

A Quarterly Review of Social Reports and Research on Social Indicators, Social Trends, and the Quality-of-Life.
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Newsletter of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies

THE TRIUMPH OF INDICATORS OF VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CHANGE

This social indicator volume brings together four sets of indicators and points to the latent impact that they have upon interpersonal relationships in the family and community. Speed, social and geographic mobility, single-person households, and materialistic acquisitions are the chief trends discussed, and there is an overtone of environmental consequences throughout. Interpretations lack the guidance of theory or an overriding framework. There is about it all a "Gee Whiz-look-at-all-these-numbers" quality. Without theory, the volume correctly emphasizes the latent consequences of many trends, noting that they often are "unseen."

Hal Kane, 2001. *The Triumph of the Mundane: The Unseen Trends that Shape our Lives and Environment*. Washington, DC: Island Press. 195 pages. Cloth \$22.95. (Address: 1718 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20009)

Hal Kane came by his interest in social indicators through editorial duties with the Worldwatch Institute. He edited five editions of *Vital Signs: the Trends that are Shaping our Future* (see *SINET*, No. 63, August 2000). He also served for a time with the U. S. Senate, the Environmental Protection Administration, and has written speeches for some European heads of state. His orientation then reflects public interests, the media and the environment. With Lester Brown, he authored *Full House: Reassessing the Earth's Population Carrying Capacity* (1994, W. W. Norton). Now a San Franciscan, he is senior fellow with Redefining Progress, a non-profit organization interested in indicators that chart the real changes in people, the environment and the economy.

Catalog of a Sensate Culture

Although Kane does not mention this, the volume presents evidence of the materialistic features of the sensate culture characterized so ably by P. A Sorokin several decades ago. Sorokin considered the present to be the last stage of a sensate culture that soon is to be replaced by either an idealistic or ideational ethos. From the evidence presented, the sensate culture still is flowering, not receding, as Sorokin assumed.

The *Introduction* sketches the theme of the book. The "Manifest Destiny of the Nation" (the United States) was to people the continent, but its new burden is to build bigger houses, move faster and supply everyone with every technological gadget imaginable. In charting the "Ascendancy of the Mundane," Kane points to the production of pills to banish pain, gadgets to give comfort, provide music, food, and other pleasures for entertainment. These changes have forged a "New National Character" which looks first to physical, material objects while slighting a concern for the other fellow, for the less fortunate, for poverty, etc. Kane asks where these trends are taking us and attempts to outline some future consequences.

Speed

The chapter on "Speed" traces how we cover distance more rapidly with the auto, and goes on to show the computer speeding information into homes and offices. There has arisen a culture of speed, infused into all aspects of life, from acquiring to entertainment and work on the job. Speed is a culture value. Automobile effusions from speed impact the environment adversely. Capital funds for commerce change hands with increasing rapidity.

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These commercial transactions affect population mobility, quickly changing farmers into factory hired hands. It is time for the people to “come alive,” Kane says. “We now have to decide ourselves how fast and how often we wish to travel, how much information we want to absorb, how frequently we want to move to new places and how to make legion other decisions having to do with speed.” (My guess is that we as a people will adapt to these changes in speed and do so speedily.)

Social and Geographic Mobility

We are a people of movers. We move away from home. About a fifth of us move into a new residence each year. Young people shake off the mud from their homestead of nurture and branch out on their own. Employees opt for better positions and move away. Employee loyalty is declining. Industry does not remain in one place. It picks up stakes and moves. Globalization is becoming commonplace as industry moves to locations with more competitive prices for labor. When people and industry move away, civic associations suffer.

Kane pictures the rich moving away from the poor, and describes the widening gap in income between the two. In keeping with the theme of environmentalism, Kane shows that we are moving indoors, into controlled environments, away from nature. These commonplace observations are seldom supported by actual data. For example, evidence exists, but is not cited, of increases in outdoor recreation participation, park visits, fishing, water sports, and the like. All this movement, Kane says, has altered our personality in numerous ways. But little evidence of actual personality traits is offered. Upon moving, we forge new connections, through the media, through TV. Altogether, this chapter offers rich leads for metricizing the consequences of mobility.

