

SPRINGER BRIEFS IN WELL-BEING AND
QUALITY OF LIFE RESEARCH

Ronald E. Anderson

Human Suffering and Quality of Life

Conceptualizing Stories and Statistics



Springer

SpringerBriefs in Well-Being and Quality of Life Research

For further volumes:

<http://www.springer.com/series/10150>

Ronald E. Anderson

Human Suffering and Quality of Life

Conceptualizing Stories and Statistics



Springer

Ronald E. Anderson
University of Minnesota
Wayzata, MN
USA

ISSN 2211-7644 ISSN 2211-7652 (electronic)
ISBN 978-94-007-7668-5 ISBN 978-94-007-7669-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7669-2
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013949247

© The Author(s) 2014

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed. Exempted from this legal reservation are brief excerpts in connection with reviews or scholarly analysis or material supplied specifically for the purpose of being entered and executed on a computer system, for exclusive use by the purchaser of the work. Duplication of this publication or parts thereof is permitted only under the provisions of the Copyright Law of the Publisher's location, in its current version, and permission for use must always be obtained from Springer. Permissions for use may be obtained through RightsLink at the Copyright Clearance Center. Violations are liable to prosecution under the respective Copyright Law.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

While the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication, neither the authors nor the editors nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein.

Printed on acid-free paper

Springer is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

Preface

The original intent of this little book is to take on four very big challenges: (1) a framework that makes it easier to think about suffering and measure it, (2) a compilation of available data on how much suffering exists in the world, (3) rationales for why people should become more aware of the vast volume of severe suffering around the world, and (4) justification for giving higher priority to the reduction of suffering in our personal, state, and global policy objectives. With these goals, you should not be surprised that the book looks at suffering from many different angles.

After 40 years of teaching sociology and research strategies at the University of Minnesota, I retired in order to just do research, travel, and volunteer work. Making this major life change forced me to confront questions of meaning, especially: What makes life worth living? What is the meaning of suffering? What can one do in later life to optimally contribute to ultimate concerns of human beings? My first major conclusion was that compassion is most needed to secure the human race. But after focusing on compassion for several years, I came to realize that the efficacy of compassion is constrained by the huge supply of suffering in the world, which only seems to be expanding.

When I started reading what others had learned about suffering, I discovered a void of knowledge and concluded that doing pioneering research on suffering would be the best way I could use my talents and experience. It has been exciting to discover some elements of suffering, which are as old as human consciousness itself.

This brief book of about 125 pages, follows the structure and format of all SpringerBriefs, of which there are thousands. In the SpringerBrief model, each chapter is like a separate article with its own abstract, keywords, footnotes, and references. This requirement, I believe, is a good one because it forces the author to make each chapter convey a complete statement of its own, but at the same time makes the chapters flow together so that the entire set is an integral whole.

The first chapter begins by explicitly defining some very different types of suffering from which a taxonomy emerged. People think about suffering in very different ways, depending upon their backgrounds in religion, local culture, and unique personal experiences. [Chapter 1](#) discusses eight ‘frames for suffering’ and [Chap. 2](#) supplies stories for each way of thinking about suffering. How suffering shapes peoples’ quality of life becomes clearer through these stories.

Statistics offer only fleeting glimpses of the distress and agony suffered by some in the course of everyday life. But in [Chap. 3](#), you will see how our taxonomy of suffering helps organize and add meaning to statistics on the health of American adults. People react differently to suffering, depending upon whether it is primarily pain, depression, anxiety, grief, existential suffering, or social suffering.

Before you read in [Chap. 3](#) how many American adults live with extreme suffering, guess the percentage. Of course, it depends on how one defines ‘extreme,’ but reflects on the question before and after digesting the statistics.

Another important question is how much extreme suffering affects people’s quality of life (QOL). The answer may surprise you. Finding so much suffering in a contemporary, affluent society raises the possibility that affluence itself, through lifestyles and beliefs produces types of suffering not typically found in poverty stricken nations.

[Chapter 4](#) shifts to a global perspective and offers pioneering indicators for both subjective and objective suffering country by country. Besides ranking countries by their degree of suffering, the chapter notes how social support networks seem to help people living in different cultures cope with suffering more easily.

