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Carpe Diem?

The Deferred Happiness Syndrome

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1. Deferring happiness

The culture of long hours has been extensively debated in Australia in recent years with increasing focus on the implications for the health of the family (eg. Pocock 2003). At the same time Australians have been engaged in a national debate over what it takes to lead a happy life, with a focus on the competing goals of material aspiration, on the one hand, and more intrinsic rewards, including the strength of relationships, on the other. A survey in 2002 revealed a widespread uneasiness among Australians about how they live their lives and what life should be about. When asked whether they could afford to buy everything they really need, 62 per cent said 'no', including nearly half of those in the richest 20 per cent of the population. By contrast, when asked if Australian society is too materialistic, that is, too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter, 83 per cent agreed (Hamilton 2002).

In the course of a recent Australia Institute study of the downshifting phenomenon, the authors became aware of an apparently widespread propensity of Australians to persist with life situations that are difficult, stressful and exhausting in the belief that the sacrifice will pay off in the longer term (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004). The tendency to endure long hours in unsatisfying jobs was dubbed the 'Deferred Happiness Syndrome'. The sacrifices that many identified were focused especially on their relationships with family and friends, but also on their own sense of what would make their lives fulfilling, the thing that they 'had always wanted to do'. Some endure many years of stress, sometimes resulting in ill health, in order to pursue the long-term dream of a 'happy' retirement.

The motivations for deferring happiness in these ways are various.

1. Growing aspirations for more expensive life styles, reflected in rapidly increasing house price, are dominating some people's lives. The desire to stay in this race leads many to work longer and harder, often at the cost of other aspects of their wellbeing.
2. Some workers feel a powerful need to accumulate as much as they can in preparation for their retirement. This is especially prevalent amongst men in their forties and fifties. Participants in the focus group discussions returned to this theme repeatedly apparent that many believed that government had indicated that they could no longer rely on the pension to meet their needs and that they are on their own (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004).
3. Some workers are stuck in demanding jobs because they are fearful of the consequences should they change. They become habituated to the stresses and pressures, perhaps until a health problem or some crisis at work or home forces them to consider alternatives.

The fallout from Deferred Happiness Syndrome is felt particularly by family and friends. In the focus groups for the downshifting study, it was apparent that some men are wracked by guilt about neglecting their children while they work long hours

(Breakspear and Hamilton 2004). However, they often felt a strong need to ‘provide for their families’ and were therefore torn between conflicting drives.

Further light has been shed on this issue in a recent report, commissioned by the Australia Institute, by Pocock and Clark (2004). In their study of the attitudes of children to money and their parents’ working patterns, the authors identified in some households what they called the ‘hyper-breadwinner model’. In some traditional single-earner families, the breadwinner is absent for long periods in pursuit of the income required to maintain the family, and this often means excessive hours at work or travelling long distances to a workplace. In focus group discussions for that study, children in this situation made it clear that they would prefer more time with their absent parent instead of more money in the household, which suggests that the absent parent (usually the father) is sacrificing a better relationship with his children in order to work longer hours. Pocock and Clark found that many children understand the dilemma in which their parents find themselves but declared that they will spend more time with their own children when they have to choose (2004, pp. 17-18).

Downshifting is what people do when they decide no longer to be driven by the Deferred Happiness Syndrome. We know from previous research that nearly a quarter of Australian adults have downshifted, that is, they have made a voluntary decision to change their lives in ways that reduce their incomes and spending (other than retirement) (Hamilton and Mail 2003). Contrary to popular belief, downshifting is not confined to middle-aged people who are financially secure and can take the risk; the practice is spread across age groups, family types and income levels (except at the lowest level).

The most important reason given for downshifting is to spend more time with family (35 per cent of respondents). A desire for a healthier lifestyle (23 per cent), more personal fulfilment (16 per cent) and a more balanced lifestyle (16 per cent) are also important (Hamilton and Mail 2003). Householders with children are much more likely to downshift in pursuit of more time with their families, while those without children are much more likely to be motivated by the desire for more balanced and healthier lives. While all income groups stress more time with family, high-income downshifters are much more likely to mention the desire for personal fulfillment, and those on low incomes are more likely to stress a healthier lifestyle.

