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Manners & morals

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Life on the island

by [Emily Esfahani Smith](#)

The digital age has been accompanied by a concerning rise in hyper-individualism.

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Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, died nearly a hundred years ago, but his insights about society and culture seem more relevant now than ever. To understand why, it's worth turning to the French intellectual's groundbreaking empirical study *Suicide* (1897). Durkheim wanted to understand why people killed themselves. Why do some European societies, he wondered, have higher suicide rates than others? It's an interesting question, one that he answered by looking at the relationship between suicide in men and variables like marriage, education levels, and religious orientation.

Here in the West, we take individualism and freedom to be foundational to the good life. But Durkheim's research revealed a more complicated picture. He concluded that people kill themselves more when they are alienated from their communities and community institutions. "Men don't thrive as rugged individualists making their mark on the frontier," the University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox pointed out recently: "In fact, men seem to be much more likely to end up killing themselves if they don't have traditional support systems." Places where individualism is the supreme value; places where people are excessively self-sufficient; places that look a lot like twenty-first century America—individuals don't flourish in these environments, but suicide does.

For instance, fewer Catholics, Durkheim found, killed themselves than Protestants, who were, for the most part, better educated than their Catholic peers but less bound by their community. Educated

people tend to leave their communities to pursue career advancement—and, thanks to their education, they also are more likely to challenge traditional societal values, something that parents of college-aged students today know all about. Durkheim discovered an exception to this trend among Jewish people. Despite being highly educated, they were also community-oriented, which buffered against suicide. Other factors that strengthened the community, like being a nation at war or having strong marital bonds, were associated with lower suicide rates.

Durkheim's work emphasizes the importance of community life. Without the constraints, traditions, and shared values of the community, society enters into a state of what Durkheim called *anomie*, or normlessness. This freedom, far from leading to happiness, often leads to depression and social decay (as the "twerking" Miley Cyrus perfectly exemplified recently at the Video Music Awards). Durkheim thought that the constraints—if not excessive—imposed on individuals by the community ultimately helped people lead good lives.

But we live in a culture where communitarian ideals, like duty and tradition, are withering away. Even conservatives, who should be the natural allies of these virtues, have in large part become the champions of an individualism that seems to value freedom, the market, and material prosperity above all else, leaving little room for the more traditional values that well known thinkers like Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver cherished. "Man is constantly being assured today that he has more power than ever before in history," wrote Weaver in *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), "but his daily experience is one of powerlessness. . . . If he is with a business organization, the odds are great that he has sacrificed every other kind of independence in return for that dubious one known as financial."

Over the summer, I came across a new study published in *Psychological Science* which brought some of these Durkheimian ideas to mind. The study, by the social scientist Patricia M. Greenfield at the University of California in Los Angeles, examined how American culture changed during the decisive post-Enlightenment years between 1800 and 2000. During this period, the American population—like the world population at large—experienced a major transformation that Weaver, with his agrarian sympathies, followed with distress. People were increasingly leaving behind their rural communities in pursuit of the big city and the opportunities they hoped to find there. "The more closely people are crowded together," Weaver complained of urban life, "the less they know one another."

In 1800, about 95 percent of the American population was rural—that is, people lived in communities with fewer than 2,500 people. Around 1840, people increasingly started moving to urban areas, leaving their rural homes behind—and after 1920, more people were living in urban centers than in rural locales. By 2000, nearly eight out of ten Americans were living in urban areas.

How did this mass migration affect the culture? That's the question Greenfield answered with the help of an interesting new tool called the Google Books Ngram Viewer. This comprehensive database of more than five million digitized books published between 1500 and 2008 lets us see what the culture values and is discussing at any given point. If you enter a word or phrase into the database, it can quickly determine how its frequency has changed over time. In other words, the Google Books Ngram Viewer gives us a quick snapshot of cultural change.

Greenfield was particularly interested in how our culture changed from a more communitarian to a more individualistic ethos over the last two centuries. Here is what she found: as the population became more urbanized, the books of the time mentioned "duty" and "obliged" less and less and mentioned "choose" and "decision" more and more. The crossover occurred right after the 1920s—that was when the books started focusing more on individualistic values than community-oriented ones. Greenfield also unearthed a troubling trend: the use of the words "get" and "acquisition" increased while the frequency of the words "give" and "benevolence" decreased,

suggesting a rise in materialism and self-concern, and a fall in being caring and focused on others.

A further consequence of our culture becoming more individualistic over the last two hundred years is that it has also—disturbingly—become more self-absorbed. Greenfield found that over the same period that individualism and urbanization were on the rise, the frequency of words like "authority," "belong," "obedience," and "pray" decreased, while the use of words like "unique," "individual," "self," and "ego" increased. The irony is that as people came together in urban centers, those values that bound people together—those values put a check on the ego—fell out of fashion.

