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Future visions, social realities and private lives:

Young people and their personal well-being

Introduction

The relationship between global futures and personal well-being is mediated through the quality of hope. Hope is linked to other qualities crucial to well-being, especially meaning and purpose in life. Frank writes: 'A unique feature of human consciousness is its inclusion of the future. Expectations strongly affect all aspects of human functioning.... Hope inspires a feeling of well-being and is a spur to action. Hopelessness, the inability to imagine a tolerable future, is a powerful motive for suicide.'[1]

Nunn describes hope as 'a pervasive and significant correlate of health and disorder'.[2] In a study of the psychosocial impact of the earthquake that struck Newcastle, Australia, in 1989, he and his colleagues found that hopefulness was as important in explaining post-earthquake illness as exposure to disruption and threat.

In his famous account of life in concentration camps during World War II, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl says the prisoner who had lost faith in the future was doomed.[3] With this loss of belief, he also lost his spiritual hold, and went into a physical and mental decline. 'It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future.' Frankl quotes Neitzsche: 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.'

The future and the hope discussed here are personal. They do not concern expectations of the future of the world or humanity. The relationship between this broad vision of the future and personal well-being is a trickier issue.

The bleakness of many young people's views on the future of the planet and the fate of humanity first aroused my interest in their well-being, including issues such as suicide, drug abuse and crime. I came across the research on youth futures while writing a report for the Australian Commission for the Future on Australians' attitudes to science and technology and the future.[4] As the father of three young children, the sense of hopelessness that pervades the imagery of many children, teenagers and young adults made a deep impression on me. So for my next project I explored whether these visions might help to explain the rising rates of psychosocial problems in young people in much of the Western world, as well as some of the broader traits and attitudes of this generation.[5]

The connection between global threats and personal well-being has been speculated upon, but, as far as I am aware, remains to be established. Researchers have warned that the pessimism of many young people could produce cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals or lasting commitment.[5,6,7] Macy has suggested that people's response to concerns of global catastrophes 'is not to cry out or ring alarms'.[8] 'It is to go silent , go numb'. She suggests this 'numbing of the psyche' takes a

heavy toll, including an impoverishment of emotional and sensory life. Energy expended in suppressing despair 'is diverted from more creative uses, depleting resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies'.

Newcomb found a significant association between anxiety about nuclear threats and less purpose in life, less life satisfaction, more powerlessness, more depression and more drug use.[6] He concludes that the threat of nuclear war and accidents is significantly related to psychological distress and may disturb normal maturational development. Nevertheless, his study only established statistically significant correlations, not a causal relationship.

Elkins and Sanson found in their research on young people's views of the future that nuclear war was seen to impinge on their own personal futures, as well as being feared for its catastrophic effects on the planet.[7] Other global threats such as environmental destruction did not have this personal impact. They suggest that the nuclear threat may be more likely to have detrimental effects on the psychological development of youth than other concerns.

There is little doubt that many qualities that future fears might intuitively be expected to influence – hope, purpose and meaning in life, coherence, efficacy or agency – are important to well-being. However, we may never be able to do more than suggest this because of the difficulty of disentangling concerns about the fate of the earth from the many other factors that influence these qualities, and hence well-being.

There are several dimensions to this entanglement. They relate to both the nature of people's expectations of the world's future and to the nature of human well-being. I want to argue that there is a dynamic and complex relationship between personal welfare, contemporary social realities and future visions, with each domain interacting with and influencing the other two.

Some aspects of this relationship are self-evident. For example, current social conditions clearly impact on personal well-being and shape how we see the future. But other aspects are not obvious. There are different ways of thinking about the future; future visions may be as much reflections of the present as expectations of the future; and they may less affect personal states of mind than be affected by them. Given these interactions, each domain provides a point of intervention to change the others.

This paper emphasises the need to take a broad, integrated and holistic view of the future and its social and personal significance. I will examine each of the three domains in turn, beginning with future visions, to explore some of the inter-relationships between them.

Future Visions

The complexities of young people's worldview and expectations of the future are evident from the research. 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. I have suggested that we can distinguish between three different images of modern youth, each of which reflects different aspects, or depths, of their lives and relationship to the future.[9]

- The *postmodern* portrait represents young people as the first global generation, attuned and adapted to the postmodern world: equipped for its abundant opportunities, exciting

choices and limitless freedoms - and its hazards and risks. They are confident, optimistic, well-informed and educated, technologically sophisticated, self-reliant (even self-contained), street-wise, enterprising and creative, fast on their feet, keeping their options open. This portrait tends to be promoted by a technology- and media-driven consumer culture that the image helps to sustain.

