What if society's primary spending outlay was on mental health initiatives?

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Abstract

If negative or abusive actions in interpersonal relations that lead to trauma are more common than known and if victims of abuse to some degree promulgate these very same actions at a multiplicative rate then there may be an inherent need to increase focus and spending on mental health initiatives from an inherent misunderstanding of the scale of the problem and its subsequent major impact on the wellbeing of entire societies.

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"A man should not strive to eliminate his complexes but to get into accord with them: they are legitimately what directs his conduct in the world."
--Sigmund Freud

"We are what we are because we have been what we have been, and what is needed for solving the problems of human life and motives is not moral estimates but more knowledge."
--Sigmund Freud

"Your visions will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes."
--C.G. Jung

"Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darknesses of other people."
*--C.G. Jung*

In the classic fable "the tortoise and the hare," the slower moving, but steady and consistent, tortoise eventually catches up to and surpasses the faster hare to win the race in the end. If we examine human history in aggregate, one cannot ignore thousands of years of war, suffering, genocide, and their apparently never-ending repeat. Yes, substantial progress has been made over the eons, but that progress was not achieved on the proverbial shoulders of giants but rather on the suffering, struggle, and death of so very many individuals.

The quest to understand the nature of reality has lead physicists to pursue their Grand Unified Theory and to examine the very small for hints of rules, equations, particles, cellular automata, code, holograms, etc.… that form a bedrock or the "start of it all." Progress in the physical sciences has led to incredible leaps in technology – both "good" and "bad" – as well as progress towards understanding Einstein and Hawking's dream of knowing the "mind of God." But what if the effort here is misplaced? How many Einstein equivalents have been lost to war, famine, poverty, illness, abuse, discrimination, or bad luck? What if all our efforts to understand reality are actually analogous to our fabled hare?

Understanding the challenges of a modern world, with competitive nation-states engaging in hot, cold, and economic wars, there still may be room for a pivot in focus of our medical, law enforcement, and/or government domestic outlays and research spending. What if the primary outlay of spending was on mental health initiatives?

As a start let us assume that there are differences between acts from human beings that are transactional (rational) but also that are "good" (that genuinely helps another or both parties in a person to person relationship) and that there are acts that are "bad" (that genuinely hurts the other person). A key problem of human psychology is that the trauma of abuse (violence, sexual assault, rape, hazing, bullying, and discrimination) have lasting impact and, unfortunately, can lead to the victims then even promulgating the events in a never-ending cycle lasting through time and future generations. The infamous examples are the girl or boy that was sexually molested becoming a sex worker or the child the witnessed parental physical abuse doing the same later in life to their spouse. But that individual is not only hurt and seeking, perhaps, to one day gain "control" over that which they did not have control, but they may not only seek to replicate the act that hurt them but perhaps the very act of hurting itself as well! Thus, throughout their life, their partners, who may have loved them in a happy long-term relationship, have their hearts broken and dreams lost and the child victim promulgates not just the same specific traumatic act but a repeat of hurting and the elimination of the dreams of others much as they lost had lost their own dreams or happiness.

An inherent concern from this train of thought is that, while the vast majority of human beings will perform actions that are beneficial to themselves and others and that are "good," or at least not hurtful or cruel, even with the large number of altruistic actions and charitable individuals and groups that exist in our civilization, the additive affects of such actions may not surpass the likely multiplicative number of actions by those that have been traumatized as they, in theory, might not act out of response to a random circumstance but rather are actively seeking to repeat the traumatic and hurtful behavior again likely in attempt to control, understand, or rationalize their trauma (see figure). The implied fear then is that the number of events and victims of abuse that lead to repeat or future similar "bad" events, will far outnumber the number or rate of "good" actions. There are obvious challenges in terms of the classification of "good" or "bad" actions and tracking any such large-scale distributions in a large or global population but the track-record of human history does not bode well to contradict the concept and its implied scaling of victims, harm, and suffering.
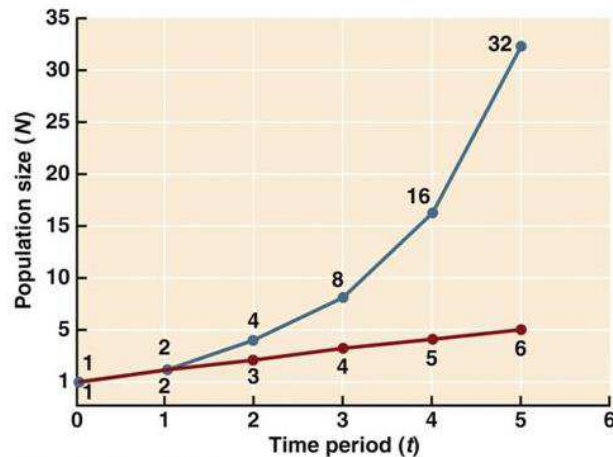
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An interesting line of inquiry would be to compare recent economic research results that show how initial simple economic transactions can lead to large disparities of wealth. In the November 2019 edition of Scientific American Bruce Boghosian in his article "The Inescapable Casino" (pgs 72-77) notes research that indicates that all economic systems involving transactions between agents inevitably result in oligopolies. Consider these below passages taken directly from the article, but consider them not in terms of the impact of economic transactions between two parties but rather of "good" or "bad" (harmful) personal actions between two individuals where the larger number count of total individuals in the group between hurt versus unhurt individuals is equivalent to the wealthy agent.

