are. John Evans (*Social Science Quarterly*, March 2003) analyzed divisions in Americans’ attitudes from the 1970s through 2000 on a variety of topics—including race, gender and crime—as reflected in large national surveys. Evans found that Americans’ attitudes on most topics converged. A notable exception is the topic of abortion and related issues of sexual morality; Americans now disagree more on these matters than they used to.

Evans also found that opinions are diverging among one set of Americans—those most politically involved. Differences of opinion between blacks and whites, men and women, southerners and northerners, college graduates and non-graduates, even religious liberals and conservatives abated. But divisions of opinion between declared Republicans and Democrats widened—just as they have between elected Republican and Democratic officials. These trends may help explain the general public’s distress with partisanship: political partisans disagree more while most Americans disagree less.

our town

Regardless of where they live, Americans hold dear the image of the small town as a model of civic participation. Research by Lois Wright Morton (*City & Community*, Summer 2003) shows that whether residents of real small towns hold their own towns dear depends on local civic participation. Some small towns are fading away as people leave. According to Morton’s study, residents remain satisfied in those small towns with good relations among individuals and considerable civic activity.

Morton surveyed people living in 99 small towns (population 500 to 10,000) across the state of Iowa to see what affected residents’ satisfaction with local services, such as

health care provision and education. In towns where people belong to civic associations, have many friends in many different social groups, and otherwise engage in civic behavior, residents are considerably more satisfied. Although other features of the towns matter, such as how long people have lived there and how wealthy the townspeople are, the volume of civic activities is much more connected to how happy residents are with the town. Participation seems to be the key to the real, as well as the idealized, American town.



Community members turn out for a Memorial Day parade in Hopewell, New Jersey. Residents of small towns are more satisfied with their communities if there is more civic participation.

does marriage pay?

U.S. government policy views marriage as a way of helping disadvantaged unwed mothers out of poverty; but is marriage really a cure-all? (see “Should the Government Promote Marriage?” *Contexts*, Fall 2003.) Some argue that marriage brings economic advantages as well as better emotional and physical health for both parents and children. Others argue that pushing marriage on women will make them dependent on a man’s income, and make it yet harder for women and children to leave emotionally or physically abusive situations.

Using family histories drawn from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, Daniel Lichter, Deborah Roempke Graefe, and J. Brian Brown (*Social Problems*, February 2003), find that marriage does not offset the financial problems of having borne children out of wedlock for low-income women. When these women do marry, they are more likely than better-off women to marry unemployed or low-income men. Such husbands only marginally improve a family’s economic situation and then only if the couple stays married. In fact, unwed mothers who marry and then divorce—very common

in this group—are actually worse off financially than those who never marry. The authors conclude that families might be better strengthened by promoting educational and employment opportunities for low-income women and men.

be all that you can be

An early concern about the Internet was that people might choose to adopt false identities online rather than reveal who they actually are. Research about social interaction online, however, suggests otherwise. In *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub* (University of California Press, 2002), Lori Kendall describes her three years of participating in a text-only online forum and conducting face-to-face interviews with members. Kendall finds that people who participate in online-based communities replicate their offline or real world identity and all that comes with it. Rather than trying to assume false or fantastical personalities, most “BlueSky” participants “continue[d] to view their identities as whole and consistent” (p. 224). In fact, not only did they adopt the same class, race, and gender characteristics in what they said and how they said it, they also reproduced many stereotypical ideas about identity. For example, the mainly male and white, college-educated community of BlueSky repeated well-known, offline gender stereotypes. By using language that could be considered sexist (“Didja spike ‘er’?”) and by legitimating particular claims (that “nerdettes” who attend science fiction conventions are by definition not sexy), BlueSky participants actively perpetuated familiar stereotypes. Kendall suggests that far from creating an enlightened environment free of mainstream gender and racial clichés, as many predicted it would, the Internet may actually help reinforce them.

private choices, public consequences

Advocates of school choice often argue that options like vouchers, charter schools, and magnet schools will improve not only the quality of education, but also social equity and racial balance in schools. In the first major study using data on actual school choices made by parents applying to magnet schools in Philadelphia, Salvatore Saporito challenges these assumptions (*Social Problems*, May 2003).

Using magnet school applications from an eight-grade class and demographic data on all students in the Philadelphia School District, Saporito shows that many white parents who send their kids to magnet schools are doing so to avoid nonwhites. The higher the percentage of nonwhite students

in their neighborhood schools, the more likely white students are to apply to a magnet school. While white parents often protest that their decisions are based on factors like school quality and safety which just happen to correlate with race, Saporito finds that the neighborhood schools' racial makeup significantly affects white students' applications to leave even after accounting for the test scores and violence rates of those local schools. At the same time, the racial composition of the neighborhood schools has no influence on the choices of nonwhite students; their applications seem driven by factors like school quality and safety. Consequently, as whites flee and nonwhites stay behind, neighborhood schools become more and more segregated. Saporito suggests that policy makers must consider the way race shapes private educational decisions if they hope to achieve equity and integration through school choice.

you buy what you think you are

Deciding what to buy seems like an individual decision based on personal preference and practical need. However, a study of more than 2,400 Finnish adults illustrates the fundamental tenet of market research: that people's buying patterns can be explained largely by their age and gender. Terhi-Anna Wilksa (*Acta Sociologica*, September 2002) identifies six consumer lifestyles that emerged from the 1999 survey, which she labels *Materialist*, *Hedonist*, *Home*, *Materialist Deprived*, *Highbrow Lifestyle*, *Green and Critical* and *Thrifty*. According to Wilksa, the *Green and Critical* lifestyle, which one might expect to be associated with highly-educated young people, is more typical of middle-aged women.

This is because Wilksa found that the social class individuals identify themselves with determines their buying patterns more than objective measures such as education. So, who we want to be affects our spending more than who we really are.



Shoppers walk along Madison Avenue, New York City. Buying patterns are shaped largely by age, gender, and what people imagine their social class to be.



Photo by Michael Browers

Ethnically diverse cheerleaders from Hawaii pose for a group photo. Peer group culture can play a key role in determining the racial composition of high school cheerleaders.

cheering for the in-crowd

Responding to complaints that cheerleading squads in Wichita were whiter than the snow on a Kansas prairie, the school board adopted a policy to ensure "equal footing" for all students who wanted to try out. Five years later, the racial composition of cheerleading squads had changed little. Pamela J. Pettis and Natalie G. Adams (*Sociology of Education*, April 2003), argue that the equity policy failed because it ignored the importance of peer group cultures for students of all races.

Among other efforts to diversify the cheerleading squads, the district reduced the cost of joining, set up classes to learn the skills, and dropped requirements (such as having a ponytail) that discriminated against nonwhite students. The researchers attribute the failure of these steps to the power of the "preps," the middle-class white students who were at the top of the school's pecking order. Cheerleading, Pettis and Adams argue, was inextricably intertwined with being a "prep;" it involved adopting prep membership as well as mastering the athletic skills. To members, being a prep girl meant being a good student, nice, cute and popular; to outsiders, it meant being stuck-up, fake and exclusionary. Cheerleading reinforced this distinction by rewarding students who were cheerful and smiled constantly, social skills mastered by the preps but alien and alienating to many outsiders. Girls who were not preps—most minority girls—were reluctant to participate in an activity that forced them to be everything they hated in order to succeed. The equity policy failed because it did not take account of how in- and out-group cultures drive the choices of individual girls and indirectly reinforce racial separation.

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