Alternative approaches to the alleviation of suffering depend upon the type of suffering, but all types need to be addressed on both the individual and institutional levels. Data comparing nations as well as states in [Chap. 5](#) show the misalignment between suffering and available care resources that may help relieve those who suffer. A major finding is that global inequality is a major cause of suffering and widens gaps in care for those who suffer.

Working toward ending needless suffering is both a personal value and a public good that offers hope to those who suffer now or in the future. [Chapter 6](#) reviews the ethical grounds for alleviating suffering. It also discusses strategies for relief of suffering and notes how the relief of suffering has to be both an individual and a collective effort. Recommendations are offered for incorporating the relief of suffering more fully into social policy for development as well as for individual decision-making.

Contents

1	Conceptualizing Human Pain and Suffering	1
1.1	The Suffering Concept	1
1.2	A Taxonomy for Pain and Suffering	4
1.3	Frames for Thinking about Suffering.	6
1.4	Suffering as Punishment.	7
1.5	Suffering as Reward.	8
1.6	Suffering as Craving.	9
1.7	Suffering from Altruistic Action	9
1.8	Suffering as Natural Destiny	10
1.9	Suffering as Manageable	11
1.10	Relief of Suffering as Human Purpose.	11
1.11	Relief of Social Suffering as Progress in Quality of Life	12
1.12	Conclusions	12
	References.	13
2	Narrative Accounts of the Agony of Suffering	17
2.1	The Significance of Narratives of Pain and Suffering	17
2.1.1	Authenticity of Narratives of Pain and Suffering.	18
2.2	Narratives of Suffering on the Internet.	18
2.2.1	Suffering as Punishment.	20
2.2.2	Suffering as Reward.	20
2.2.3	Suffering as Craving.	22
2.2.4	Suffering from Sacrifice or Altruistic Actions	22
2.3	Suffering as Natural Destiny	23
2.4	Suffering as Pain Management	24
2.4.1	Relief of Suffering as Human Purpose.	24
2.4.2	Relief of Social Suffering as Progress in Quality of Life	26
2.5	Conclusions	27
	References.	28

3 Statistical Portrait of Suffering in America 29

3.1 Data for Measuring Suffering in the United States 30

3.2 Indicators of Specific Types of Suffering 30

 3.2.1 Physical Suffering 31

 3.2.2 Extreme Pain 33

 3.2.3 Mental Suffering. 34

 3.2.4 Anxiety 34

 3.2.5 Extreme Anxiety. 35

 3.2.6 Depression 35

 3.2.7 Extreme Depression 35

 3.2.8 Grief 35

 3.2.9 Existential Suffering. 36

 3.2.10 Social Suffering 36

 3.2.11 Any Suffering. 37

 3.2.12 Any Extreme Suffering. 38

3.3 Sex, Age, and Income Differences in Suffering 39

3.4 Quality of Life and Suffering 41

 3.4.1 Predicting Quality of Life. 44

3.5 Implications 44

3.6 Summary 45

3.7 Conclusions 45

References 47

4 Suffering on a Global Scale 49

4.1 Applying the Notion of Global Suffering. 49

4.2 Subjective Suffering 50

4.3 Types of Calamities Related to Suffering. 52

 4.3.1 Hunger (Nutrition Deprived) 54

 4.3.2 HIV Prevalence 55

 4.3.3 Internally Displaced Persons 55

 4.3.4 Refugees (Outflow) 55

 4.3.5 Infant Deaths (Under-age-5). 55

 4.3.6 Pollution-related Deaths. 55

 4.3.7 Disaster Victims 56

 4.3.8 Suicides 56

 4.3.9 Homicides. 56

 4.3.10 Civil War Deaths 56

 4.3.11 Poverty 56

 4.3.12 Corruption 57

4.4 Construction of an Objective Suffering Indicator 57

4.5 Multidimensional Suffering and Gender Inequality. 59

4.6 Multidimensional Suffering and Social Supports 61

4.7 Conclusions 66

References 67

- 5 World Suffering Expands as Gaps in Care Widen.** 69
 - 5.1 Alternative Approaches of Responding to Suffering 69
 - 5.2 The Care Divide 72
 - 5.2.1 Nations 73
 - 5.2.2 Rich Nations. 75
 - 5.2.3 States 76
 - 5.3 How the Rich Undermine Reduction of World Suffering 79
 - 5.4 Inequality and the Widening of Care Divides 81
 - 5.5 Inequality, Income Segregation and World Suffering 81
 - 5.6 Implications 83
 - References 84

