

# Flashpoints & Signposts: Pathways to success and wellbeing for Australia's young people

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*March 2006*

*A project by Australia 21 and the Australian Youth Research Centre,  
funded and supported by VicHealth*



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*The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the following people to this project:*

- Dr John Ainley, Australian Council for Educational Research
- Ms Rosemary Aird, University of Queensland
- Prof Lois Bryson, RMIT
- Dr Jane Dixon, Australia 21 and ANU
- Dr Gary Marks, Australian Council for Educational Research
- Prof Janet McCalman, University of Melbourne
- Dr Julie McLeod, Deakin University
- Assoc Prof Elisabeth Northam, Royal Children's Hospital
- Prof George Patton, University of Melbourne
- Prof Margot Prior, University of Melbourne
- Ms Diana Smart, Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Dr John Spierings, Dusseldorp Skills Forum
- Assoc Prof David Tacey, La Trobe University
- Ms Irene Verins, VicHealth
- Mr Dan Woodman, University of Melbourne.

The authors are also grateful to Ms Julie Marr, University of Melbourne, for assistance with the report and Ms Helen Cahill, University of Melbourne, for editorial suggestions.



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## Executive Summary

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This report draws together the findings of a cross-disciplinary project carried out by Australia 21, a non-profit research company, and the Australian Youth Research Centre, and funded by VicHealth. It involved a process of synthesis and sought a better understanding of the points of convergence and divergence in the commentaries and evidence relating to young people's wellbeing. Both convergence and divergence provide routes out of the confinement of traditional research boundaries, but the latter may be especially important to researchers and policy makers as it highlights different ways of seeing things.

The project suggests a need for a greater focus in both research and policy on the following issues: the 'big picture' of the broad social changes reshaping life today; holistic approaches to health and wellbeing (rather than just a focus on ill health); a whole of population approach, (rather than just a concern with the marginalised and at-risk); and consideration of the social and cultural resources, as well as the material and economic resources, that impact on wellbeing.

Perceptions of young people's health and wellbeing vary greatly, reflecting differences between disciplines, ideologies and generations. Young people are seen to be resilient, adaptable and doing well and, at the same time, experiencing increased rates of some important mental and physical health problems. The wide range of views reflects: highly fragmented and narrow disciplinary research perspectives, which are usually based on a limited evidence

base; an incomplete understanding of a complex picture; and ideological, generational and other sources of bias and prejudice.

On the one hand, young people are resilient, adapting to changing social conditions, adjusting goals and expectations to suit their times. Health, measured by life expectancy and mortality, continues to improve. Over 80 per cent of young people say in surveys that they are healthy, happy and satisfied with their lives.

On the other hand, many young people are not faring well. More young people are overweight or obese and inactive, placing them at risk of a wide range of health problems later in life, including diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. A fifth to a third of young people are experiencing significant psychological stress and distress at any one time, with some estimates of the prevalence of a more general malaise reaching 50 per cent.

Some of the conflicting views and contradictory evidence on young people and their world - for example, the apparent optimism and wellbeing expressed by young people whose lives would appear, according to objective criteria, to be fairly negative – can be explained. Responses to questions about happiness and life satisfaction reflect people's adaptability and a tendency to take their situation as a given and assess their wellbeing within that context. Conversely, what researchers consider a health 'problem' or 'risk' is not what many young people would regard as a problem and could even be considered as part of enjoying life. For example, drug use can be seen as an adaptive response to life's pressures; it is also part of the 'good life' popular culture promotes.

However, tensions— ‘flashpoints’ – remained because different disciplines often draw on different evidence and use different conceptual frameworks to interpret the evidence. Project participants – and even we, the authors of this report – did not agree on points such as: whether trends in wellbeing can be generalised; the extent to which different measures and findings can be explained and reconciled; the relative importance of social influences and individual capacities in determining wellbeing; and whether potential and wellbeing are separate and distinct.

The project sought to go beyond the dominant statistically based portraits of youth, including epidemiological studies framed around risk and protective factors. It focused on three, overlapping, areas: (1) how social, economic and cultural changes intersect with socio-economic and gender differences to produce different outcomes for different groups in society; (2) how young people respond to social change and the way they translate this complex process into a narrative or life story; and (3) how cultural ‘intangibles’ which are hard to measure, and so tend to be overlooked in research, shape potential and wellbeing.

A key issue to emerge from the analysis is the importance of the way that social changes, including the processes of social fragmentation and individualisation, have increased uncertainty in young people’s lives. This uncertainty underscores a need to make sense of it all, and ‘make a life’ for one’s self. Young people make their lives by using various resources, especially those drawn from trusted relationships, to create storylines about who they are and where their lives are leading. The results of their narratives, or ‘storying’ are visible over time:

different understandings shape the way individuals engage in the world, the way they engage shapes experience, and experience, in turn, shapes understandings.

Social, economic and cultural changes feed into this narrative process in complex ways which cannot easily be captured in statistical associations. While the costs and benefits of social change are not evenly distributed in the youth population, nor are they confined to particular groups. Costs are being incurred across the social spectrum – from unemployed, poorly educated young men who are being excluded from social participation, to privileged, well-educated young women who are experiencing considerable stress because of high, and sometimes conflicting, expectations and aspirations. Changes that affect everyone can, therefore, affect people differently and contribute to specific problems that only some experience.

A central issue is not so much how young people are coping with, or adapting to, these changes, but how and under what conditions young people’s wellbeing is maximised. The development of ‘resilience’ and ‘the capacity to cope or adapt’ implies an exposure to potentially adverse situations and circumstances. That most young people possess these qualities doesn’t mean the effects of social change on human health and potential can be ignored.

Conversations with practitioners and policy makers in the youth sector have revealed that, in terms of doing justice to the challenges of working holistically, easy solutions, simple formulas and neat guidelines that gloss over differences in perspectives do not work. A push into inter-disciplinary

work means entering a newer territory that requires its own process and conceptual development.

In this project we (the authors) have attempted to do justice to some alternative viewpoints and voices, and to identify some of the challenges of cross-disciplinary work. This has meant both acknowledging complexity and disagreements (flashpoints), and seeking shared implications and directions for policy (signposts). Recognising a need of each other's perspective for a holistic understanding means continuing to explore the key issues in dialogue.

Several 'signposts' – pointers for future research and policy development – emerged from the project. These include the need for more focus or emphasis on the following:

*The big picture – young people in context:*

The ongoing impact of social change on successive generations places a responsibility on researchers to document and analyse these changes. Policy makers must also ensure that young people's lives are not being interpreted from the viewpoint of ideas and conditions that are now outmoded. Young people's own interpretations provide important insights into many contemporary issues. Without such input, policies, interventions and services for young people are likely to be fragmented and out of step with their lives.

*Wellbeing:* A holistic focus on health and wellbeing is especially important in the area of youth policy because: (1) it retains a link with 'big-picture' issues; (2) it focuses on pathways to 'living well' as a universal measure, as well as acknowledging the need to focus on particular risk groups and

problems; and (3) it provides a framework for crossing sectoral boundaries and identifies the points of permeability between disciplines and sectors. It also highlights the need for a 'whole of life' approach: all policy becomes youth policy.

*The mainstream:* The pace of social change has outstripped the usefulness of the idea of a 'mainstream' of young people who are 'OK' and an identifiable minority who are 'at risk' and require targeting. At some time, most individuals will face difficulties (for example, a period of depression or unemployment). The implication is that both targeted and universal policy measures and interventions are necessary.

*Social and cultural resources:* Research has shown a strong inter-generational effect on people's life chances, reflecting differential access to material and cultural resources. Other research reveals the significance of narratives or 'stories' that enable individuals to connect their lives with people around them and to make sense of their world. Trust is essential to this process. From a policy point of view, this finding indicates the importance of supporting the development of social and cultural resources, as well as the economic and material resources.

*Inter-disciplinary dialogue and grounding implications for policy and practice:* This project has highlighted the potential of supported dialogue within and between some key groups: researchers (from across different disciplines), policy makers and professionals (across the youth and community sector). Two areas of possibility have emerged: firstly further shared inquiries and inter-disciplinary synthesis around specific areas related to young people's wellbeing; and secondly exploring

processes for knowledge translation from synthesis, to signposts, to policy and practice.

In terms of drawing down the implications from this project, there is more work to be done; through these signposts we have simply begun the task.

Importantly, the findings of this work highlight that the most effective policy responses will not be simply about attempting to enhance young people's resilience, flexibility and adaptability and so to mould them to suit changing

social circumstances. Realising young people's potential and optimising their wellbeing also mean shaping social conditions to suit their needs.

These signposts signal the need to acknowledge that broad social changes do not 'just happen', but flow from the choices people make, individually and collectively; to question the often-assumed links between means and ends that underpin these changes; and to allow time for reflection, for conversations about the things that matter, and for asking questions as well as seeking solutions.

## Introduction

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This report is the final outcome of a project whose purpose was to identify ways to help young Australians to optimise their wellbeing and to realise their full potential against a background of often adverse trends in their physical and psychosocial health and wellbeing.

The project was initiated by Australia 21, a non-profit company established to promote interdisciplinary and cross-institutional networks on important challenges facing Australia. The Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne was a collaborator in the project, which was funded by VicHealth.

### *Background*

The project brought together researchers involved in several longitudinal studies of children and youth, together with others who are contributing to the work in this area. The initial aims were: to identify important consistencies, complementarities and contradictions in the study data, focusing on broader social, economic and cultural factors; to formulate key research questions that address identified gaps in the knowledge and understanding of the determinants of young people's wellbeing and potential; and to attempt to answer some of these questions using the existing data sets.

The reasons for focusing on longitudinal studies included that: they represented an existing, but under-used resource, with scope for further data analysis; they were, at least to some extent, based in different disciplines – sociology, psychology, epidemiology – so had good prospects for cross-fertilisation; some were continuing, so

there was the potential to add components to address questions identified in the workshops; and it limited the group to a manageable number, so was likely to be more productive.

The research panel met twice, in May and November 2004, with work continuing between and since these workshops. A third workshop was held for policy people and youth professionals in June 2005 to consider the policy implications of the project. As the project proceeded, the emphasis changed for several reasons. We did not want to duplicate other, comprehensive reports on the wellbeing of children and youth, including the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports on young people and children (AIHW 2003, 2005), new books (Prior and Richardson 2005, Stanley et al 2005), or other examinations of research questions and priorities, such as that being undertaken by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (Research Directions Reference Group 2004). It also became clearer that there were gaps in researchers' approach to and understanding of the topic.

Drawing on the findings of the longitudinal studies that were included in this project, this document provides an overview of young people's wellbeing. The insights about young people's wellbeing that are generated by these studies provide a point of reference for a discussion of a broader objective that underlies this project: how social, economic and cultural changes intersect with socio-economic and gender differences to produce different outcomes for different groups in society and how young people respond to social change and the way they translate this complex process into

a narrative or life story, which is essential to enhancing their potential and wellbeing.

