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most young people . . .
positive towards . . .
expressed negative . . .
lacking goals . . .
felt optimistic . . .
surveys show . . .
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... answers depend on the wording of the questions; asking people about their personal well-being and circumstances elicits a more positive response than asking about general conditions and prospects.

The question is: how important is this pessimism (and the cynicism and distrust that can go with it) to individuals and to society?

Second, rates of psychosocial disorders such as suicide and suicidal behaviour, depression, drug abuse and crime, have risen among young people, especially since World War II, in almost all developed nations, including Australia; there are now good data showing this (Eckersley 1997b). These problems are not confined to the disadvantaged and marginalised. The more serious problems affect only a small minority of young people (and young adults more than teenagers), but they serve as indicators of the changing situation of youth in our society. For example, research suggests that many young people today, perhaps a majority, feel suicidal at some time in their lives – at least to the extent of thinking that life is so bad they feel like giving up, or that life just isn't worth living.

Third, young people are not the problem (and this is where this perspective differs from the so-called "moral panics" about earlier generations of youth). The problem lies with the failure of our society and our culture to meet the psychological and social needs of children, adolescents and young adults.

Surveys are tricky things, and answers depend critically on the wording of the questions. In particular, asking people about their personal well-being and circumstances elicits a

more positive response than asking about general conditions and prospects. Asking teenagers about the prospects of today's teenagers, as *The Weekend Australian* did, is less personal than asking about their own individual prospects, but it is closer to the personal than asking about people's or society's prospects in general.

Thus *The Australian* found that 73% thought job prospects for today's teenagers were good. Yet just two months earlier (*The Australian* 4/7/97, p.5), it found that 44% of teenagers were "very concerned" about job opportunities (and presumably quite a few more were "quite concerned"); it ranked as their top concern. The ASTEC Youth Partnership study of youth views of the future found only 34% of 15- to 24-year-olds thought the unemployment situation would be better in 2010 than it was now, while 41% thought it would be worse (Eckersley 1996a). (Those in their twenties were more pessimistic than those in their teens.)

The wording of questions can be crucial in other respects. The *Weekend Australian* found almost everyone, young and old, thought Australia would remain a good place to live in for today's teenagers. Yet its earlier polling showed 37% of teenagers were "very concerned" about Australia's future (it ranked fourth after job opportunities, drug use and the environment). A CSIRO poll (1997) conducted as part of a recent confer-

ence, *Measuring National Progress*, found that 52% of Australians thought that, overall, life in Australia – taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends – was getting worse, and only 13% thought it was getting better (33% thought it was staying about the same).

Young people were more optimistic than older people in this survey (although the difference may not be statistically significant), but the optimism was expressed in terms of more opting for "remaining the same" (39% of 18- to 24-year-olds), rather than "getting worse" (44%), not significantly more choosing "getting better" (15%). This difference could reflect young people's greater adaptation to modern life, that a significant proportion in this age group are not yet "out there" making their own way in life, and/or their shorter frame of reference. In fact, given these factors, it is perhaps surprising the differences are not greater.

Several other recent surveys and many more over the past decade, of both younger and older Australians, have found a similar concern about the state of the nation and the world and where we're heading (Eckersley 1996b). So have international surveys. A 1995 survey found that Asia was the only region of the world where more people were optimistic than pessimistic about the future (*The Age*, 23/5/95, p.9). A global survey of teenagers found that, on average, only 30% thought the world would improve

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in their lifetime; in Australia the proportion was 24% (*The Age*, 13/7/96, p.1).

With respect to the differences between personal and broader, social perspectives, it is possible that, as indicators of national performance or social well-being, the personal view is biased towards the positive and the social towards the negative. For example, research suggests personal happiness and hopefulness are largely unrelated to our external circumstances. We may be reluctant to admit to unhappiness or pessimism about our own lives because to do so is to admit to being a loser.

On the other hand, our wider worldview includes many elements that are not part of the personal experience of most of us (such as wars, environmental destruction, poverty and serious crime). This worldview may be distorted by media representations that emphasise these negatives. We may tend, in this broader view, to take for granted past improvements, and focus instead on aspects of life we believe have deteriorated, or at least have not improved or met our expectations. And, finally, our culture is dominated by dystopian, rather than utopian, images of the future.

Whether pessimism about the future in general – as distinct, I stress again, from perceptions about personal futures – and the attitudes and values associated with this pessimism are contributing, along with other factors, to rising rates of psychosocial prob-

lems among young people is one question. Another is how this outlook affects society by influencing the way we see our role and responsibilities, and our relationship to social institutions, especially government.

I believe our worldview and expectations of national and global futures are important to both personal and social well-being – especially in the case of young people because of their stage of development and socialisation. I also believe that we will only address this situation effectively by widening public and political debate to examine much more critically and openly key features of our way of life, including the relationships between economic growth, quality of life, health and well-being, and ecological sustainability.

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