

Invisible force: Why culture matters

Richard Eckersley

Abstract

Cultures define what we know about the world, and so what we do in the world. We need to pay them more attention. This paper is a personal research narrative, and new synthesis, drawing on several decades of research and writing on the importance of culture in two related fields: the social determinants of population health and wellbeing; and models and measures of human progress and development. In both domains the significance of cultural factors is often under-estimated. Culture is a vexed topic of research, much debated and contested, defined and used differently in different disciplines and even within the same discipline. It can be difficult to find indicators that 'pin down' cultural qualities and so allow us to measure their effects. These effects are often diffuse and pervasive, with complex interactions with other social factors. We need to acknowledge better the central role of cultures in human affairs if we are to address the challenges facing humanity.

Introduction

When I was young, in the 1970s, I spent two years travelling across the world: by truck with a group through Africa from south to north; in a campervan with a friend through northern and eastern Europe and Russia; on foot along most of the south coast of Crete; and by bus and train overland across Asia to India and Nepal.

In a way I hadn't anticipated, the experience allowed me to view my native culture from the outside; and in ways I hadn't appreciated before, I became aware ours was a flawed and harsh culture. I realised that the Western worldview was not necessarily the truest or best, as I had been brought up and educated to believe, but just one of many, defined and supported by deeply ingrained beliefs and myths like any other. We in the West tend to see material poverty as synonymous with misery and squalor; yet only with the most abject poverty is this so. Mostly the poorer societies I travelled through had a social cohesion and spiritual richness that I felt the West lacked. We see others as crippled by ignorance and cowed by superstition; we don't see the extent to which we are, in our own ways, weighed down by our rationalism and lack of 'superstition' (in a spiritual sense).

The most difficult cultural adjustment I had to make was not to the cultures of other countries, but to my own on my return home to Australia. Many long-term Western travellers have the same experience, shocked, in particular, by the West's extravagant consumerism. My initial response on flying into Sydney from Bangkok was one of wonder at the orderliness and cleanliness, the abundantly stocked shops, the clear-eyed children, seemingly so healthy and carefree. However, this initial celebration of the material comforts and individual freedoms soon gave way to a growing apprehension about the Western way of life.

There were other elements to my 're-entry trauma' besides the experience of other cultures. My lifestyle, very open in some respects, was closed or contained in others - the

consequences being on the road; the almost total absence of mass media in my life; and the exposure to the counter-culture of my fellow travellers, especially in Asia.

Over the following years, the intensity of my reactions faded as I adapted and got on with my life. Nevertheless, initially intermittently then full time - while working for the Australian Commission for the Future in the 1980s, at CSIRO Australia, the national research organisation, in the 1990s, and with the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University in the 2000s - I developed these early insights into a transdisciplinary analysis of cultural influences on health and wellbeing and, going wider still, of how we define and measure human progress and development.

‘Culture’ is extraordinarily difficult to study. It is often taken to mean the arts - literature, theatre, painting, film. We also often think of it as ethnicity and ethnic differences; or as a quality of specific institutions, especially when their cultures become toxic - think politics, banks, the law, and various sporting codes. But culture also exists, or functions, on a larger scale: the cultures of nations and groups of nations, such as Western nations.

‘Culture’ here refers to the language and accumulated knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and values that are passed between individuals, groups and generations; a system of meanings and symbols that shapes how people see the world and their place in it, and gives meaning and order to their lives; or, more simply, as the knowledge people must possess to function adequately in society (Eckersley, 2006a). It is this way of thinking about culture that has underpinned much of my work on population health and wellbeing, human progress and development, and what the future holds for our civilisation and species.

Culture and health

Over the past few decades, epidemiologists have become more interested in the so-called social determinants of health, with a particular focus on socio-economic inequality: the greater the inequality, the steeper the gradient in health (where at any point on the social ladder, people, on average, have better health than those below them, and worse health than those above them), and the poorer people’s health overall (Eckersley, 2001, 2006a, 2015). One reason that research into health inequalities has attracted so much attention and support is that it resonates with a progressive ideology, which emphasises social justice and equity, at a time when neoliberalism or market fundamentalism has become more powerful, and inequality is rising in many countries. Inequality is also relatively easily addressed through changes in public policy in areas such as taxation, housing, education and health (which is not to say it is being properly addressed).

However the emphasis on inequality can be challenged on both empirical and theoretical grounds (Eckersley, 2015). Empirically, the evidence is contradictory and contested (a topic beyond the scope of this essay); theoretically, it is inconsistent with our understanding of human societies as complex adaptive or dynamical systems.

Complex systems are driven by multiple and diffuse interactions between their components. Change in one part of the system can cause changes, often non-linear and unpredictable, in other parts. These can be rapid, triggering amplifying and cascading effects that are often

hard to identify and map. Rather than deterministic one-to-one relationships between 'causes' and 'effects', there are many possible paths between them. Importantly, the characteristics of complex systems 'emerge' from the collective behaviour of the whole system, not from the behaviour of its individual components; the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Research and discussion, both scientific and political, need to reflect better this complexity, and give greater recognition to other social determinants of health. Furthermore, in the wider context of humanity's problematic future, the case for fundamental change becomes much stronger when we look, not just at inequality, but at all the structural and cultural foundations of modern life, and the multiplicity of their interactions. Reducing inequality may well be a good thing for many reasons, including improving health, but it will not solve the persistent and sometimes worsening problems of population health and wellbeing.