The exploration of the ways in which young people generate narratives of life and create meaning within their worlds raises the complex issue of culture, values and spirituality. At this point the discussion paper moves beyond the longitudinal studies into a wider, more speculative synthesis about cultural 'intangibles' which are hard to measure and so tend to be overlooked or at least under-estimated in research. Nonetheless, these dimensions shape young people's potential and affect wellbeing. Their inclusion here is intended to contribute to a broadening of future research on young people and wellbeing.

The focus of the report is consistent with the outcome of an earlier Delphi survey on 'realising human potential' that Australia 21 undertook in 2002. The survey was completed by about 25 researchers and others from a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, epidemiology, economics, philosophy, education, futures studies and history, and produced a ranked list of 36 research questions. The top ten questions suggested a broad examination of the nature of wellbeing and the transactions, interactions and balances between individuals and society and its institutions that affect wellbeing. They also indicated a particular focus on two areas: individual freedom and autonomy; and young people's wellbeing. The next 12 questions supported this orientation and focus, while also introducing global and futures perspectives.

### *Synthesis*

The report is an exercise in interdisciplinary synthesis, in recognition that discipline-based

empirical studies cannot capture the subtlety of the effects of social change on young people or the complexity of their responses. Synthesis raises several important conceptual issues. It strives for coherence in the overall picture rather than precision in the detail; it dispenses with expectations of scientific certainty and exactness, especially with respect to cause and effect; everything is provisional, and relationships are often reciprocal. It permits speculation - going beyond the data - to enrich the picture.

Synthesis adds value to existing specialised knowledge, generates new research questions, illuminates disciplinary biases and interdisciplinary tensions, and enhances the application of knowledge. With respect to the last - application - synthesis can improve the fit between research and policy, and can strengthen the links between research and advocacy. It is particularly appropriate for addressing the increasing scale and magnitude of human problems, and suits the complex, diffuse processes of social change.

Synthesis provides a valuable means for identifying not only areas of convergence and synergy, but also 'flashpoints' of tension or collision between disciplinary assumptions and evidence. We (the authors) have noted several of these in this report, arising out of the project discussions or the drafting of the report (marked \*\*). Disagreements can be productive as they keep in focus different ways of seeing. Relying on agreement, while it is sometimes necessary, and has its own virtues, tends to iron out the different ways of seeing and to present the picture as all too seamless. Both convergence and divergence provide routes out of the confinement of traditional boundaries. By compelling

researchers and others to think holistically, and positively, about young people's potential and wellbeing, synthesis can foster both honesty about the limitations of the research and the evidence, and innovation in overcoming these limitations.

## Overview

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Opinions about the position of young people (by which we mean adolescents and young adults) in contemporary society range from the very optimistic to the deeply pessimistic. Is life for young people getting better or worse? The wide range of views reflects: highly fragmented and narrow disciplinary research perspectives, which are usually based on a limited evidence base (and sometimes no empirical evidence at all); an incomplete understanding of a complex picture; and ideological, generational and other sources of bias and prejudice.

Health, broadly defined to include physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing, provides a valid measure or benchmark for assessing young people's situation. Taking a wide range of research evidence into account, it appears that:

- Young people are resilient, adapting to changing social conditions, adjusting goals and expectations to suit their times.
- Health, measured by life expectancy and mortality, continues to improve, mainly as a result of declines in deaths from road accidents and other injuries and, more recently, suicide and drugs (AIHW 2003, 2005). Over 80 per cent of young people say in surveys that they are

healthy, happy and satisfied with their lives.

- However, many young people are not faring well. This is not a fixed group (Dwyer et al 2005). At one point or another, it seems that a majority will experience problems.
- The 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.
- A fifth to a third of young people are experiencing significant psychological stress and distress at any one time, with some estimates of the prevalence of a more general malaise reaching 50 per cent (Eckersley 2005a: 147-69). Young people are experiencing higher rates of mental health problems than other age groups, and are retaining their increased risk beyond youth into older age (Eckersley 2005a, ABS 1998, Kessler et al 2005a).
- Almost a third of young males and a quarter of young females (aged 12-24) are overweight or obese (AIHW 2003). Inactivity has also increased. The changes place young people at risk of a wide range of health problems later in life, including diabetes, heart disease and some cancers; there may also be effects on mental health, including through the stigmatisation of the obese.

In Australia and in other countries researchers have noted the apparent optimism and wellbeing expressed by young people whose lives would appear, according to objective criteria, to be fairly negative (Evans 2002, Furlong and Cartmel 1997, Dwyer and Wyn 2001). For example, the *Life-*

*Patterns* study found that, despite the objective reality of a down-turn in the availability of full-time jobs (eg. see ABS 2005), and the difficulty of gaining places in tertiary education, young people largely remained optimistic about their personal situation (Dwyer and Wyn 2001).

This corresponds with the common finding that ‘most young people are resilient’ and that they appear to adapt to changing social conditions. These broad descriptions of young people’s subjective assessments of their lives need to be taken seriously, but they also need to be seen against a backdrop of other data on wellbeing, including

that on psychological and social problems. We suggest that it is important to understand that all data on young people’s wellbeing are relevant, and that they tap into different dimensions.

**\*\*1 How to measure wellbeing?** Some researchers and commentators use findings on self-reported health and happiness to argue that most young people are doing well and that we need to focus on the small minority who are not. Others say self-reports are only one dimension of any assessment, and should be considered within the context of other measures of health and wellbeing.

*Young Australians: most satisfied but half have a ‘problem’*

The Australian Temperament Study has followed a large, representative group of Victorian children from infancy to age 19-20 in 2002. A new analysis of the latest data, stimulated by this project, illustrates the often sharp contrast between life satisfaction measures and other wellbeing indicators. It showed that over 80 per cent of young people were satisfied with their lives – including lifestyle, work or study, relationships with parents and friends, 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 (Smart and Sanson 2005).

We believe both sets of findings need to be qualified, giving a better picture of young people’s lives. The most troubled youth often drop out of such studies, and people also tend to give what they think are the ‘right’ answers. Responses to questions about happiness and life satisfaction are also biased by the nature of these qualities, especially that happiness and satisfaction involve using various cognitive devices to maintain these states, whatever people’s circumstances. To some extent, people take their situation as a given, and assess their wellbeing within that context.

On the other hand, ‘antisocial behaviour’ included illicit drug use in the past month, and problem alcohol use was defined as binge drinking (7 or more drinks for males and 5 or more for females) on five or more occasions in the past month. While these categories seem reasonable from a health perspective, many young people would not necessarily see this drug and alcohol use as a problem and could even consider it as part of enjoying life. Drug use can be seen as an adaptive response to life’s pressures; it is also part of the ‘good life’ our culture promotes.

Interpreting objective data is no less difficult. For example, the reversals in suicide and drug-related deaths within the past decade are cited as evidence that ‘things are improving’. Yet these declines do not necessarily mean an improvement in any underlying health condition. Hospitalisations of young people for intentional self-harm and emotional and behavioural problems increased during the period that the youth suicide rate fell (AIHW 2003). Psychological distress has also increased among young men over this period (Jorm and Butterworth 2006). This evidence suggests the explanation for the fall in suicide is that more young people are seeking and getting help, not that fewer young people need help.

While Australia has good data on trends in deaths over time, it lacks these data for diseases, so the trends are hard to establish. For example, in a review prepared for this project, Rosemary Aird and her colleagues (2004) concluded that, from an examination of available mental health data, it was not possible to determine whether there had been a long-term change in the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Australia.

Overseas studies tend to support the view that psychosocial problems have become more common in young people in recent decades (Rutter and Smith 1995, Collishaw et al 2004), although the evidence is sometimes contradictory (Collishaw et al 2004, Hagell 2004). The latest US research shows almost a half of Americans will experience a clinical mental disorder during their lives, while over a quarter will suffer a disorder in any one year (Kessler et al 2005a, Kessler et al 2005b). The lifetime risk increases for successive generations: those aged 18

to 29 have a fourfold higher risk than those aged 60 and over.

Other research provides more indirect evidence of young people’s situation. This evidence includes public perceptions of trends in quality of life and parents’ perceptions of the world in which their children live, the impacts of media, and the effects of broad cultural qualities such as materialism and individualism.

For example, a recent study reported ‘a growing sense among parents that childhood is at risk because the daily environment in which children live is perceived to be increasingly less safe, stable and predictable’ (Tucci et al 2005). It found that 80 per cent or more of parents believed children were growing up too fast; worried about their children’s futures; and felt children were targeted too much by marketers. Sixty per cent or more worry about children’s exposure through the media to world events such as terrorism, war and disasters; regulating what their children see on television; and the potential for their children to be exploited on the internet. It seems hardly surprising, then, that most lack confidence as parents, and want more affirmation and support (Tucci et al 2004).

Views of young people are often framed in terms of differences: between the ill and the well, the marginalised and the mainstream, the disadvantaged and the privileged, males and females. While discussing some of these differences, we also want to explore the different layers of perceptions and understanding of young people and their world to assess the ‘net effects’ of broad social changes.

The costs and benefits of social change are not evenly distributed in the youth population, nor are they confined to particular groups. Costs are being incurred across the social spectrum – from unemployed, poorly educated young men who are being excluded from social participation, to privileged, well-educated young women who are experiencing considerable stress because of high, and sometimes conflicting, expectations and aspirations. Indicators of health and wellbeing show that young indigenous Australians have comparatively very poor outcomes (AIHW 2003, 2005).

Thus changes that affect everyone can, nevertheless, affect people differently and contribute to specific problems that only some experience. In demonstrating this, we want to draw attention, not so much to how young people are coping with, or adapting to, these changes, but to how and under what conditions young people's wellbeing is maximised. 'Resilience' and 'the capacity to cope or adapt' imply an exposure to potentially adverse situations and circumstances. That most young people have these qualities doesn't mean the effects of social changes on human health and potential can be ignored.

While individual problems may often be explained in terms of a young person's personal circumstances, the trends in the rates of these problems in a population cannot. Furthermore, population-level effects cannot necessarily be determined from individual-level studies. The population trends appear to reflect fundamental social, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in Australia and other nations in recent decades.

The sources of psychosocial problems in youth commonly include (Eckersley 2005a: 147-69): genes and temperament; developmental susceptibility; difficulties with family, friends, school, including conflict, abuse, neglect, failure; changes in adolescent transitions, including the emergence of a youth culture that separates young people from adults; socio-economic factors such as poverty, disadvantage, inequality and unemployment; and cultural change such as media influences and increasing materialism and individualism.

