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**PORTRAITS OF YOUTH:
Understanding young people's relationship with the future**

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Young people's relationship with the future is complex and contradictory. Some surveys and commentaries suggest most are optimistic, others that they are pessimistic. Some indicate they are adapted to the postmodern world of rapid change and uncertainty, others that they are anxious and apprehensive. Some of these differences can be readily explained; others require more thorough analysis. We need a better understanding of this relationship if we are to improve both young people's personal well-being and humanity's prospects. It may help if we distinguish between three different images - modern, postmodern and transformational.

A new view of young people seems to be gaining currency in Western popular culture. It portrays them as riding the crest of a wave of change - rushing into a dazzling, turbulent, high-tech future - while adults flounder in its wake.

For example, Douglas Rushkoff, in *Playing the Future*, suggests today's kids are unfazed by the pace of change and the technologies that give adults anxiety attacks.¹ These 'screenagers', as he calls them, are flexible and adaptable. They have learned to thrive on chaos, uncertainty and insecurity in ways their parents never have. Rushkoff likens this to an immigrant family: the children rapidly learn the language, customs and values of their adopted country, while their parents and grandparents struggle to make the transition.

This 'postmodern' perspective of young people also emerges from some recent surveys, and it is the image reflected in a lot of youth advertising. They are the first global generation: confident, optimistic, well-informed and educated, technologically sophisticated. They are self-reliant (even self-contained), street-wise, enterprising and creative, fast on their feet, keeping their options open.

In other words, they are attuned to the postmodern world: adapted to its transience, fragmentation, and pluralism; comfortable with its absence of absolutes and blurred distinctions between real and unreal; as at home in cyberspace as in physical space; equipped for its abundant opportunities, exciting choices and limitless freedoms - and its hazards and risks.

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A second view is more conventional, but still largely positive. This 'modern' portrait suggests most young people successfully negotiate the transitions of adolescence to become well-adjusted adults.² Most cherish their families, enjoy life and are confident they'll get what they want out of it - a job they like, travel, a partner and eventually a family of their own. Yes, more these days may be turning to crime, abusing drugs, suffering depression or eating disorders, even taking their own lives, but they are a small minority (on which the media tend to focus) - victims, so it is said, of their personal situation and circumstances. A different spin on this perspective is that, down through the ages, adults have always fretted about youth, seeing them as an issue or a problem, and nothing much has changed.

Then there is a third, much darker, perspective. This 'transformational' portrait (so called because of the social transformation it suggests is required) reveals young people as deeply cynical, alienated, pessimistic, disillusioned and disengaged.² Many are confused and angry, uncertain of what the future holds and what society expects of them. While they may continue to work within 'the system', they no longer believe in it, or are willing to serve it. From this perspective, the suicidal, the depressed, the drug-addicted and the delinquent represent the tip of an iceberg of psychological pain and distress that includes a substantial proportion, perhaps even a majority, of young people today.

How do we make sense of these very different portraits of youth? I should note here that some futures writing distinguishes between two primary futures images: the more personal and optimistic 'modern' outlook, and the more pessimistic, global 'postmodern' view.³ However, the emergence of a largely positive 'postmodern' perspective and the 'transformational' nature of young (and older) people's preferred futures have prompted me to use a different nomenclature to describe three different images.

Also, I should stress that while some survey findings and commentaries are dominated by one or another of these perspectives, others reveal elements of two, or all three. For example, the 'Teenmood' survey of teenagers in 30 countries identifies a 'global teen generation' characterised by four moods: alienated, cynical, experimental and savvy.⁴ 'The New World Teen Study' of 44 countries reported similar findings: "Anticipating a future planet with much to fear and no real safety net, the world's teens are exhibiting a new sense of self-reliance as they reject tradition and forge new strategies for creating happy lives".⁵

In these broad-ranging studies, we can detect evidence of all three portraits: adaptability and resilience; conventional dreams of career, family and happiness; and anxiety and pessimism about the future. However, there is often little, if any, analysis of how the different images relate to each other, and what the findings mean for personal and social well-being. Many are conducted by marketing and advertising agencies, whose primary interest is in youth as consumers, and this is reflected in the analysis. (This can give the studies a disturbingly amoral flavour: what young people think of the future of the planet is wrapped up with questions about their favourite TV commercial, celebrities and whether they eat pizzas or use acne medication. Coca

Cola once used teenage angst about the world as part of its marketing strategy for a new soft drink.)

To some extent, all the portraits reveal something about young people and their world, with each perspective focusing on different dimensions of their lives. Some of the obvious differences can be explained. There are the contradictions inherent in modern Western youth and their upbringing: many are materially indulged, but morally abandoned; we demand too much of them in some respects, too little in others; they can be both worldly and dependent beyond their years.

The optimism and confidence they project can be deceptive. David Cannon, who surveyed more than 1,100 young, mainly higher-educated North Americans and Europeans, notes (especially about the former) that they give “an illusion of durability - that they can handle more than they actually can. Inside the confident shell is a world of fear and uncertainty that no-one sees except for strangers, in the form of counsellors.... When Generation X loses it, they can lose it big. Happy, confident high flyers can turn into deeply depressed and confused individuals in an instant.”⁶

Most people claim to be content in their personal lives and optimistic about their own future, even while professing concern and pessimism about wider society and the fate of the planet. The ‘modern’ view reflects this domain, focusing on the more immediate, personal aspects of young people’s world.

