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## **The state and fate of nations: Implications of subjective measures of personal and social quality of life**

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**Abstract:** The equation of ‘more’ with ‘better’ – of standard of living with quality of life – is at the heart of a growing international debate about indicators of progress. At one level, the debate is about the adequacy of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as the dominant indicator of national performance. However, the debate also reaches far beyond this question to challenge conventional thinking about progress. Quality of life includes both objective and subjective elements, so indicators of progress should include measures of how people feel about their lives. Drawing mainly on Australian data – but also on US and international studies - this analysis examines and differentiates between subjective measures of *personal* and *social* quality of life, and discusses their use in evaluating whether life is getting better - or worse.

**Key words:** happiness, life satisfaction, progress, quality of life, subjective well-being.

### **Introduction**

A defining feature of modern Western culture is the belief in progress, the expectation that life gets better. So, is life improving? How we answer the question depends crucially on how we define and measure ‘a better life’.

Modern industrial societies have tended to equate standard of living with quality of life because increased wealth allowed people to ‘buy’ greater well-being. The equation of more with better - of prosperity with happiness – in defining progress is coming under critical scrutiny in the research literature, but remains largely unquestioned in mainstream political debate. At one level, the issue is the adequacy of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as the dominant measure of a nation’s performance, relative to both the past and other nations. GDP, the total value of goods and services produced by the market economy, was never intended to be a measure of overall national well-being. The fundamental assumptions about growth in GDP – including that it enhances quality of life - are rarely highlighted or explored at a political level.

However, the scrutiny also reaches far beyond this issue to challenge conventional thinking about progress, what it means and how it should be measured. Measurements matter. They influence people’s perceptions and political priorities, so their accuracy, validity and comprehensiveness are important. For government, poor measures, or the poor choice of measures, lead to poor policy because policies are designed to influence the measures. Good indicators are a prerequisite for good policy.

The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, declared in a speech to a World Economic Forum Dinner in Melbourne in March 1998 that: 'The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual (economic) growth rate of over 4% on average during the decade to 2010' (Howard 1998). The Government's strategic economic objectives were pursued not as ends in themselves, he said, but as the means for achieving more jobs, higher living standards and an effective social safety net. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister clearly set the rate of economic growth as the prime benchmark by which to judge his Government's performance. Four of the six priorities Howard set out in his speech related to the 'growth' objective. The other two, dealing with social and environmental issues, were essentially compensatory – that is, they were aimed at offsetting the costs of growth.

The Australian Government is not alone in placing so much emphasis on growth, in believing it to be a measure of all things. Its view is fairly representative of governments the world over. If Australians were to sustain this rate of economic growth, they would be, on average and in real terms, twice as wealthy in about 20 years as they are now (and ten times as wealthy as they were 100 years ago). On present trends - at least as measured by earned income - most of the new wealth would go to those already wealthy. Should this really be the top priority of a nation?

If progress is about improving quality of life, indicators of progress should attempt to measure quality of life, not just standard of living. The exercise has its difficulties. Quality of life is, clearly, subjective as well as objective – a matter of opinion as well as of fact. On the face of it, survey findings about people's opinions on quality of life are confusing and contradictory. The most striking contradictions occur between those studies that measure how people feel about their own lives (*personal* quality of life) and those that assess how they feel about what's happening in their society, in the world around them (*social* quality of life). We are both satisfied and dissatisfied with our way of life.

This paper explores subjective measures of personal and social quality of life (or well-being), the differences between these perspectives and what they mean for measuring progress. In distinguishing between the two perspectives, the paper uses the term 'social' in the sense of 'societal' – that is, referring to the quality of life or well-being of an entire society, population or nation. Quality of life and well-being are not identical constructs to happiness or life satisfaction (Wearing and Headey 1998, Cummins 1998). Nevertheless, the paper considers research in these areas, as well as optimism, as part of its broad discussion of quality of life.

### **Subjective personal quality of life**

The vast majority of people say they are happy, satisfied with their lives and optimistic about their future. This finding is remarkably consistent across countries and over time.

The 1995-96 National Social Science Survey (N=2,259) indicates 81% of Australians are 'mostly satisfied', 'pleased', 'very pleased' or 'delighted' with their 'life as a whole', and

85% feel this way about their standard of living (Kelley et al 1995). The 1995 World Values Survey (Australian component, N=2,048) asked people to rate their satisfaction with 'your life as a whole these days' from 1 (dissatisfied) to 10 (satisfied), and found 77% of Australians rated it at 7-10 (Alan Black, Edith Cowan University, Perth, pers. com.). The survey also found 95% of Australians said that, 'taking all things together', they were 'quite happy' or 'very happy', with 43% claiming to be 'very happy'.

Comparisons with the results of the same questions in the 1983 Australian Values Study (N=1,228) indicate the relative consistency of these findings over time (AVS 1983). If anything, the results suggest a fall in well-being: while the proportion of Australians saying they were 'very happy' increased, the more precise questions on life satisfaction show a decline between 1983 and 1995 (see Table 1).