However, not all of these factors are necessarily implicated in the trends over time in these problems. For example, studies typically show a gradient in mental health problems with socio-economic factors such as income and family structure (that is, higher prevalence in lower-income and single-parent and blended families) (eg, Sawyer et al 2000). However, a UK study of 15-16-year-olds showed these problems had risen between 1974 and 1999 across all family types and social classes, suggesting changes in these areas were not the main reasons for the rising trends (Collishaw et al 2004, Hagell 2004).

Furthermore, recent American studies suggest that children in affluent families, although usually seen as being at lower risk, may in fact be more likely than other children to suffer substance use problems, anxiety and depression (Luthar 2003). Two factors appear to be implicated: excessive pressures to achieve and isolation from parents (both physical and emotional). The researchers say that comparative studies of rich and poor youth reveal 'more similarities than differences in their adjustment

patterns and socialisation processes' (Luthar and Latendresse 2005).

Australian data, such as they are, are contradictory on this point, although most measures of health show the usual socio-economic gradient. Even where specific social factors are associated with health problems, they explain only a small fraction of individual cases. In other words, even where poverty, for example, is a risk factor for these problems, most cases will occur outside this group because only a small proportion of the population is poor. Such considerations strengthen the argument for paying more attention to other possible causal factors and processes, including how social factors interact with individuals' lives at a subjective as well as objective level, in seeking to understand patterns and trends in wellbeing.

There was some discussion among project participants about whether it was, in fact, possible or useful to attempt an overall assessment of whether life was getting better or worse for young people – that is, to try to determine what the 'net effects' have been of the social changes of the past several decades. Certainly, outcomes have been mixed across many dimensions of change. For example, while some dimensions of gender inequality have been improved (for example, the participation of women in education), others have continued to manifest unequal outcomes (for example, the continuing gender gap in pay). Gains in human rights sit alongside often dubious improvements in living conditions for some marginalised groups. Tolerance of different cultures, identities and lifestyles has increased, but so, recently, have suspicion and fear of

other cultures and religions. However, we feel it is important to attempt a synthesis of a complex picture, and this is reflected in this overview. The following sections examine in more depth how some of the social changes of recent decades have shaped young people's potential and wellbeing, and how these responses, in turn, shape social changes.

**\*\*2 *Life for young people - getting better or worse?*** Some project participants questioned the value of this question because such a broad assessment is not necessary and the evidence is incomplete, contradictory and inconclusive. Others argue the question provides a point of reference for considering the 'big picture' of the impact of broader social changes on young people's health and wellbeing, and also encourages a closer scrutiny of the totality of the evidence.

Another, related question raised in the workshops was whether it was possible to separate potential from wellbeing, and have, for example, better realisation of potential but declining wellbeing. Most felt this was unlikely, and that the two qualities were tied together. In psychology 'subjective wellbeing' is often equated with happiness, but is more accurately defined as a people's positive evaluation of their lives and includes positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction and meaning, thus implying a link with potential (Diener and Seligman 2004). The link with potential is closer in the concept of 'eudaimonic wellbeing', which focuses on meaning and self-realisation rather than happiness; wellbeing consists of fulfilling one's daimon or true nature, of being 'fully functioning' (Eckersley 2005a: 96-97). Daimon is an ideal of excellence, of striving towards a

perfection, which gives meaning and direction to one's life, and is distinguished from simply achieving pleasure.

There is also a sociological literature that focuses on wellbeing in terms of the quality of the social relationships within societies, communities or groups, rather than seeing wellbeing as a quality that is possessed by individuals (Wyn and White 2004). One of the sociological links between wellbeing and potential is expressed in the concept of 'social capital', in which 'enabling' social structures create the possibilities for individuals and groups to thrive. Thus the sociological literature also implies a close relationship between potential and wellbeing.

It could be argued that, to some extent at least, better education, greater social (ethnic and gender) equality and greater material prosperity have improved the potential of many groups of young people. However, at the same time, there is evidence that in some areas of life wellbeing has not been enhanced, and has even declined. Research on young people's lives

reveals the emergence of priorities and patterns of living that are different from the previous generation. The process of 'individualization' has created new forms of social division between groups (the haves and the have-nots in new global economies), new forms of engagement (e.g. consumption), and new ways of relating (more independently) that have significant implications for both wellbeing and potential. The following sections explore the extent to which these shifts represent a re-definition of wellbeing by individuals and the impact of social change on young people's potential.

**\*\*3 Potential and/or wellbeing?** The project raised the question of whether potential and wellbeing could be distinguished and the trends in each move in opposite directions. It may be that freeing and equipping people to realise their full potential entails risks to wellbeing because of the increased risk of failure. How terms such as wellbeing and happiness are defined or understood is relevant to this issue. This question was not considered in detail and we feel it warrants further discussion.

### *Wellbeing: more than feeling good*

We often measure wellbeing as happiness or satisfaction with life (Eckersley 2005b). 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.

Our wellbeing is shaped by our genes, our personal circumstances and choices, the social conditions in which we live, and the complex ways in which all these things interact. The evidence shows that a close family, the company of friends, rewarding work, sufficient money, a good diet, physical activity, sound sleep, engaging leisure and spiritual belief and practice all enhance our wellbeing. Optimism, trust, self-worth 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. Our position relative to others counts; comparing favourably elevates us, comparing poorly diminishes us. The gap between our aspirations and achievements also matters.

Associations between social factors and wellbeing are often, if not always, reciprocal: happier people are more likely to have partners, have more friends, do more interesting work, or earn higher incomes. Many of the factors are interrelated: the costs of being unemployed go well beyond the loss of income; work also offers purpose in life, belonging and friendship. One source of wellbeing can compensate, at least partly, for the lack of another: having a partner does most for people who lack friends and other social connections; those who are single, elderly or in poor health gain most from religion.

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

## **Socio-economics, gender and history**

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The researchers who participated in this project are practiced in defining, refining and deepening knowledge about young people's wellbeing, health and outcomes within their own area of expertise. At the same time, all are well aware that each 'area' of expertise is only able to tell part of the story. As pointed out in the previous section, the

available data on the key aspects of young people's lives describes a complex situation for young Australians.

While there are increased opportunities compared with a generation ago (for example, in education, employment and life-style) the evidence reveals that the expected benefits in terms of health and wellbeing are not equally shared across all groups of young people. A steady stream of evidence shows that

the conditions of post-industrial society in Australia may pose a threat to young people's wellbeing.

The challenge for the participants was to go beyond the recognition that the effect of social change on young Australians' lives is 'complex' and to analyse its dimensions. In order to do this, insights and evidence generated from different fields and disciplines through longitudinal research have been brought to bear. Working along the 'fault lines' of the different disciplines, the project has worked at deepening and extending the intersections to interweave insights about young people's health and wellbeing from the fields of history, sociology, cultural studies, and epidemiology.

#### *A historical perspective*

The perspective provided by McCalman (2004) has formed a historical underpinning for the project. Her research on Australians during dramatic periods of change (for example, 1857 – 1900; 1920s – 1930s) illustrates the social effects of uncertainty and of poverty on people's lives. Drawing on a data set of birth records of Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital of 3335 charity babies born between 1857 and 1900, she describes the life chances of poor white Australians in the twentieth century.

She found that poor men with uncertain job prospects were the least likely to form families and that low-skilled men rarely lived long. Those who did form families had the greatest longevity. Childhood deprivation (which she describes as physical, emotional and intellectual) is associated with higher risk of coronary heart disease. Prolonged unemployment, especially in early

adulthood, has a negative impact on health and capacity to form stable families. McCalman sees strong links between the social conditions of uncertainty of past generations and today's situation in which 'the fragmented, short-term, constantly changing work experience of post-industrial youth is exacting a toll already in postponed marriage and childbearing, which for many will become foregone in the next decade' (McCalman 2004).

#### *The Life-Patterns Project*

McCalman's historical perspective highlights the relationship between economic conditions and social relations. Her underlying question – how do people construct a life in their times? - is also the driving question for two contemporary research projects: the *Life-Patterns* project of the Australian Youth Research Centre and Wierenga's *Making a Life* project. The *Life-Patterns* project, an explanatory longitudinal cohort study has generated insights into the lives of young Australians in the 'post-1970 generation'. It describes the ways in which young people who left secondary school in the year 1991 have coped with change and uncertainty.

Taking a sociological approach, this study has highlighted the need for social researchers to acknowledge both generational change (i.e. the 'life course') and social change (the context of social, political and economic conditions). The analysis of the experiences and perceptions of these young people from the age of 24 to 31 has produced the concept of a 'new adulthood', shaped by this generation. It is argued that the social conditions prevailing for the post-1970 generation have precluded access to the adulthood that was available to generations that came of age between 1950 and 1969.

### *A Historian's view of post-industrial youth*

One of the paradoxes of our times is that Australian young people are better educated, healthier and wealthier than ever before in history, yet they perceive themselves to be a less fortunate generation. There seems to be a contradiction between the affluence that has supported their years of growing and their newly learnt experience that in their own turn, they may be unable to match their parents' personal equity and security. Their advantages derive from the good fortune of their parents, and even if their parents' equity is to become theirs in time by inheritance, it will not go far in supporting the next generation. They are very aware that their future comfort and security depends not on the past, but what they can make in the future.

It is before living memory now, but it is still not that long ago that a significant proportion of the poor were trapped for life in the casual labour markets. That indeed was a major reason for their poverty, and for the apparently self-destructive behaviour that appalled moralists – the heavy drinking, the gambling, the violence, the petty crime. The Australian economy remained dependent on casual employment in agriculture, building, infrastructure construction and the wharves until after World War II. There was a chronic shortage of work for men and women who had only their bodily strength and manual dexterity to sell on the labour market. The golden age of employment after the second world war has been an historic anomaly. The effect of the new stability in working-class incomes was felt most by their families and was demonstrated in the fact that they even started families.

Despite the great disparity in life chances between the educated and the unskilled in the early twenty-first century, they share a common generational plight where the generations ahead of them need high property values to sustain their own equity and long-term security. This means that many young people will never own a home and will continue to carry debts from their education, so that they cannot afford to retrain, and they will face early parenthood with fewer services. To compound their difficulties, they cannot raise and house a family without two incomes, but they are denied adequate childcare. The jobs the young can find are too often as members of the new digital proletariat where they have no future, no superannuation, no sick pay and no long service leave. As some of the old poor told Peel (2003): they feel for their grandchildren who were born into hope and who must again learn how to be poor if they are to survive.

*From a contribution to the project by Janet McCalman, 2004*

There are many factors that have impacted on this generation, including the widespread use of new information technologies, and the (related) expansion of economic deregulation (or globalisation). However, two factors are seen to specifically affect the post-1970 generation: a) they were the first generation of Australians for whom completion of secondary education and the engagement with post-compulsory education became the norm and b) they entered a flexible,

unstable labour market in which casual, part-time and short-term employment was the norm (Dwyer and Wyn 2001).