Age may also be a factor. Children laugh and play, even in the midst of war and disaster. Recent Australian research shows that both the personal and global views become more negative as young people grow up and leave the relative security of home and school to venture out into the wider world. For example, one survey found that while most adolescents were happy with their lives, felt confident things would improve in the future, and believed their life had purpose and meaning, there was a 10-13-percentage-point decline in positive responses between 12-14 and 15-16 (the upper age range).⁷ In another study of personal concerns and aspirations, the Australian Commission for the Future found that “at 15 youth are optimistic and positive. By 25 many have become somewhat disillusioned and rudderless.”⁸ David Hicks has also reported decreasing optimism with increasing age among UK students (more so with global futures than personal).⁹ However Anita Rubin found in her study of Finnish youth that lower secondary students were more pessimistic than upper secondary and vocational school students.¹⁰

Beyond these explanations, however, there remain fundamental contradictions between the ‘postmodern’ and ‘transformational’ perspectives that warrant further analysis.

The ‘postmodern’ view does reveal some of the ways in which young people are responding and adapting to their social and cultural environment. Undoubtedly, there are aspects of postmodernity that are fascinating and offer exciting opportunities. But to my mind this image is too glib, too superficial. It is an image created and promoted by a technology- and media-driven consumer culture that it helps to sustain. It ignores young people’s deeper feelings and needs, and overlooks the growing evidence of the damage our way of life is doing to them.

Expressed as a celebration of a brave new world, which it often seems to be, it appears oblivious of the reality of people's lives and of a world that is becoming more crowded, competitive, degraded, depleted, divided and violent - a world where both social and natural systems will be pushed to their limits, and possibly beyond. Even where potential problems are acknowledged, the historical trajectory is assumed to be fixed; adaptation is the only option.

If the 'postmodern' and 'modern' portraits suggest we can continue on our present path of progress, with some continued fine-tuning, the third, 'transformational' portrait indicates the need for radical change in social direction. It shows that modern (and postmodern) society is becoming increasingly hostile to our well-being, as clearly evident from the trends in psychosocial disorders in young people, and from their own attitudes, hopes and expectations. Major changes in our way of life, goals and priorities will be needed.

I have concentrated on this perspective in my own work because it seems to offer more insight into the human condition - into who we are and where we are going.² I often find it hard to reconcile this portrait with my own every-day experience of young people - for example, the playful children with their chillingly apocalyptic images of the future of humanity. But I hesitate to dismiss those images as meaningless or insignificant. What affects us most profoundly is often not what is revealed, but what lies deep in our psyche. And our destiny will be determined more by the subtle, but powerful, cultural forces that influence how we feel about ourselves, each other and the future than by, say, the measures of economic performance with which we are currently so obsessed.

At this deeper level, we need to look at the broad role played by modern western culture - notably its failure to provide an adequate framework of hope, meaning, and moral values in our lives. If young people place great store in their individuality, as surveys suggest, it may be because it is one of the few things left to them to believe in. Martin Seligman, an American psychologist, has said that one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self, and the larger that entity, the more meaning you can derive.¹¹ "To the extent that it is now difficult for young people to take seriously their relationship to God, to care about their relationship to the country, or to be part of a large and abiding family, meaning in life will be very difficult to find. The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning."

Young people are aware of what is missing in their lives at this level. The Australian Commission for the Future study found they believed Australian society lacked leadership, vision, clear morals or values, and had become a spiritual vacuum.⁸ Such studies reveal a very different outlook from those that portray youth as eagerly embracing a postmodern future. The Commission study says: "Youth seem unusually apathetic about the future. They are not negligent or ignorant of the challenges; they just feel powerless to do anything about it. It is a sense of being disenfranchised and disengaged, awaiting the outcome of events rather than anticipating a role in them."

The ‘transformational’ perspective also shows there is another side to the ready acceptance and enjoyment of technology that is central to the ‘postmodern’ view. The Commission study found young people were powerfully influenced by the perception of rapid technological development, noting: “The sense of dramatic change caused by technology provokes in them a strong sense of uncertainty, anxiety and even foreboding. Technological change is not seen as liberating but as yet another obligatory hurdle.”

Similarly, a study of 15-24-year-olds by the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council (ASTEC), which I proposed, planned and participated in, found many young people had profound misgivings about technology’s growing domination of our lives.^{12,13} The number who believe science and technology have had more benefits than disadvantages has fallen, not risen, in the past decade, and they are now a minority. Young people are not so much *against* science and technology: they acknowledge their importance in achieving a preferred future, and almost 70 per cent said science and technology offered the best hope for meeting the challenges ahead. But they are astute enough to realise science and technology are tools, and their impacts depend on who controls them and whose interests they serve.