*[Insert Table 1 on happiness and life satisfaction about here.]*

The 1983 Australian Values Study also found 87% of Australians agreed they usually felt their 'own future will be bright'; 13% disagreed (AVS 1983). In an unpublished 1988 study by the Australian Commission for the Future (N=1,047), 80% of Australians said they were 'very' or 'on the whole optimistic or hopeful' about their personal future; only 18% were 'somewhat' or 'very pessimistic or concerned'.

American survey data yield similar findings, and also demonstrate the stability of people's life satisfaction over time. A 1998 Gallup Poll social audit (N=5,001) found that 85% of Americans expressed satisfaction with 'the way things are going in your personal life' (Gallup 1998). Measured 43 times over the past two decades, the score has never exceeded 87%, nor fallen below 73%. The audit also found that 95% of Americans said that, generally speaking, they were 'fairly' or 'very happy', with 45% saying they were 'very happy'. The combined total of over 90% is generally consistent with measurements recorded by Gallup dating back to 1948.

A third question Gallup asked about personal well-being in its social audit does suggest, however, that Americans have become more positive about their lives and their prospects over the past decade or so. The question asked respondents to picture life as a ladder where the top step (10) represents the 'best possible life for you' and the bottom step (0) the 'worst possible life for you'. It asked them to state which step of the ladder they stood on at the present time, five years ago, and which step they thought they would stand on in about five years. Asked eight times since 1964, Americans consistently put the past lower than the present and the future higher than the present – that is, they see their lives getting better with time. Between 1964 and 1985, the proportion choosing steps 8 to 10 ranged from 25-29% for the past, 31-38% for the present, and 52-60% for the future. However, in 1998 the figures were 26%, 44% and 72% respectively.

In the 1991-93 World Value Survey of 43 countries, 77% of people, overall, said that 'taking all things together', they were 'quite' or 'very happy' (Basanez et al 1998). The proportion of those saying they were 'very happy' ranged from 48% (Netherlands) to 2% (Latvia), with the average being 23%. Cummins (1995, 1998) has demonstrated the

remarkable uniformity in population estimates of life satisfaction. He found that, when life satisfaction is measured as an average on a percentage scale (per cent of scale maximum - %SM), Western populations average 75 plus or minus 2.5%SM. For countries across all major geographic regions the population average is 70 plus or minus 5%SM. Cummins argues that this way of reporting life satisfaction has more validity than the more common practice of reporting the percentage nominating a particular category (such as 'very satisfied') or falling within one section of the scale (such as 8-10 on a 10-point scale).

### **Subjective social quality of life**

In marked contrast to studies of how people feel about their own lives, studies seeking to assess how people feel about the state of their society and its future yield much more negative findings. A June 1997 national poll (N=1,200) found that 52% of Australians believed 'the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends' was getting worse, with only 13% believing it was getting better (Eckersley 1998, 1999a). A third (33%) said quality of life was staying about the same; 2% did not know.

Those on high incomes were more positive than those on low, those aged under 35 more positive than those over 35, city people more positive than country people, and men (slightly) more positive than women. However, the differences are mostly not large; in fact the overall pattern is remarkably consistent across different groups. The percentage saying life was getting better ranged from 9% to 19%, that it was worse from 42% to 59%.

The results suggest the question is measuring what was intended: a perception of people's common or shared experience of life, not just their own personal situation, although the latter clearly is influencing people's views. The question was also intended to measure fundamental and long-term trends in quality of life. However, a repeat of the same question in May 1999 indicates public perceptions do shift significantly over the short term (Eckersley 1999a).

The 1999 poll (N=1,200) found the proportion of people saying life was getting better increased to 24% and that saying it was staying about the same rose to 38%, while the percentage saying it was getting worse fell to 36%; 2% did not know. The percentage saying life is getting better ranged from 15% to 36%, that it was worse from 21% to 43%. Thus the spread of opinion across demographic groups may have increased on some measures, notably between genders and income groups on whether life was getting better. Details of the 1997 and 1999 results are given in Table 2.

*[Insert Table 2 on QoL survey 1997-1999 about here.]*

In a follow up question (not asked in 1997), people were asked 'in about what decade do you think overall quality of life in Australia has been at its highest' (more than one decade could be chosen): 24% said the 1990s (the same the proportion as said life was

getting better), 25% the 1980s, 23% the 1970s, 13% the 1960s, 6% the 1950s, and 2% before the 1950s (8% did not know). Not surprisingly, the results were strongly age-related: for example, 45% of those aged 18-24 chose the 1990s, but only 29% of those 25-34, 20% of those 35-49 and 17% of those 50 and over.

It would appear, then, that such broad questions are tapping public sentiments about long-term trends in social quality of life, but that, as one would expect, these sentiments are influenced by personal attributes and circumstances and relatively short-term shifts in social conditions and public mood. The results require further research to assess their validity.

