

What is wellbeing?

In a world of seemingly endless options, what choices will make us happier? Studies of happiness show that the following things all enhance our wellbeing:

- a good marriage
- the company of friends
- rewarding work
- sufficient money
- a good diet and physical activity
- sound sleep
- engaging leisure and
- religious or spiritual belief and practice.

Optimism, trust, self-respect and autonomy also make us happier. Gratitude and kindness lift our spirits. Having clear goals to work towards, a 'sense of place' and belonging, a coherent and positive view of the world, and a belief that we are part of something bigger than ourselves also foster wellbeing.

These ingredients of a happy life are not just a matter of personal choice. They are also determined by the social conditions in which we live, and these, in turn, are influenced by government policy.

Australian governments make it clear that a strong, growing economy is their over-riding goal and responsibility, believing wealth is the foundation for creating a higher quality of life. Yet the evidence shows that wealth does not automatically produce wellbeing. Wealth can be harmful when its pursuit crowds out more important sources of happiness. The need to belong is more important than the need to be rich; meaning matters more than money.

Creating wealth as a nation means consuming more as individuals. As it seeks ever more ways to colonise our consciousness, consumerism both fosters and exploits the restless, insatiable expectation that there has got to be more to life.

So we need to think about social or community wellbeing, not just our personal happiness. A focus on personal happiness discounts the importance of broader social, economic, cultural and environmental factors that affect our lives.

Despite our affluence, about twice as many Australians say quality of life is declining as say it is getting better. Many are concerned about the greed and selfishness they believe are causing social problems and threatening their children's future. They yearn for a

better balance in life, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, people don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

As the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu said, 'to know when you have enough is to be rich'.

The paper that follows explores these questions in more detail.

What is wellbeing, and what promotes it?

Richard Eckersley

National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health

Australian National University

Introduction

The Wellbeing Manifesto is intended to change how we think about national progress, and especially about how we equate progress with economic growth. Increasing scientific interest in wellbeing is contributing to this re-evaluation.

We can think of wellbeing and what promotes it in many ways. Most of the recent media attention has been on happiness – how to find it and how much of it money can buy. But there are also other ways of thinking of wellbeing that go beyond individual happiness.

This background paper to the Manifesto goes further than many recent discussions of wellbeing by considering these other dimensions. They include people's perceptions of social wellbeing or national quality of life; patterns and trends in physical and mental health; alternative measures of progress; and how cultural qualities such as materialism and individualism affect personal and social wellbeing.

Wellbeing: more than feeling good

We often measure wellbeing as happiness or satisfaction with life. The search for happiness is often confused with the pursuit of pleasure, but wellbeing is about more than living 'the good life'; it is about having meaning in life, about fulfilling our potential and feeling that our lives are worthwhile.¹

Our personal or subjective wellbeing is shaped by our genes, our personal circumstances and choices, the social conditions we live in, and the complex ways in which all these things interact. Genes affect our wellbeing mainly through their influence on personality traits such as extraversion and neuroticism, which are associated with higher and lower wellbeing respectively.

But genetic influences are not fixed or immutable. They are shaped by the environment in which we live: our upbringing, our personal experiences, even the general conditions of life. In fact, our personalities appear to be changing over time as a result of social changes. As an Arab proverb states: ‘Men resemble their times more than they resemble their fathers.’

The evidence shows that a good marriage, the company of friends, rewarding work, sufficient money, a good diet, physical activity, sound sleep, engaging leisure and religious or spiritual belief and practice all enhance our wellbeing, and their absence diminishes it. Optimism, trust, self-respect and autonomy make us happier. Gratitude and kindness lift our spirits; indeed, giving support can be at least as beneficial as receiving it. Having clear goals that we can work towards, a ‘sense of place’ and belonging, a coherent and positive view of the world, and the belief that we are part of something bigger than ourselves foster wellbeing.

Wellbeing is powerfully influenced by perceptions and expectations. Adaptation and social comparison are especially important. We tend to adapt to changes in our situation, whether it’s gaining something or losing it (although losses – of a job or partner, for example – are hard to take). Our position relative to others counts a great deal; comparing favourably elevates us, comparing poorly diminishes us. The gap between our aspirations and achievements also matters.