Living Alone

Chapter 3 traces the increase in U.S. single-person households. Eight percent of persons 15 years of age and older lived alone in 1980. By 2000 Kane estimates ten percent will be living alone. Actually, the 2000 Census figure is more than eleven percent. Single households, the author contends, “is the root cause of some of the physical changes taking place in the United States.” Consequences are greater gas and traffic congestion when singles visit their families on week-ends, the greeting card industry, overnight mail, retirement homes, and on and on. Single-person households also mean that the single person has said good-bye to relatives. By some slight of hand, living alone changes one’s responsibility for others, to family, to the environment. Except for the loneliness of the aged who live alone, this trend seems overblown. More important, it seems, would be treatment of single-person motherhood, many of whom live marginal to poverty.

Acquisitions and Consumerism

The chapter labeled “Possessions” spreads out the panoply of gadgets and conveniences with which American’s have acquired to enhance the quality of their lives. These acquisitions have changed the way we spend out time, relate to our friends, and “how we look at our world.” For example, the washing machine and the dryer have eliminated the intimacy engendered between neighbors when washing was hung out to dry! Similarly changes have come about from air conditioning, watching TV, microwave ovens, computers.

To acquire these necessities of life, Americans must shop. This creates shopping malls, and visiting them has impacted our personalities. “The marketplace for objects frees us to follow our own ideals, with fast transport taking us to the homes, temples, and occupations of our choices, and all sorts of gadgets making new kinds of work and recreation possible.” Our values influence choices in making purchases.

The Misty Future

Finally, the book addresses where all this is taking us. Will the future see us traveling greater distances each day? Will more of us be living alone? These, and other, future changes are uncertain. A “reinvigorated political discourse” is called for. To fuel such discourse, new data are needed. We need to measure laughter, honesty, and loyalty. These “ambiguous realities” defy easy measurement. New indicators are needed to chart changes in the family, in equality among people, the environment, and the like.

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The *Genuine Progress Indicator* is pointed to as a measure which gives a more equitable picture of change in the U.S. than the Gross Domestic Product. It can be found at the web site of Redefining Progress: www.rprogress.org. Its touted virtue is that it takes into account depletion in social and natural capital. After listing a number of behaviors the author would like to see measured, the author discusses the function of subsidies and taxes and their influence upon the environment.

Comment

Redefining Progress was established in 1994 as a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research center. Its objectives are: "exposing the inadequacy of equating economic growth with progress; facing and embracing nature's limits as a path to true sustainability; promoting pricing systems that incorporate the social and environmental costs of products; and recognizing and building the natural and social value of common assets. "Its strategy is to work through opinion leaders to stimulate public discourse on issues that affect public policy."

Considered in the light of these objectives, the book does a yeoman's job of outlining influences affecting the environment, and identifying some of the genuine impacts upon the quality of life. However, if the redefinition of progress is to include steps to enhance well being, they must look to other sources.

As a miniature social report on the United States, the volume treats speed, mobility and consumerism. It also treats the relatively insignificant topic (in my opinion) of single-person households. As a social report it fails far short of the many topics affecting the Nation, topics that are treated fully in Canada's *North American Social Report*, and in *Recent Social Trends in the United States, 1960-1990*. Perhaps this is expecting too much of *Triumph*, but, truly, our lives and the environment are affected by a host of factors. Any comprehensive treatment should address them.

As a social indicator volume, the study offers many suggestions for new data needs. Some of the suggestions, such as a measure of the extent of laughter, could not easily be met, but there are many additional data topics suggested by the volume, topics reflecting the intimate, life serving behaviors that should be included in periodic surveys. Some of these include periodic assessment of civility, of good neighborliness, of activities supportive of the environment, clean air, etc. The volume hints at the need for survey data, including a comprehensive assessment of well being. Perhaps, Redefining Progress should reassess its mission by identifying the quality of life domains that would gauge genuine progress in the human condition, and take steps to incorporate them into national survey questionnaires. Such would be consistent with the "positive psychology" movement.

Finally a note of gratitude that partial support for the volume came from the Ford Foundation.

~ Abbott L. Ferriss

ISQOLS MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL NOTICE

The International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) has automated much of its services online. We have made it easy for international QOL researchers to order publications online, apply for membership renewal (and new applications) online, and register for conferences online. We also are trying to cut costs by reducing expenses related to postal mail.