Within this larger social context, I felt cultural factors were being neglected, at least in the epidemiological literature. A notable exception was the work in the 1990s of psychologist and anthropologist Ellen Corin, to which I immediately related because of my travel experiences. In contributions to two books on social determinants of health, Corin (1994, 1995) argues that culture shapes every area of life, defines a worldview that gives meaning to personal and collective experience, and frames the way people locate themselves within the world, perceived the world, and behave in it. Humans do not live in a purely objective world in which objects and events possess an inherent and objective significance, she says; instead, these things are imbued with meanings that vary with individuals, times and societies, and which emerge from a network of associations.

There is a complex interaction between the objective and subjective worlds and between reality, expectations and values, Corin says. Values play an important role within these interactions, shaping the effects of an experience by regulating its meaning and its importance. 'Every aspect of reality is seen embedded within webs of meaning that define a certain worldview and that cannot be studied or understood apart from this collective frame' (Corin ,1995, p 273).

As reflected in my own experience, Corin notes that cultural influences are always easier to identify in unfamiliar societies. 'As long as one remains within one's own cultural boundaries, the ways of thinking, living, and behaving peculiar to that culture are transparent or invisible; they appear to constitute a natural order that is not itself an object of study. But this impression is an unsupported ethnocentric illusion' (Corin, 1994, p 119).

It is not surprising, given the 'slippery' quality of culture and science's need to pin concepts down in order to study them, that culture is a vexed topic of research: much debated and contested, defined and used differently in different disciplines and even within the same discipline. One review, undertaken decades ago, identified 164 different definitions of culture.

Epidemiology understands 'culture' mainly in terms of 'subcultures' or 'difference', especially ethnic and racial, and so, usually, as one dimension of socio-economic status and inequality, on which research into the social determinants of health has focused, as I have

said already. Culture in the broader sense of the mainstream or defining culture of a society has been given relatively little attention in the recent literature. Generally speaking, the influence of culture (in this broad sense) on health has been seen as remote and diffuse, pervasive but unspecified. As Corin (1994) observes, epidemiology's 'categorical' approach to sociocultural factors, which fits comfortably within prevailing scientific paradigms, strips human realities of much of their social context and disregards and dismisses other approaches to social and cultural realities.

Modern Western culture, health and Occam's Razor

I have written many scientific papers discussing culture and health. This essay draws on this material. Perhaps the most influential is a 2006 paper, 'Is modern Western culture a health hazard?', published in *The International Journal of Epidemiology*, together with three commentaries by other researchers (Eckersley, 2006a). In this paper, I argue cultural factors such as materialism and individualism are underestimated determinants of population health and wellbeing in Western societies; and that an important and growing cost of our modern way of life is 'cultural fraud': the promotion of images and ideals of 'the good life' that serve the economy but do not meet psychological needs or reflect social realities.

The research on health inequalities suggests that inequality impacts on health through both material and psychosocial processes (the latter involving interactions between social conditions and individual psychology and behaviour, including perceptions, expectations and emotions). If this is the case, I proposed, research also needs to take culture into account because culture influences these things. Psychosocial processes are associated (in their negative effects) with stress, depression, anxiety, isolation, insecurity, hostility and lack of control over one's life. They also affect physical health by encouraging unhealthy behaviour and through direct effects on the neuroendocrine and immune systems.

Epidemiology's contemporary oversight is the more surprising given earlier research into culture's effects (Eckersley, 2001, 2006a). For example, researchers in the 1970s examined the health of Japanese people in Japan, Hawaii and California to see if varying degrees of exposure to Western influence affected the rate of coronary heart disease. They found a clear gradient of increasing heart disease from Japan to Hawaii to California. Conventional individual risk factors did not fully explain the trend. They later measured the degree of exposure to traditional Japanese culture during people's upbringing and found that more traditional Japanese had lower rates of heart disease than non-traditional Japanese, even /after controlling for individual risk factors such as diet.

A classic study in psychiatric epidemiology, the Stirling County Study, begun in the 1950s, looked at the relationship between mental health and social 'integration' in remote rural Canadian communities, as measured by the degree of consensus about values, meaning and shared sentiments. The researchers showed that social 'disintegration' was directly related to the prevalence of psychiatric disorders, and proposed that people forced to live in an environment characterised by disorder and chaos had to strive to maintain their inner equilibrium and that this striving would be associated with more mental illness. (How relevant to life today!)

In a different field, human ecology, researchers found in a major 1970s study of Hong Kong that perceptions were important in determining how people responded to high population density: whether people *felt* crowded appeared to be by far the most important determinant of psychological maladjustment - more important than actual physical density. Significantly, exposure to Western influence was associated with greater intolerance of crowding.

Nevertheless, the complexities and ambiguities of the associations between culture and wellbeing make the research formidable, which became clear to me in a 2002 study a colleague and I carried out of cultural correlates of youth suicide, which rose in many Western countries in the second half of the 20th Century (Eckersley and Dear, 2002). We found strong, positive correlations between (male) youth suicide rates and population measures of subjective health, optimism and several indices of individualism, including personal freedom and control (correlations with other positive variables, including happiness, were also positive but not significant.)

The findings can be interpreted as supporting two, very different hypotheses: that youth suicide represents 'an island of misery in an ocean of happiness', or 'the tip of an iceberg of suffering'. In favouring the latter interpretation, we argued that increased youth suicide reflected a failure of Western societies to provide appropriate sites or sources of social identity and attachment, and, conversely, a tendency to promote unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of individual freedom and autonomy.