For these young people, one of the most significant effects has been uncertainty. Although educational credentials have become increasingly important for employment, the link between the two is relatively indirect. Employment conditions are also relatively unpredictable. Uncertainty

about which educational pathway to take and about longer-term employment prospects has created a generation for whom flexibility is more important than predictability as a means of security.

They are a generation for whom the capacity to make choices is paramount. They need to hold on to multiple options in work and study and they take responsibility (and blame) for their own personal development and wellbeing. Dwyer and Wyn (2001)

argue that, in response to the conditions they find, this generation has forged a 'new adulthood' in which the timelines for key life events that were taken for granted by the previous generation have been altered.

Elements of the 'new adulthood' resonate with the lives of earlier generations, as described by McCalman. The effects of uncertainty, on a wide scale, have been noted in both McCalman's historical work and in the *Life-Patterns* study.

*Some gender and class outcomes from the Life-Patterns study*

Socio-economic status and gender differences highlight the need to understand the ways in which individuals negotiate and shape social change. For example, young women from the higher socio-economic (SE) backgrounds are more likely than any other group to report that it has been 'hard' to achieve what they have and their male counterparts are the most likely of any group to report that it has been easy. By contrast, males from low SE backgrounds report that it has been 'hard' to achieve what they have and their female counterparts report that it has been easier. Young women from high SE backgrounds were far more likely to report that it was 'harder for them than for their parents.'

However, objectively, SE background produces very different results. Although young women from high SE backgrounds report that subjectively things have been difficult or 'hard', they are far more likely than women from low SE backgrounds to be in a professional occupation. The class effect for males is almost negligible.

Across all dimensions of their lives, health continues to be the greatest source of concern to all groups. Young men from low SE backgrounds are the most likely to report that their health is a concern (only 10 per cent are 'very satisfied' with their health), and men from high SE backgrounds are more likely than any other group to report that their health is less a concern (29 per cent are 'very satisfied' with their health).

Equally low numbers of young women in both low and high SE background groups (17 per cent) report that they are 'very satisfied' with their health. The *Life-Patterns* research demonstrates the effects of class and gender on satisfaction with life. It provides a more complex analysis of the effects of social change on young people's life patterns and health than is often available through the analysis of broad population statistics.

### *Other research*

Like the research conducted by McCalman, the implication drawn from the *Life-Patterns* study is that wellbeing is a function of broader social conditions (for example, ‘uncertainty’, job insecurity) and of class and gender. This argument is given a sharper focus by researchers from the Mater-University Study of Pregnancy (MUSP), a prospective longitudinal study of maternal and child health. MUSP researchers found that maternal smoking in early pregnancy was a much stronger predictor of behaviour problems in childhood than maternal smoking when the child was 5 years of age (Williams, O’Callaghan, Najman et al 1998). Interestingly, the socio-economic status of a child’s grandparent was found to be a stronger predictor of adolescent cognitive development than the socio-economic status of the child’s parents (Najman, Aird, Bor et al 2004).

It would appear that the relationship between socio-economic status and wellbeing would warrant further study because while the relationship is commonly acknowledged, its nature is not clear. Aird and her colleagues (2004) are cautious about drawing conclusions about trends in the health of young Australians over time, and the causes of these trends. In common with other researchers employing longitudinal approaches to research, they point out that longitudinal studies are prone to methodological shortcomings. These include difficulties of making comparisons across data bases that do not share uniform methodologies and bias through over-reporting by some groups and through sample attrition.

A further caution relates to the interpretation of data. It is important

that the complexity underlying broad patterns is acknowledged, and that the interpretation of trends is not simplistic. This point was emphasised by McLeod, drawing upon a study of young people’s transitions through school (The *12 to 18* project, Yates and McLeod 1993-2001). The study pointed to the multi-layered and sometimes double-edged effects of gender and class relations. For instance, much research now shows that many young women, and particularly middle-class young women, are feeling under increasing pressure to perform well academically, to work hard, to plan for a successful working life and to juggle many commitments. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a threat to wellbeing because of the associated high levels of stress and anxiety. On the other hand, the sense of satisfaction and even pleasure that such young women may simultaneously derive from such hard work should not be discounted.

The research of McLeod and Yates also highlights that, at the same time that young people are living in an increasingly ‘individualised’ world and coping with choice, there is a discernable process of ‘re-traditionalisation’ along both class and gender lines. In other words, individuals are not free to invent themselves totally, and new forms of gender and class inequality can be masked by apparent change. For example, while the pattern for young women to have higher levels of educational participation than their male peers, their educational success is not translated into occupational success. Women continue to be employed in a narrow range of occupations and a gap of 8 per cent exists between male and female earnings (ABS, 2005). This pattern for

the apparent reduction in gender inequality (the educational success of girls) is overlaid by the enduring nature of traditional gender inequalities in the workplace (re-traditionalisation).

The complexity of understanding how young people make a life in the context of uncertainty and change is also noted by the *Women's Health Australia Study* (Lee 2001, Eckersley 2005a: 164). It found that young women (aged 18-23) reported higher levels of stress than middle-aged and older women, were often tired, and were over-concerned with their weight and body shape. The young women scored highest of the three groups on the physical-health measures, but the lowest on the mental-health scales.

Dobson (in Eckersley 2005a:155-164) says of the study that young women reported even higher levels of stress when they were surveyed a second time, when aged 22 – 27. 'They are stressed about money, employment and work. Their expectations are high and so are their aspirations – for more education, full-time employment, a stable relationship, and two or more children by the time they are thirty-five...they feel more pressured and rushed than previous generations.'

Other researchers also emphasise the double-edged effects of social change, and the conditions under which young people are shaping their lives. For example, Harris (2004), echoing the point made by McCalman, observes that young people's 'enthusiasm for the aspects of life that bring joy, creativity, and connectedness' seems to be incongruous against the 'facts' – high levels of unemployment for some groups of youth, part-time

employment, the gradual disappearance of the welfare safety net and expanded policy surveillance for those who do rely on welfare support. She expresses deep concern about the failure of policies and social structures to support young people, and notes the incongruity of the lack of support and the increasing expectations of young people (for example, to extend their educational credentials, pay increasing fees for education and health care and adapt to economic and labour market uncertainty).

Other longitudinal research adds further complexity to the assumed relationship between social conditions and wellbeing. The Australian Council for Educational Research study of Australian youth undertaken by Marks and Fleming for example, compares the changing transition patterns for cohorts of young Australians (Marks and Fleming 1999). This study of the influences and consequences of wellbeing amongst Australian youth (1980 to 1995) draws the conclusion that wellbeing is in itself a factor contributing to the likelihood of employment and to level of remuneration. To put this another way, they argue that wellbeing has 'sociological implications'.

Notwithstanding the kinds of methodological and interpretive problems and cautions that have been identified, the process of synthesising the findings of these longitudinal studies has revealed remarkably common themes. In summary:

- Wellbeing is both a 'cause' and 'effect': that is, it appears to be significantly related to underlying social conditions and, at the same time, to be an important element in creating positive outcomes for individuals.

- Contemporary social change has created conditions of ‘uncertainty’ which have an uneven impact on social groups.

In the next section we attempt to deepen our understanding of the broad and complex patterns identified by the participants in this project by focusing on an in-depth longitudinal study of how one group of young people have responded to the challenges in their lives. The study by Wierenga is our focus because the level of detail about individual decisions and experiences and the extensive recourse to young people’s own words and stories provide a medium through which the insights from other studies can be synthesised.

## Two worlds

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The studies mentioned in this report have pointed to this generations’ increased need to negotiate uncertainty and make choices. This section of the report, will explore the need to negotiate complex, changing and unknown territory. How, in this context, are young people managing to negotiate their lives? In terms of context, what assists them to do this? On the basis of research with Australian young people, is it possible to make some statements about the social conditions that help and hinder them to do so? Lots of young people fall down but what helps them to stand up again? Might it be possible, through these lenses, to highlight processes that would contribute to young people’s success and wellbeing?

One way into exploring this terrain is to listen closely to young people’s own accounts of how they are negotiating their lives in different social contexts. Several Australian studies bring us this kind of fine-grained data (eg, Dwyer

and Wyn 2001, McLeod and Yates 2000, Woodman 2004). These qualitative studies aim to generate theoretical and conceptual understandings. Qualitative research makes no claim of generalisability to populations on the basis of statistical calculations. Instead, the claim for relevance is on the basis of embedding conceptual advances in empirical research (Denzin 1978).

Some of these qualitative, exploratory studies assist us to focus in on young people’s own observations about how they are doing, what helps, and what gets in the way. One example of a longitudinal study that has specifically explored this territory is the *Making a Life* project (Wierenga 1999, 2001, 2002). The study focused on a group of 32 rural young people as they grew up. Of particular concern to teachers, parents and professionals in their community were the issues of young people reaching their potential, particularly under conditions of dramatic local and global social change and rural decline. Interviews were conducted with young people every two years, from high school (year 8) to adulthood. The focus for the study was on the ways in which the young people in the cohort established meaning, livelihood and connectedness.

Over time, these young people’s lives and paths fanned out, in terms of success and wellbeing. They had a range of different circumstances. Over time, many fell down, some got back up. What were the factors underlying this difference? Undoubtedly there were many (eg, biological, genetic, class, gender etc). Wierenga notes that one thing which consistently made most significant difference is the individual’s capacity to make sense of the things that she or he was facing and doing. In a context of constant change,

it was important to have some sense of personal 'agency' - control or capacity to negotiate willfully the things that they were facing. In this study, the most powerful way that this agency was revealed was through their practices of 'storying'.

#### *Story and practices of 'storying'*

The *Making a Life* study offers a conceptual framework and some insights that might be drawn out here for more general purposes. Particularly, it highlights the different ways in which these young people use stories and practices of 'storying' in order to (with differing degrees of success) negotiate a complex social world.

In this study Wierenga points out the links between understanding and agency – the association between clarity of story and clarity of action. When asked about their futures, some young people would tell 'clear stories'. For example one might talk about loving the valley they lived in, and say that they intended to stay close to family. Another might talk about wanting to become a teacher and leaving the valley. Other young people might tell 'unclear stories': for example not saying what they wanted to do, where they wanted to go, why or how. These also tended to be the ones who were, at the time of finishing year 10, least prepared for their futures. As time went on, those who did not share clear stories were least able to be creative with the changing circumstances in which they found themselves.