- 6 Ending Preventable Suffering: Ethics and Social Change** 87
 - 6.1 Ethical Foundations for the Relief of Suffering 87
 - 6.2 Individual Actions to Relieve Suffering 89
 - 6.3 Institutional Change to Relieve Suffering 91
 - 6.4 Change in Social Policy for Aid and Welfare Programs 92
 - 6.5 Implications for Quality of Life Research 93
 - 6.6 Cutting Edge, Contentious Issues Related to Suffering 93
 - 6.6.1 The Relief of Suffering Versus Obligation to Sustain Life . . . 94
 - 6.6.2 The Relief of Suffering Versus Protection from Addiction . . . 94
 - 6.6.3 Suffering Relief Versus Economic Relief. 95
 - 6.6.4 Accountability and Responsibility for Suffering 95
 - 6.6.5 Is Human Progress Possible without Major Strides
in Relief of Suffering? 96
 - 6.7 Conclusion 97
 - References 98

- About the Author.** 101

- Index.** 103

Chapter 1

Conceptualizing Human Pain and Suffering

When we suffer, our quality of life declines—it is an intuitive idea. What is not so obvious, however, is that by intertwining suffering and quality of life in our *thinking*, we can better understand and cope with suffering (whether our own or others’). To begin pulling these concepts together, I highlight relevant social scientific literature and suggest eight frames or ways of thinking about and investigating human suffering. In later chapters, I will have examples from stories about suffering and statistics showing the spread of suffering, both national and global.

1.1 The Suffering Concept

Imagine yourself undergoing major surgery 200 years ago. While some cultures had used pain-relieving herbs and other natural substances for millennia, you are in Europe or America, where such palliatives are not yet used. You will not be given anesthesia (beyond, perhaps, some alcohol). Essentially, you are facing torture. This is what happened to Frances Burney, a wealthy English writer living in France in 1810. She left a vivid story of suffering as she described six surgeons’ work to remove her breast tumor. Journal entries of her unimaginable pain have been described by Dormandy (2006) and preserved by Hemlow (1975). Her pain, unchecked by any anesthesia, sears the page:

When the dreadful steel was plunged into my breast, I released an unremitting scream.... I felt the knife rackling against the breast bone, scraping it while I remained in torture.... When I opened my eyes I saw the good Dr. Larrey, pale nearly as myself, his face streaked with blood, and depicting grief, apprehension and almost horror (Hemlow 1975).

Burney’s recollection is a monument to the raw pain and suffering of both patients and doctors. The doctor’s suffering, resulting from compassion, attests to the reality of collective—or social—suffering.

For those of us living in an era of high-quality anesthetics and laser surgery, Burney’s agony reads like primitive depictions of hell. Through her words,

we empathize. Yet as you read this sentence, millions of people suffer in dark corners of the globe, just as millions have in the past, and, potentially, millions will in the future (Amato 1990). Every day, our fellow human beings face torture, rape, and excruciating trauma (Bourdieu et al. 2000; Dormandy 2006; Trachtenberg 2008; Vollman 2005).

Now, not all pain and suffering is extreme, bordering on the unbearable. Pain and suffering range from the infinitesimal to the unimaginably excruciating. And both pain and suffering may last seconds or lifetimes. They may be fleeting or chronic.

Pain and suffering may also be individual or social. Often we cut a finger, occasionally a friend dies, but such suffering is not distributed evenly across social strata, much less the globe (Anderson 2011, 2012; Bock 2011; Diener et al. 2009). While severe suffering from violence and injury occur more often in the Global South, particularly in pockets of poverty, studies in western societies generally conclude that at least 20 % of adults suffer from chronic pain, the reoccurrence of severe pain over several months or longer (Breivik et al. 2006; Chabal 2009; Collier 2007; Nagappan 2005; Kleinman 2009a; b; 2011). Suffering is pervasive, if not always shared.