Why this choice of hypothesis? The 'tip of the iceberg' explanation is consistent with sociologist Emile Durkheim's theories on suicide, which emphasise the role of social institutions such as the family and religion in binding individuals to society, in keeping 'a firmer grip' on them and drawing them out of their 'state of moral isolation' (Durkheim, 1897/1970, pp. 361-392). The wider literature on individualism, both theoretical and empirical (to which I will return) also favours this explanation. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2002) notes, there is 'a nasty fly of impotence in the ointment of freedom', an impotence that is all the more upsetting in view of the empowerment that freedom was expected to deliver.

Furthermore, other research does not support the 'island of misery' hypothesis. Rather it shows that suicide represents one end of a spectrum or gradient of distress and suffering that, in less severe forms, affects a much larger proportion of young people and which had also become more prevalent over time. This still remains the case of young people's wellbeing in Western countries (Eckersley, 2011; Humphrey and Bliuc, 2021). A recent review of research on individualism and young people's psychological wellbeing concludes that while 'individualistic traits related to personal development and freedom of expression enhance psychological wellbeing, other aspects of individualism such as poor social support, competitiveness and comparisons with others are likely to be linked to a decline in the social connections and mental health of Western young people over the previous few decades' (Humphrey and Bliuc, 2021).

The social story behind youth suicide illustrates many of the difficulties in studying culture as a social determinant of health: defining just what culture is; finding indicators that 'pin

down' cultural qualities and allow us to measure their effects; the often diffuse, pervasive nature of cultural influences; the complex interactions with other social factors. The story challenges William of Occam's famous 'razor', which states that 'entities must not be unnecessarily multiplied'. Roughly translated, this means 'the simplest theory that fits the facts corresponds most closely to reality'. Occam's Razor has a wide application in science, and employing it in this case, and taking the results of my colleague and my statistical analysis at face value, would favour the 'island of misery' hypothesis. However, in casting the net of evidence more widely, we had to 'multiply entities' beyond what seemed at first to be necessary. I believe this 'multiplication' is often the case is dealing with culture and its effects as complex systems, as discussed above.

Different disciplinary perspectives

Epidemiology's neglect of culture raises the question of why all societies have developed rich, complex cultures to explain the world and to give meaning to life. The omission reveals a professional orthodoxy, a mindset that filters out concepts and issues that fall outside the dominant paradigms that frame thinking on the social determinants of health. In other words, scientific disciplines also each have their own cultures: they see things differently; they develop different models for explaining and studying the world, which generate different research questions, produce different results, and lead to different interpretations of reality. Transcending disciplinary boundaries and perspectives is not easy, but it is what researchers must do to understand 'real world' conditions.

In a published commentary on my 2006 paper, epidemiologist Tom Glass (2006) says the paper is important and thought-provoking, a rare attempt to deal with a complex subject that has traditionally stood outside 'normal science' in epidemiology. It is likely to stimulate discussion and controversy (although many will probably remain unconvinced), he says. He agrees that culture has been 'largely ignored or denuded of its essential meaning' in contemporary discourse about determinants of population health. Culture is 'profoundly counter-paradigmatic'. 'That which is cultural, because it is non-local, non-material, omnipresent, and largely invisible, has been off-limits in a field that treats individuals as objects moving through a material world, subject to linear billiard-ball-like perturbations of their motions.'

Two medical anthropologists, Craig Janes (2006) and William Dressler (2006), in their commentaries on my paper, are gracious enough to applaud my attempts to integrate culture into the social determinants of health, but have, as anthropologists, serious reservations about how I have gone about it. Anthropology, which claims intellectual dominion over the construct of culture, eschews the broad use of the term as I employ it. Indeed, anthropologists even debate whether the term has any value at all, a discussion that, to the outsider, illustrates just how dauntingly arcane scholarly argument can become (Eckersley, 2007a).

Medical anthropologists favour a more restricted use of the term, one which recognises just how fuzzy, complex and multifaceted culture is - variably distributed, locally influenced and intimately connected to history, politics and economics. They question whether whole societies (let alone groups of societies) can be characterised by a few dominant themes

(such as individualism). Instead, they focus on the details of population patterning and distribution, individual and group differences, and culture as local knowledge and daily life.

I responded that researchers needed to study culture at both small and large scales (Eckersley, 2006b, 2007a). Faced with the globalising nature of social, economic, cultural and environmental forces, researchers must study these forces at a societal, even global, level; we cannot afford to limit our study to the small, local scale. Otherwise, what are we to make of the observation that in the new world countries of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand male youth suicide rates rose from almost identical levels in the 1950s through the 1960s to the 1990s, when they peaked in all four countries? Or, as I reported, the strong correlations found between youth suicide rates in Western nations and several different measures of individualism, but not other cultural, social or economic factors?

We can draw parallels between cultural changes and environmental or economic changes. The actual and projected impacts of climate change vary dramatically from place to place in terms of changes in temperature, rainfall, and extreme weather events. This does not mean it can only be studied at a local level; indeed, we would never understand the processes if this were done. The same is true of economic globalisation: its effects vary from country to country, between urban areas and rural, and among different industries; but it involves global forces and must be studied at this level, as well as in more specific, focused ways.

The broader approach to culture is a part of psychology, where differences between individualism and collectivism have been a major research theme (Eckersley, 2007a). Psychologists also use other ways of characterising cultures and societies, including whether they are simple or complex, loose (tolerant) or tight (strict), vertical (hierarchical) or horizontal (egalitarian). These qualities interact with collectivism and individualism in shaping social qualities. The review of individualism and wellbeing mentioned above calls for a greater depth of research into the association between them, and the way in which various sub-traits of individualism such as vertical and horizontal dimensions can impact on the association (Humphrey and Bliuc, 2021). For example, a recent study found that individualism was negatively related to wellbeing among young Americans, with these relationships varying somewhat between horizontal and vertical individualism (Nezlek and Humphrey, 2021). Horizontal collectivism was positively related to all measures of wellbeing used in the study, while vertical collectivism was positively related to only some of the measures.