2. Survey results

Here we present evidence on the extent of the Deferred Happiness Syndrome in Australia gathered from a national opinion survey carried out by Newspoll over 19-22 April 2004. Respondents were a randomly selected sample of 518 full-time workers aged 18 years and over. They were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

“Your work means you currently neglect your relationships with family and friends, but you plan to make up for it in later years.”

If they agreed that this statement applied to them then they were deemed to be suffering from Deferred Happiness Syndrome. The main results are reported in Table

1 where it is shown that 30 per cent of Australian full-time workers suffer from Deferred Happiness Syndrome. Men are a little more prone to it, with a higher proportion of men (17 per cent) saying that they *strongly* agree with the statement than women (14 per cent).

Table 1 Full-time workers suffering from Deferred Happiness Syndrome, by sex (%)

	Male	Female	Total
Total agree	31	28	30
Strongly agree	17	14	16
Partly agree	14	13	14
Total disagree	68	70	69
Partly disagree	19	20	19
Strongly disagree	49	50	49
Don't know	2	2	2

Figures may not add due to rounding.

The results indicate that workers with children are more likely to experience Deferred Happiness Syndrome (34 per cent) than those without (27 per cent) – see Table 2. However, we also found that the syndrome is somewhat more prevalent among workers over 50 (35 per cent) than those in the 25-34 year-old group (27 per cent) and the 35-49 year-old group (28 per cent). This may be explained by the focus of older workers on their retirement incomes. Many middle-aged and older workers ‘live for their retirement’, imagining a time of extended bliss that is worth major sacrifices in the decades before retirement.

There is no appreciable difference in the prevalence of Deferred Happiness Syndrome between residents of capital cities and those outside capital cities, but there are some differences between states – see Table 3. It would appear that Queenslanders (37 per cent) and South Australians (35 per cent) are much more likely to suffer from Deferred Happiness Syndrome than other Australians, especially Tasmanians (only 17 per cent).¹ This is particularly striking for Queensland, given that it enjoys a reputation for being laid-back and accommodates a higher proportion of downshifters than other states. Compared to the national average of 23 per cent, there are more downshifters located in Queensland (31 per cent) than the other big states (22 per cent in NSW and 23 per cent in Victoria) (Hamilton 2003). Although the earlier survey did not explore the extent to which downshifting also involves a change of residence, it is

¹ The difference between Queensland and NSW is not quite statistically significant at the 95% level, while the small sample size for Tasmania means that the difference is not statistically significant.

likely that some NSW and Victorian downshifter moved to Queensland as part of their life change.

Table 2 Full-time workers suffering from Deferred Happiness Syndrome, by age and with/without children (%)

	Age				Children		Total
	18-24	25-34	35-49	50+	Yes	No	
Total agree	31	27	28	35	34	27	30
Strongly agree	19	11	17	17	16	15	16
Partly agree	12	16	11	18	34	27	14
Total disagree	68	73	70	62	65	71	69
Partly disagree	17	22	22	13	17	20	19
Strongly disagree	51	52	47	49	47	51	49
Don't know	2	0	2	3	1	2	2

Figures may not add due to rounding.

Table 3 Full-time workers suffering from Deferred Happiness Syndrome, by state (%)

	State						Total
	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	
Total agree	26	30	37	35	26	17	30
Strongly agree	16	16	19	15	11	4	16
Partly agree	10	15	18	19	15	13	14
Total disagree	73	67	62	64	72	83	69
Partly disagree	19	17	24	17	14	20	19
Strongly disagree	54	50	37	47	58	63	49
Don't know	2	3	2	1	1	0	2

Figures may not add due to rounding.

Perhaps not surprisingly, workers from high-income households (incomes in excess of \$60,000 per annum) prove much more prone to Deferred Happiness Syndrome – 32 per cent are afflicted – than those from low-income households (less than \$30,000), where only 15 per cent are afflicted. Among high-income households 18 per cent strongly agree that they neglect family and friends, while among low-income households there are none who strongly agree. This may reflect a greater preoccupation with financial security on the part of wealthier households.

Table 4 Full-time workers suffering from Deferred Happiness Syndrome, by household income (%)

	Household income			Total
	Less than \$30000	\$30000 to \$59999	\$60000 plus	
Total agree	15	26	32	30
Strongly agree	0	12	18	16
Partly agree	15	14	14	14
Total disagree	75	74	66	69
Partly disagree	20	19	20	19
Strongly disagree	55	56	47	49
Don't know	10	0	2	2

Figures may not add due to rounding.

