

BURSTING POINT AND BEYOND

Edward Hernandez

The implications of allowing the world's population to increase at its present rate are recognised as being both disasterous and horrifying. Despite agreement on this point, hardly any research into 'the psychology of overpopulation' is being carried out. Are we steadily creating an environment in which people will find it increasingly difficult to tolerate each other?

The population of the world is not approaching a crisis—it is in the middle of one. The situation is so crucial and difficult, rushing upon us with such velocity and magnitude, that it almost amounts to a world emergency.

The practical capacity of central London streets is 2,500 cars an hour. Above that limit, average speeds would fall to 5 mph and motorists would find it easier and quicker to walk. Already streets are clogged during the evening rush hour with an average stop-start crawl of about 2,400 cars an hour—only 100 short of capacity. It is not surprising that every major city in the world is seriously threatened with ultimate traffic paralysis. Cars are not the problem. People are.

This is only one of the symptoms of an over-crowded social environment. How many people can be contained in a given space at a given time? Can the problem of over-population ever be controlled? More important, how will the individual act and react under increasingly crowded conditions? Is the problem to prevent over-population, or to understand it? The answer is that both are related and both are probably equally important.

The psychology of population demands serious thought and research, but only about 12 psychologists in America are doing full-time research on the problem. In Britain, it is doubtful whether one professional psychologist has taken the issue seriously. From research so far conducted it is clear that most people do not take the problem very seriously and very few

people care enough to do anything about it. Such feelings of indifference and/or complacency cannot be justified from any point of view.

The psychology of man living under special (and critical) social conditions in a congested physical environment is far from definitive. No final answers can be suggested; perhaps it is impossible to give complete and clear answers to vital questions in the face of today's 'knowledge explosion'.

I suggest that the 'over-population syndrome' is the social and psychological state in which people will find it increasingly difficult to tolerate each other. Under such conditions many forms of rebellious behaviour will occur. We do not have to look very far to find people who are now opting out of society because of frustrations and anxieties. I suppose in the future one will be able to opt out of this world.

Consider people who protest. If one starts to analyse conditions which produce such behaviour, it is possible to discern patterns. Usually this type of behaviour is born out of frustrations and personal conflicts against existing systems, beliefs, values, complacencies and injustices. But behind nearly all protesters there is a deep emotional desire for self-assertion and self-identification. It reflects the need to feel an individual, a human being, in our society—not just an object or another number. It is not unreasonable to assume that an over-crowded social setting will sustain the 'protest reaction' and even create other symptoms of social unrest and confusion.

The personality type and the personal values which



have emerged within our contemporary environment are interesting. Hippie or yippie movements are similar to those which arise in any period of social crisis and transition. They occur when old values and codes of behaviour seem no longer adequate and new ones have not yet been defined. Consequently, individual rebellion can take the form of some sort of deviant behaviour as an escape. Furthermore, the 'anti-nomian personality' (characterised by 'intuition, immediacy, self-actualization, feelings of doing whatever one feels like doing, and transcendence') is indicative of attempts to adapt to the changing social scene.

Professor Toynbee has already warned us of the possible perils of cities on the move, absorbing all land between them. This could reach a point where the whole planet would be one single 'Ecumenopolis'—an all-engulfing conglomeration of buildings, skyscrapers, factories and motorways, all linked together.

It is not exaggerating to say that over-population will produce an environment where our children will have little or no choice about what to do with their lives. It is not stretching the imagination to suggest that 2 or 3 mile-high skyscrapers would have to be built to house people. Each complex could contain about a quarter of a million tenants and they could communicate with each other through some 'technical inter-com' system or underground channels. Under such conditions (or limitations) 'psychological lifts' carrying hundreds of people would have to be equipped with special music or commentaries in order to relieve boredom and building fatigue—the urban life equivalent of battle fatigue.

Animal studies have already shown that severe overcrowding leads to curious and sinister behaviour disorders. If overcrowded environments affect animals, what will they do to people? How will it affect the family unit? Severe conditions of stress distort perception, personality and behaviour. Stress can be evoked experimentally by psychological conditions i.e. fear, anxiety, apprehension, crowding, even exposure to a novel environment. Will the over-population syndrome evoke the same things in the same way?

This syndrome may even demand a redefinition of the concept of 'normality'. What may appear strange now may have to be accepted as usual in the future. If people live in close physical proximity, homosexuality may become an acceptable basis of interpersonal relationships. There may be families which will be based on homosexual marriages with the partners adopting children. Whether these children would be of the same or opposite sex would have to be worked out.

A different concept of marriage may emerge. The banding together of several adults and children into a single family unit could provide insurance against feelings of isolation and loneliness. If one or two members of the family leave, the remaining members will still have each other for personal security. Marriage could involve more than one partner on grounds of practicality and available living area. These are some of the possibilities.

It is reasonable to speculate that the psychology of the individual in an over-crowded world will not remain the same as we understand it under prevailing conditions. We should wake up to the seriousness of the situation. The suggested projections about the doubling of the world's population by the year 2000 have become so familiar that they have lost much of their shock or concern value. (The present population of the world is about 3,500 million). Perhaps it is more startling and effective to consider that the number of people living in 1980 will exceed the sum total of individuals who have died since the beginning of man's recorded history. Equipping ourselves to cope with the urgent problem of the population explosion should be a matter of high priority.

Yet it is perplexing, to say the least, that so few scientists have been attracted to research into the psychological effects of birth, family planning and abortion-seeking behaviour. In spite of the dire predictions there are scientists, politicians, clergy and masses of people who feel it is still wrong to interfere with 'nature'. Presumably they feel that somehow the problem will resolve itself. One of the reasons why people respond in this way is because our age of over-specialization has produced 'professionals' who are so engaged in their own work that they are not interested in the general pattern of environmental development—even if the impending dangers are clearly spelled out.

If serious programmes are to be put into action, serious research must precede them. Here are some hypotheses which need investigation:—

What are the psychological factors related to an unwanted child?

What are the psychological disadvantages in having children?

What are the psychological factors which lead parents to want a child?

What are the psychological factors related to practising contraception?

Unless some serious work is done now I doubt that the quality of life has a chance of being rich, meaningful and emotionally satisfying in the future. If we are to solve or resolve some of the issues, we must limit our population growth. Or we must set new

directions in thinking. I believe that abortion, contraception and sterilization should be available to anyone who wants them. Otherwise it will be more than necessary to build 'floating cities' on the oceans which will relieve pressure on the land surfaces.

Over-population is not created simply because of a rapid increase in numbers of people. It does not necessarily depend on density either. Rather it is an increase in the quantity of people without an improvement in quality of living. This is the essence of the problem and unless it is realised we are heading for social suicide without personal, emotional survival. I am not a pessimist giving up hope of a future with unchangeable consequences; I am a discontented optimist.

If leading authorities in ecology, environmental policy, sociology and psychology, education and family planning co-ordinate their efforts, there is just a chance that they will not be too late. Of course the group will have to be more concerned with human growth than mechanical progress, with feeling communities instead of masses and with nurture not exploitation.

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