In sociology, individualism – the relaxation of social ties and regulation, and the promotion of personal freedom and choice – is a defining quality of modern life (Eckersley 2006a, 2007a). Historically, individualism has been a progressive force: loosening the chains of religious dogma, class oppression and gender and ethnic discrimination, and so associated with the liberation of human potential. However, research indicates that freedom is a two-edged sword: it can be both exhilarating and disturbing; with new opportunities for personal growth and experience can also come the anxiety of social dislocation and isolation. As Bauman (2008) has observed, today's social ills have their source in an 'individualised society of consumers', with consuming more being the 'sole road to inclusion', and 'existential uncertainty' now a universal human condition. Single-issue

solutions might bring temporary and partial relief, he says, but short of reforming the individualistic way of life, they will not remove the cause.

These different disciplinary perspectives on culture point to the potential for a rich cross-fertilisation between disciplines in studying culture's effects on health (Eckersley, 2007a). For example, anthropology, its 'up close and personal' focus notwithstanding, provides important insights into culture. Its view of culture as a system of meanings, a web or matrix of collective influences that shape people's lives, contrasts with epidemiology's more structural or categorical approach.

Also useful is anthropology's concept that individuals possess cultural models that derive both from their own biographies and from the collective or shared understandings that form the traditions of their society. These models reflect a 'cultural consensus' about the way the world works, but this consensus is not complete and can be contested, even bitterly so. 'Cultural consonance' is the extent to which individuals reveal in their own beliefs and behaviour the cultural consensus (with one focus of research, often conducted on ethnic minorities, being the association between cultural consonance and disease risk).

It follows that culture can be measured as differences between societies (reflecting differences in cultural consensus), or as differences among individuals and groups within a society (reflecting degrees of cultural consonance). For example, some societies are more materialistic or individualistic than others (even among Western nations), and some individuals and groups within any one society will reveal these qualities more than others.

In other words, I am not suggesting that culture exerts a uniform effect on everyone, regardless of gender, class and ethnicity; or that individuals passively absorb cultural influences, rather than interacting actively with them; or that there is not a variety of subcultures marked by sometimes very different values, meanings and beliefs. To rephrase a leading biologist's comment about genes: cultures do not shout commands to us about our behaviour, they whisper suggestions (although the whispers are loud and persistent).

In arguing in my 2006 paper that Western culture's promotion of images and ideals of 'the good life' amounted to cultural fraud, I concluded: To the extent that these images and ideals hold sway over us, they encourage goals and aspirations that are in themselves unhealthy. To the extent that we resist them because they are contrary to our own ethical and social ideals, they are a powerful source of dissonance that is also harmful to health and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for optimism (on this score at least): as Western culture becomes more harmful to health, we are seeing a diminishing 'cultural consonance': increasing numbers of people in Western nations are rejecting this dominant ethic of individual and material self-interest, and making a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values and ways of life as they seek to close the gap between what they believe and how they live. This is a driving dynamic behind various 'counter-cultural' movements such as simple living, downshifting, minimalism and transition movements. We are, then, witnessing parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic contest as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human struggle for definition and acceptance.

Let me give an example of how this struggle might change us: how people construe the self. When I was at school, 60-odd years ago, we were taught that the atom was made up of solid particles, with electrons whizzing around the nucleus like planets orbiting the sun. Similarly, we think of the self as a discrete, biological entity or being. Sociologists talk of modern society as one of 'atomised' individuals.

These days science depicts the atom as more like a fuzzy cloud of electrical charges. What if we were to see the self like this, as a fuzzy cloud of relational forces and fields? As a self of many relationships, inextricably linking us to other people and other things and entities? Some are close and intense, as in a love affair or within families; some more distant and diffuse, as in a sense of community or place or national or ethnic identity; some maybe more subtle, but still powerful, as in a spiritual connection or a love of nature.

These relationships can wax and wane, vary in intensity and charge (positive or negative). Importantly, they never end – for example, the break-up of a marriage, or the death of a parent or child, does not 'end' the relationship, just changes it. Transforming how we see the self in this way – as a fuzzy cloud of relationships – would change profoundly how we see our relationships to others and the world. It brings us closer to how indigenous peoples see the self; and it would alter radically our personal choices and our social and political goals.

Culture, meaning and values: the 'why' and 'how' of life

I have drawn extensively on research in several disciplines in my own work - the transdisciplinary analysis I have mentioned (Eckersley, 2007a, 2016). For example, the sociological and psychological literatures suggest that materialism and individualism, when taken together and too far, reduce social integration, self-worth, moral clarity and existential confidence and certainty. There is a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic values and goals; from self-transcendence to self-enhancement; from doing things for their own sake to doing things in the hope or expectation of other rewards, such as status, money and recognition. The result is an increasing focus on our own lives and an unrelenting need to make the most of life: to fashion identity and belonging increasingly from personal achievements and appearances, possessions and lifestyles, rather than from enduring social bonds and cultural traditions. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, 'he who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*' (Eckersley, 2016). Western culture over-emphasises the 'how', at the expense of the 'why'.

According to psychologist Philip Cushman (1990), we have created 'the empty self', stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era, he says, has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made cohesive by being constantly 'filled up' with consumer products, celebrity news, and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth. In other words, meaning in life, so central to wellbeing, becomes both more difficult to find, or create, and more dependent on transient and ephemeral qualities, on passing fads and fashions.