Over time other research has explored how personal stories or narratives can be useful for negotiating complex social spaces. For example, for 40 years, social theorists have explored how individuals make meaning and

construct identities in story (eg, see Strauss 1977). Moral philosophers have suggested that individuals' stories are narratives of progress, charting the journey towards and away from 'the good' or valued goal-states (eg, Taylor 1989). A body of work has emerged around narrative, exploring the increased importance of story in the *multiple* and *changing* ways in which people make sense of their lives and identities in a now complex and changing world (eg, see Bruner 1987, Gergen and Gergen 1988).

These observations about the significance of story also converge with the findings of other Australian studies of young people. For example researchers on career education note that, amidst increasingly complex options and pathways, personal narratives or stories have become necessary not only for individuals to negotiate the options, but also to understand why and how they might even engage with their education (eg, Patton 2001).

The *Making a Life* study revealed significant differences in the life-courses of those who were able to be pro-active versus those who were 'doing something else'. 'Something else' seemed often to be about basic survival. Clear stories correlated to themes of hope. Unclear stories often reflected fear. Clear stories would articulate 'best options for me': for example an individual might want to become a teacher because they think they might enjoy it and have the skills to do it. Unclear stories would often reflect 'least worst' options: for example wanting to live 'anywhere but here'. Over time those who were engaging with 'best options for me' were in a much stronger position. Practices of engagement and planning lead to opportunities, new networks,

new opportunities, and so on. Withdrawal or avoidance is protective, but tends to lead to the opposite.

Beyond particular stories or narratives, Wierenga notes the significance of 'storying'. Over time, circumstances change, and many young people do not end up following the courses of action that they thought they might. However, it is the practice of storying, of action and reflection, rather than the detail of the stories themselves, that seems to demarcate those who have some sense of control over their destiny. Having this capacity is like being captain of their craft rather than being 'at the mercy of social forces, blown about by wind and tide.' (Wierenga 1999:198)

The study revealed that the capacity to hold strong personal narratives also allow young people to negotiate chaos, hardship and crisis. Evidence from a variety of other sources suggests that stories are increasingly recognised as useful to this end (eg, Frankl 1984). More recently, narrative therapists have explored the process of 're-storying' shattered lives (White and Epston 1990, White 1995).

This work also highlights the notion of 'thick' and 'thin' stories (Geertz 1973). Applied in this setting 'thick' stories involve multiple layers of possibility about 'who I am' / 'who we are' and 'what I could do' / 'what we could do'. In a complex world, those with multiple contingencies (or available storylines) are in a relatively strong position. The breadth of storylines equates to robustness, particularly when circumstances change. Narrative therapists have also picked up this dynamic, revealing how 'richly described lives' equate to robustness at a time of crisis (White 1997).

### *Two worlds, and the space in between*

It is well and good to talk about the particular practices of individuals, but what can this tell us about the associated conditions that foster wellbeing in young people? What social conditions foster active negotiations, clear stories of identity or richly described lives? What social conditions can be linked back to robustness in the face of change or potential crisis?

Addressing these questions requires an exploration of the interaction between society and the individual, social structure and individual agency, the external conditions and individual interpretations, the objective and subjective worlds – in summary, exploring two worlds and the space in between. It appears that this storying dynamic reaches well beyond the subjective world. Firstly, (as above) it is about action. If something is defined as real, it becomes real in its consequences (even if only to a limited extent).

Other research (eg, McLeod and Yates 2000) has looked more to points of connection between social processes and subjectivity, investigating how biographies are formed in interaction with particular social and institutional locations. Personal stories, then, are understood as not only the representation of unique lives but as also in part social conversations and storylines that arise out of specific social experiences and settings. In this way, the shared storylines shed light on more than the subjective world. They take us to the space in between. Meanwhile other work (eg, Putnam 2003) emphasises the importance of personal stories to individual and collective action.

*Futures, decision making and the self: observations from the 12-18 Study*

Young people's future thinking combines ideas about 'destinations' (what sort of job I would like?) and desires about being and becoming a certain type of person (who am I and who do I want to become?) (McLeod and Yates, in press). These ways of thinking about the future are inter-related. Yet in research and in policy discussions about young people's futures, 'daydreams' and 'pathways' tend to occupy different worlds.

The language of 'pathways' and destinations is more likely to be part of concerns about vocational directions, labour market options, tracking cohorts, studying transitions and analysing institutional structures and supports. Attention to 'daydreaming' and 'dreams' is associated with a more interpretive focus on subjective meanings. However, the key point is that if we are to deepen our understandings of young people's pathways and wellbeing, then we need to investigate both.

In the plethora of findings on pathways and transition patterns, we still do not know enough about the decision-making and motivations of young people. One way into this could be through the stories they tell themselves and others about they kind of person they'd like to be or become. In other words, future thinking is linked to more than career plans. It is powerfully linked to imagining the kind of person you might like to become. There are connections here to young people's sense of self (who am I?) and associated questions of 'wellbeing'.

*From a contribution to the project by Julie McLeod, 2005*

Other new research (Woodman 2004) points to the idea that whilst it is important for young people to be active negotiators of their own lives, for the sake of their own wellbeing they also see the need to claim 'time out' from all the negotiating and planning.

From the *Making a Life* study, Wierenga suggests that beyond being personal resources, young people's stories tell us about the social world in which they live. Individuals are differently making their lives, based on access to different resources. These resources could be things that are practical and concrete (housing, lifts to places, job opportunities), or more intangible and cultural (for example

different kinds of ideas, storylines of how things could be, particular habits). Young people's stories about their lives can be understood as maps of resource flows (Wierenga 2001). They reveal the different resources they can access, and the significance of the relationships through which they are doing so. Access to *any* resource happens only through trust relationships. There is a difference between things that are made available to the public, and things that actually become accessible to particular individuals and groups. That is, resources can be made available to young people but they do not become accessible to them – in terms of incorporation in life-story - unless they are mediated through relationships of trust.

### *The meaning of wellbeing to young people*

In a study of young people aged 16 and 17, Woodman (2004) found that two strong themes emerged in the way young people speak about wellbeing. Firstly, young people feel responsibility for their future outcomes, keeping their options open, and managing their own lives. Secondly, in this context, time for 'present-centred' activity, activity focused on engagement with the 'here and now', away from responsibility is also important for wellbeing. Wellbeing for young people involves balancing these two aspects of their lives.

Achieving this balance can be difficult, in the face of the need to negotiate an uncertain and changing social world, and the expectations of schools and parents. To a certain extent young people themselves reinforce the idea that being successful and 'well' means taking responsibility for your own life and keeping options open. However, this puts young people under considerable pressure and takes a great deal of time. The young people interviewed felt that they did not have enough time for the other less-cognitive and present-centred aspects of wellbeing that they also value and, ironically, help them cope with taking responsibly.

Work on young people's coping strategies generally interprets problem avoidance approaches (as many present-centred, less cognitive behaviours are often labelled) as less effective and more problematic than cognitive problem solving strategies. However, Woodman's research indicates that these present-centred activities are significant coping mechanisms for young people, who feel almost completely responsible for their own futures. While not ruling out the influence of other factors such as marketing or availability, or denying that for some young people alcohol and drugs become a serious issue, these research findings suggest that drugs, alcohol use, and driving cars or time at the local mall with friends can be part of bracketing out some time in the present moment away from the burden of the future.

*From a contribution to the project by Dan Woodman, 2005*

So, for example, where teachers are not trusted, the information they share with students may even be learned, able to be parroted back, but it is less likely to be incorporated into young people's stories about their own lives. Likewise, they may be aware of a health service; but unless it involves a person they trust, or they are introduced by a person they trust, they will be less willing to use it. Wierenga highlights the role of subjective understandings. Young people's different cultural definitions of 'people like me, 'who I am', 'who we are', 'them and us' become significant filters of ideas and information. Wierenga notes the same happening

with practical resources (eg, housing, hobby choices, job opportunities).

Trust can be vicarious (it is caught rather than taught) but it is contingent upon the available storylines about who can be trusted. So where families do not trust education providers, and where their own local networks are eroded by social change, when they negotiate their children's futures, they are largely on their own. This is an increasingly frightening place to be. Understood in this context, young people's success and wellbeing is not just a function of the resources available to them through their own networks, but also in their network's networks.

If this set of findings applies more widely, it has significant implications for policy. These points become particularly significant if we are embarking on a discussion about shaping social context to be livable, not simply shaping lives to fit or withstand the conditions. This material focuses the central issues for success and wellbeing towards young people's access to the resources that they require. It focuses the main solutions (and challenges) around establishing and maintaining relationships of trust. This seems to go against the grain of many of the trends that appear in contemporary society, for example increased mobility and economic rationalisation.

The points raised above also echo some key findings about Australian young people by Connell et al (1982) in a classic longitudinal study of different life chances, opportunities and constraints. They suggest that social inequalities can most usefully be understood not as different categories of people, but as what people *do*, and *are able to do* with resources and relationships. This could sound individualistic, but if it is understood in the context of networks, different sets of trust relationships, and the very different flows of resources through society, it makes far more sense. Again, trust relationships set the context for individuals' different life-chances.

The findings also echo other more contemporary work, for example Putnam (2003), who argues that trust relationships lay the foundation for any form of social exchange. Putnam also argues that contemporary social conditions are increasingly hostile to the webs of trust relationships that support people to make a life. One of the arguments raised by the *Making a*

*Life* study is that young people only draw help from trusted sources. At times of crisis help is only accessed through relationships already in place. This seems to be backed up by Australian research on help-seeking practices in young people (eg, Cahill et al 2004).

#### *Individual and shared stories*

For the purposes of this report, Wierenga's insights might also be located in a still broader context. In the face of social change, weaving storylines through chaos, change and complexity becomes a significant task for young people, but also for groups and communities. It also becomes significant task for researchers and policy makers.

Literature from anthropology, sociology, moral philosophy and education has highlighted the significance of stories, for individuals constructing their own lives (as explored above), but also for ongoing community life. At the level of community, anthropologists have charted how the central ideas of communities are carried between generations in the stories that they tell, and that story is a powerful vehicle for transporting ideas over both time and space (Levi-Strauss 1979). Out of the field of education comes the realisation that the kinds of stories people tell actually shape history (eg, see Freire 1973). How people tell a story will shape how they act, so what gets selected as being important, and how it is told, is inherently political.

This raises questions about the source material from which young people can draw, about the cultural storylines available to, and about young people – for example, spiritual beliefs, shared understandings about the world's future.

The ideas about needing to create robustness through change through multiple storylines and thick stories also raise some interesting questions about the role of the mass media as storytellers. Access to a particular kind of dominant storyline appears to be having widespread impacts on health and wellbeing, including through social unease and conflict (eg, the defining stories behind terrorism and the war against it).