Most of the qualities and characteristics associated with wellbeing are also related to physical health, including longevity.² Socially isolated people are two to five times more likely to die in a given year than those with strong ties to family, friends and community. Wellbeing itself has a central role in these associations, improving health through direct effects on our physiology, including our immune system, and by influencing diet, exercise, smoking, drinking and other lifestyle behaviour.

All in all, wellbeing comes from being connected and engaged, from being enmeshed in a web of relationships and interests. These give meaning to our lives. We are deeply social beings. The intimacy, belonging and support provided by close personal relationships seem to matter most; and isolation exacts the highest price.

What causes what?

There are several important points to make about the causes of wellbeing. The relationships are often, if not always, reciprocal. In other words, happier people are more likely to be married, have more friends, do more interesting work, or earn higher incomes.

Many of the factors are interrelated. For example, the costs of being unemployed go well beyond the loss of income; work also offers purpose in life, belonging and friendship. The benefits of being religious flow from the social connections, spiritual support, sense of purpose, coherent belief system and moral code that religion provides; all these things can be found in other ways (although perhaps less easily).

One source of wellbeing can compensate, at least partly, for the lack of another. Higher income matters more to single parents than to couples, and to the non-religious more than the religious. Marriage does most for people who lack friends and other social connections. Those who are single, elderly or in poor health gain most from religion.

Comparing groups on the basis of income, marital status or age can yield quite large differences in happiness, but we need to bear in mind that the differences among individuals are greater still. Groups overlap: on average, the rich do better than the poor, but many poor people have higher wellbeing than many rich people.

Finally, we need to beware that in our eagerness to be happy we don't make the pursuit of happiness yet another personal goal that is self-focused and self-defeating, a source of stress and disappointment because of unrealistic or inappropriate expectations. As the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu advised, 'seek not happiness too greedily, and be not fearful of unhappiness'.

This danger is reinforced by the focus of the popular media (and researchers) on the personal aspects of wellbeing rather than the social influences. As one researcher has warned, the new science of happiness (most of it undertaken in the United States) reinforces American biases about how individual initiative and a positive attitude can solve complex problems.

Declining quality of life?

When people are asked how happy or satisfied they are they give an 'air-brushed' picture of the situation: most of us are mostly happy most of the time. The average Australian rates their happiness or satisfaction at about 75 per cent.³ And while people have not become happier over time, nor do they appear to be unhappier today than in the past. The reason is that the 'art' of happiness involves using various cognitive devices to maintain it, including holding illusory beliefs about ourselves, rationalising our situation and mitigating negative experiences.

Asking people about others' lives, or life in general, as distinct from their own lives, gives a more negative picture.⁴ Average satisfaction with national conditions in Australia rates at about 60 per cent, 15 percentage points below personal satisfaction. About twice as many Australians say quality of life is declining as say it is getting better.

Public attitude surveys show that many people are concerned about the greed and selfishness they believe drive society today, underlie social ills, and threaten their children's future. We yearn for a better balance in our lives, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, we don't seem 'to know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

Values and life satisfaction: Among college and university students worldwide, those who report high life satisfaction give priority to love over money



Source: D. G. Myers, *Happiness*, 2004 (see endnotes).

Since the mid-1980s, social researcher Hugh Mackay's reports have charted Australians' growing concerns about the rate and nature of the changes reshaping Australian society. Feelings of 'pessimism', 'uneasiness' and 'tension' have marked this period.⁵ While continuing to affirm that Australia was 'the best country in the world', they saw it as 'a nation in trouble', 'a tougher, less compassionate place'. Mackay⁶ says that, against a background of anxiety about 'the state of the world' and relentless 'bad news', Australians are disturbed by the many signs of 'degeneration' in the Australian way of life.

While noting the moral basis of Australians' concerns about society (especially that people have become less caring and more materialistic), Mackay's reports also discuss other worries – about stress, drugs, crime, mistrust, the widening gap between rich and poor, financial pressures, growing job insecurity and work pressures, and, more recently, refugees and terrorism.