In this book, the word ‘suffering’ will be used as an all-inclusive term, subsuming pain. However, Table 1.1, which identifies three categories of suffering and provides a brief entry of descriptors for each, categorizes pain as separate from other types of suffering. Our language is filled with words that imply affective or emotional responses to events or objects that result in negative feelings, many of which are listed in Table 1.1. For example, grief as a type of suffering is viewed by Charmaz and Jilligan (2006) as a composite of many emotions and cognitions including fear and sorrow.

In the spirit of Cassel (2004) and Chapman and Volinn (2005), who defined suffering as perceived threat or damage to a sense of self, here suffering is defined as distress resulting from threat or damage to one’s body or self-identity. Suffering can vary in intensity, duration, awareness and source. Physical suffering is the subset of distress resulting from threat or damage to one’s physical being, whereas mental suffering is distress perceived as originating in one’s cognitive or affective self-identity. Self-identity is the set of characteristics and their meanings observed when one looks at oneself.

Physical suffering is equated with pain, even though it often co-occurs with mental suffering (Black 2005; Carr et al. 2005; Livingston 1998; Morris 2002; Wilson et al. 2009), while mental suffering includes cognitive suffering (thoughts that produce suffering) and emotional suffering (Francis 2006).

For present purposes, social suffering is defined as suffering whose sources are social collectivities and/or social institutions. Social suffering, which will be discussed at much greater length in the next section, differs in that it refers to the social contexts that shape the suffering of both individuals and collectivities. Social suffering typically co-occurs with other types of suffering, results from social forces, and results in social change (Das et al. 2001; Farmer 1997; Kleinman 1988;

Table 1.1 Words associated with common types of suffering

Suffering type	Words for suffering
Physical suffering (Pain)	Agony, discomfort, excruciation, hurt, incapacitation, torture, torment, soreness, acute pain, chronic pain, extreme pain, excruciating pain, unimaginable pain
Mental suffering	Anguish, angst, anxiety, addiction, distress, troubled, craving, post-traumatic stress disorder, compulsive disorder, loss, mourning, grief, sadness, disgust, irritation, anger, rage, hate, contempt, jealousy, envy, frustration, heartbreak, fear, panic, horror, indignation, shame, guilt, remorse, regret, resentment, repentance, embarrassment, humiliation, boredom, apathy, confusion, disappointment, hopelessness, doubt, emptiness, homesickness, loneliness, rejection, pity, self-pity, nervousness, restlessness, minor depression, chronic depression, severe depression, hopelessness, self-worthlessness, spiritual confusion, purposelessness, other types of loss of meaning
Social suffering	Social exclusion, discrimination, ostracized, persecution, incapacitation, disability, shame (self-ostracized), distrust, relative deprivation, subjugation, atrocity, homelessness, unemployment, social rejection, discrimination, bullied, disability, blindness, deafness, bedridden, hunger, war, civil violence, survival risk factors

Kleinman et al. 1997; Nordgren et al. 2011; Wilkinson 2005a). Genocide, battlefield slaughters, and lynching are well-known examples. Research on social suffering has uncovered that those affected by such dreadful events suffer in part from a devastating loss of their identity as human beings (Bourdieu et al. 2000; Kleinman et al. 1997; Wilkinson 2005a, b).

Existential suffering (later combined with mental suffering) is the result of struggles with the meaning of one's existence (Langle 2008). This may seem like a lofty idea, but you might think of it as a struggle in which you question the meaning of your life (or life itself). A common course of existential suffering is confrontation with death and other threats to one's existence. Williams (2004) interviewed low-income cancer victims receiving end of life care. In many instances, the patients' suffering was compounded by wondering how their impending death could square with their beliefs about life's meaning. On top of that, some felt left out or treated as non-persons as death approached. Here is how a 42-year-old man described the experience:

People talk as if you're not there. One of mother's friends died of cancer last week, and people around me were talking all about the funeral, like they didn't even think it might bother me. It gets to me and makes me feel my life isn't worth anything compared to theirs (Williams 2004).

This narrative demonstrates how social and existential suffering may occur together, amplifying the degree of tragedy and suffering.