A more comprehensive 1996 survey, The Middle Australia Project, produced similar findings to those of the 1997 poll (Pusey 1998a, 1998b). Of a sample of 400 'middle Australians' (randomly selected from urban postcode areas with average household incomes between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentile), 51% said that, for 'ordinary middle Australians like us', quality of life was declining and 39% that it was improving, while 10% did not know. (The inclusion of a 'remain the same' option in the 1997 poll appears to have reduced the percentage that were undecided or chose improvement, but not the percentage that said quality of life was declining.)

A 1997 report by the Clemenger/BBDO Group, *The Silent Majority III - The Everyday Problems of the Average Australian* (1997) - the third in a series which began in 1977 - documents 'the distress of a nation divided, deeply anxious about its children and its future'. 'The trivial problems that beset Australians twenty years ago in the first Silent Majority study - the length of the cord on electrical appliances or the short life span of school textbooks - have disappeared. In their place are concerns about perceived inequities in the delivery of welfare, the behavior of the mass media, the operation of the criminal justice system and the betrayal of trust by community leaders.'

[Insert Box 1 on Silent Majority study about here.]

In contrast to the optimism about personal futures, the 1988 Australian Commission for the Future survey found only 30% thought 'quality of life in Australia early next century' would be better than in 1988, while 40% thought it would be worse, and 29% that it would be about the same. Only 44% were 'very' or 'on the whole optimistic or hopeful' about the future of humanity, while 53% were 'very' or 'somewhat pessimistic or concerned'.

Optimism appears to decline further if the question is not framed in terms of a direct contrast in attitudes (optimistic/pessimistic, better/worse etc). When respondents were asked an open question (ie, they could respond in their own words) about *images* of the future of the world, and their responses grouped, only 26% described optimistic images, while 54% offered pessimistic images and 29% neutral images. Social decay, environmental destruction and global conflict dominated the negative images. Asked about their *feelings* about the future of the world, only 28% expressed positive feelings, while 63% expressed negative and 16% ambivalent feelings (the totals exceed 100%

because more than one response was allowed). Open poll questions are closer to qualitative studies which, when exploring social conditions and trends, also tend to produce more negative outcomes than 'closed' opinion polls (Eckersley 1999b).

When Americans were asked in *Business Week* / Harris Polls whether they thought the American Dream of 'equal opportunity, personal freedom and social mobility' had become easier or harder to achieve in the past ten years 'for most Americans', 67% said it had become harder (*Business Week* 1995, 1996). Asked about achieving the American Dream in the next ten years, 74% said it would be harder.

Uslaner (1993) says that public optimism in the US has fallen since the 1960s. Over 60% of Americans believed life would improve in 1940, 1947 and 1962 surveys. 'At no point since the late 1970s – not even during the Reagan recovery – did a majority of Americans express such optimism. By 1990 less than a third believed that life would get better.' He also argues that optimism is closely and causally associated with trust, a key element of social capital (Uslaner, in press). Like optimism, trust in other people has declined in America since the 1960s.

Could these US findings have changed significantly in recent years, when the public mood has become more buoyant? In apparent contrast to these surveys, a Gallup Poll question on whether Americans are satisfied or dissatisfied 'with the way things are going in the US at this time' shows that 71% were satisfied in February 1999, an all-time high and up from 24% in January 1996 (Gallup 1998). However, the response appears to be a reflection of transient contemporary political and economic conditions, rather than any long-term shifts in American life. Results are highly volatile, swinging over the past 20 years from troughs as low as 12% satisfied to peaks of over 60% satisfied in cycles as short as 5 months (more usually several years). Satisfaction seems to be on the decline again; by April 1999, it had dropped to 51%.

### **Quality of life, economic growth and preferred futures**

Perceptions of declining social quality of life appear to be common in developed nations. In the late 1980s, Max-Neef (1995) and his colleagues undertook a study of 19 countries, both rich and poor, to assess the things that inhibited people from improving their well-being. They detected among people in rich countries a growing feeling that they were part of a deteriorating system that affected them at both the personal and collective level. This led the researchers to propose a threshold hypothesis, which states that for every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in quality of life, but only up to a point - the threshold point - beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate.

The hypothesis has been supported in recent years by the development of indices, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare and the related Genuine Progress Indicator, that attempt to correct some of the anomalies and omissions of GDP. The new indices adjust GDP for a wide range of social and environmental factors, including income

distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and pollution (Eckersley 1998, Halstead 1998, Hamilton 1998). These 'GDP analogues' show that trends in GDP and social well-being, once moving together, have diverged since about the 1970s in all countries for which they have been constructed, including the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

The reasons for this divergence may vary between nations, but include: the growing costs of environmental damage and resource depletion, including greenhouse gas emissions; increasing income inequality; unsustainable foreign debt; the rising cost of unemployment and overwork; the failure to maintain capital investment; and the transfer of (unpaid) household production to the market. The American non-profit, public-policy organization, Redefining Progress, which developed the Genuine Progress Indicator, argues that much of the current growth in GDP derives from three things: 'fixing blunders and social decay from the past; borrowing resources from the future; or shifting functions from the traditional realm of household and community to the realm of the monetized economy' (Cobb et al 1995).