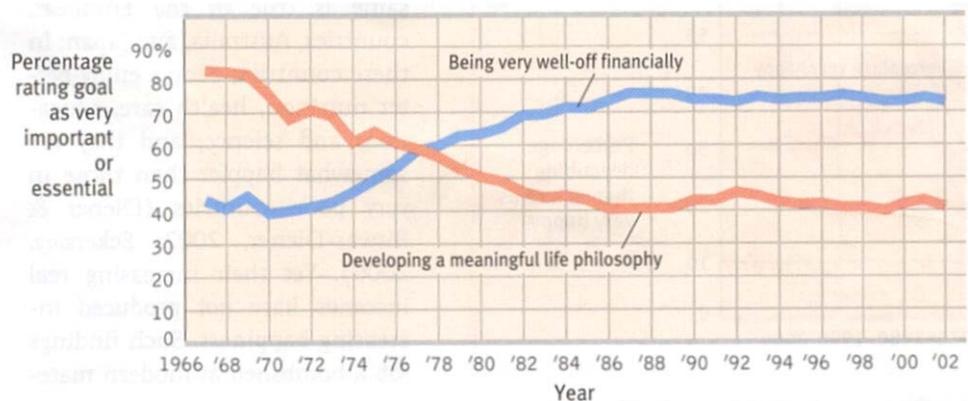
Sociologist Michael Pusey⁷ found over a half of those surveyed in his Middle Australia Project felt quality of life was falling, with the most common reasons given being, in order: too much greed and consumerism; the breakdown in community and social life; too much pressure on families, parents and marriages; falling living standards; and employers demanding too much. Most people believed family life was changing for the worse, citing the breakdown of traditional values, too much consumerism and pressure to get more money and buy things, a breakdown of communication between family members, and greater isolation of families from extended family networks and the community.

A report by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Values and Civic Behaviour in Australia*, says people feel values are changing, generally for the worse, and that Australia is becoming too selfish and materialistic.⁸ **Personal aspirations and aspirations for the nation appeared to be largely unrelated. Few participants believed that Australia would become their ideal society and they had distanced themselves from this goal:**

‘They manage, or control, their reactions to social issues so they can maintain a comfortable and self-focused life.’

People’s perceptions of quality of life are supported by some health trends, especially among young people, who reveal most clearly the tenor and tempo of the times.⁹ While mortality rates continue to decline, adverse trends in young people’s health range across physical problems such as obesity and inactivity to psychological problems such as depression and drug abuse, and from relatively minor but common complaints, such as chronic tiredness, to rare but serious problems, such as suicide.

From 1970 through most of the 1980s, annual surveys of more than 200,000 students entering U.S. colleges revealed an increasing desire for wealth



Source: D. G. Myers, *Happiness*, 2004 (see endnotes).

A fifth to a third of young people are experiencing significant stress and distress at any one time, with some estimates of the prevalence of a more general malaise (headaches, indigestion, insomnia) reaching 50 per cent. An American study of mental health found less than a fifth of adults today were ‘flourishing’ (that is, they enjoyed good mental health), while over a quarter were ‘languishing’ or depressed; the rest – over a half – were somewhere between, neither mentally ill nor well.¹⁰ Consistent with other research, younger people were more likely to be languishing or depressed and less likely to be flourishing.

Illustrating the often sharp contrast between life satisfaction measures and other wellbeing indicators, a recent study of young Australians found over 80 per cent said they were satisfied with their lives – including lifestyle, work or study, relationships, accomplishments and self-perceptions – but that 50 per cent were experiencing one or more problems associated with depression, anxiety, anti-social behaviour and alcohol use.¹¹

When wealth dominates

Through the centuries, sages have counselled that happiness is not a goal but a consequence. It is not so much something to be sought or pursued as a result of how we live, and it is more likely to be experienced when we think not just of ourselves, but also of others. It comes, too, from balancing wants and means, from being content with what we have. As Lao-Tzu also said, 'to know when you have enough is to be rich'.

Today, we are sold the message that we can only be happy if we have more money and more things. Both government policy and a vast media-marketing industry promote this message. None of the lessons of human experience or scientific research supports it. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*'. Today, in emphasising the 'how' of life, we neglect the 'why'.