- The *modern* portrait suggests most young people successfully negotiate the transitions of adolescence to become well-adjusted adults. Most cherish their families, enjoy life and are confident they personally will get what they want out of it - a good job, travel, a partner and eventually a family of their own. This portrait focuses on the more personal, and often more immediate, aspects of young people's lives.

- The *transformational* portrait (so called because of the social transformation it suggests is required) reveals young people as understandably cynical, alienated, pessimistic, disillusioned and disengaged. 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. This portrait reflects broader social, and deeper psychological, perspectives.

Another way to look at young people's views of the future is to distinguish between expected, promised and preferred futures. Here the social and psychological significance lies in part in the level of tension, or degree of coherence, between these three futures. Of particular importance is that young people do not see the *promised* future of unlimited economic growth and technological development as delivering a *preferred* future, or addressing the problems characterising the *expected* future.

These tensions were clearly apparent in a 1995 study by the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council, which I initiated, planned and participated in.[10] The study sought to obtain a better understanding of what young Australians expect and want of Australia in 2010, and to draw out, from these perspectives, the key issues shaping the nation's future, including the role of science and technology. It had two components: a series of eight scenario-development workshops involving a total of 150 young people, most aged between 15 and 24 and from a variety of backgrounds; and a national opinion poll of 800 Australians in this age group.

The ASTEC study shows the future most young Australians want is neither the future they expect, nor the future they are promised under current national priorities. Most do not expect life in Australia to be better in 2010. They see a society driven by greed; they want one motivated by generosity. Their dreams for Australia are of a society that places less emphasis on the individual, material wealth and competition, and more on community and family, the environment and cooperation.

The contrast between expected and promised futures at a global level is apparent in the responses to a poll question that asked which of two statements more closely reflected their view of the world in the 21st century. More than half (55%) chose: 'More people, environmental destruction, new diseases and ethnic and regional conflict mean the world is heading for a bad time of crisis and trouble'. Four in ten (41%) chose: 'By continuing on its current path of economic and technological development, humanity will overcome the obstacles it faces and enter a new age of peace and prosperity'. Pessimism increased with age.

The gulf between promised and preferred futures at a national level emerged in the responses to another question which asked young people 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 (63%) 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 (81%) 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'.

The contradictions between young people's views of the future reveal 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. We can draw an analogy 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.

This personal response to social realities and future prospects demonstrates how the three domains interact with each other. The growing political disengagement by young people – and older - can be seen as an adaptive response to harsher circumstances in which people feel less control over the forces shaping society, and so are determined to focus more on their own welfare. Yet this same response raises the prospects of the expectations becoming self-fulfilling as it, in turn, influences social outcomes and directions.

Social Realities

Visions of the future do not have an external 'reality' independent of contemporary social conditions and cultural images. While many of the concerns people express about future war and conflict, social upheaval and environmental degradation are plausible as future realities, they also obviously reflect perceptions of what is happening today.

The ASTEC study suggests most young people see the future mainly in terms of a continuation or worsening of today's global and national problems and difficulties, although they also expect some improvements, even in problem areas.[10] Major concerns included: pollution and environmental destruction, including the impact of growing populations; the gulf between rich and poor; high unemployment, including the effect of automation and immigration; conflict, crime and alienation; family problems and breakdown; discrimination and prejudice; and economic difficulties. In areas such as health and education, opinions were more equally divided between improvement and deterioration. In the preferred future, the problems have been overcome. There are: a clean environment, global peace, social harmony and equity, jobs for all, happy families (although not necessarily traditional families), better education and health.

Thus, apart from reflecting legitimate concerns about the *future*, young people's fears for the future may also be a means of expressing their anxieties about the *present*. These anxieties may be ill-defined – especially when according to conventional measures of progress most of us are better off than ever before – but are nonetheless personal and deeply felt. By

projecting these concerns into the future, they can be described in fictional, and more concrete, terms.

A vague sense of unease about the direction the world is going and people's impotence to change that course becomes, for many, visions of a world in which a growing gap between rich and poor has produced deeply divided and hostile communities; the arms race has resulted in nuclear warfare (still a concern despite the end of the Cold War); ever-expanding industrialisation and populations have plundered the environment; or the development of technologies with powers beyond our comprehension have ended in human obsolescence. This translation is most obvious in the future visions of children, who often relate very personally to global threats and problems, and depict them in apocalyptic terms.