We can obtain meaning at a variety of levels (Eckersley, 2005, pp. 222-223). Many people today find meaning in the pursuit of personal goals, in things like our work, families and friends, interests and desires. There is also the level of identity with a nation or ethnic group, and with a community. There is also spiritual meaning: a deep sense of being connected to the world and the universe in which we live, of having a place in 'the grand scheme of things'. Spirituality represents the broadest and deepest form of connectedness. It is the most subtle, and therefore easily corrupted, yet perhaps also the most powerful. It is the only form of meaning that transcends our personal circumstances, social situation and the material world, and so can sustain us through the trouble and strife of mortal existence.

History suggests a measure of both balance and stability in meaning in life is crucial to personal wellbeing and social cohesion. A lack of meaning beyond the personal increases our vulnerability; too much meaning is attached to things that are fragile, transient or ephemeral: our looks, careers, sex lives, romantic relationships, personal development, health and fitness, even our children (especially when we burden them with our own expectations and dreams). Disappointment and failure become more likely.

However, the imbalance can also be in the other direction, where the desperate search for meaning and belonging ends in the total subjugation of the self – in, for example, religious or nationalistic fanaticism. Even short of this extreme, religion is no panacea. Americans stand out from the people of other developed nations in the strength of their religious belief and observance (Eckersley 2007b). Yet the United States compares poorly on many social indicators, including life expectancy, crime, poverty and inequality.

One critical consequence of the trends in modern Western culture has been their effect on moral values (Eckersley, 2005, pp. 49-56, 2006a). Values provide the framework for deciding what is important, true, right and good, and have a central role in defining relationships and meanings, and so in determining wellbeing.

Most societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. Virtues are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. Vices, on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires, or the capitulation to human weaknesses. Virtues serve to maintain a balance – always dynamic, always shifting - between individual needs and freedom, and social stability and order.

Durkheim argued that social integration involved the interplay between two antagonistic aspects of human existence, the individual and the social (Eckersley, 2007a). Integration was optimal when the two sides were in balance, and part of this balance required constraining human needs. He saw anomie as a 'malady of infiniteness'; it was a general law of all living things that needs and appetites are normal only on condition of being controlled.

Christianity's seven deadly sins are: pride (vanity, self-centredness), envy, avarice (greed), wrath (anger, violence), gluttony, sloth (laziness, apathy) and lust. Its seven cardinal virtues are faith, hope, charity (compassion), prudence (good sense), temperance (moderation), fortitude (courage, perseverance) and religion (spirituality). Extending this list, philosopher

Andre Comte-Sponville (2002) gives these as ‘the great virtues’: politeness (as it is the imitation of virtue that paves the way for true virtue to be learned), fidelity, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, humility, simplicity, tolerance, purity, gentleness, good faith, humour and, finally, love (which transcends virtue). He says that a virtuous life is not masochistic or puritanical, but a way of living well and finding love and peace.

Modern Western culture undermines, even reverses, universal values and time-tested wisdom. The result is not so much a collapse of personal morality, but a loss of moral clarity: a heightened moral ambivalence and ambiguity, a tension or dissonance between our professed values and our lifestyles, and a deepening cynicism about social institutions. Without appropriate cultural reinforcement, people find it harder to do what they believe to be ‘good’; it takes more effort. And, conversely, it becomes easier to justify or rationalise bad behaviour. There are positive (reinforcing) feedbacks in the process: anti-social values weaken personal and social ties, which, in turn, reduce the ‘hold’ of a moral code on individuals because these ties give the code its ‘leverage’; they are a source of ‘moral fibre’.

Values are the foundations of social organisation, and any discussion of progress and wellbeing must begin here. The sounder the foundations, the less we need to rely on elaborate, and often too rigid, supporting structures of legislation and regulation. As the political philosopher Edmund Burke said, the less control there is from within, the more there must be from without. Human societies are complex systems, as I have noted, and the management of complexity requires rules that are generic, diffuse, pervasive, flexible and internalised; in other words, they need a strong framework of values. As moral frameworks erode, and our culture becomes more rational, legalistic and technocratic, the more the work of values is supplanted by laws and regulations, which tend to be rigid, specific, and externally imposed; they are often a poor, inappropriate substitute.

The apparent harm caused by excessive materialism and individualism raises the question of why these qualities persist and even intensify (Eckersley, 2006a). Both have conferred benefits to health and wellbeing in the past, but appear now to have passed a threshold where rising costs exceed diminishing benefits. Various forms of institutional practice encourage this cultural ‘overshoot’. Government policy gives priority to sustained economic growth but leaves the content of growth largely to individuals, whose personal consumption makes the largest contribution to economic growth.

This ever-increasing consumption is not natural or inevitable, but culturally ‘manufactured’ by a massive and growing media-marketing complex. In my 2006 paper, I cite a figure from a 2003 publication: big business in the United States spent over US\$1 trillion a year on marketing – about twice what Americans spend annually on education, private and public, from kindergarten through graduate school. This spending includes ‘macromarketing’, the management of the social environment, particularly public policy, to suit the interests of business.

While other species have ‘cultures’ in the form of learned behaviours, humans alone require a culture to give us reasons to live, to make life worth living: to give us a sense of purpose, identity and belonging – personally, socially and spiritually – and a framework of values to

guide our actions. There may be many cultural paths we can follow in meeting human needs (as I discuss later). This is the source of our extraordinary diversity and versatility, but it is also a source of danger: we can lose the path altogether, run off the rails.