Australian governments explicitly state that a strong, growing economy is their overriding goal and responsibility.¹² The Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard, and his Labor predecessor, Paul Keating, have even put a target on this goal: an economic growth rate of over four per cent a year. Howard has stressed that the Government's economic objectives are not ends in themselves but the means for satisfying human needs, including more security and greater happiness. Just how well do the means serve these ends?

Historically, economic growth has been associated by many indicators of improved health, wellbeing and quality of life. This is consistent with the view that money matters most when it helps us meet basic needs; beyond that the relationship between wealth and wellbeing becomes more complex. This is apparent when we compare per capita income and happiness in different countries. At low income levels, the relationship is strong; above about US\$10,000 a year, the correlation is close to zero.¹³ And, as already noted, in rich nations, population happiness has not increased in recent decades (over 50 years in the United States) even though people have become, on average, much richer.

Across countries, happiness is more closely associated with democratic freedoms than with income. It is also strongly linked to equality, stability and human rights. The strength of these relationships can vary from country to country, however, suggesting culture and ideology play a part by shaping perceptions and expectations. National personalities or temperaments also differ and these differences help to explain why happiness varies among nations.

A recent study that compared life satisfaction amongst East and West Germans since reunification in 1990 found East Germans had lower satisfaction over the ensuing decade, but that, unlike West Germans, their satisfaction increased steadily during the 1990s, so narrowing the satisfaction gap between East and West.¹⁴ Only about 12 per cent of the increase in satisfaction could be attributed to rising household income, with most of the improvement explained by 'better average circumstances', such as greater political freedom and improved public services.

Does money buy happiness? While buying power has more than doubled since the 1950s, the average American’s reported happiness has remained almost unchanged



Source: D. G. Myers, *Happiness*, 2004 (see endnotes).

Rich and poor

When we look at the relationship between income and wellbeing within countries – that is, between individuals or groups – we do find that the rich are happier than the poor, even in rich nations. While it is often said that money can’t buy happiness, most surveys show happiness grows with increasing income. Still, a rise in income matters more to the poor than to the rich. It costs about \$7,500 a year to raise the satisfaction of someone on a household income of under \$15,000 by one percentage point, but \$1 million a year to increase the satisfaction of a person in a household earning \$200,000 by the same amount.¹⁵

Money helps by improving living conditions and alleviating hardship, especially among the poor, but it is also a measure of social status, and social status affects wellbeing through the social comparisons that status defines. So income-related differences in happiness will persist no matter how high average incomes rise as a result of economic growth. In other words, it is a zero-sum game in which one person’s happiness comes at the expense of the unhappiness of another.

The evidence shows that the focus on wealth creation as the foundation for raising wellbeing is mistaken. We would be better off concentrating on eliminating poverty, reducing inequality and improving community conditions and services. However, the consequences for wellbeing of a 'go for growth' national strategy reach far beyond these issues to include profound effects on social conditions and the natural environment. Both have immense implications for wellbeing.

Costs of growth

The relentless drive for greater economic efficiencies, which are needed to maintain high growth rates, has been accompanied by increasing inequality, sustained high unemployment, the growth in under-employment and overwork, pressures on public services such as health and education, and the geographic concentration of disadvantage, leading to deeper and more entrenched divisions within society.¹⁶

Increased work pressures and demands, including non-standard hours, and decreased job security not only harm workers by reducing morale and job satisfaction (and possibly productivity), but also threaten the wellbeing of partners and children.¹⁷ These effects on families mean that the costs to wellbeing are transmitted from generation to generation.

Another 'side-effect' of the current patterns of growth is the destruction of the natural environment, of which we are an intrinsic part. However much we seem to be able to address some impacts through increased wealth, technological innovation and environmental regulation, the evidence shows we are disrupting planetary systems on a scale that grows ever greater and more pervasive.¹⁸ Global warming, described by *Newsweek* in a 1970 cover story on 'the ravaged environment' as one of the more fanciful notions of global disaster that scientists played with in 'their more apocalyptic moments', is today's reality and tomorrow's fearful prospect.