Wierenga notes that in the *Making a Life* study cohort, some individuals appear to live in a state of crisis. One of the features of these stories is fragmentation. This is revealed as lack of pro-activity, focus is close and immediate, obstacles are met with a simple pain avoidance pattern, rather than a long term focus on what might be best. Particularly when survival is paramount, it seems that energy is not available or being utilised for the bigger picture, reflection, and planning.

One observation is that this also might happen for people, at a collective level, in the ways they culturally and organisationally face social change. Social and economic factors (eg, work and time pressures) can have the effect of making stories individualised, fragmented and incoherent. Individual and corporate focus can remain small, limited to the solution of immediate problems. Those working with young people often talk about having limited spaces for personal and shared reflection (Wierenga et al 2003). The next section of this report will explore some of these themes relating to culture and policy in more depth. Having claimed a shared space, and having asked some of the 'bigger' questions, it seems important to do so.

## Cultures, values, futures and spirit

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The previous section of this report has highlighted the significance of young people's narratives and the social, cultural and material resources that they call on to 'make a life' – well. This section takes up subjective and cultural areas of life that are often intangible, and rarely addressed in research on wellbeing and human potential. We have developed this section in order to place these issues on future research agendas. They include popular notions of success and wellbeing; materialism and individualism; the role of values; future visions and social cohesion; and the importance of cultural expressions of spirituality, including ritual.

Cultures provide many of the resources young people need to construct the personal narratives that are crucial to making their way in life and relating to the world around them - and so to their wellbeing. Australia shares broad cultural qualities with other modern Western societies. But it also comprises many subcultures marked by sometimes very different values, meanings and beliefs. Because of factors such as location, gender, class and ethnicity, young people will have access to different cultural resources, or different storylines about what is important and who they can be. Individuals absorb cultural influences, but also interact actively with them; they are also creators of culture. The important point here is that young people will make their lives with the cultural resources (ideas, storylines) that are available.

**\*\*4 Social influences or individuals' own capacities?** This issue focuses on the extent to which the social and economic environment (for example the increased opportunities for commercial influences to intrude into young people's lives through new media forms) can be said to affect wellbeing, regardless of young people's capacities to interpret, critique, subvert and resist these influences.

The extent to which young people are vulnerable or at risk within the process of social change is also addressed through a renewed interest in the developmental perspective. Youth commentators have begun to draw on research (Dittman 2004) that suggest

that young people's neurological development makes them more susceptible than older people to particular problems. Psychologists have argued that children are cognitively less equipped than adults to understand the intent behind cultural messages. Recent research suggests that children aged eight or less lack the cognitive ability to recognize advertising's persuasive purpose, and so believe its claims are true (Dittman 2004). Other new research suggests that, contrary to earlier beliefs, the greatest changes to the parts of the brain responsible for functions such as self-control, judgment, emotions and organisation occur between puberty and adulthood (Spano 2003).

*Media: limited storylines have negative effects*

Eckersley (2005a: 126-46) says that, as with most social changes, the media's growing influence has many benefits: informing, educating and entertaining people; increasing awareness of human rights and environmental impacts; breaking down dogma, promoting diversity. But the stories the media tell, which define modern life, are also often driven by the lowest common denominator in public taste. While most societies have taken great care of their stories, today's media present, at one level, a cacophony of conflicting messages and morals; at another, they offer a seductive harmony of harmful influences, both personal and social. As one media critic warns: 'The media claim they are only telling our stories, but societies live and die on stories'.

The mass media are:

- Promoting a negative, distrustful and fearful worldview by depicting the world outside our personal experience as one of conflict and calamity.
- Defining quite arbitrarily what is and is not news, so limiting public debate on crucial issues (and in doing so, often distracting us from the important with the trivial).
- Promoting a superficial, materialistic and self-indulgent lifestyle (a way of living marked by fleeting fads and fashions, which is, in any case, beyond the reach of growing numbers of people).
- Eroding our sense of personal worth and significance by constantly parading before us the lives of people who are more powerful, more beautiful, more successful, more exciting (but which are, in truth, so often dysfunctional).

Eckersley (2005a: 145-6) says media effects, taken in isolation, are easy to dismiss as insignificant relative to all the other things that impact on wellbeing. Taken together, however, these effects make the media a powerful and often destructive force. This situation amounts to 'cultural fraud', he says: the promotion of images and ideals that serve the economy but do not meet psychological needs or reflect social realities. 'Never before have our images of social realities been so filtered and distorted. For all the cultural celebration of autonomy and self-realisation, never before have people lived so much through the experiences of others; and never before have they been so denied the drama, dignity and romance of their own lives'.

However, these claims are also strongly contested, with other researchers arguing it is impossible to make simple, direct links from the biological to the social. In past times, people have taken on adult roles and responsibilities at a younger age than they do today. Developmental and social processes interact in complex ways in shaping young people's responses to their cultural world.

**\*\*5 Social versus biological factors?** Some researchers are concerned that research findings on neuropsychological development are used to reinforce a deficit model of young people, undermining their status, creating a justification for greater social controls on young people, and so eroding their rights and contributions to society. Others say that the findings help to explain young people's increased psychosocial risk and underscore the need for greater safeguards against the social exploitation and manipulation of children and youth, including by the media.

Much of the research on the effects of social change on young people's health and wellbeing is located within the disciplines of social epidemiology and health sociology. These disciplines understand 'culture' mainly in terms of 'subcultures' or 'difference', especially ethnic and racial difference, and so, usually, as one dimension of socio-economic status, on which the research has focused. However, culture also needs to be seen in the broader sense of a system of meanings and symbols that shape how people see the world and their place in it and give meaning to personal and collective experience. The neglect of broader trends within the national culture is perhaps not surprising, given that cultures tend to be 'transparent' or 'invisible' to those living within them because they comprise deeply internalised assumptions and beliefs, making their effects hard to discern. A growing

body of evidence and opinion suggests trends in cultural qualities such as materialism and individualism have been underestimated in the research on health and wellbeing.

### *Trends towards materialism and individualism*

There are many 'isms' that can be said to characterise modern Western culture, but two of the most important and best researched are materialism and individualism. They are also becoming more global in their influence. Even with these cultural qualities, however, the evidence of their health effects often consists of correlations, not causal associations, or depends of making connections between different lines of inquiry. In other words, the arguments rest as much on synthesis as on empirical proof.

Many studies show that materialism - the pursuit of money and possessions - seems to breed not happiness but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation (Kasser 2002, Eckersley 2005a: 85-96, DeAngelis 2004). 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 people are, the poorer their quality of life.

Individualism - placing the individual at the centre of a framework of values, norms and beliefs, so freeing people from institutional arrangements, ties and expectations - is supposed to be about liberating people to live the lives

they want. There is no doubt that, historically, individualisation has been associated with a loosening of the chains of religious dogma, class oppression and gender and ethnic discrimination, and so with a liberation of human potential. It has expanded opportunity and made life more exciting. Yet the reality of freedom is very different from its ideal; it has its costs, especially when it is taken too far or is misunderstood.

Individualisation has transformed the process of identity from a 'given' into 'task' (Bauman 2002: xv). The necessity to make something of one's self ('obligatory self-determination') has significant implications for collective action and citizenship, but it also has serious implications for the lives of individuals because of the pressure endlessly to perform, achieve and re-invent one's self (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Individualisation's down-sides 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 (Eckersley 2005a: 85-96).

All of these developments tend to loosen the individual's ties to family, community and society, so reducing the connectedness and support that are important to wellbeing. However, individualism's effects may be deeper, more subtle, even paradoxical. Individualism may also diminish personal control by confusing autonomy (the ability to act according

to our own values and beliefs) with independence (not being reliant on or influenced by others). This confusion encourages a perception by individuals that they are separate from others and the environment in which they live, and so from the very things that influence their lives.

The more narrowly and separately the self is defined, the greater the likelihood that the social forces acting on people are experienced as external and alien, and so beyond their 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. Increasing affluence abets this process because it makes independence financially possible.

These possibilities are reflected in 'self-focus' among young people that research has identified (Dwyer et al 2003). They also suggest that the autonomy that young people prize is the 'narrow' autonomy of the separate self; it is having the flexibility and mobility to move around and between the social structures of family, community, work etc, to be only loosely attached, uncommitted, independent. On the other hand, the tribal connectedness that other studies (eg, Mackay 2003) suggest young people are embracing may be a very human response to the isolation that independence produces. It is probably no accident that the most popular drugs today are those (alcohol, marijuana and party drugs such as ecstasy) that dissolve the boundaries of the self and induce a sense of belonging, a merging with others.

### *Values*

Values provide the framework for deciding what people hold to be

important, true, right and good, and so have a central role in defining relationships and meanings. We acknowledge there is considerable debate about the nature of moral community and its current state (within academic circles and within particular groups). However, it is beyond the scope of this project to provide a detailed discussion of this contentious area.

Work from the Australian Youth Research Centre affirm that the values that support young people's potential and wellbeing are those that recognise and enhance young people's own sense of meaning, control (or agency, or effectiveness) and social connectedness. These are points that cause us to question how relationships between the individual and society are mediated and articulated.

Of particular interest to this report are the values underpinning our popular notions of 'success' and 'wellbeing'. In contemporary Western societies, people seem to be well practiced at defining themselves in terms of success, but not so good at unpicking the different stories surrounding this concept to explore what values inform them. Often in public expressions, from education policy to mass media, success is being defined narrowly in terms of material success.

When a community abdicates the role of storytelling to the mass media, particularly commercial media, a focus on wellbeing or the good life is diminished to stories about feeling good. These stories can have a very individual focus. Publicly shared storylines about the conditions, contexts and relationships that create wellbeing are still relatively undeveloped, with little focus on creating contexts and relationships in which all

people can grow and flourish. Perhaps communities need more robust or 'thick' storylines about this topic, access to alternative storylines, and to create safe spaces for other voices in public dialogue?

Research has explored the way that young people engage with, and respond to, social change. New technologies, for example, mobile phones open up a whole range of opportunities for social connection, but also opportunities for bullying and harassment. What social values will equip them to negotiate these encounters? Internet sites open up a range of opportunities for information but also to encounter the unexpected. What frameworks of values, understandings and stories will equip young people to deal and negotiate effectively?

Beyond young people's sense of private morality to their sense of social ethics - how do individuals make sense of ecological and social justice issues, socially available storylines about 'them' and 'us' (eg. who belongs in Australia), and possible world futures? These questions become pertinent particularly in a context where many publicly available storylines are divisive and inflammatory, driven by commercial media. How might the area of 'values' be opened up to further exploration, research and discussion without falling into set positions that are based on lived experience or tradition and do not allow for debate?

Eckersley (2005a: 43-58) argues that modern Western culture undermines, even reverses, universal values and time-tested wisdom. In making meaning in life more individualised and materialistic, it reduces social cohesion, confidence, trust and stability, and leave people personally

more isolated and vulnerable. This, in turn, reduces a community's moral hold on practice: values depend critically on personal, social and spiritual ties for effect, for tangible expression in people's behaviour towards each other. So there are complex feedbacks in the social effects of cultural trends.