People's changing perceptions about progress are also evident in research into their preferred futures. A 1995 study of young Australian's expected and preferred futures for Australia in 2010 found young people's hopes for Australia were not only very different from their expectations, but also different from what they are promised under current priorities (Eckersley 1999b). Their dreams for Australia are of a society that places less emphasis on the individual, competition and material wealth, 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.

For example, asked to nominate which of two *positive* scenarios for Australia for 2010 came closer to the type of society they both expected and preferred, almost two thirds of the young people said they expected 'a fast-paced, internationally competitive society, with the emphasis on the individual, wealth generation and enjoying the "good life"'. However eight in ten said they would prefer 'a "greener", more stable society, where the emphasis is on cooperation, community and family, more equal distribution of wealth, and greater economic self-sufficiency'.

In a similar vein, Mackay (1995) says that in response to feelings of instability, insecurity and uncertainty as Australian society is transformed and redefined, Australians harbor certain dreams: the 'urban village', where people know and care for each other; 'happy families', because when families are in disarray, society suffers; 'shared values', to help create a more cohesive sense of community; and more jobs, for anyone who wants one.

### **Quality of life and values**

The legitimacy and validity of subjective measures of social quality of life are strengthened by the close association between social quality of life and values: quality of life is widely seen to be declining because moral values are perceived to be declining. Values provide the foundations and frameworks of social systems and functions. They

determine how we get along together and manage our affairs; they define our relationships and shape our identities, beliefs and goals.

The 1988 Commission for the Future survey included an open question that asked, 'what do Australians need to do, either as individual or as a nation, to manage change better and improve future prospects?' By far the most common response, given by 42% of respondents, related to the need to change personal values and behavior. The sort of things people mentioned were the need to work harder, work together, work for the good of the country, be less greedy, less selfish, and raise moral standards. This category was followed by the need for better government, mentioned by 29%, which covered both the desire for stronger leadership and the need for greater participation in the political process. After these came improving the economy (22%), better education (19%) and protecting the environment (13%).

A decade later, the deeply moral nature of Australians' concerns about their country and its future has, if anything, intensified. As already noted, the Clemenger/BBDO Group, *The Silent Majority III - The Everyday Problems of the Average Australian* (1997) found that, in contrast with a decade or two ago, the issues of greatest concern in the late 90s were 'big' topics embracing moral, ethical and economic issues within our community.

The Middle Australia Project found that the most common ways in which quality of life was perceived to be falling were: too much greed and consumerism; the breakdown in community and social life; too much pressure on families, parents and marriages; falling living standards; and employers demanding too much (Pusey 1998b).

The study suggests Australians are experiencing economic change as harmful pressure on the family. Over 90% of people believed family life was changing, with 54% saying it was changing a lot). Of all those who said family life was changing, two thirds said the negative aspects of these changes stood out most. These included: the breakdown of traditional values; too much consumerism and pressure to get more money and buy things; a breakdown of communication between family members; and greater isolation of families from extended family networks and the community. (The third which saw the changes as positive cited the more equal relationship between men and women, the sharing of housework and more freedom.)

The 1999 survey of quality of life asked people to rate the importance of several factors in improving their own quality of life (Eckersley 1999a). It found that 75% rated as very important 'being able to spend more time with your family and friends' and 66% 'having less stress and pressure in your life'. Only 38% rated 'having more money to buy things' as very important.

Mackay (1997) says that his qualitative research reveals growing community concern in Australia about the gap between people's values and the way they live. People crave greater simplicity in their lives, yet continue to complicate them. They would like to be less materialistic, but seem to acquire more and more. People are concerned that 'we don't seem to know where to stop': many developments which are motivated by positive

and worthwhile aspirations often turn out to be excessive (Mackay 1998). No matter how much we might want to be moderate and balanced, we seem incapable of it. Mackay has detected in his recent research growing sympathy for the 'simplicity' movement. 'Underlying such attitudes is the widespread belief that, although we are all attracted by material comfort and prosperity, here again we may not have known when to stop.'

The Australian findings are echoed in US research. A study, *Yearning for Balance*, undertaken by the Harwood Group for the Merck Family Fund and available through the Center for a New American Dream (1995), underscores Americans' deep concerns with their way of life. Based on focus group discussions and a national survey, the study was undertaken to examine patterns of consumption in the US and the consequences for society and the environment.

