

income professional class operating in both the national and international arenas fuels a demand for state-of-the-art office buildings, luxury residences, and luxury “consumption spaces.” Households and profit-making firms of more modest income, no matter how healthy they might be for the economy, are displaced. And this trend sets up a fundamental 21st-century urban rivalry: the gentrifiers vs. the displaced.

It’s been more than 30 years since President Gerald Ford turned down New York’s pleas for aid and earned the slightly unfair, if memorable, headline, “Ford to City: Drop Dead.” No one talks anymore about poor, sad, ailing New York—or London, Tokyo, Chicago, Hong Kong, Singapore, even Frankfurt. Everyone’s too busy servicing the international knowledge economy.

SOCIETY

Immigrating to Obesity

THE SOURCE: “Immigration and the American Obesity Epidemic” by Lingxin Hao and Julie J. H. Kim, in *International Migration Review*, Summer 2009.

IMMIGRATION AND THE INCIDENCE of obesity in the United States both started increasing around 1965, but don’t blame newcomers for the nation’s bulging bellies. Without mass immigration, America’s obesity crisis would be even worse.

The average immigrant is slimmer than the average native-born American and stays that way for some 10 years after coming to the

Immigrants to America help the national obesity numbers, at least for awhile.

United States, report Lingxin Hao, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, and Julie J. H. Kim, a Hopkins Ph.D. candidate. Part of the explanation is self-selection. Migrating from one country to another (even under good conditions) tests even the fittest, and those who take the risk tend to be in good health. And if immigrants get sick, they exhibit what sociologists call the “salmon-bias effect”—they head for home. Moreover, the exercise and nutrition patterns of immigrants stay in place for a few years after they emigrate, giving them an “immigrant advantage” before they embrace America’s fast-food lifestyle.

The typical native-born American male, 5’8” tall, weighs 187 pounds. This makes him officially seriously overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A man of that height should weigh 170 pounds, at most. His immigrant counterpart weighs, on average, 175 pounds. An immigrant woman of average stature (5’4”) is also about 12 pounds lighter than a corresponding native-born woman. Roughly 30 percent of Americans are obese, which is defined as weighing more than 205 pounds for men of typical height, and 180 for similar women. One’s body mass index, the formal measurement of healthy weight, tends to increase until age 60, then level off.

America would be better off if newcomers were inoculated against the national penchant for gobbling fries and shakes in front of the television. A shrewd public-health policy, Hao and Kim conclude, would aim to delay the erosion of the immigrant advantage.

SOCIETY

Damned Either Way

THE SOURCE: “Want to Lose Friends? Make Tough Choices” by Tom Jacobs, in *Miller-McCune News Blog*, July 23, 2009.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT KNEW from personal experience what it was like to be damned if you do and damned if you don’t. “Do what you feel in your heart to be right,” she said, for “you’ll be criticized anyway.” New research suggests she had it right. Elected officials cannot win when they have to choose between bad alternatives.

Given a choice between awarding child custody to either of two equally rotten parents, a judge takes heat no matter what the decision, according to a study conducted by Justin Kruger and Laura M. Kressel of New York University and Jeremy Burrus of Columbia. After students read a summary of a court case in which a judge, who ostensibly had no other choice, awarded custody to the parent who appeared to be the lesser evil, one group was informed of the actual outcome and the other was told the losing parent had won.

In both cases, the students evaluated the judge negatively. Their disapproval of the parents seemed to

“trickle down to the evaluations of the decision maker,” according to Tom Jacobs, a staff writer for *Miller-McCune*. In a second experiment, participants were told they had to wear a signboard with an offensive slogan: “Long Live Osama” or “Free Saddam.” (This was before Saddam Hussein was executed.) Their partner on the team, they were told, had decided which of the two slogans they would wear. Participants thought their partner had made a bad decision no matter which sign was picked (though they considered the Osama slogan slightly less repugnant).

Sometimes, the researchers say, no alternative is desirable, and in these instances decision makers absorb the opprobrium. The team noted that a plausible explanation is “focalism.” People focus on the (negative) features of the decision that was made rather than the even worse attributes of the alternative.

SOCIETY

Finding Happiness After Harvard

THE SOURCE: “What Makes Us Happy” by Joshua Wolf Shenk, in *The Atlantic*, June 2009.

ARLIE BOCK, A BRUSQUE Iowan who took over the Harvard University health services in the 1930s, had little patience with the medical establishment’s preoccupation with ill health. He wanted to analyze the forces that produce “successful living.” Selecting 268 students at Harvard (then all-male), he began one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies in history, tracking

students from the classes of 1942, ’43, and ’44. In 1967, psychiatrist George Vaillant stumbled on the largely forgotten study (now called the Harvard Study of Adult Development) and became the “chief curator of these lives” and the author of many books about them, writes Joshua Wolf Shenk, author of *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (2005).

By 1967, many of the men had become successful, some extraordinarily so. (Most remain anonymous, known by pseudonyms and case numbers.) Four ran for the U.S. Senate, one served in the cabinet, and another became a best-selling novelist. One, John F. Kennedy, became president. But 20 of the men had run into “severe psychiatric difficulties” as early as 1948, and by age 50 almost a third had at one time or another met Vaillant’s criteria for mental illness.

One of the original stars of the Harvard group got off to a good start, but by the time Vaillant tried to contact him he was living a dissolute life, drinking heavily and spouting Latin poetry in public (though his remarkable sense of humor was intact). He explained that he had discovered long-suppressed hostilities toward his illustrious family; others said he never grew up. Before long he was dead. But there was also “Ted Merton,” a “poetic and troubled young man” during his college years who attempted suicide after graduating from medical school. At 35, Merton had a spiritual experience and flowered; at 55, he was hospitalized for depression; a second bout at 60 cost him “his wife, his savings, and his job.” By and large, though, Vaillant says, Merton

managed a kind of emotional alchemy that turned adversity into creativity and human connections.

The Harvard men—about half of whom, now in their late eighties, are still alive—don’t fit yes/no categories of successful living. Their lives are too big, too strange, and too full of contradictions, Shenk says.

Vaillant sees the men in terms of their “adaptations” or “defense mechanisms,” the unconscious thoughts and actions that shape a person’s approach to life. These range from the psychotic to the immature (such as passive aggression) to the neurotic (such as intellectualization). The healthiest men exhibit “mature” adaptations. They react to life’s vicissitudes with altruism, humor, anticipation, suppression, and sublimation. Vaillant sums up their attitude with the story of a boy who awakens on Christmas morning to find his stocking full of horse manure and concludes that Santa must have left him a pony, if only he can find it.

Vaillant found a few things that don’t seem to matter to well-being. People who are shy and anxious as children suffer in young adulthood but are just as likely to turn out “happy-well” at 70 as their outgoing peers. There is no link between cholesterol levels at age 50 and health status in old age.

Warm relationships are key to successful aging. For example, 93 percent of the men who were thriving at 65 had been close to one of their siblings earlier in life. Once asked in an interview what he had learned from the study after more than 40 years, Vaillant replied: “That the only thing that really matters in life [is] your relationships to other people.”