Human progress

At the heart of Western culture is the notion of progress, the belief that life is getting better. Another line of my research has been to address this topic, including its cultural and subjective elements (Eckersley, 2016, 2019). The measures of progress that societies use matter: good measures are a prerequisite for good governance because they are how we judge its success; they also influence how we evaluate our own lives because they affect our values, perceptions and goals (our cultural consensus). Models and measures both reflect and reinforce what we understand progress to be: if we believe the wrong thing, we will measure the wrong thing, and if we measure the wrong thing, we will do the wrong thing.

Essentially, we equate progress with modernisation (Eckersley, 2016). Modernisation is a pervasive, complex, multidimensional process which characterises our times. It includes: industrialisation, globalisation, urbanisation, democratisation, scientific and technological advance, capitalism, secularism, rationalism, individualism and consumerism. Many of these features are part of the processes of cultural Westernisation and material progress (measured as economic growth). This equation of progress and modernisation reflects a deep cultural bias.

Western nations dominate the top rankings of most indices of progress and development, and Western nations are promoted as a model of development for other countries. On the face of it, the equation seems compelling. The United Nations Development Programme has noted that past decades have seen substantial progress in many aspects of human development. Most people today are healthier, live longer, are more educated and have more access to goods and services, it says; they also have more power to select leaders, influence public decisions and share knowledge.

Thus, indicators focus on those qualities which characterise modernisation and which Western culture celebrates as success or improvement, such as material wealth, high life expectancy, education, democratic governance, and individual freedom. However valuable these gains are, they do not represent the sum total of what constitutes optimal wellbeing and quality of life. Emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing barely register in this view of progress. And it is in these areas that progress has become most problematic, especially in rich nations. The neglect, even dismissal, of these aspects of life flies in the face of human history and a huge body of psychological and other knowledge on the importance to human health and wellbeing of qualities such as meaning, belonging, identity and security, as I have discussed.

Nor does this view of progress integrate or reconcile adequately the requirements of environmental health and sustainability. This dimension is being addressed in new indices, although not yet adequately (Eckersley, 2016, 2019). Modernisation's benefits are counted, but its costs to wellbeing are underestimated and downplayed. At best, the qualities being measured under orthodox approaches may be desirable and even necessary, but are not

sufficient. At worst, the measures are resulting in a falling quality of life and leading us to towards an uncertain and potentially catastrophic future.

Subjective-wellbeing indicators, especially life satisfaction and happiness, are attracting special attention in the quest for better indicators of population wellbeing and societal progress and development because they are believed to capture important subjective elements of wellbeing which other objective indicators do not. A recent paper even states that there appears to be an emerging consensus in the policy community that subjective wellbeing ought to be the key criterion of policy success (Eckersley, 2016).

I am a co-author of a national index of subjective wellbeing, one of the first of its kind in the world, and now widely used in international research (Cummins et al., 2003). Initially enthusiastic about the potential of such measures to measure progress and to compare nations, I am now more sceptical (while continuing to believe in their value in other areas) (Eckersley, 2009, 2013, 2016). Subjective-wellbeing indicators and indices do not fundamentally alter the dominant view of progress. The Human Development Index and the World Happiness Report's scores are strongly correlated (Eckersley, 2016). A global study linked happiness to the extent to which a society allowed free choice; free choice was, in turn, associated with economic development, democratisation, and social liberalisation, all aspects of modernisation.

On the face of it, these associations seem persuasive. However, subjective-wellbeing indicators have their limitations; like other indicators, they also fail to capture fully the 'psychosocial dynamics' of our ways of life: the interrelationships between social factors and individual behaviour and wellbeing. These factors include the worldviews, cultural stories, myths and symbols that define reality and give meaning to our lives, as I have discussed above. Sociologist Philip Selznick (1992, pp. 7, 8), for example, argues that modernisation initially brings the benefits of greater freedom, increased equality of opportunity, efficiency and accountability, and the rule of law – but at the price of 'cultural attenuation', in which, eventually, 'selfhood itself become problematic'.

In contrast to the high levels of reported personal happiness and life satisfaction, many studies over the past few decades have revealed growing public anger and anxiety about the changes remaking Western societies (Eckersley, 2005, pp. 105-125, 2016, 2019). Most people in the West do not believe life is getting better. This pessimism is itself an important cultural dynamic. Our perceptions of the future are woven into the stories we create to make sense and meaning of our lives. This 'storying', when positive, is important in linking individuals to a broader social or collective narrative, and affects both our own personal wellbeing (by enhancing our sense of belonging, identity and agency, for example), and societal functioning (by engaging us in the shared task of working for a better future).

These matters are finding increasing expression in politics in liberal democracies. Cultural factors are one driver behind growing electoral fragmentation and tribalism. A lack of a sense of identity and belonging was important to Donald Trump's election (Eckersley, 2022). The veteran journalist Carl Bernstein (of Watergate fame) said recently that American democracy had not been working well for decades, and that Trump had ignited what was a 'cold civil war' (Dorman, 2022). 'We make mistakes as reporters to look at the country just

in terms of politics and of media. This is a cultural shift of huge dimension.’ Historian Kenneth Clark observed in his acclaimed BBC television series *Civilisation* that civilisation, however complex and solid it seems, is really quite fragile (Eckersley, 2005, p. 122-123). 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’

Measures of progress do not get close enough to our lives to incorporate, define and describe these complex effects. Income, democracy, human rights and education do not ‘measure’ our deep, personal and social concerns, nor reflect the importance of the more intimate aspects of life, especially personal relationships, which are so important to health and wellbeing. For example, material progress does not simply and straightforwardly make people richer, so giving them the freedom to live as they wish, as indicators research implies. Rather, it comes with an array of cultural and moral prerequisites and consequences (for example, giving priority to money and what it buys) that affects profoundly how we think of the world and ourselves, and so the choices we make. The internal, psychosocial dynamics of Western societies reveal a very different picture of their ‘development’.