The report says that Americans: believe their priorities are 'out of whack' - with materialism, greed and selfishness increasingly dominating American life and crowding out more meaningful values based on family, responsibility and community; are alarmed about the future - feeling the material side of the American Dream is spinning out of control; but are ambivalent about making changes in their own lives and in society - their deepest aspirations are non-material, but they also want financial security and material comfort. Asked to rate on a 10-point scale, what would make them more satisfied with their lives, 66% rated at 8 or higher spending more time with families and friends, 56% having less stress in their lives, and 47% feeling they were doing more to make a difference in their community. In contrast, only about one in five rated at this high level having a nicer car, a bigger house or apartment, or more nice things in their homes.

*Yearning for Balance* says Americans want to talk about values. People said in the survey and focus groups that they share a deep and abiding concern about the core values driving their society; they believe that materialism, greed, and excess characterize the way they live and underlie many of their worst social ills. The report notes that focus group participants agreed firmly that there is a tension between their own priorities and those of society.

'They view this tension as underlying many of the other concerns they raised....When pressed on their views, people insist they are talking about a single core problem with many aspects, not a list of separate issues.' 'Too much of a good thing' was the phrase many people used, with freedom and material abundance uppermost in their minds. Compared to the rest of society, Americans saw themselves as attaching much greater importance in their lives to responsibility, family life, friendship, generosity and religious faith, and less importance to prosperity and wealth. They did not feel the same dissonance with respect to other important aspects of life including financial security, career success, pleasure and having fun, and freedom.

These results are supported by the results of another survey, conducted in August 1998 by *The Washington Post*, Harvard University and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (1998). The survey found that 76% of Americans thought the country was 'pretty seriously off on the wrong track' when it came to values and moral beliefs. Over half (55%) believed 'people and groups that hold values similar to yours' were losing

influence in American life in general, while 66% said Americans were ‘greatly divided’ over the most important values.

*[Inert Box 2 on Yearning for balance report about here.]*

### **Explaining the differences**

We need to make sense of the differences between personal and social perspectives on quality of life if we are to use subjective measures to assess whether life is getting better or worse. It is possible that, as indicators of national progress, the personal view is biased towards the positive and the social towards the negative.

One important reason for the differences between personal and social measures is that personal happiness or life satisfaction is not closely related to people’s external and material circumstances. Wealth is a poor predictor of happiness (as is age, gender and ethnicity) (Myers and Diener 1996). People have not become happier as their societies have become richer. In most countries, the correlation between income and happiness is small; only in the poorest countries is income a good measure of well-being. In general people in rich countries are happier than people in poorer countries, but the margin may be slim, and due to factors other than wealth. People who win the lottery are no happier a year after the event than they were before. Even the very rich are only slightly happier than the average citizen, and those whose incomes have increased over a ten-year period are no happier than those whose incomes have not.

Recent research indicates a substantial hereditary component to happiness (Hamer 1996). It suggests that how good someone feels at any particular time is about equally determined by their genes and their circumstances, but how good they feel on average over, say, ten years is fully 80% determined by their genes.

Another consideration is that people may be less likely to admit to unhappiness or pessimism about their own lives and families because to do so is to admit to being a loser. This may not be a deliberate, conscious decision. There appears to be a significant element of genuine, and necessary, illusion about people’s personal situation - what has been called the ‘human sense of relative superiority’ (Headey and Wearing 1988). In almost all countries that have been studied, most people rate their subjective well-being well above average. Headey and Wearing suggest that this might be because almost all human beings explicitly believe that their own performance in major life roles is well above average. Other research, they note, has found that depressed people are more realistic in assessing their own performance than people who are not depressed. A sense of relative superiority appears to be normal and an important aspect of human psychology. ‘People who feel average (let alone below average) in their main roles have lost a crucial prop to self-esteem and well-being.’

Cummins (1998, 1999) argues that the uniformity of population measures of life satisfaction suggest that it is held under homeostatic control. This control attempts to maintain the life satisfaction of populations above about 70% of the maximum possible

score. Nistico and Cummins (2000) propose that positive cognitive illusions are central to this homeostasis, saying there is ‘an intimate relationship between illusory self-beliefs and life satisfaction’. The factor most closely associated with subjective quality of life is satisfaction with the self, and, in particular, positive beliefs of self-worth, control and optimism, they say. Illusions allow the existence of these self-beliefs as ‘buffers of reality’ – that is, the beliefs do not accurately reflect the objective realities of life. ‘The non-specific and unfalsifiable nature of illusions makes them a robust mechanism for the maintenance of self-satisfaction.’

Whatever the explanations, there is clear evidence for a positive bias in responses to personal questions. Pusey (1998a) asked his sample of middle Australians who were the winners and losers from ‘the economic change that Australia has experienced over the last 15 years or so’. The proportion saying ‘people like me’ were losers was considerably smaller than that for ‘ordinary people generally’, ‘people in the middle’ or ‘wage and salary earners’, while the proportion saying ‘people like me’ were winners was correspondingly higher than for the other categories.

