

[Eckersley, R. 2001, That's all well and good...', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June, *Spectrum*, pp.2-3.]

That's all well and good...

...but if society is becoming more prosperous, why do young people seem less happy?
Richard Eckersley looks at how science is struggling to sift the data from day-to-day reality.

Late last year I asked Year 11 students at a private boys school whether they'd ever thought about the meaning or purpose of life. Almost all raised their hands. I asked if they had ever felt that life seemed meaningless or pointless. Quite a few –between a third and a half – indicated they had. Most admitted to having some sort of spiritual or religious belief, but none volunteered a description of that belief.

The boys' responses don't fit neatly into the popular images of young people today – either the portraits of happy, hedonistic teenagers and young adults, revelling in the freedoms and opportunities of contemporary life, or the pictures of distress and disillusion amidst material excess, social inequity and spiritual dessication.

What is emerging from the scientific research into well-being are the subtleties, complexities and depths of the human psyche, and of the personal, social and spiritual ties that lie behind our health and happiness. At the same time, science is straining to define and differentiate these things. Our politics and economics have barely begun to come to grips with them.

If we want to assess the state of society, a good place to begin is with young people and how well they are faring. There is growing evidence that developmental stages and transition points in life, from before birth to adolescence, are crucial to adult health and well-being. What happens at these times matters for life, and it makes the young susceptible to the effects of social failing and disruption.

However, research is throwing up more troubling questions than providing definitive answers; findings are fragmented and contradictory. Some surveys and commentaries indicate the young are thriving in the postmodern world of rapid change and uncertainty, others that they are anxious and apprehensive.

Differing views can reflect different disciplinary frameworks, different political ideologies, and selective or partial use of research findings. Attempts to lay blame get confused with efforts to explain. Some analyses focus on marginalised youth, others (such as in the current debate about boys' education) on gender. Many commentaries on young people are framed in generational terms: conflict and competition between Baby Boomers and Gen X; periodic 'moral panics' by adults about youth; or historical cycles.

Judith Bessant and Rob Watts, two Melbourne youth researchers, say that concerns about young people as 'victims of change' or 'sources of misrule' are a recurring historical myth unsupported by empirical evidence. They say they are arguing 'against some of the widespread generalisations made about young people as problems or victims', but their thesis goes well beyond this, to the point of denying that the myth has any basis in reality.

This view is also reflected in some recent US writing, with the added dimension that if there has been a youth crisis, then we are over the worst, and things are now improving (there is

some evidence of this in Australia, but not yet much). Mike Males argues in his 1999 book, *Framing Youth: 10 Myths About the Next Generation*, that American teenagers today are better behaved than adults today, than today's adults when they were young, and than adults have a right to expect given the way young people are treated. Rates of serious crime, drug abuse, self-destructive behaviour and school failure among youth today are lower than they were 20 years ago.

David Brooks, author of an influential 2000 analysis of contemporary America, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, takes the upbeat appraisal further in a recent essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Drawing mainly on interviews with students at Princeton and other Ivy League universities, he presents an approving image of happy, incredibly hard-working conformists who don't have a rebellious or alienated bone in their bodies: respectful, obedient, responsible, clean, generous, bright and good-natured.

Brooks admits he is writing about an elite, but he nevertheless states that they are 'not entirely unlike' other young Americans. Princeton reflects America, he says, and 'in most ways it reflects the best of America'. Both Males and Brooks mention the work of historians William Strauss and Neil Howe, who in a 1997 book, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*, argue that history runs in cycles of 80-100 years, with each cycle having four turnings, and each turning being associated with a different generational type.

The post-war Baby Boomers are classic prophets, indulged and 'spirited'; Generation X, born during the second half of the 60s and the 70s, are typical nomads, neglected and 'bad'; today's teens, the Millennials, born in the 80s, are the next heroes, protected and 'good'. The fourth generation in the current cycle, yet to be born, are the artists, suffocated and 'placid'. Brooks notes Howe and Strauss surveyed young people for their latest book, *Millennials Rising*, published last year, and found them to be generally hard-working, cheerful, earnest and deferential.

The positive view is supported by recent suggestions that even a disturbing trend like rising youth suicide may not mean what it seems to mean – rising unhappiness. Jim Barber, professor of social welfare at Flinders University, recently compared youth suicide rates with adolescent self-esteem, school adjustment and social adjustment in seven countries, both Asian and Western. He found that the higher the level of self-esteem and adjustment, the higher the male suicide rate.

I examined associations between youth suicide rates in up to 21 developed nations and a wide range of social, economic and cultural characteristics, and found that male suicide rates were highest in the most individualistic countries. The more personal freedom and control over their lives young people felt they had, for example, the higher the suicide rate.

