

Weeks Population

Dr. John Weeks' official demographic blog - just the latest post!

This blog is intended to go along with [Population: An Introduction to Concepts and Issues](#), by **John R. Weeks**, published by Cengage Learning. The latest edition is the 12th (it came out in 2015), but this blog is meant to complement any edition of the book by showing the way in which demographic issues are regularly in the news.

If you are a user of my textbook and would like to suggest a blog post idea, please email me at: john.weeks@sdsu.edu

About Me

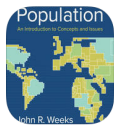


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Monday, February 22, 2016

Another Explanation for the Rise in White Death Rates in the US

Princeton economic demographers Anne Case and Angus Deaton opened up a national discussion recently with their findings that [death rates have been mysteriously increasing](#) among whites, especially those with less education. One explanation has been a rise in the use of prescription opioids in this population, [as I noted last month](#). Now another possible explanation has arisen from Andrew Cherlin at Johns Hopkins University, a world-renown sociologist and a Past President of the Population Association of America. He put his ideas out there [today in a NYTimes op-ed](#).

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.

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.

He goes on to discuss his own research that led him to these conclusions. The value of Cherlin's discussion is that it provides a good theoretical perspective for what, at first, seemed like an otherwise hard to understand phenomenon. To be sure, others had notions that were on the same track, [as I previously noted](#). But they were looking at the proximate causes--such as depression and the use of pain medications. Cherlin's explanation is more systematic and thus potentially testable, increasing the chance of figuring out possible interventions.

Posted by [John Weeks](#) at 4:17 PM

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