The evidence suggests, then, that people adjust expectations and use illusions to maintain over time a relatively stable, and positive, rating of life satisfaction or quality of life. Indeed, their health and sanity may depend on this adaptability. This does not mean that what happens in the social, economic and political spheres does not matter at a personal level, but that the relationship between the objective and subjective worlds is not linear – that is, a change in the former does not produce a corresponding and equal change in the latter.

There is another aspect of the use of indicators of subjective personal well-being for measuring national performance and making international comparisons that warrants mention. Cummins (1998) notes that material wealth and individualism stand out in international comparisons in their ability to predict life satisfaction. However, taken together, the two factors account for only about 35% of the variance. National wealth, of itself, does not guarantee a high level of national life satisfaction. Furthermore, the association with individualism may be an artefact of measurement, with scales focusing on the ‘I’ consciousness emphasized by individualistic societies, rather than the ‘we’ consciousness of collectivist societies. ‘It is certainly premature,’ Cummins states, ‘to conclude that international rankings on life satisfaction...imply ranking some desirable population state’.

The possibility of a measurement bias of this sort provides one explanation of the rather surprising trend in the responses to Gallup’s ‘ladder of life’ question, which shows a recent rise in Americans’ ratings of their present life and expectations for the future. At face value, it suggests Americans have become more satisfied and optimistic over the past 10-15 years. Alternatively, the trend might indicate a society that has become more individualistic and unequal, and so a society that attaches more importance to being a winner. This would increase the subjective pressure on people to rate themselves higher on the ladder - especially with respect to their future, which is less constrained by current realities and therefore more ‘open’. If a sense of relative superiority is part of the human

condition, then presumably it can become heightened or intensified in individualistic, competitive societies.

When we turn to the broader, social perspectives on quality of life, we face possible biases in the other direction. For example, the wider worldview includes many elements that are not part of the personal experience of most people (such as wars, environmental destruction, poverty and serious crime). This worldview may be distorted by media representations that emphasize these negatives. Also, people may tend, in this broader view, to take for granted past improvements, and focus instead on aspects of life they believe have deteriorated, or at least have not improved or met their expectations, which, in Western nations, keep getting higher. Reinforcing this tendency, Western culture is dominated by dystopian, rather than utopian, images of the future, which may taint people's view of progress.

These issues warrant further research and analysis. The more remote social concerns may have relatively little impact on personal well-being because of its very nature, as discussed above (Wearing and Headey 1998). In the 1988 Australian Commission for the Future study, respondents who were pessimistic about the future of humanity were asked if their concerns 'in general diminish or reduce your enjoyment of life'. Only 2% said 'very much' and 13% 'quite a lot', while 48% said 'not much' and 35% 'not at all' (still, this means 63% of this group were personally affected).

While the mass media are often blamed for promoting a bleak worldview, research suggests people do distinguish between media imagery and the 'real world'. For example, a recent Australian study of fear of crime found that the media are not necessarily as influential as previously thought in increasing this fear (NCAVAC 1998). It found most people use the media selectively, 'filtering out the information they think is realistic and accurate from what is sensationalist or fantasy'. Uslander (1998) argues that his research shows television is not responsible for people's impression of a 'mean world'.

The images that dominate the view of a world growing meaner – images of social decline, division and alienation; family breakdown, conflict and isolation; environmental depletion and degradation; and regional and ethnic conflict and friction – do have a basis in reality, including in people's own experience of life. Still, the media may keep them focused on, and aware of, these realities. And people's judgements are probably rarely located consciously within a total historical context, according to which aspects of quality of life may have improved.

## **Conclusion**

Subjective measures of quality of life are important, supplying a crucial dimension missing from objective indicators of national performance or progress. But we need to be very clear about what it is they are measuring. As we have seen, measures of personal quality of life may reveal little about whether living conditions are changing for the better or the worse. On the other hand, measures of social quality of life may have their own

inherent biases. We have perhaps less understanding of these biases than of those of the personal measures. Nevertheless, measures of social quality of life or well-being do appear to provide useful insights into the state and fate of nations.

On balance, then, this paper favors using subjective measures of social quality of life in evaluating progress. Of particular significance is the evidence that personal quality of life is most influenced by the more personal and intimate aspects of life and that it is kept under a homeostatic control that buffers it against shifts in personal circumstances and social conditions.

Despite this characteristic of personal quality of life, most national polls of public mood and most cross-country comparisons of subjective well-being are based on questions framed in personal terms. These studies are often used, in both the research literature and the popular media, as a basis for assessing and ranking national performance. There is also a growing array of international comparisons based on indices constructed from objective measures such as income, income distribution, employment, education and longevity. In contrast, there appear to be fewer studies drawing on subjective measures of social well-being.

The widespread perception that things are getting worse at the societal level is significant, regardless of whether it is 'factually' or 'objectively' true. The resulting erosion of faith in society and its future influences the way people see their roles and responsibilities, and their relationship to social institutions, especially government. It denies people a social ideal to believe in - something to convince them to subordinate their own individual interests to a higher social goal - and a wider framework of meaning in their lives.