The results of this social shift include not so much a collapse of personal morality, but its blurring into ambivalence and ambiguity. Without cultural reinforcement, people find it harder to define what is 'good' and to do what they believe to be 'good' takes more effort. And, conversely, amongst competing storylines about what is valued, it becomes easier to justify or rationalise courses of action that are inconsistent with core principles. People also perceive a widening gulf between private and public morality, between their own standards and those reflected by institutions such as the media, government and business, even religion. This produces a growing sense of alienation and disengagement from social institutions, and a deepening cynicism.

#### *Future visions*

Images of the future are an important component of culture, affecting social cohesion and personal wellbeing. Positive images of the future allow individuals to identify with, and work for, social goals and national, even global, priorities; they reflect a social ideal that encourages people to channel their individual interests into a higher, or broader, social purpose; they provide a broader base of meaning in life.

An unnecessary source of confusion and contradiction about young people's potential and wellbeing is whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about the future –

unnecessary because of the need to distinguish between personal and social perspectives. Hope is important to wellbeing, and most young people are personally hopeful or optimistic. The role of optimism about the future of humanity or the world is more complex and its effects on wellbeing are likely to be more subtle and indirect, linked to social cohesion and harmony, as already noted. Many, perhaps most, young people are not optimistic about global futures.

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

There has been some commentary about the current generation of youth being better adapted to the change and uncertainty that characterise their times, and more optimistic about future prospects (Eckersley 2005a: 147-169). An analysis of findings from surveys of young people in 1988, 1995 and 2004 was carried out for this project (Warren 2004); while the data are not strictly comparable, they suggest no rise in optimism, and even a possible widening of the gap between expected and preferred futures.

The pessimism flowing from these failures of vision reinforces the social isolation and detachment that accompany materialism and individualism, and so further undermines young people's sense of having shared social values.

### *Visions of the future*

How people, especially the young, perceive the future – whether with hope or trepidation – matters, to them and to society. The future is part of culture and, like other cultural elements, can shape people's personal stories, values and priorities. Surveys of young people carried out in 1988, 1995 and 2004 hint at interesting constants and changes in their outlook.

An analysis of the findings for this project suggest that, overall, optimism has not increased since 1988 – if anything the reverse is true (Warren 2004). The following results focus on the attitudes of young women in 1995 and 2004. When asked to choose between two positive scenarios of the future of Australia, 64 per cent in 1995 and 87 per cent in 2004 said they *expected* a 'growth' society focused on individual wealth, economic growth and efficiency and enjoying 'the good life'; 34 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively, *expected* a 'green' society focused on community, family, equality and environmental sustainability. Asked which scenario they *preferred*, 13 per cent in 1995 and 9 per cent in 2004 chose 'growth' and 84 per cent and 82 per cent, respectively, chose 'green'. In other words, the 2004 girls were less likely to expect the future they preferred.

A series of questions asking respondents to agree or disagree with a series of statements about the impacts of science and technology suggest some interesting possible shifts in attitude, some positive, but more negative. Thus agreement that:

- computers and machines would take over the world fell from 40 to 28 per cent;
- computers and robots were taking over jobs fell from 59 to 42 per cent;
- governments would use new technologies to watch and regulate people more fell from 74 to 69 per cent.

On the other hand, agreement that:

- science and technology offered the best hope for meeting the challenges ahead fell from 64 to 40 per cent.
- science and technology were alienating and isolating people from each other and nature rose from 55 to 73 per cent;
- science would find ways to conquer new diseases fell from 85 to 73 per cent;
- technological advances would make democracy stronger and give people more control fell from 38 to 24 per cent;
- science and technology would find ways of solving environment problems fell from 40 to 25 per cent;
- science would find ways to produce enough food for the growing world population fell from 35 to 20 per cent.

The survey findings are not strictly comparable because the 2004 findings are from a pilot study. Even without implying any trends, however, the results hardly reveal widespread faith in the future young people expect or are promised.

### *Religion and spirit*

Wellbeing, especially positive wellbeing, is strongly related to meaning in life. People can find meaning at a variety of levels. Closest to people's lives, there is families and friends, work, interests and desires.

Many people today find meaning in the pursuit of personal goals. Then there is the level of identity with a nation or ethnic group, and with a community. At the most fundamental, transcendent level, there is spiritual meaning: a sense of having a place in the universe. Spirituality represents the broadest and

deepest form of connectedness. It is the only form of meaning that transcends people's personal circumstances, social situation and the material world, and so has a powerful capacity to sustain them through adversity.

Spiritual traditions offer powerful storylines about wellbeing: wholeness, the purpose and the nature of 'success', values and the nature and state of community. Because of this, questions about spirituality sit at the heart of understanding how individuals negotiate life, and how collectively as communities we negotiate uncertainty.

This may be the subject matter that most fundamentally underpins conversations about success and wellbeing. Ironically the role of spirituality appears to be the hardest topic for people to discuss. People tend to hold their own views very closely and discuss with their own kind. Outside the study of religion and spirituality, the role of spirituality in individual and communal wellbeing is not discussed much in research circles. The same applies to broader public and policy conversations. Australia has also tended to be reluctant to draw the exploration of spiritual traditions into education.

Spiritual traditions include the larger stories of how people across different places and times have dealt with tough life issues, or the human condition itself. Where there is silence on these matters, there are limited resources, limited storylines available to young people as they negotiate their own lives.

Religion is the most common form of the cultural expression of spirituality. Research shows that religious belief and practice enhance health and happiness (Argyle 2002, Myers 2005).

The benefits 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; religions 'package' many of the ingredients of wellbeing. At the same time, religion is no panacea. Its storylines have been used to justify wars and other atrocities. Americans stand out from the people of other developed nations in the strength of their religious belief and observance; yet the United States compares poorly on many social indicators, including its human rights record, life expectancy, crime, poverty, inequality.

More importantly, the mainly statistical correlations on which the associations between religion and wellbeing are based barely scratch the surface of the role of spirituality. Its essence makes it extraordinarily difficult for science to grasp and analyse, as is clear from the work of Tacey, who has written extensively on spirituality. He argues 'spirit' plays a crucial and yet largely unacknowledged role in wellbeing, especially that of young people. Young people who become depressed, suicidal or fatigued in response to the hopelessness that confronts the world are living symbolic lives, he says (Tacey 2003: 176). Their struggles with meaning are not just personal struggles. 'They are trying to sort out the problems of society, and their suffering, deaths and ruptures are not just personal tragedies but contributions to the spiritual dilemmas of the world.'

In a paper prepared earlier for this project, Tacey (2002) says secular societies have not understood the meaning of spirit, nor recognised its capacity to nurture and transform.

People today live in a modern world of improved services and faster machines, but they do not 'feel' any better because the thing that justifies and validates their existence is missing, he says. They are forced to acknowledge that what gives meaning and value to life is mysterious and elusive. Today, the central problem is how to speak of spirit outside the religious traditions that apparently no longer speak to many people.

Researchers have also noted that Australians, on the whole, have tended to have ambivalent relationships to organised religion. Australia's history has been very different to, for example, the United States. Non-indigenous Australians have a history of violence against, and ignorance of, indigenous spirituality, and have tended to show a lack of insight into how these traditions might locate peoples in terms of relationship to each other and the land. Alongside this sits an uneasy tolerance (or recently outright suspicion) of other migrant spiritual traditions.

Along with a movement away from traditional religious institutions like the church, there has been a corresponding rise in eclectic, hybrid, deeply personal

expressions of spirituality. Apart from Tacey's work, researchers like Webber (2002), Berger and Ezzy (2004), and Verdouw (2004) reveal that many Australian young people are engaging deeply with spirituality and moral community, and exploring different forms of their expression. Others may be seeking alternative paths (eg. the 'rave' scene) to transcendence (Siokou 2002).

In a time of uncertainty, fundamentalist traditions are also growing. This seems to represent a re-claiming of some certainties. Drawing on a Freudian analysis, Tacey (2003:24) offers an alternative explanation: where something has been repressed at the heart of a culture, it appears at the fringes in a mutant form. Beyond church institutions, at a policy and program level, conversations about spirituality are rare, but are now appearing from the political fringes particularly in the form of fundamentalism.

We believe the topic of spirituality is an important element of discussions about young people's success and wellbeing. There is clearly room for more exploration.

### *The power of ritual*

An issue for young people in contemporary society is the opportunity for meaningful rituals to make sense of life, and meaningful rites of passage, particularly when the traditional marks for adulthood have been moved. A range of Australian research on youth issues relates stories of young people claiming their own rituals and rites of passage (eg, Berger and Ezzy 2004).

Tacey (2002) says that, growing up in central Australia, he was constantly impressed by the effects of 'initiation' on adolescent tribal members of Aboriginal cultures. The initiation would take them out of the haze of adolescence and its typical rebelliousness, and make them responsible and creative members of adult society, not by rational means (the lure of job, money, materialism) but by non-rational means (contact with a spiritual/cosmic reality as the source of new maturity).

Paradoxically, it is contact with that which is 'other' than human that teaches us how to be truly human. In anthropological terms, it is respect for the sacred that makes society possible. Without sacred experience and initiation, individuals become wayward, rebellious, unruly, lawless. As spiritual initiation disappears from community life, the uninitiated seek destructive expressions because at a deep level they do not feel they belong to society.

Tacey (2004) says he once asked an Aboriginal leader why so many youth – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - were harming themselves, and was told, 'They don't know who they are'. The leader explained that the task of culture was to tell a person who he or she really was. 'When they know who they are, they no longer want to harm themselves, for they have received, as a gift from life, their true dignity and worth.'

## **Implications and future directions**

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The examination of a wide variety of Australian longitudinal studies on youth that formed the starting point of this study has confirmed that young people's wellbeing is closely related to the social conditions that surround them. Research provides an insight into various dimensions of how young people are faring in terms of their health and wellbeing. Almost inevitably, however, the data on ill health tends to dominate. Studies of disease, morbidity, risk and disability provide an objective measure of young people's (ill)health status. Understandings and measures of pathways to success and wellbeing tend to be less well developed.

The stories young people tell about themselves and their world offer a way of weaving together the various layers or levels of examining and understanding health and wellbeing. There are at least four of these layers, each offering a different perspective.

- *Individual*: wellbeing is a subjective property of individuals; research distinguishes between the ill and the well; causes of ill health are 'near' and direct (exposure to toxin or pathogen, conflict or abuse); treatment of individual disease and disability, usually with clinical and biomedical interventions; health promotion focuses on changing health-related behaviour (diet, exercise, smoking, drinking etc).
- *Social*: acknowledges broad social, economic and environmental factors behind population patterns of

wellbeing; acknowledges patterns of disadvantage, marginalisation and poverty; interventions seek to address social inequalities and the risks associated with them, either by reducing inequalities or changing individual behaviour.

