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DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

Crowded Places Make People Think More About the Future

An Interview with Oliver Sng by Alison Beard

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Oliver Sng—a research fellow at the University of Michigan—and colleagues at Arizona State University compared country and state population-density figures against data on residents' willingness to invest in education, save for retirement, and otherwise plan for the future. Their analysis revealed that people in more-populated areas showed a significantly stronger preference for activities with a long-term payoff. The team's conclusion:

CROWDED PLACES MAKE PEOPLE THINK MORE ABOUT THE FUTURE

DR. SNG, DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

SNG: Based on these findings and on follow-up experiments designed to test causation, I do believe there's a link between population density and what biologists refer to as "life-history strategy." The general idea is that species and organisms either live "fast"—focusing on the present, reproducing early, bearing lots of offspring, and not investing as much in each child or in themselves—or "slow," focusing on the future, self-development, longer-term relationships, and fewer kids. Humans pursue a slower life-history strategy than other animals do, but there is variation among us, and while some of that may be genetic, we've also evolved to respond to our environment. In crowded places, where there's arguably greater competition for resources, we might feel we need to invest more in ourselves and our kids to succeed. That's the hypothesis my coauthors, Steven Neuberg, Michael Varnum, and Douglas Kenrick, and I wanted to test.

HBR: And it proved correct? Yes. In more-densely-populated countries, we saw less sexual promiscuity, lower fertility rates, higher preschool enrollment, and a greater societal emphasis on planning for the future versus solving today's problems. In more-densely-populated U.S. states, people married later, had fewer children, and were more likely to attain a bachelor's degree and participate in retirement savings plans. All these measures of future orientation build on one another, but population density seems to play a foundational role. These findings held up even when we controlled for population size, economic prosperity, and urbanization.

Couldn't it just be that forward-thinking people prefer more-populated areas? That's why we did the experimental studies. In the first one, we asked half our participants—people recruited online from all over the United States—to read a fictitious *New York Times* article about how the U.S. population was growing at an unprecedented rate. We then had them answer questions designed to gauge their future orientation, such as "Would you want to get $100 tomorrow or $150 in 90 days?" The other half, our control group, read no article but took the same survey. We found that people given the article showed a greater preference for the delayed but larger rewards. Though small, the effect was significant. By artificially introducing the idea of high density, we seem to have pushed people to think more about the long term.

PEOPLE LIVING IN DENSELY-POPULATED STATES WERE MORE LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN RETIREMENT SAVINGS PLANS.

Maybe reading just got their brains working, which led them to make smarter decisions? In the next study we dropped the article and instead asked participants to listen to audio clips—of either lots of people talking or white noise—before answering the questions. Those who heard the crowd sounds were also more likely to prefer long-term rewards.

Could organizations exploit these tendencies in, say, consumer marketing? I haven't thought much about the practical applications of the research, but it could be helpful in terms of product and service design and marketing. To appeal to people in crowded environments, I think you'd want to emphasize the future benefits they and their kids would accrue. In uncrowded markets, you might instead focus more heavily on instant gratification.

If firms want their employees to shift from a short- to a long-term focus, should they relocate from rural to urban areas? Or cram people into small offices with piped-in crowd noise? Those types of moves might have a slight effect on some people. But a few caveats: First, remember that our first two studies focused on country-to-country and state-to-state differences, not

WHICH U.S. STATE RESIDENTS FOCUS ON THE LONG TERM?

"Life-history scores"—which combine average marriage age, fertility, higher-education and preschool rates, and retirement plan participation—show that people in more-densely-populated states tend to follow a "slow" strategy (investing in the future), while people in less-densely-populated states tend to follow a "fast" one (focusing on the present).

NOTE POPULATION DENSITY IS BASED ON U.S. CENSUS DATA AND PLOTTED ON A LOGARITHMIC SCALE.

city versus noncity. We did see a correlation between density and urbanization, but our general findings held when we controlled for the latter. Second, in our experiments the effects were small by academic standards. Third, we were careful to present population growth in a neutral way. If people feel that density is creating a chaotic, unpredictable environment, they might adopt a faster, not slower, strategy. They might ask, "Is this an environment where you get ahead by building your skills and knowledge or where we compete by punching each other in the face?"

But many of us do think of crowded places as chaotic, stressful, and even dangerous. Someone once told me that's an American bias. There's a tendency to associate population density with cities and cities with crime, or people succumbing to their baser instincts. I grew up in Singapore, which is the world's third-most-densely-populated country (behind Macao and Monaco) but is extremely orderly. I'm not saying that crowded places aren't chaotic or dangerous. They can be. But this doesn't have to be the case.

SUBJECTS WHO LISTENED TO AUDIO CLIPS OF CROWDS WERE MORE APT TO CHOOSE DELAYED REWARDS.

Then you moved to the United States, which ranks 161st among 214 countries in population density. Are you trying to live a faster life? Well, I just got married last year at age 32, so I guess not. But I suspect environmental density may affect life-history strategy most when people are young. One thing we did test in two more experiments is whether college students would react differently to the idea of high population density than young adults under 40. We found that students who read the fake article on the growing U.S. population, rather than one on rising squirrel populations, showed a greater preference for long-term relationships but not for fewer children. People in their twenties and thirties showed a greater preference for fewer children but didn't change their relationship plans. So density seems to affect our thinking only with our top-of-mind future goals.

How many children do you plan to have? Maybe two. But not anytime soon. It's getting crowded these days.

Interview by **Alison Beard**
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