Given other positive correlations between individualism and happiness and life satisfaction, my results, like Barber's, seem to suggest that suicide is higher in happier societies and, presumably, rises as life gets better. Possible explanations include that suicidal behaviour increases when unhappy people have fewer outside sources on which to blame their misery; that the greater happiness of most increases the misery of the few; or that social changes such as increasing individualism are good for the majority but bad for a minority.

Barber says his findings suggest that when vulnerable young people perceive those around them to be better off than they are, their distress is magnified and their susceptibility to

suicide is increased. 'If you are a depressed, unhappy kid in a country where you are surrounded by kids who are happy and well-adjusted, then you have a double problem – you are depressed and you are isolated as well.' While these explanations are plausible, I doubt they are right.

A detailed analysis of these perspectives is beyond the scope of this article. However, a core element is the notion that the vast majority of young people are okay and doing well, and that those in trouble are a small, discrete minority. The opening article in the current, 'youth' issue of *VicHealth Letter*, published by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, begins: 'Most young people, an estimated 90 per cent, live healthy, happy lives and make the transition into adulthood smoothly'. Consistent with this positive interpretation, surveys do show that about nine in ten young Australian say they are healthy, happy and satisfied with their lives.

Yet a recent Victorian study found 25-40 per cent of students aged 11-18 experienced in the previous 6 months feelings of depression, worries about weight, worries about self-confidence, troubles sleeping, and not having enough energy. A survey of students aged 11-15 in 28 Western countries found that while the great majority (over 90 per cent in many nations) reported feeling healthy and happy, significant minorities (reaching majorities for some countries, ages and complaints) also admitted to 'feeling low' and having headaches and stomach aches at least once a week, and to feeling tired most days of the week.

Another Victorian study of year 7, 9 and 11 students showed 23 per cent of girls and 12 per cent of boys reported 'high levels of depressive symptoms'. In a large Queensland survey, 52 per cent of 15-24-year-olds had experienced at least one episode of depression in their lives (defined as 'a period of feeling sad, blue or depressed that lasted for two weeks or more'), and either 34 per cent or 18 per cent were currently depressed, depending on the 'cut-off' point in the depression scale used in the research.

A study of Queensland university undergraduates found almost two thirds admitted to some degree of suicidal thoughts or behaviour in the previous 12 months, at least to the extent of feeling that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up'. Almost a quarter admitted to suicide-related behaviour, including telling someone they wanted to kill themselves or attempting it.

A large survey of women's health in Australia has found that young women reported the highest levels of stress, were often tired, and were over-concerned with their weight and body shape. A long-term study of four representative cohorts of young Australians suggests declining well-being, based on a nine-item subjective well-being index.

These findings are mirrored in public perceptions of life for young people today. When, two years ago, I polled almost 100 teachers in ACT colleges (years 11-12) on whether they thought the social and emotional well-being of young people in Australia was getting better or worse, 81 per cent said it was getting worse. In a 1999 US survey of how life in America today compared with the 1950s, teenagers were one of only two groups (the other being farmers) for whom a clear majority of Americans (56 per cent) thought life today was worse. Life for children also rated poorly, with only 46 per cent saying it was better today.

The point about these comparisons is to show that the picture of young people's well-being can depend crucially on the questions asked or the indicators used. More specifically, they

show measures of self-reported health, happiness and satisfaction do not present an adequate or accurate account of health and well-being.

Overall, the evidence shows the prevalence of social and psychological problems has increased among young people and is higher than in older age groups. It does not support the view that there is a small group of troubled youth clearly segregated from the mainstream, or majority, of young people who are happy, healthy and thriving.

The distinctions between them are often of degrees; there are gradients of disturbance, distress and discomfort that include a large minority of young people today, perhaps even a majority at some time in their lives. Regardless of whether we look at crime, depression, drug use, or suicidal thought and behaviour, we find these gradients in the severity and prevalence of youth problems.

Nor does the evidence indicate that those at greatest risk to their health and their lives are all located, or even heavily concentrated, among the most materially disadvantaged. While, generally speaking, there are socio-economic gradients in health - worse health at the lower end of the social scale, better at the top - the relationship is not consistent and clear-cut, and varies according to the cause of death and gender.

Let me be clear about what I am saying here. It is not to give the impression of universal, serious pathology, or to 'medicalise' or 'problematise' common human emotions and experiences. It is to show that there are links between even extreme personal distress and more prevalent, but less serious, suffering, and that the sources of these conditions can be traced to defining qualities of our societies. In other words, these sources are social and pervasive as well as personal and specific, and problems must be addressed at both levels. Youth suicide represents the tip of a large iceberg of suffering, not a tiny island of misery in an ocean of happiness.