Popular culture helps this process. But while science fiction fantasies such as *Blade Runner* and *Terminator* influence the *images* young people use in describing the future, their fears are not distant and detached. They are related to their perceptions of life today, and they are particularly related to perceptions about the values that dominate our way of life today. My own work in Australia shows that most people do not believe quality of life is improving. In a recent survey we found only 24% of Australians think life is getting better, while 36% think it is getting worse.[11,12] Studies in Australia and the United States indicate a widespread concern that greed, selfishness, materialism and excess characterise modern (Western) life, with family and community life paying the price. [11,12]

In his acclaimed BBC television series, *Civilisation*, the historian, Kenneth Clark, observes that civilisation, however complex and solid it seems, is really quite fragile.[13] In the concluding episode, after reviewing thousands of years of the rise and fall of civilisations, 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'. The pessimism of young people's expected futures is one measure of this erosion of confidence, this loss of hope. Conversely, their preferred futures can provide a framework for guiding action to address contemporary social concerns, so preventing the expectations from becoming a reality.

Personal Well-being

The coincidence of a sense of futurelessness among young people with the existence of a constellation of traits and attitudes that researchers have seen as its likely consequences makes the possibility of a causal link compelling. Young people are at a stage of development and socialisation – deciding who they are, what they believe and where they belong – that makes them vulnerable to the consequences of a lack of a clear and appealing social vision.

Rates of psychological and social problems among young people have risen in almost all developed nations over the past 50 years.[14,15] Highly-publicised problems like youth suicide and drug-overdose deaths are only the tip of an iceberg of suffering among the young, with recent studies showing that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance.

The evidence suggests that while tragedies such as suicide arise from intensely personal circumstances, they also represent one end of a spectrum of responses by many young people to modern life, one end of a gradient of distress. This gradient extends through degrees of suicidal attempt and ideation, depression, drug abuse and delinquency to a pervasive sense of

alienation, disillusion and demoralisation (traits more likely to be expressed in passivity than through anger or anti-social behaviour).

While any link between broad cultural issues such as global pessimism and the more extreme events like suicide is likely to be diffuse and indirect, evidence for it exists. Counselors and psychoanalysts have told me their suicidal patients feel their lives lack meaning. The father of a young man who killed himself said: 'My son was certain the world would end with a nuclear holocaust, and that it wasn't a good place to be in'. A woman whose son committed suicide said: 'He was upset by the Port Arthur shooting (where a young man shot dead over 30 people at a popular historic site in Tasmania, Australia). He said to me, "everywhere you look, something terrible is happening".' Another young man who took his own life wrote: 'There is too much pain in others for me to be happy.'

Many recent surveys of youth attitudes have reinforced the view that many young people are not comfortable with the broader changes they see taking place in society, even if most are, most of time, happy and optimistic about their own personal circumstances.[5,9,14] Nor are they inspired by the visions of the future held up to them by society. As already noted, the surveys suggest many are mistrustful, cynical and fatalistic; wary of commitment; outwardly confident but inwardly insecure; alienated and disengaged from society. They believe that life should be fast and fun, they are on their own, options should be kept open, governments are incapable of solving our problems, and they themselves are powerless to change things.

The Global Pessimism - Well-being Nexus: some qualifiers

There are, however, three important qualifications of the belief that global pessimism is eroding young people's well-being: the association also works the other way; the nature of well-being means the more personal aspects of life matter most, with people having a capacity to adapt and to 'buffer' themselves against external realities; and, finally, to the extent to which pessimism is a causal factor in personal well-being, it is only one of many social and cultural contributors.

Firstly, the direction of any causal relationship between future pessimism and diminished well-being can also run in reverse. For example, depression affects people's view of the world and their place in it: the depressed typically look at themselves, the world and the future with bleakness.[16] The association uncovered by Newcomb, for example, might mean that people's psychological state influenced the degree of nuclear anxiety.[6] This doesn't make their perceptions somehow wrong. However, this link between people's psychological state and their worldview does draw attention to the subjective influences on perceptions of objective realities. If depression levels are increasing, as the evidence suggests, this would tend to make future visions more pessimistic.