- *Cultural*: sees wellbeing as influenced by broader, less tangible, characteristics of individuals and their relationship to society, including worldviews, beliefs, stories and values; interventions seek to enhance these qualities at both individual and social levels.
- *Spiritual*: wellbeing reflects the deepest level of meaning for individuals, a sense of having a place in the world, being part of ‘the grand scheme of things’; its essence is mysterious and elusive, so hard for science to grasp and explain; interventions are in the realm of religion and other forms of spiritual expression.

#### *Flashpoints: Issues for further research*

Across the youth sector there is increasing recognition of the need for cross-sectoral practice and ‘whole-of-government’ solutions. In this context the development of processes for effective inter-disciplinary conversations – where participants can disagree but still stay at the table – is vital. This report has sought to highlight both common ground and divergence between disciplinary understandings of the key issues surrounding young people’s wellbeing. The ‘flashpoints’ include:

- *The extent to which research findings from different disciplines can be explained and reconciled.* Young people’s subjective assessments of their wellbeing and health constitute a different measure from other tests of health status. They are not measuring the same thing and it is difficult to know how to draw effectively on both to gain a balanced picture.

#### *Reflections on stories, research and policy*

The notion of stories may be an appropriate way to think about research and policy. There is increasing interest in the way in which the stories that individuals and social groups tell about themselves *and others* are constructed in the context of ‘discourses’, or socially shared storylines that are selective in the particular truths that they tell (following Foucault 1980). From this perspective, findings of the longitudinal studies from different disciplines embody a range of different and cross-cutting storylines about what is happening for young people. The stories of different professions in relation to young people locate different understandings of ‘the problem’ and frame the role of professionals differently in relation to solutions (Wyn and White 1997). The different stories are disciplinary artefacts: reflecting the different types of evidence bases used to denote truth, and types of stories in which ‘people like us’ are specifically interested (or not).

This separation makes sense until the space researchers, policy makers and professionals occupy becomes particularly complex. There is a growing body of work across research and policy arenas that now talks of the need to work in cross-disciplinary ways in order to deal effectively with the cross-cutting nature of social problems. This is particularly evident across the youth and community sectors, where there are increasing calls for professionals to go beyond disciplinary and professional culture, the organisational ‘silos’ of health, education, and so on, and to work holistically (eg, see Riddell and Tett 2002, Wierenga et al 2003).

- *Whether overall trends in wellbeing can be generalised to describe the situation of different generations. Is life getting better or worse? Participants asked whether it was meaningful to attempt to distinguish the health and wellbeing of a generation (for example, Gen X or Y) from previous generations. Critics argue that in generalising, the full extent of diversity within, and continuities across, generations are obscured. Others suggest the question encourages a closer scrutiny of the 'big picture' of social change and the totality of the evidence.*
- *Whether potential and wellbeing always belong together. Can potential and wellbeing be distinguished and the trends in each move in opposite directions? It may be that freeing and equipping people to realise their full potential entails risks to wellbeing because of the increased risk of failure.*
- *The relative importance of social influences and individuals' own capacities in determining wellbeing. This question focuses on the extent to which the social and economic environment can be said to affect wellbeing, regardless of young people's capacities to interpret, critique, subvert and resist these influences.*
- *The relative influence of social and biological factors in shaping wellbeing. Some suggest that recent findings on neuropsychological development underscore the need for greater safeguards for children and youth.*

Others are concerned that developmental arguments can be used to justify greater social controls.

We see a need for fuller exploration of these issues, for more conversation and mapping across areas of interdisciplinary tension.

#### *Signposts for research and policy*

Several 'signposts' – pointers for future research and policy development – emerged from the project. These include the need for more focus or emphasis on the following:

- *The big picture – young people in context: The ongoing impact of social change on successive generations places a responsibility on researchers to document and analyse these changes. Policy makers must also ensure that young people's lives are not being interpreted from the viewpoint of outmoded ideas and conditions. An example is the need to recognise that many young people today are often concurrently workers and students, and have increasingly complex lives, with associated health consequences. Young people's own interpretations provide important insights into many contemporary issues. Without such input, policies, interventions and services for young people are likely to be fragmented and silo-based and out of step with their lives.*
- *Wellbeing: One of the most significant effects of social change over the last 20 years has been: (1) an increase in several measures of ill health, especially mental health;*

and (2) an increased level of concern about health and wellbeing across all groups, but particularly young people. A focus on total health and wellbeing is especially important in the area of youth policy because: (1) it retains a link with ‘big-picture’ issues; (2) it focuses on pathways to ‘living well’ as a universal measure, as well as acknowledging the need to focus on particular risk groups and problems; and (3) it provides a framework for crossing sectoral boundaries and identifies the points of permeability between disciplines and sectors. It also highlights the need for a ‘whole of life’ approach: all policy becomes youth policy.

- *The mainstream:* The pace of social change has outstripped the usefulness of the idea of a ‘mainstream’ of young people who are ‘OK’ and an identifiable minority who are ‘at risk’ and require targeting. At some time, most individuals will face difficulties (for example, a period of depression or unemployment). The implication is that both targeted and universal policy measures and interventions are necessary. One disadvantage of focusing solely on ‘target’ groups as a basis for research or policy is that it tends to reinforce sectoral and disciplinary boundaries and ultimately limits the potential to understand and solve the problem.
- *Social and cultural resources:* Both contemporary and historical research reveals a strong inter-generational effect on people’s life chances, reflecting differential access to material and cultural resources. More research needs to be developed to understand how

this process works. Other research reveals the significance of narratives or ‘stories’ that enable individuals to connect their lives with people around them and to make sense of their world. Access to resources depends upon webs of relationships. This means young people’s wellbeing depends upon creating conditions for trust and exchange of resources, between young people and significant others, within families, and within communities. From a policy point of view, this finding indicates the importance of supporting the development of social and cultural resources, as well as the economic and material resources.

- *Inter-disciplinary dialogue and grounding implications for policy and practice:* This project has highlighted the potential of supported dialogue within and between some key groups: researchers (from across different disciplines), policy makers and professional (across the youth and community sector). Two areas of possibility have emerged: firstly further shared inquiries and inter-disciplinary synthesis around specific areas related to young people’s wellbeing; and secondly exploring processes for knowledge translation from synthesis to signposts, and to policy and practice.

This project has achieved much in identifying – and bringing out into the open – critical differences (‘flashpoints’) in disciplinary perspectives, as well as the ‘signposts’ for further research and policy development. It has created a body of knowledge from which it will be possible to direct research and interrogate policy. It has established a

platform for ongoing dialogue between disciplines and professions, so false closure on important issues can be avoided. In terms of drawing down the implications of this project, there is more work to be done; through these flashpoints and signposts we have simply begun the task.

Importantly, the findings of this work highlight that the most effective policy responses will not be simply about attempting to enhance young people's resilience, flexibility and adaptability and so to mould them to suit changing social circumstances. Realising young people's potential and optimising their wellbeing also mean shaping social conditions to suit their needs.

These signposts signal the need to acknowledge that broad social changes do not 'just happen', but flow from the choices people make, individually and collectively; to question the often-assumed links between means and ends that underpin these changes; for communities to claim space for conversations about things of value; and to allow time for reflection, for asking questions as well as seeking solutions.

Youth researchers, policy makers and professionals in the project's final workshop expressed interest in ongoing conversations which would assist them to locate their own work within a bigger picture of evidence around young people's wellbeing. They acknowledged the value of knowing that their day-to-day activity is part of a larger, shared strategy towards young peoples' wellbeing. However, policy makers and practitioners also stressed the importance of an extra step – grounding the 'big picture' findings.

Their input particularly highlighted a need for processes that elaborate 'big-picture' research into clear signposts for policy and practice. Knowledge translation is important, and there is a corresponding need – more broadly - to explore processes that might develop ideas from synthesis to signposts, and to policy and practice and back. In terms of this project, we feel there is also more work to do, and we are exploring opportunities to further develop the signposts listed. To this end we welcome comments.

We would welcome your comments on this report. Please send these to Ani Wierenga at:

[wierenga@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:wierenga@unimelb.edu.au).

## Appendix

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### *Research Panel*

Dr John Ainley, Australian Council for Educational Research  
*(Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth)*

Ms Rosemary Aird, University of Queensland  
*(Mater-UQ Study of Pregnancy)*

Prof Lois Bryson, RMIT  
*(Women's Health Australia Study)*

Dr Jane Dixon, Australia 21 and ANU

Mr Richard Eckersley, Australia 21 and ANU (project director)

Dr Gary Marks, Australian Council for Educational Research  
*(Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth)*

Prof Janet McCalman, University of Melbourne

Dr Julie McLeod, Deakin University  
*(The 12 to 18 Project)*

Prof George Patton, University of Melbourne  
*(Victorian Adolescent Health Cohort Study and other studies)*

Prof Margot Prior, University of Melbourne

Ms Diana Smart, Australian Institute of Family Studies  
*(Australian Temperament Project)*

Ms Irene Verins, VicHealth

Dr Ani Wierenga, University of Melbourne (Project research associate)  
*(Making a Life Project)*

Prof Johanna Wyn, University of Melbourne  
*(Life Patterns Study)*

### *Research Panel Workshops*

#### **May 25-26, 2004**

John Ainley  
Lois Bryson  
Rosemary Aird  
Jane Dixon  
Richard Eckersley  
Janet McCalman  
Julie McLeod  
George Patton  
Margot Prior  
Diana Smart  
Irene Verins  
Ani Wierenga  
Johanna Wyn

#### **November 11-12, 2004**

Rosemary Aird  
Richard Eckersley  
Gary Marks  
Janet McCalman  
Julie McLeod  
Margot Prior  
Irene Verins  
Ani Wierenga  
Johanna Wyn

#### **Guests**

John Spierings  
David Tacey  
Elisabeth Northam

### *Youth Policy Workshop*

#### **June 29, 2005**

Rosemary Aird  
Bev Begg  
Lyndal Bond  
Luke Bo'sher  
Jenny Brown,  
Richard Eckersley  
Georgie Ferrari  
Lill Healey  
Craig Hodges  
Rebecca Gardner  
Kellie Ann Jolly  
Gary Marks  
Rob Moodie  
Janet McCalman  
Susan McDowell  
Julie McLeod  
Amanda Smith  
Mary Tobin  
John Toumbourou  
Irene Verins  
Lyn Walker  
Dan Woodman  
Ani Wierenga  
Johanna Wyn  
Trudy Wyse  
Julie Marr (note-taker)

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