Instead of sending you a membership application/renewal by postal mail, please consider this message as a reminder to renew your ISQOLS membership (or apply for membership if you are not a current member) for the year 2002. Of course, this reminder notice will not apply to you if you already applied in the last few weeks or have attended the 2001 ISQOLS Conference (in Washington DC, USA).

You can renew/apply for membership in one of several ways: (1) You can apply for membership online. You can do this by visiting our web page at www.cob.vt.edu/market/isqols (which we prefer). (2) You can print the membership application/renewal form from the attachment here and mail it to the central office (see address under signature below) with a check or money order. (3) You can fax the membership form with your credit card number to the central office at 540-231-3076 with the credit card information, and we will process the application from our end.

To remind you, our membership benefits are:

1. Four issues of *Social Indicators Network News (SINET)* every year.
2. A hard copy of ISQOLS directory.
3. Significant subscription discounts for *Social Indicators Research (SIR)*, *the Journal of Happiness Studies (JHS)*, *Journal of Business Ethics (JOBE)*, *Teaching Business Ethics (TBE)*, and *Intervencion Pisosocial (IP)*.
4. Significant discount to ISQOLS conferences and publications.
5. Significant discounts of regular prices of books from the *Social Indicators Research Book Series*. These discounts apply to volumes published after 2001.
6. Communications with other QOL researchers through a listserv.
7. Putting up one's personal (or one's institute) expertise profile on ISQOLS homepage.
8. Getting recognized for important work through ISQOLS awards program.
9. Apply for research support through ISQOLS Foundation.
10. Coordination from the editors of ISQOLS affiliated and non-affiliated journals to help members find suitable outlets to publish research among the following journals: *Social Indicators Research*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Teaching Business Ethics*, *Intervencion Pisosocial*, and *Journal of Economic Research*.

Editor's Note on ISQOLS Announcements:

SINET functions as the Newsletter of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies. As such, I am pleased to announce that Dong-Jin Lee, ISQOLS Vice-President for Publications has agreed to pull together a set of ISQOLS news items and announcements that merit publication in *SINET* for each issue. Readers thus will notice an expanded set of announcements beginning with this issue, and Dr. Lee has been added to our Board of Corresponding Editors.

AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL TRENDS ENTERS THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The 2001 edition of *Australian Social Trends*, the eighth in this annual series continues its established format with 31 articles on social trends and analyses thereof. These are organized by seven areas of social concern—population, family, health, education, work, income and expenditure, and housing—plus a section on international comparisons of population composition growth, and projections and indicators in the areas of health, education, and work. With extensive referencing across articles, including those presented in previous editions of the series, connections between topics and indicators have also been highlighted. In some articles, the volume revisits topics covered in previous editions, to provide an expanded and more contemporary picture with the most up-to-date data.

Previous editions of *Australian Social Trends* have been reviewed in *SINET*. The 1995 and 1996 volumes were reviewed extensively by Kenneth C. Land in No. 45, February 1996. Abbott Ferriss reviewed the 1997 and 1998 volumes in No. 55, August 1998. And the 1999 volume was reviewed by Kenneth C. Land in No. 60, November 1999. Accordingly, the present review will focus on the main unique features of the 2001 volume.

New topics featured in the 2001 volume include drug-related deaths, older mothers, and a comparison of the population characteristics of Australia and New Zealand.

Drug-Related Deaths

In the nearby figure, the trends for males and females in drug-related deaths per 100,000 persons in Australia from 1979 to 1999 is reproduced from the *Trends* volume. *Drug-related deaths* are those caused directly by drug abuse, including deaths from organ damage caused by drugs. They include deaths from illegal drugs as well as the misuse of legal drugs. The source of data for the figure is the ABS Causes of Death collection, compiled from data provided by the Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in each State and Territory.

Two main trends stand out from the figure. First, there has been a substantial rise in the death rate for males since 1981, and the trend accelerated from 1993 to 1999. Second, the rate for females has lagged behind that from males, thus creating a substantial gender differential in the drug-related death rate in the late-1990s. Specifically, by the late 1990s, the male drug-related death rate was on the order of 2.5 times the female rate.

The article on this topic in the *Trends* volume shows that the main factor accounting for the rise in the drug-related death rate for both males and females is a corresponding increase in accidental drug-related deaths. These are deaths that usually are the result