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Why Are White Death Rates Rising?

By ANDREW J. CHERLIN FEB. 22, 2016

IT'S disturbing and puzzling news: Death rates are rising for white, less-educated Americans. The economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton reported in December that rates have been climbing since 1999 for non-Hispanic whites age 45 to 54, with the largest increase occurring among the least educated. An analysis of death certificates by The New York Times found similar trends and showed that the rise may extend to white women.

Both studies attributed the higher death rates to increases in poisonings and chronic liver disease, which mainly reflect drug overdoses and alcohol abuse, and to suicides. In contrast, death rates fell overall for blacks and Hispanics.

Why are whites overdosing or drinking themselves to death at higher rates than African-Americans and Hispanics in similar circumstances? Some observers have suggested that higher rates of chronic opioid prescriptions could be involved, along with whites' greater pessimism about their finances.

Yet I'd like to propose a different answer: what social scientists call reference group theory. The term "reference group" was pioneered by the social psychologist Herbert H. Hyman in 1942, and the theory was developed by the Columbia sociologist Robert K. Merton in the 1950s. It tells us that to comprehend how people think and behave, it's important to understand the

standards to which they compare themselves.

How is your life going? For most of us, the answer to that question means comparing our lives to the lives our parents were able to lead. As children and adolescents, we closely observed our parents. They were our first reference group.

And here is one solution to the death-rate conundrum: It's likely that many non-college-educated whites are comparing themselves to a generation that had more opportunities than they have, whereas many blacks and Hispanics are comparing themselves to a generation that had fewer opportunities.

When whites without college degrees look back, they can often remember fathers who were sustained by the booming industrial economy of postwar America. Since then, however, the industrial job market has slowed significantly. The hourly wages of male high school graduates declined by 14 percent from 1973 to 2012, according to analysis of data from the Economic Policy Institute. Although high school educated white women haven't experienced the same major reversal of the job market, they may look at their husbands — or, if they are single, to the men they choose not to marry — and reason that life was better when they were growing up.

African-Americans, however, didn't get a fair share of the blue-collar prosperity of the postwar period. They may look back to a time when discrimination deprived their parents of equal opportunities. Many Hispanics may look back to the lower standard of living their parents experienced in their countries of origin. Whites are likely to compare themselves to a reference group that leads them to feel worse off. Blacks and Hispanics compare themselves to reference groups that may make them feel better off.

The sociologist Timothy Nelson and I observed this phenomenon in interviews with high-school-educated young adult men in 2012 and 2013. A 35-year-old white man who did construction jobs said, "It's much harder for

me as a grown man than it was for my father.” He remembered his father saying that back when he was 35, “I had a house and I had five kids or four kids.’ You know, ‘Look where I was at.’ And I’m like, ‘Well, Dad, things have changed.”

African-American men were more upbeat. One said: “I think there are better opportunities now because first of all, the economy’s changing. The color barrier is not as harsh as it was back then.”

In addition, national surveys show striking racial and ethnic differences in satisfaction with one’s social standing relative to one’s parents. The General Social Survey conducted by the research organization NORC at the University of Chicago has asked Americans in its biennial surveys to compare their standard of living to that of their parents. In 2014, according to my analysis, among 25- to 54-year-olds without college degrees, blacks and Hispanics were much more positive than whites: 67 percent of African-Americans and 68 percent of Hispanics responded “much better” or “somewhat better,” compared with 47 percent of whites.

Those figures represent a reversal from 2000, when whites were more positive than blacks, 64 percent to 60 percent. (Hispanics were the most positive in nearly all years.)

But we size ourselves up based on more than just our parents. White workers historically have compared themselves against black workers, taking some comfort in seeing a group that was doing worse than them. Now, however, the decline of racial restrictions in the labor market and the spread of affirmative action have changed that. Non-college-graduate whites in the General Social Survey are more likely to agree that “conditions for black people have improved” than are comparable blacks themselves, 68 percent to 53 percent.

Reference group theory explains why people who have more may feel that they have less. What matters is to whom you are comparing yourself. It’s not

that white workers are doing worse than African-Americans or Hispanics.

In the fourth quarter of 2015, the median weekly earnings of white men aged 25 to 54 were \$950, well above the same figure for black men (\$703) and Hispanic men (\$701). But for some whites — perhaps the ones who account for the increasing death rate — that may be beside the point. Their main reference group is their parents' generation, and by that standard they have little to look forward to and a lot to lament.

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