My interest in these issues is primarily not to identify why one individual and not another has a problem or disorder, which can then be treated, but to explore the social significance of population patterns and trends. 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide,' the French writer, Albert Camus, wrote. 'Judging whether life is, or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.'

So what lies behind the social and psychological problems associated with being young these days? We don't really know. Disadvantage, poverty and unemployment may play a role but, as I've already indicated, their importance is unclear and they don't appear to explain the trends in these problems. Changes in family life, including increased conflict, abuse and neglect, and in adolescent transitions are likely factors.

In a major international review, two British researchers, Michael Rutter, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and David Smith, a criminologist, call for further investigation of the theory that shifts in moral concepts and values are among the causes of increased psychosocial disorder. They note, in particular, 'the shift towards individualistic values, the increasing emphasis on self-realisation and fulfilment, and the consequent rise in expectations'.

British sociologists, Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, say that 'the processes of individualisation, coupled with the stress which develops out of uncertain transitional

outcomes, have implications for the health of all young people'. They note the increased sources of stress 'which stem from the unpredictable nature of life in high modernity'. These include the ongoing sense of doubt, the heightened sense of insecurity, the increased feelings of risk and uncertainty, and the lack of clear frames of reference that mark young people's world today.

While traditional forms of inequality remain, they say, even young people from privileged social backgrounds worry about failure and the uncertainty surrounding their future. Conversely, those from disadvantaged backgrounds may feel that the risks they face are personal and individual rather than structural and collective.

Individualism could impact on youth suicide and other problems through its effect on specific social institutions and functions, such as the family and child-rearing. In my analysis, for example, both youth suicide and individualism were negatively correlated with sense of parental duty (it is 'parents' duty is to do their best for their children even at the expense of their own well-being') – that is, suicide and personal autonomy were greater in those countries where a smaller proportion of the parental generation agreed with this statement.

Individualism's effects may go further than this, however. Western societies – and some more than others – may be taking this trait to the point where it can become more broadly dysfunctional, to both society and the individual. In other words, these societies are promoting a cultural norm of autonomy that is unrealistic, unattainable or otherwise inappropriate. They project images and raise expectations of individual freedom, choice and opportunity, and of the happiness these qualities are supposed to deliver, which are increasingly at odds with human needs and social realities.

Brooks' interviews with Princeton students casts an interesting light on these issues. He sees them as the products of an era of parental protection, prosperity and peace. They are 'the most honed and supervised generation in human history', he says. In contrast to the freedoms granted young people in the 1960s and 1970s, this is a group whose members have spent most of their lives in structured, adult-organised activities. 'The kids have looked upon this order and decided that it's good'.

Brooks does qualify his positive view. He notes the growth in medicating children with disruptive behaviour with Ritalin and similar drugs, and the rise in the proportion of college freshmen who say they feel 'overwhelmed'. The rules are growing stricter by the year. The students appear to be instructed on just about every aspect of life, except character and virtue; and that they are lively conversationalists on just about any topic, except moral argument. Perhaps the busyness and the striving are to compensate for what is missing, he suggests.

The students are highly goal-oriented. Activities are rarely an end in themselves, but the means for self-improvement, resume-building – for climbing, step by step, 'the continual stairway of advancement'. There is little time or energy for serious relationships, it seems, or for national politics and crusades. 'People are too busy to get involved in larger issues,' a student journalist tells Brooks. 'When I think of all that I have to keep up with, I'm relieved there are no bigger compelling causes'.

Jean Twenge, an American psychologist, recently examined survey data from 1952 to 1993 and found large, linear increases in anxiety and neuroticism in children and college students in

the US. 'The average American child in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s,' she notes.

Twenge ascribes the increased anxiety to low social connectedness and high environmental threat (fears of violent crime, AIDS, nuclear war etc), both of which she says are linked to increasing individualism. She says there may have been improvements in some areas since the early 1990s, but not in others. The past year has seen a surge in public and professional concern in the US over the harmful pressures on children associated with 'hyper-parenting' and increasingly organised, structured lives – a trend also apparent in Australia.

Brooks spoke to those who have thrived on this regimen. But even these high-flyers will, sooner or later (and especially when they stumble on the stairway), wonder what they are striving so hard to achieve, and whether it is worth the effort. They will ask what their lives mean.

In the lives of these privileged, clever students – just as in the lives of the poor, dispossessed and despairing - we see reflected the values and priorities of our societies. Much of the research literature, the contradictions notwithstanding, suggests these values and priorities are the very opposite of what promotes personal and social well-being.

Still, there are grounds for optimism. While science may never give us clear-cut recipes for social improvement, it is contributing to a growing willingness to question and discuss what, all things considered, makes a better life. It is better that we obtain imperfect knowledge about the important issues of our times than precise answers to what are, in the overall scheme of things, trivial questions.

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