The tension between public concerns about quality of life and the political emphasis on growth is implicit in the survey findings mentioned above. Some studies make this tension quite explicit.¹⁹ Hugh Mackay says of his research that Australians 'are troubled by the feeling that so much emphasis is placed on the need for economic growth – and personal wealth – that quality of life is often a casualty'. In a 1999 survey, 75 per cent of respondents agreed that, 'too much emphasis is put on improving the economy and too little on creating a better society'. In a 2002 poll, 83 per cent agreed that 'Australian society is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter'.²⁰

A 1999 Australian survey found that 'having extra money for things like luxuries and travel' ranked last in a list of seven items judged 'very important' to success, well behind the top-scorer, 'having a close and happy family'. In contrast to government priorities, 'maintaining a high standard of living' ranked last in a list of 16 critical issues headed by educational access, children and young people's wellbeing, and health care – things many Australians believe are being sacrificed to increase standard of living.

Growth *versus* wellbeing

The diminishing returns and rising costs of growth have led to the proposal of a threshold hypothesis, which states that for every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in quality of life, but only up to a point – the threshold point – beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate.²¹

The threshold hypothesis has been supported in recent years by the development of indices, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, that adjust GDP for a range of social, economic and environmental factors that GDP either ignores or measures inappropriately.²² These include income distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and pollution.

These ‘GDP analogues’ show that trends in GDP and social wellbeing, once moving together, have diverged since about the mid-1970s in all countries for which they have been constructed, including Australia.²³ The reasons for this divergence may vary between nations, but include: the growing costs of environmental damage and resource depletion, including greenhouse gas emissions; increasing income inequality; unsustainable foreign debt; the rising cost of unemployment and overwork; the failure to maintain capital investment; and the transfer of (unpaid) household production to the market.

There is, however, much more to the equation of more with better. The costs of growth are not just material and physical; they are also cultural and ethical. Growth is closely associated – as both a cause and a consequence – with two qualities that, more than any other, define modern Western culture: materialism and individualism.

Materialism and individualism

Cultures exist to bring order and meaning to our lives. When they do this badly, our wellbeing suffers. A growing body of research shows that materialism – the pursuit of money and possessions – seems to breed not happiness but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation.²⁴ People for whom ‘extrinsic goals’ such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall wellbeing – and to be less trusting and caring in their relationships – than people oriented towards ‘intrinsic goals’ of close relationships, personal growth and self-understanding, and contributing to the community.

In short, the more materialistic we are, the poorer our quality of life.

Individualism – placing the individual at the centre of a framework of values, norms and beliefs – is supposed to be about freeing us to live the lives we want. The reality, however, may be very different.²⁵ Individualism’s downsides are described in different ways: a heightened sense of risk, uncertainty and insecurity and a lack of clear frames of reference; a rise in personal expectations, coupled with a perception that the onus of success lies with the individual, despite the continuing importance of social disadvantage

and privilege; and a surfeit or excess of freedom and choice, which is experienced as a threat or tyranny.

One of the effects of these developments is that individualism not only reduces social connectedness and support, but also diminishes personal control, including through confusing autonomy (the ability to act according to our own values and beliefs) with independence (not reliant on or influenced by others). This confusion encourages a perception that we are separate from others and the environment in which we live, and so from the very things that influence our lives.

The more narrowly and separately the self is defined, the greater the likelihood that the social forces acting on us are experienced as external and alien, and so beyond our control. The creation of a 'separate self' could be a major dynamic in modern life, impacting on everything from citizenship and social trust, cohesion and engagement, to the intimacy of friendships and the quality of family life.

An important means by which individualism and materialism affect wellbeing is through their influence on values.²⁶ Values provide the framework for deciding what we hold to be important, true, right and good, and so have a central role in defining relationships and meanings. Consistent with what we know about 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.

French philosopher André Comte-Sponville²⁷ lists these as the great virtues: politeness, fidelity, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, humility, simplicity, tolerance, purity, gentleness, good faith, humour and, finally, love (which transcends virtue).

