The world is in trouble. We are in trouble. If 2020 has taught us anything it’s that as the human race we need to start rethinking things. So, today I’m going to talk about community and the role it can play in the reshaping of our planet.

In 2017 the World Health Organisation published that depression is one of the most prominent mental health disorders worldwide. Affecting more than 264 million people globally, the disorder is caused by “complex interactions between social, psychological and biological factors.”

It is the nature of these “social factors” that is explored through my investigation, as social disconnection is a proven cause of depression. Social disconnection is defined by Cornwall and Waite as having a “small social network, infrequent participation in social activities… perceived isolation, loneliness and lack of social support”. Findings across various studies have uncovered that individuals who experience social disconnection tend to suffer higher rates of mortality, as well as infection, depression, and cognitive decline.

Understanding that social disconnection has definite implications on mental and physical health, contributing to millions of cases of depression globally, it is apparent that solutions must be sought.

So, research in the field of social connection is often limited by focussing on communities that are socially disconnected to try and gain insight into what is lacking. This investigation takes a different approach by identifying what makes socially connected communities connected, to examine how social connection can be fostered in order to reduce depression and increase quality of life.

Three communities that have been identified in anthropological research as highly socially connected are the Yawuru who are the traditional custodians in and around Broome, the Amish of North America, and rural Shaanxi farming communities in China. Various studies have identified that the subjective wellbeing of individuals within these communities is greater than that of individuals living a more Westernized way of life.

By analysing these communities this investigation sought to identify and create a list of factors that enable social connectedness. This list could serve as a reference point for individuals to consider when seeking to identify and address factors lacking in their own communities. Additionally, this research could substantiate the value of future research in the field of social connection.

So, onto the study itself. This investigation sought to answer the question; By looking at diverse, connected communities around the world, such as those of the Yawuru people, the Amish and the farming communities in north Shaanxi China, what social factors can be observed that contribute to social connections and promote a sense of belonging?

This investigation was a meta-ethnographic study of qualitative, expert written, peer-reviewed literature. A meta-ethnographic study is one that draws together data from multiple pre-existing studies to answer one’s own research question. The advantage of using a meta-analytic approach was to enable comparison between diverse groups through the repurposing of pre-existing data.

The whole process of the meta-analysis was broken into the five following phases. In phase one the research question was created.

Phase two involved study selection. The information required for each community needed to be in depth and observational of the way in which each community functioned. Because of this specificity the data gathered on each community primarily came from singular, extensive reports on each community - essentially resulting in a synthesis of three reports.

Phase three involved repeated reading and note takingwith the nifty Guideline of Literature Analysis, completed for each community. The guideline consists of various base factors that are influential in an individual’s wellbeing - as identified by the World Health Organisation’s biopsychosocial model of mental health which recognises that illness and health are a result of an interaction between biological, psychological and social factors.

The Guideline also includes base factors derived from The Characteristics of the Community and Resource Management Incentives to incorporate more community specific aspects of social connection. The purpose of this guideline was to direct analysis by ensuring observations remained focussed on the social dynamics of communities and provide a means of comparison between them. The reasoning behind the use of these models was that, for one; the biopsychosocial model is an internationally renowned understanding of wellbeing. And secondly, both provided easily accessible information that was exactly what was required to create the list of base factors needed for the guideline.

In phase four the three completed Guideline of Literature Analysis were juxtaposed, with each specific base factor compared - i.e. all “ideas of happiness” were compared. This was to identify factors that enable social connectedness. Each base factor was summarised to synthesise the relationships between studies, resulting in the summary of all thirteen base factors.

In phase five, observations were further refined and collated into a list of seven ‘social factors that contribute to social connections and promote a sense of belonging.’ A primary limitation of this approach was that observations were taken almost solely from one source per community, restricting the perspectives and ideas put forward. As such, an underlying assumption is that these sources are comprehensive and entirely accurate; a limitation that exists in all meta-ethnographic approaches. Also present was the risk of generalisation and romanticising of the various communities analysed. This potential for bias throughout the analysis was countered through the sole use of expert written, peer-reviewed literature and use of the Guideline of Literature Analysis. However, it still remains an overarching limitation that the created list is not entirely comprehensive nor absolute.

Regardless of these various limitations, this investigation effectively examined the role of social factors in the Yawuru, Amish and Shaanxi communities. The seven factors identified are as follows. For lack of time I won’t delve deeply into each aspect, but the principle ideas remain unchanged:

Community Independence and Self-sufficiency: The Shaanxi communities are typically very geographically and socially isolated due to the relative remoteness of the Shaanxi province. The Amish community isolate themselves from the greater world through a rejection of modern day technologies and their removal from external social networks. The Yawuru community has thousands of years of ancestral history living in Australia before and throughout the colonisation of their land.

Adaptability and Survival: The Yawuru continually face the ramifications of European colonisation. Rural Shaanxi has experienced a history of poverty, famine and war. The Amish faced religious persecution in 18th century Europe before immigrating to North America.

Reliance on and Strong Connection to the Land: Each community has a reliance on the land for its tangible produce and the self-sufficiency that it provides, as well as an emotional connection to and gratitude for the land.

Importance of Family: While the role of family varies between each community there is a consistent reliance on family for both practical and emotional support, for sharing of knowledge, labour and resources.

Community-Minded Altruism and Reliance on Community for Practical and Emotional Support: Acts of selflessness to help others are commonplace as it echoes the reciprocal community mindedness in each community.

Shared Beliefs and Goals: This presents itself through a strong recognition of beliefs and a manifestation of beliefs through actions. For instance the Amish community believe in doing what is right in the eyes of God, where the Yawuru believe in doing what’s right for the benefit of the land and community.

Traditions and Education that Perpetuate a Physical and Emotional Connection to Community: Various traditions and the nature of sharing knowledge to teach specific beliefs and practises is present in all three communities as a means to strengthen the dedication one has to their community.

The socially connected nature of the three communities provided a unique opportunity to gain insight into the social factors that contribute to social connection. However, the reliance on singular studies of each community impinged on the strength of the results. In future research more data should be included in the meta-analysis, or primary research strategies such as surveys and interviews of community members undertaken.

Ultimately, through consideration of the identified factors in day-to-day living, individuals and communities have the propensity to influence social connectedness, and thus depression. Overall, the results of this investigation prove that community analysis is an effective method for the creation of tangible solutions to social disconnection and depression.

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