The second important qualification concerns the nature of well-being. Research shows subjective well-being is most influenced by the more personal domains of life such as family, work, school, friends and leisure.[5,17] Furthermore, we have the ability to adapt to our circumstances and maintain a high degree of life satisfaction. The great majority of people say they are happy, satisfied with their lives and optimistic about their future.[11,12,18] This finding is remarkably consistent across countries and over time. In my own analysis of future views and well-being, I noted that a psychological safety mechanism seemed to operate: 'There is plenty of evidence that people tend to make sharp distinction between their personal

future and the future of society or the world: a happy belief that the misfortunes that they believe are increasingly likely to befall others, won't affect them'.[5]

This psychological barrier is not, however, totally impermeable. It does not mean that what happens in the social, economic and political spheres is unimportant 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. While people show remarkable resilience in adversity and while the personal affects well-being more than the global, perceptions of the future of the world and humanity may, nevertheless, have a significant impact on well-being.

Research has shown that the ability to adapt, being able to set goals and progress towards them, having goals that do not conflict, and viewing the world as essentially benevolent and controllable are all associated with well-being.[17,18] Future visions would certainly affect (and reflect) the last, and may well bear on other qualities as well.

In an unpublished 1988 Australian Commission for the Future study, the 53% of those surveyed who said they were pessimistic or concerned about the future of humanity were asked if their concerns 'in general diminish or reduce your enjoyment of life'. Two per cent said 'very much' and 13% 'quite a lot', while 48% said 'not much' and 35% 'not at all' (meaning 63% of this group were personally affected to some degree). Those aged 14-19 were less likely to say 'not at all' - 25%, compared to 43% for those over 60 and 33-37% for other age groups.

The third important aspect of the personal impact of global pessimism is that, to the extent that it a cause of psychosocial distress and disturbance, it is acting together, and perhaps synergistically, with other features of modern societies. These include, but go beyond, structural social realities. Pessimism is only one of several cultural traits of modern Western societies that are inimical to well-being, especially through their impact on values and life meaning. Others include:

❑ *Consumerism:* Reverses traditional societal values that emphasize social obligations and self-restraint, making traditional vices such as greed, envy and self-centredness into virtues and traditional virtues such as moderation and prudence into vices.
❑ *Economism:* The more economics, which is amoral, dictate our choices, individually and as a society, (which is what I mean by economism) the more marginalized moral considerations become.
❑ *Postmodernism:* Characterized by relativism, pluralism, ambivalence, ambiguity, transience, fragmentation and contingency, postmodernism risks an 'anything goes' morality, where values cease to require any external validation, or to have any authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment.
❑ *Individualism:* Increasingly expressed as self-centredness, the gratification of personal wants, a pre-occupation with entitlements, an abrogation of responsibilities and a withering of collective effort.

These five cultural traits (including pessimism) each have, or can have, positive dimensions. The inalienable right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' is at the core of modern democracy. The loosening of social constraints and obligations can enhance personal freedom and creativity, and bring a greater social vitality, diversity and tolerance.

Consumerism has made our lives more comfortable. Pessimism, if it does not destroy hope, can be an incentive to change.

Taken together, however, and taken too far, they have high costs. These are not necessarily obvious: a descent into depravity, the triumph of evil over good. The effects are mainly more subtle, and include a tendency for each of us to make ourselves the center of our moral universe, to assess everything - from personal relationships to taxes - in terms of 'what's in it for me'. The price of this self-centredness is a weakening of the personal, social and spiritual attachments conducive to well-being.

Psychological well-being is closely related to meaning in life, with positive life meaning related to strong religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership in groups, dedication to a cause and clear life goals.[19] In their book, *Understanding Happiness,* Headey and Wearing note that: 'A sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with life satisfaction'.[20] Seligman argues that one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self, and the larger that entity, the more meaning people can derive: 'The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning'.[21]

Future Visions Nurturing Meaning

I have argued that the visions we have of humanity's future involve complex and subtle relationships between expected future conditions, contemporary social realities and personal states of mind. Future visions can both reflect and reinforce social conditions and personal attributes. They can act on personal well-being directly, and indirectly through their social impacts.

What most delighted and encouraged those of us involved in the ASTEC youth futures study was the energy and enthusiasm of most of the young people who participated, and the idealism and altruism that shone through when they had the opportunity to discuss their preferred futures. Many of the students said they had enjoyed the experience; they clearly would like more of their schooling to be like this. They also valued the opportunity to think about the future in more than just personal terms. They said that thinking about preferred futures had made them more aware of the positive changes that could be made and their personal responsibility to contribute to these changes.

So while the future is an outcome of past and present choices and events, it is also an entry point for nurturing meaning and purpose and other qualities essential to healthy societies and healthy people. Visions of a better world can guide social action and provide personal inspiration and hope. They can help to ensure that the relationships between the three domains constitute a virtuous circle, not a vicious one.

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