In undermining, even reversing, these universal values, we weaken the personal relationships, social roles and spiritual beliefs that are central to wellbeing. In making meaning in life more individualised and materialistic, we reduce social cohesion, confidence, trust and stability, and leave ourselves personally more isolated and vulnerable. This, in turn, reduces morality's grip on us: values depend critically on these ties for effect, for tangible expression in our behaviour towards each other. So there are complex feedbacks in the social effects of growth.

Consumer hunger

Current patterns of economic growth demand ever-increasing personal consumption. This 'consumerism' depends on materialism and individualism. As consumerism reaches increasingly beyond the acquisition of things to the enhancement of the person, the goal

of marketing becomes not only to make us dissatisfied with what we have, but also with who we are.

As it seeks ever more ways to colonise our consciousness, consumerism both fosters and exploits the restless, insatiable expectation that there has got to be more to life. And in creating this hunger, consumerism offers its own remedy – more consumption. A recent study concluded that Australians spend \$10.5 billion each year buying things they don't use and just throw out.²⁸

We often see these effects in the media celebrities who are the promoters of this lifestyle – and frequently its victims. They are individuals whose outward success is so often a thin veneer over troubled lives of insecurity, self-absorption, profligacy and addiction.

This ceaseless consumption is not, then, simply a matter of freedom of choice; it is culturally 'manufactured' by a massive and growing media-marketing complex. For example, big business in the United States spends over a US\$1,000 billion a year on marketing – about twice what Americans spend annually on education, public and private, from kindergarten through graduate school.²⁹ This spending includes 'macromarketing', the management of the social environment, particularly public policy, to suit the interests of big business.

Together, government policy and corporate practice are distorting personal and social preferences. Psychologists who have studied cults and mind control warn that even the brightest and best of us can be recruited or seduced by social situations and conditions to behave in ways contrary to our values and dispositions, to engage in actions that are immoral, illegal, irrational and self-destructive.³⁰ As American psychologist Philip Zimbardo has said, many agents of mind control 'ply their trade daily on all of us behind many faces and fronts'; we need to learn how to resist them and to weaken their dominance.

Summing up

The evidence shows that wealth does not always or automatically produce wellbeing and that it can, in fact, be harmful when its pursuit crowds out more important sources of happiness. The need to belong is more important than the need to be rich; meaning matters more than money.

Two leading American wellbeing researchers, Ed Diener and Martin Seligman³¹ say a (partial) formula for high wellbeing is to:

- live in a democratic and stable society that meets material needs;
- have supportive friends and family;
- have rewarding and engaging work and an adequate income;
- be reasonably healthy and able to treat mental health problems;

- have important goals related to one's values; and
- have a philosophy or religion that provides guidance, purpose and meaning to one's life.

These researchers say there are 'distressingly large, measurable slippages' between economic indicators and wellbeing. They urge the establishment of a system of national measures of wellbeing to supplement the economic measures and provide a better guide to policy.

'Economic measures have seriously failed to provide a full account of quality of life.'

Notes

¹ The discussion of wellbeing draws on several recent reviews of the literature, including:

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- H. Shah and N. Marks, *A wellbeing manifesto for a flourishing society*. London, New Economics Foundation, 2004.
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Other references are included for specific studies, new research, and important findings and comments.

² Richard Eckersley, *Well & Good: How We Feel & Why It Matters*, pp.59-76.

³ *ibid.*, pp.77-204.

⁴ *ibid.*, pp.105-205.

⁵ Hugh Mackay, The Wrap: Understanding Where We Are Now and Where We've Come From. *The Mackay Report: 1979-2003*, June. Sydney, Mackay Research, 2003.

⁶ Hugh Mackay, Mind & Mood. *The Mackay Report: 1979-2003*, May. Sydney, Mackay Research, 2003.

⁷ Michael Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁸ C. Flowers, *Values and Civic Behaviour in Australia: Project Report*. Melbourne, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2002. www.bsl.org.au.

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¹¹ D. Smart and A. Sanson, *What is life like for young Australians today, and how well are they faring?* Paper presented at 9th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, 9-11 February, 2005.

¹² Richard Eckersley, *Well & Good: How We Feel & Why It Matters*, pp.20-21.

¹³ Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, Beyond Money: Toward an economy of wellbeing, pp. 1-31.

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- ²⁶ *ibid.*, pp.44-56.
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