They *expect* to see new technologies used further to entrench and concentrate wealth, power and privilege: for example, they were almost twice as likely to believe that governments would use new technologies to watch and regulate people more as they were that these technologies would empower people and strengthen democracy. They *want* to see new technologies used to help create closer-knit communities of people living a sustainable lifestyle: for example, they recognised the potential for advances in information and communication technologies to facilitate the creation of overlapping communities - virtual and real, global and local - and the possibility of a sustainable way of life through greater use of alternative energy technologies and renewable resources.

This brings me to another crucial issue: Young people’s views on science and technology are embedded in a broader social context which changes markedly between their dreams and expectations. And their preferred futures are ‘transformational’ rather than ‘postmodern’.

The ASTEC study found young people’s hopes for Australia are not only very different from their expectations, but also different from what they are promised under current priorities. The belief that life will improve, nationally and globally, is a minority position. More than half believed that the 21st century was more likely to be “a bad time of crisis and trouble” than “a new age of peace and prosperity”. Only a third believed the quality of life in Australia would be better in 2010 than it was now.

Their dreams for Australia are of a society that places less emphasis on the individual, competition, material wealth and enjoying ‘the good life’, and more on community and family, cooperation and the environment. Some expressed their wishes in terms of a greater recognition of the ‘natural’, ‘human’ or ‘spiritual’ aspects of life. These findings are broadly consistent with Elise Boulding’s concept of a ‘baseline future’ as discussed recently in this journal by David Hicks.¹⁴

The ASTEC study shows, as does the work of Hicks and others, that, given the opportunity, young people are able to move beyond their pessimism and cynicism. Most of those involved in the study tackled the task of creating visions of a preferred future with energy and enthusiasm. Their visions reflected a surprising degree of altruism and idealism. In media interviews, it was suggested to me that the preferred futures represent ‘motherhood’ statements with which no-one would disagree. The implication is that the findings signify nothing more than that we all have dreams for a better world which we never expect to come true, and that we are all prepared to be generous, just and green, as long as it is only in our dreams. Maybe. But it seems to me that we ignore such dreams at our peril: theirs is a vision young people might be prepared to ‘sign on’ for, and work towards, in a way they are clearly not prepared to do with the visions of relentless economic and technological determinism that we currently hold up to them.

The contradictions between the ‘postmodern’ and ‘transformational’ views may in part reflect a tension between the real and ideal in the hearts of today’s youth. Surveys suggest they appear to be adopting attitudes and values they believe are demanded by the world they live in and the future they expect - mistrust, cynicism, self-reliance, detachment, materialism, impatience etc - not those needed to achieve the world they want. This possibility reinforces the importance to young people of opportunities to envision alternative and preferred futures.

Rushkoff draws an analogy with migrants; let me draw one with homeless youth. At one level street kids can be described as savvy, self-reliant, resourceful, adapted to their world. Yet it is a world characterised by high levels of drug abuse, crime and violence, sexual exploitation, mental illness and suicide. What street kids want most of all are caring families and trusting relationships. No-one would suggest theirs is an acceptable or happy situation.

These contradictions and tensions need to be acknowledged. To represent young people as comfortable with the ‘postmodern’ world - even enthusiastic about it - when this is not true, risks fuelling their cynicism, alienation and disillusion. We need to deepen public, political and educational discourse to consider these fundamental issues.

There is more at stake here than the well-being of young people, important as this is. In his acclaimed BBC television series, *Civilisation*, the historian, Kenneth Clark, observes that civilisation, however complex and solid it seems, is really quite fragile.¹⁵ In the concluding episode, after reviewing thousands of years of the rise and fall of civilisation, he warns that “it’s lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilisation. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs”.

Notes and references

1. Rushkoff, D. *Playing the future: How kids’ culture can teach us to thrive in an age of chaos*. HarperCollins, 1996.
2. I have discussed youth issues, attitudes and views of the future, including findings of different studies and surveys and the possible implications for personal and social well-being, in the

following:

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3. For example, the modern/postmodern distinction between personal and global expectations is mentioned briefly in the survey results of the Millennium Project (http://nko.mhpc.edu/millennium/Millennium_Project.html) and is used by Anita Rubin, of the Finland Futures Research Centre, in her study of Finnish students (personal communication).
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7. Zubrick, S. R. et al. *Western Australian child health survey: developing health and well-being in the nineties*. Perth, Western Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Institute for Child Health Research, 1995.
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9. Hicks, D. A lesson for the future: Young people's hopes and fears for tomorrow. *Futures*, 1996, **28** (1), 1-13.
10. Rubin, A. Finland Futures Research Centre. Personal communication, 1996.
11. Seligman, M. E. P. *Why is there so much depression today? The waxing of the individual and the waning of the commons*. In *Contemporary psychological approaches to depression - theory, research and treatment* (Ingram, R. E., ed). Plenum Press, New York 1990.
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13. Eckersley, R. Dreams and expectations - young Australians' views of the future. *Youth Studies Australia*, 1996, **15** (3), 11-17.
14. Hicks, D. Retrieving the dream: How students envision their preferable futures. *Futures*, 1996, **28** (8), 741-749.
15. Clark, K. *Civilisation*. Four-volume video series. BBC Enterprises Ltd 1993.