A critique of positive psychology (the disciplinary home of subjective-wellbeing research) says it rests on Western ideologies of liberal individualism, and so risks becoming ‘a form of disguised ideology that perpetuates the socio-political status quo and fails to do justice to moral visions outside the dominant outlook’ (Eckersley, 2016). Variants of Western individualism constitute moral visions which shape our understanding of both what the self is and what the self should be or become, visions which are not necessarily shared by other cultures.

Recent cross-cultural evidence on happiness and wellbeing reveal substantial cultural variations (Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama, 2013). In North American culture, happiness tends to be defined in terms of personal achievement; individuals seek to maximise positive affect (feelings, moods and emotions); and happiness is predicted by self-esteem. In East Asian culture, happiness tends to be defined in terms of intersocial connectedness; individuals are motivated to maintain a balance between positive and negative affect; and happiness is predicted by perceived embeddedness of the self in a social relationship. Other cross-cultural studies suggest that, compared to individualists, collectivists have a higher tolerance for contradictions, cope better with change, are more flexible across social situations, and think more holistically (Eckersley, 2009). These differences have obvious implications for how well societies deal with modern conditions and challenges.

Transforming culture

Our flawed idea of progress is further challenged by the realities of global threats to humanity, such as climate change and biodiversity loss; pollution of land, air and water; food, water and energy security; global economic crises; nuclear war; and technological anarchy (where technologies become so powerful and develop so rapidly that people lose -

or cede - control over them). Without a deep change in culture, we will not close the gulf between the magnitude of the problems we face and the scale of our responses (Eckersley, 2016).

A cultural transformation of this extent is very different from the policy reforms on which our public discussions and political debates focus and which, by and large, our indicators of development track. The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, hailed politically at the time as an outstanding success, but judged scientifically to be a failure, exemplifies well this 'scale anomaly' or 'reality gap'. The 2021 Glasgow COP 26 climate-change conference focused on achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050; the science suggests this will not be enough to avoid catastrophic global heating.

From a political perspective, the world made progress on Paris; from a scientific one, it failed to close the gap between the reality of climate change and our response. Politics continues to produce slow, incremental change while science demands urgent, radical action. Perhaps the central lesson from COP 26 is that the pressure on the political status quo is increasing, but has yet to crack it open; we are still 'kicking the can down the road'.

This predicament applies across the range of humanity's challenges. These are 'existential' in that they both materially and physically threaten human existence, and also undermine people's sense of confidence and certainty about life. Culture is central to resolving the situation, both Western culture in general and the specific institutional cultures of politics and journalism, which 'concentrate' some of the worst aspects of the broader culture. In my most recent writing, I have argued that a deep and dangerous divide exists in liberal democracies between people's concerns about their lives, their country and their future, and the proclivities and pre-occupations of mainstream politics and news media (Eckersley, 2022). The cultures of politics and journalism are too 'short-sighted' and 'narrow-minded' to bridge the gulf between what society is doing and what we now know we need to do. Political debate needs to encourage the conceptual space for a transformation in our worldview, beliefs and values as profound as any in human history.

This cultural transformation can be compared to that in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment: from the medieval mind, dominated by religion and the afterlife, to the modern mind, focused on material life here on earth. Historian Barbara Tuchman (1978/1989, p. xxi) has said that Christianity provided 'the matrix and law of medieval life, omnipresent, indeed compulsory'. Its insistent principle was that 'the life of the spirit and of the afterworld was superior to the here and now, to material life on earth.... The rupture of this principle and its replacement by belief in the worth of the individual and of an active life not necessarily focused on God is, in fact, what created the modern world and ended the Middle Ages.'

Today, humanity faces another rupture or discontinuity in its view of what it is to be human which will change profoundly how we live. Just as it was impossible for the medieval mind to anticipate the modern, so too is it impossible for the modern mind to grasp what might come next. However, a greater awareness and acknowledgement of the flaws and failings of material progress and modernisation encourage us to think more positively about alternative ways of living which deliver a high quality of life with much lower material

consumption and social complexity. This is where we come back to anthropology and what it tells us about other cultures.

The modern myth of material progress implies, even insists, that past life was wretched, as expressed in the oft-quoted words of Hobbes that the life of man in his natural state was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Eckersley, 2016). It is true that people were materially poorer and their life expectancy lower in the past, but they often led rich social and spiritual lives, as recent accounts of the quality of life among indigenous Australians show. Traditional indigenous ways of living were devastated by the arrival of Europeans, but early accounts suggest a life of relative abundance and ease.

People spent between two and five hours a day gathering and preparing food; there were seasonal fluctuations but, except during extreme drought, it was not hard work. They spent a few hours more on making tools and shelters, allowing the rest of the day to be spent on 'intangibles', such as spiritual, intellectual and artistic activities. James Cook noted in his journal after his visit to Australia in 1770: 'From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth; but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans...the earth and the sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life' (Eckersley, 2016).

Culturally speaking, the lesson is that we need to realise and accept that other, quite different, and even better, ways of making sense of the world and our lives are possible. Furthermore, we need to examine our situation at this fundamental level if we are to have any chance of achieving a higher and sustainable quality of life.