> "After a large number of transactions, one economic agent ends up as an oligarch holding practically all the wealth of the economy and the other 999 agents in the test end up with virtually nothing. The lower someone's wealth ranking, the faster the decrease. In the long run, all participants in this economy except for the very richest one will see their wealth decay exponentially. Inequality inevitably grows more pronounced because of the collective effects of enormous numbers of seemingly innocuous but subtly biased transactions."

> "These mathematical models demonstrate that far from wealth trickling down to the poor, the natural inclination of wealth is to flow upward, so that the "natural" wealth distribution in a free-market economy is one of complete oligarchy. It is only redistribution that sets limits on inequality. Only a carefully designed mechanism for redistribution can compensate for the natural tendency of wealth to flow from the poor to the rich in a market economy. Redistribution, separate from taxation, is best thought of as the flow of wealth from people to people to compensate for the unfairness inherent in market economies."

In essence, if there is a "wealth bias" the can lead to a large number of poor (those without the bias), then could there be an unfortunate mental health corollary where, if there is, in theory, a bias in terms of actors performing "bad" or harmful actions, more frequently than those that are performing "good" actions in person-to-person relations, then might a final result become a population with the vast majority of its members "hurt" or victims of "bad" and abusive actions? If there are thus such a large number of "hurt" actors that thus potentially also could promulgate the same actions, it becomes increasingly costly and impractical to remove or eliminate such large numbers of individuals from the society – consider prison populations in the United States. Thus, might the need be to consider mental health treatments (i.e. efforts to treat and heal and prevent the harm or hurt) as foundational and ever-present akin to a basic human need like fresh water, emergency care, or human rights.

Research may indicate if harmful or "bad" actions actually disseminate through populations at a multiplicate rate or even something akin to a slow pandemic rate or perhaps they actually occur at a much less extent due to the influences of social pressures, community norms, laws, educational, legal, and medical systems, and/or religious beliefs, but likely, given the above considerations, the number of human individuals that have been harmed by "bad" actions in a significant or traumatic manner is likely much larger than estimated and likely has a much larger impact on the aggregate well-being of our civilization than believed. It is thus also not beyond consideration that such a large-scale "victim count" could also potentially lead to directly, or increase the potential likelihood of, large-scale disasters and tragedies like war, genocide, systemic discrimination, and caste systems.

Perhaps high-tech efforts to replicate human brains in silicon and code like Europe's Blue Brain project and the Paul Allen's Allen Institute for Brain Science can help solve some of many mental health challenges and illnesses faced by so many human beings even beyond illnesses like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Disease and Dementia.

If even a fraction of the concepts above are shown to exist, then there clearly is an inherent and immediate need for a pivot in terms of the prioritization and focus on mental health and the impact of "bad" abusive actions and actors in our society and how to treat them and the vast number of likely victims that exist as, in all likelihood, we are not spending on and treating the few, but rather, the whole.

Thus, perhaps one day we can live in a world with so many happy and fulfilled lives where we have practically eliminated all abuse and violence by focusing on mental health and by attacking it from the-bottom-up and across and the entire human population. Given human history, I pray we try.