3. Deferrers, gratifiers and downshifters

The surveys referred to in this paper, together with a range of other evidence, indicate that most Australians fall into one of three groups – deferrers, gratifiers and downshifters. The Deferred Happiness Syndrome appears to contradict the life approach reflected in the huge growth in consumer credit and mortgage debt, which is motivated by the desire for instant gratification (Hamilton 2002). But the underlying desire of both deferrers and gratifiers is the same. Gratifiers want the money and what it buys now, and accumulate financial debts as a result. Deferrers want the money and the life it buys later and accumulate relationship debts as a result. Both risk ending in bankruptcy, the difference being that in the one case the bailiffs come in the door, while in the other one's partner leaves by it.

Downshifters, by contrast, break the link between money and happiness. While deferrers 'postpone the day' while they accumulate the resources they believe they will need to live happily, downshifters have decided to 'seize the day' to pursue a more fulfilling life. The deferrers tend to be driven above all by financial security

while the downshifters place much less emphasis on money and much more on their relationships, their health and a sense of personal fulfilment. Simplifying, downshifters sacrifice money for time, deferrers sacrifice time for money, and gratifiers sacrifice money later for money now.

It would be wrong to characterise the difference between the groups as one of planning *versus* instant gratification. There are clear benefits from life planning that may involve sacrificing certain things now to achieve a better outcome in the long term. But the alternative to planning may be either the pursuit of instant gratification or carrying on in the vague hope that things will be better in the future.

There are around equal numbers of deferrers and downshifters in Australia. Among adults aged 30-60, 23-30 per cent are downshifters, depending on the definition, while among full-time workers 30 per cent have been identified as deferrers. It is not clear how many might fit into the category of gratifiers. It is clear, however, that neither deferrers, gratifiers nor downshifters are concentrated in any socio-economic group, family type or geographical area; each is drawn from across the community.

While downshifters may be thought of as those who have decided to break out of the Deferred Happiness Syndrome, it would be wrong to think that deferrers are no more than downshifters in preparation. It is clear from the two studies of downshifting in Australia that they are not, for the most part, those who can 'afford to take the risk' because they have accumulated extensive assets. Risk aversion is in fact a characteristic of deferrers. Detailed interviews with downshifters show that it takes considerable courage to make the leap (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004). So while some deferrers may reach a point where they decide to take the risk and seize the day, many, perhaps most, will continue to defer until retirement. There is anecdotal evidence that for many the happy life deferred until retirement in fact never arrives.

Downshifters often attract hostility for 'bailing out' early (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004). While the dream of a sea-change has very widespread appeal, some believe that downshifting is a 'selfish' decision because it means abrogating responsibilities to family, especially children. But time and again we found that people's antagonism and incomprehension are mixed with envy and, in some cases, a hidden resentment at downshifters because, in the words of one, they 'have the courage to change' while their critics do not. The accusation of selfishness from some is in sharp contrast to the beliefs of downshifters themselves who see their decisions as motivated by the desire to give *more* to their families rather than less. But they are giving more time and affection rather than more money.

Those who make individual choices to reject the dominance of money in their own lives are often characterised as 'crazy' or irresponsible. This attitude is also held by many who recognise the more intense pressures people are under today, yet there is a view that people should be stoical and put up with the stresses for the sake of others. This difference between downshifters' motives and some of the reactions of those around them reflects the most fundamental feature of the downshifting phenomenon, a change in personal values in which financial and material success is no longer the dominant motive.

Australia is a materially rich country, but there is considerable doubt about whether we are any richer in our relationships (Tanner 2003; Eckersley 2004). It has been

known for centuries that money does not buy happiness. It has also been known that a fulfilled life depends on feeling that we have contributed to society and to family, and that paid work is an important way of doing so. The issue is not whether money is necessary or not; clearly adequate incomes are essential. The question posed by the Deferred Happiness Syndrome is how much we are willing to sacrifice to have more money. For downshifter the answer is 'not very much' while for deferrers the answer is 'quite a lot' and, in cases where families break up due to overwork, 'almost everything'.

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