Mackay (1998) says the big theme of Australia today is insulation. 'We are increasingly preoccupied with our personal lives – our families, our friends, our house and garden, our cars, our leisure and entertainment. We are "tending our own patch" and becoming absorbed in our own concerns...our focus has narrowed to an extent that allows us to exclude some of the "nasty stuff" which has become too unpalatable to think about.' Public attitudes to politics and politicians, he says, now reflect a level of 'cynicism bordering on contempt' and 'despair bordering on disgust'. He warns that this is a vulnerable time for Australians. 'Seeking to be insulated from issues which might previously have stimulated debate can provide short-term emotional relief, but, if this solidifies into a serious attitude of disengagement, it will lead to the kind of political apathy which encourages the abuse of political power.'

The implications and consequences for society of this loss of faith are serious, even if it may not immediately impact on the personal life satisfaction of most people. The risks can be illustrated by citing the views of three scholars, two historians, the other a sociologist. In his acclaimed BBC television series, *Civilization*, Clark (1993), observes that civilization, however complex and solid it seems, is really quite fragile. In the concluding episode, after reviewing thousands of years of the rise and fall of civilizations, he warns that 'it's lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs'.

Tuchman (1989, foreword), in *A Distant Mirror - the Calamitous 14th Century*, says that until recently historians have avoided the century because it could not be made to fit into a pattern of human progress. The Black Death, which killed a third of the population between Iceland and India, was only one of the century's problems. It was a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age - quite simply, a bad time for humanity. Tuchman notes that in Europe a gulf had opened between Christian beliefs and conduct, not least within the Church itself, and between the ideal of chivalry and the behavior of the nobility. 'When the gap between the ideal and real becomes too wide,' she observes, 'the system breaks down.' Like other historians, Tuchman is conscious of parallels with our modern age: 'If our last decade or two of collapsing assumptions has been a period of unusual discomfort, it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.'

Bauman (1995, p257), in *Life in Fragments – Essays in Postmodern Morality*, has expressed well the importance of social perceptions and cultural images. '...(I)f what we think about each other reflects what we are, it is also true that what we are is itself a reflection of what we believe ourselves to be; the image we hold of each other and of all of us together has the uncanny ability to self-corroborate. People treated like wolves tend by and large to behave in a wolf-like fashion; people treated with trust tend on the whole to become trustworthy. What we think of each other does matter.'

All societies need visions or stories that embody their values and goals, and define who their people are, what they believe and where they want to go. Mackay (1997) says of Australia that what seems to be lacking is a 'guiding story' that connects leaders and people: 'a set of coherent values and beliefs, imaginatively couched, that gives us a framework for making sense of our lives and, indeed, for taking more confident steps towards control of our destiny.'

In the past, the quest for material progress and prosperity provided much of that 'guiding story' for Western nations, perhaps especially the newer nations such as Australia and the United States. It seems it no longer does. Progress needs to be redefined, the story rewritten, taking account of a new global context - social, economic and environmental. Better measures or indicators of progress are essential to this task.

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**Table 1: Australians' happiness and satisfaction: 1983 vs 1995**

Question <sup>1</sup>	Category	1983	1995
Happiness (4-point scale, very to not at all happy)	Very happy	35.5	43.0
	Quite happy	60.0	51.6
	Total happy	95.5	94.6
	Unhappy	4.5	5.4
	Average %SM*	76.7*	79.0*
Satisfaction with life (8/9-point scale, delighted to terrible)	Total satisfied	93.3	81.2
	Mixed feelings	4.5	12.6
	Total dissatisfied	2.3	3.8
	Average %SM*	73.3*	67.9*
Satisfaction with life (scale 1-10)	Total 7-10 (satisfied)	83	77
	Total 5-6	13	16
	Total 1-4 (dissatisfied)	4	8
	Average %SM*	76.7*	73.1*
Satisfaction with standard of living (8/9-point scale, delighted to terrible)	Total satisfied	89.0	84.9
	Mixed feelings	7.4	9.2
	Total dissatisfied	3.7	3.4
	Average %SM*	73.4*	68.7*

1. Australian Values Study 1983, World Values Survey 1995, National Social Science Survey 1995.

\* Calculated by Cummins (Deakin University, Melbourne, pers com), using the full scales. See text for explanation.