The reign of ego—this individualism-on-steroids—has another name: narcissism. In 1979, during a decade famous for self-
obsession, the neo-Marxist-turned-iconoclast historian Christopher Lasch argued, in his bestselling book *The Culture of Narcissism*, that the culture was in the throes of a pathological "preoccupation with the self." Thirty years later, our psychologists have found that matters on this score have only gotten worse. In their 2009 book *The Narcissism Epidemic*, the social psychologists Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell cite compelling social science research to argue that in many aspects of society, people are focusing on themselves more than they are on others or the world at large.

Let's return to the Google Books Ngram Viewer to illustrate the point. When Twenge, Campbell, and their colleague Brittany Gentile analyzed books published between 1960 and 2008, they found that the use of words and phrases like "unique," "personalize," "self," "all about me," "I am special," and "I'm the best" significantly increased over time. Of course, it is not just in our books where this narcissism appears. It is also throughout the popular culture, not least in pop music. When a group of researchers, including Campbell and Twenge, looked at the lyrics of the most popular songs from 1980 to 2007, they found that the songs became much more narcissistic and self-centered over time. In the past three decades, the researchers write, the "use of words related to self-focus and antisocial behavior increased, whereas words related to other-focus, social interactions, and positive emotion decreased."

Consider the song "Roar" by the pop starlet Katy Perry, which, at this writing, sits at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 list. In the song, which is about self-expression, Perry refers to herself three times in the first verse alone:

> I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath
> Scared to rock the boat and make a mess
> So I sat quietly, agreed politely
> I guess that I forgot I had a choice
> I let you push me past the breaking point
> I stood for nothing, so I fell for everything

It would certainly be easy to dismiss narcissists as vain egoists—easy and not incorrect. (Later in the song, Perry sings, "I went from zero, to my own hero.") But the problem with narcissism, as Lasch pointed out in his book, is not just self-obsession. The problem with narcissism lies in the *consequences* of that self-obsession. Narcissists, he writes,

> may have paid more attention to their own needs than to those of others, but self-love
> and self-aggrandizement did not impress me as their most important characteristics.
> These qualities implied a strong, stable sense of selfhood, whereas narcissists suffered
> from a feeling of inauthenticity and inner emptiness. They found it difficult to make
> connection with the world. At its most extreme, their condition approximated that of
> Kaspar Hauser, the nineteenth-century German foundling raised in solitary confinement,
> whose "impoverished relations with his cultural environment," according to the

psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich, left him with a feeling of being utterly at life's mercy.

This is precisely what we see happening in the culture at large. At a time when we are more connected digitally than ever before, at a time when we live closer together than ever before, rates of social isolation are rising at alarming rates. In 1985, when the General Social Survey asked Americans about the number of confidants they have in their lives, the most common response was three. The survey was given again in 2004 and the most common response was zero. Our connections to others are slowly dissolving, a trend that Harvard's Robert Putnam discussed in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*. As community goes, so do the values that accompany social connections—values like duty and restraint.

Left unchecked by the constraints of the community, individualism has a nasty underside, as Durkheim came to see and as we are now seeing. This past spring, the Centers for Disease Control released an alarming study indicating that the suicide rates of middle-aged Americans aged 35–64 rose 30 percent between 1999 and 2010, with men taking their lives at higher rates than women. More generally across the population, rates of depression have increased ten-fold since the 1950s. Young people have been particularly affected. Youth suicide, especially among boys, has risen over the past fifty years in most developed countries.

When Richard Eckersley and Keith Dear, two Australian researchers, looked at what is driving youth suicide, they found that, among males, it was associated with several measures of individualism, like personal freedom and control. According to Jean Twenge, levels of anxiety have also been increasing over the past five to six decades, among both adults and children. She has found that this increase in anxiety is linked to a decrease in social connectedness—one more reminder, on top of all the others, that social isolation is not man's natural state.

This is an insight that the English poet John Donne grasped long before psychologists and sociologists came to similar conclusions by looking at people and culture as data points. In his oft quoted lines he writes:

> Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Though in certain important respects, individuals *are* increasingly living as islands—as isolated beings—Donne reminds us that the individual is not a discrete entity, untethered from those around him and his environment, operating independently in the world at large; he is, rather, part of something bigger, much bigger, than himself.

At the very least, he is part of some social unit. As Aristotle writes in his *Politics*, "man is by nature a social animal":

> an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.

Day by day, we are denying this fundamentally social aspect of our nature. We do so at our peril. As we look around the culture at the pathologies that are bubbling to its surface, it is clear that the hyper-individualism—the infatuation with the self—of the last several decades is partly to blame. Though individualism itself is not the problem, the manic individualism of modern life is. For people to thrive, individualism must be in balance with something bigger—it must be rooted in a community or a moral order. Otherwise, it will continue to reveal its dark underbelly in the form of social malaise.

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