Anthropologist Wade Davis's writing is an eloquent exposition of this viewpoint. He urges us to heed the voices of other cultures because these remind us that there are alternatives, 'other ways of orienting human beings in social, spiritual, and ecological space' (Davis, 2009, pp. 217-218). They allow us 'to draw inspiration and comfort from the fact that the path we have taken is not the only one available, that our destiny is therefore not indelibly written in a set of choices that demonstrably and scientifically have proven not to be wise'. By their very existence, he says, the diverse cultures of the world show we can change, as we know we must, the fundamental manner in which we inhabit this planet.

Davis (2001) says he learned as a student to appreciate and embrace the key revelation of anthropology: the idea that distinct cultures represent unique visions of life itself, morally inspired and inherently right. Cultural beliefs really do generate different realities, separate and utterly distinct from each other, even as they face the same fundamental challenges.

The significance of an esoteric belief lies not in its veracity in some absolute sense but in what it can tell us about a culture, he says. 'What matters is the potency of the belief and the manner in which the conviction plays out in the day to day life of a people' (Davis, 2001, pp. 64-65). A child raised to believe that a mountain is the abode of a protective spirit will be a profoundly different human being from one brought up to believe that a mountain is an inert mass of rock ready to be mined. A child raised to revere forests as a spiritual home will be different from one who believes that they exist to be logged.

Davis cautions that modernity (whether identified as Westernisation, globalisation, capitalism, or democracy) is an expression of cultural values: 'It is not some objective force removed from the constraints of culture. And it is certainly not the true and only pulse of history' (Davis, 2009, p. 193). The Western paradigm, for all its accomplishments, and inspired in so many ways, is not 'the paragon of humanity's potential', he says; 'there is no universal progression in the lives and destiny of human beings' (Davis, 2009, p. 195).

The nature and travel writer Barry Lopez also brings an anthropological perspective to humankind's precarity, 'a time when many see little more on the horizon but the suggestion of a dark future' (Lopez, 2019, p. 26). 'As time grows short, the necessity to listen attentively to foundational stories other than our own becomes more imperative.... Many cultures are still distinguished today by wisdoms not associated with modern technologies but grounded, instead, in an acute awareness of human foibles, of the traps people tend to set for themselves as they enter the ancient labyrinth of hubris or blindly pursue the appeasement of their appetites' (Lopez, 2019, pp. 45-46).

Lopez warns that if we persist in believing that we alone (whatever our culture) are right, and that we have no need to listen to anyone else's stories, we endanger ourselves. 'If we remain fearful of human diversity, our potential to evolve into the very thing we most fear - to become our own fatal nemesis - only increases' (Lopez, 2019, pp. 45-46).

The future of cultures

Davis's and Lopez's warnings take me back to an early 1990s UNESCO project on the futures of cultures, which I have cited in past writing (Eckersley, 2005, pp. 56-58; UNESCO, 1991). It had as its hypothesis that 'cultures and their futures, rather than technological and economic developments, are at the core of humankind's highly uncertain future'. A project report notes: 'Some of the participants expressed the view that culture may well prove to be the last resort for the salvation of humankind.'

The project considered some critical questions about culture. Will economic and technological progress destroy the cultural diversity that is our precious heritage? Will the 'meaning systems' of different societies, which have provided their members with a sense of identity, meaning and place in the totality of the universe, be reduced to insignificance by the steamroller effects of mass culture, characterised by electronic media, consumer gadgets, occupational and geographic mobility and globally disseminated role models? Or, on the other hand, will the explosive release of ethnic emotions accompanying political liberation destroy all possibility of both genuine development founded on universal solidarity and community-building across differences? Will we witness a return of local chauvinisms, breeding new wars over boundaries and intercultural discriminations?

Background papers for the UNESCO project proposed two scenarios - one pessimistic, one optimistic. The pessimistic scenario is that cultures and authentic cultural values will be, throughout the world, bastardised or reduced to marginal or ornamental roles in most national societies and regional or local communities because of powerful forces of cultural standardisation. These forces are technology, especially media technology; the nature of the modern state, which is bureaucratic, centralising, legalistic and controlling; and the spread

of 'managerial organisation' as the one best way of making decisions and coordinating actions.

The optimistic scenario is that humanity advances in global solidarity and with ecological and economic collaboration as responsible stewards of the cosmos. Numerous, vital and authentic cultures flourish, each proud of its identity while actively rejoicing in differences exhibited by other cultures. Human beings everywhere nurture a sense of possessing several partial and overlapping identities while recognising their primary allegiance to the human species. Cultural communities plunge creatively into their roots and find new ways of being modern and of contributing precious values to the universal human culture now in gestation.

Participants in the UNESCO project appeared to see the pessimistic scenario as the more likely, as things stood; the optimistic scenario was more an ideal to guide policy. Thus with culture, as with so many other areas of modern life, our destiny hangs in the balance: a dominant culture that is deeply flawed is nevertheless spreading throughout the world. Epitomised by today's global, technocratic, managerial elite, this culture has become hugely powerful, the 'default setting' for running national and world affairs.

Yet its failures grow correspondingly more profound, with growing inequality and concentration of wealth and power, growing mistrust of government and other institutions, growing global problems such as climate change. And at the same time, ethnic and other 'tribal' feelings have become more fervent and exclusive, often fanatical, including in the West. The 20-year war in Afghanistan is a powerful symbol of this cultural contest.

On the other hand, somewhere beyond this ugly mix, largely hidden by the outdated and dysfunctional cultures of mainstream politics and the news media, through these same dual processes, there is also the potential, the possibility, for the optimistic scenario: a world where rich cultural diversity underpins a new and vital cultural universality.

At least we should hope so.

Compliance with ethical standards

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