**Table 2 – Australians’ perceptions of overall quality of life, 1997-1999**

Percent/ Group	Total better		Total worse		About same		Lot better		Little better		Little worse		Lot worse	
	1997	1999	1997	1999	1997	1999	1997	1999	1997	1999	1997	1999	1997	1999
<b>Year</b>														
<b>Total</b>	13	24	52	36	33	38	3	6	10	18	27	22	26	14
<b>Males</b>	15	29	51	37	33	33	4	7	11	22	28	23	23	13
<b>Females</b>	11	19	54	35	33	44	3	6	9	14	25	21	28	14
<b>Capital city</b>	16	27	50	32	33	39	4	8	12	19	26	18	24	13
<b>X-city</b>	9	19	56	43	33	37	1	4	8	16	28	28	28	15
<b>18-24 yrs</b>	15	27	44	21	39	51	1	5	14	22	34	15	10	6
<b>25-34 yrs</b>	14	29	46	31	39	38	3	5	11	24	24	25	22	7
<b>35-49 yrs</b>	15	22	55	39	29	38	3	6	11	16	30	25	25	14
<b>50+ yrs</b>	10	22	57	41	31	34	4	8	7	14	22	21	34	20
<b>&lt;\$30k</b>	9	15	59	43	31	40	3	5	6	10	26	22	33	21
<b>\$30-50k</b>	11	19	54	39	33	39	2	5	9	14	30	27	24	12
<b>\$50k+</b>	19	36	42	25	37	38	4	9	15	27	24	18	18	7

The question, asked on 20-22 June 1997 and 7-9 May 1999 in a Newspoll telephone survey of 1200 Australians aged 18 and over, was: ‘Thinking now about the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends: Would you say that life in Australia is getting better, worse or staying about the same?’ Those who indicated it was getting better or worse, were then asked if that was a little or a lot better or worse. The income figures in the table are for combined household income from all sources before tax. Source: Eckersley (1999a)

***Box 1 - The views of the silent majority in Australia***

The Silent Majority III is the latest in a continuing research series which identifies and tracks what really concerns the majority of Australians. It replicates research carried out in 1977 and 1988 and offers insight into the changes that have occurred in community attitudes over the past twenty years. The study found that major changes have occurred since The Silent Majority I and II and that in 1997 Australians:

- Are thoughtful and analytical about many problems. In contrast with a decade or two ago, the issues of greatest concern in the late 90s are 'big' topics embracing moral, ethical and economic issues within our community.
- Deeply resent a society that seems to penalize those who battle to look after themselves and reward those who take unfair advantage of the system.
- Believe strongly that people in positions of power and influence abuse public trust and are more likely to be part of the problem than the solution.
- Worry intensely about the welfare of their children in a violent and predatory world.
- Feel powerless to control their lives in the face of rapid economic restructuring and social change.
- Are clustered at the extremes of opinion rather than in a consensual middle.

Extracted from: *The Silent Majority III - The Everyday Problems of the Average Australian* (Clemenger/BBDO 1997)

## ***Box 2 - Yearning for balance in America***

Americans are upset about the course they are on, but find it difficult to imagine how that course could be altered. Beset by a whirlwind of change -- economic, technological, cultural, political -- people feel increasingly disconnected and atomized from one another. They have lost their bearings; they feel cast adrift. Racing around, frazzled, exhausted, people feel they barely have time to stop and think about their own priorities, much less discuss them with others. The easiest thing is to turn on the TV, close the blinds, and hope that things are different in the morning.

Yet this research identified some openings as well -- some opportunities for moving forward. The degree of consensus uncovered by the survey and focus groups about the nature of the problem Americans face is an essential ingredient for creating broadly-supported, meaningful, and sustainable change. People from all walks of life share similar concerns about a culture of materialism and excess, and the consequences for future generations. Many are surprised and excited to find that others share their views.

The challenge now is to find ways for people to move forward together - to create a public conversation around the issues of consumption, materialism, and the environment that can lead to real change. Here are five principles that emerge from this research for creating that conversation:

*People want to talk about values.* Americans said in the survey and focus groups that they share a deep and abiding concern about the core values driving their society; they believe that materialism, greed, and excess characterize the way they live and underlie many of their worst social ills.

*Children and future generations are a crucial entry point.* Every time children or future generations were mentioned in the focus groups, interest and engagement in the conversation perked up; every time they were mentioned in the survey, huge majorities registered strong views. Children are ground zero on this issue – their values and their future are at stake, and people are trying, unsuccessfully, to envision a better world for their kids.

*There is a yearning for balance.* The frenzied, excessive quality of American life today has left people yearning for balance in their lives and in their society. They feel that an essential side of life centered on family, friends and community has been pushed aside by the dominant ethic of ‘more, more, more’, and they are looking for ways to restore some equilibrium.

*People need to work through their ambivalence.* People feel strongly ambivalent about their society's preoccupation with material goods. While condemning greed and excess, they admit to a little greed of their own; understandably, they prefer wealth to poverty and wish to live in some degree of material comfort. The third point in this triangle of ambivalence is a strong belief in freedom of choice and an aversion to tell or be told how to live.

*People are looking for a sense of possibility.* People associate the public discourse today with acrimony, divisiveness, and gridlock; most do not want any part of that. This issue offers an opportunity to move out of that paradigm by uncovering people's latent sense that a better way is possible. When they hear each other describe common concerns about misplaced values, children, and the environment, and have a chance to explain their longing for a more balanced life, a spark appears -- people begin to imagine the possibility of change.

Extracted and adapted from: *Yearning for Balance* (Center for a New American Dream, 1995)