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A revolution of wellbeing.
Recognising why values matter:
Individualism versus Community

Presentation to the Communities in Control
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Richard Eckersley
Fellow,
National Centre for Epidemiology
and Population Health,
Australian National University

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Thanks very much Joe.

As you told a fish story I'm going to tell another fish story.

A couple of years ago I took part in the Art of Dissent Conference here in Melbourne it was part of Victorian Arts Festival and I was part of a panel to discuss the democratisation of culture. And as we were introducing ourselves the bloke sitting next to me said that his dissent went back to his student days when he was reading Marx and taking psychedelic drugs. And I said when my colleague was doing Marx and drugs; I was in the lab studying the endocrinology of thermal tolerance in gold fish. "Same thing," he interjected. I'm still trying to work that one out.

The transition from gold fish to human health and wellbeing is a fairly obvious one so I won't go into detail of how I made that shift and I'll get on with what I want to talk about but before I do I want to suggest that you don't furiously take notes during this.

I'd much prefer that you sat back and absorbed the big picture that I'm going to be talking about. How the pieces fit together, to give, I hope, a fairly coherent view of some of the issues that are confronting us. The powerpoints will be available on Our Community website. A lot of my writing – particularly media articles are available on my web page you can get to it through the website for the **National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health**. If you really like the movie then you can read the book.

I wanted to focus here on not so much the internal dynamics and properties of communities as such, which we've tended to be talking about mainly today but some of the external influences that shape what happens in communities. So I'm focusing very much on issues to do with worldviews, cultures, values, and the things that mess around with our heads. And I noted a number of points that David Henshaw made yesterday where he spoke about things like powerlessness, facing the brutal reality of our situation, the importance of behaviours and cultures. And I'm going to be talking about a lot of those things as well but at a very different scale of application. And I particularly liked his metaphor of the shadow and the shadows we cast and one of the key points I want to make is that our dominant world-view at the moment does cast a very deep shadow over communities.

What I say will also relate and touch on points made by other speakers including Peter Costello and Larry Anthony today as well as some of yesterday's speakers like Clive [Hamilton] and Hugh Mackay. And if

you're having trouble reconciling what Clive Hamilton said and what Peter Costello said today then hopefully what I have to say today will cast a bit of light on that.

I want to argue that changing our situation requires a number of different things. That is that it's going to require us to shift our view or our way we think about individualism. It's going to require us to change the way we think about democracy and also to change the way we think about our world views. I want to move now to look at three different perspectives that impact on communities and relate to these issues.

One is perceptions of quality of life, the **second** is materialism and individualism and how they affect wellbeing, and then **thirdly** I want to look at some trends in wellbeing that I think cast a very dramatic and very disturbing picture of what's going on at the moment.

I've been involved in a number of projects that have essentially involved surveys that have asked the question: Do you think the quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account the economic, social and environmental conditions and trends, is getting better, worse or remaining about the same? And you can see the results there over a number of different years. The question has been asked by the same company, Newspoll, on the same sort of sample and so on. And essentially you can see (**refer to Slide 4)** that while the answers have varied over the years, broadly speaking, about twice as many people think that the quality of life is getting worse, as think its getting better. Despite the fact that over this period the economic indicators are very good.

When you ask people why they think quality of life is deteriorated - and this is based on work by the Sydney Sociologist Michael Pusey from his Middle Australia project - these are the responses ranked in order that people give **(Refer Slide 5)**. So you can see that they think there is too much greed and consumerism, the breakdown in community life, too much pressure on families, falling living standards and employers demanding too much.

Another example is this graph **(refer to Slide 6)** based on some results from a survey that The Australian used which showed that over the last 10 years a large majority of people, over nine in ten, think that there's more stress and pressure in life and almost two thirds think that there is less time for family and friends, over half think that there is less caring for the community, whereas more people think now that they've got more money to buy things.

And then to give some qualitative examples of this sort of thing, and this is something that Hugh Mackay talked about yesterday, that since about the mid 1980s his reports have charted Australians' growing anxiety, concern, unease about the changes shaping Australia **(refer to Slide 7)**. And as he (Hugh Mackay) said this has prompted a sense of disengagement with people tending their own patch, focusing on their own needs and requirements.

Likewise if you look at the report by the Clemenger Communication Group. *The Silent Majority* reports the concerns of the average Australian and it suggests that Australians are turning away from these big international and national issues to focus on family, home and especially their children. And we've seen as they suggest in that quote **(refer to Slide 8)** the concern collapse in recent years. Now these concerns are much bigger than they were when Clemenger first did this survey back in the 1970s. In those days our concerns were relatively trivial, Clemenger says, relating to things like the fact that school textbooks didn't last very long and that the cords on electrical appliances were too short.

So you can see that we've seen momentous changes in the sorts of things that are concerning us. And here is another example **(refer to Slide 9)** taken from a report by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence which likewise reinforces this sense that people feel that values are changing generally for the worse, that Australians have become too selfish and materialistic. And there is this consequent loss of faith in social institutions, and there is desire then to maintain a sort of comfortable and self-focused life by adjusting the way we react to the things around us.

All these studies and surveys hold a similar message that affectively what we are seeing is a narrowing or weakening of community in a civic or political sense. The paradox is that because of these things people feel they have to take control of their own lives more than they did in the past. But in a sense it's a diminished form of control, which doesn't extend to influencing the social conditions and influences in the wider world around us.

I want to now look at materialism and how it affects our wellbeing and the psychological research is quite compelling. **(refer to Slide 10)**

The more materialistic our values, in other words the more attached to money and possessions that in fact the poorer our wellbeing is, the more depression we tend to experience; anxiety, anger, social alienation and poorer personal relationships. And it shows that people oriented towards extrinsic goals like fame, fortune, physical attractiveness or glamour actually experience lower overall wellbeing, more anxiety and

depression than those people who are oriented towards these so call intrinsic goals of close personal relationships, self acceptance and understanding and contributing to the community.

I guess the best examples of this, of the excesses of materialism are seen in the Hollywood style celebrities whose outward success, glamour and fame and wealth so often go along with deep personal insecurities, addictions and self absorption. So broadly speaking the research shows the more materialistic our values the poorer our quality of life.

I want to now turn to individualism; **(refer to Slide 11 and 12)**

Here the picture is perhaps a little bit less clear-cut. What I want to suggest that individualism, which is essentially about putting the individual self at the centre of a framework of values, norms and beliefs, is actually delivering a double whammy to our wellbeing in the sense that it reduces social support and personal control.

There are basically two mechanisms by which it's doing this. The first is that our notion of individualism actually confuses autonomy with independence or separateness. Autonomy is a matter of volition; it's about being able to act according to internalised values and norms. In its opposite is not dependence but heteronomy where we feel our lives are acted on by social forces beyond our control and regardless of our interests. And in confusing autonomy with independence or separateness, there are a couple of mechanisms by which it not only decreases our sense of connection or belonging to others, but it actually reduces our sense of control over our own life.

The one mechanism is that the more separate the self, the more the social forces acting on us are perceived as external and alien to us. The other possibility is that the separate self demands very high self esteem in order to function, and one-way psychologists have suggested we maintain that self-esteem is to believe that the things that threaten it are beyond our control. In another sense then we actually end up having less sense of control over our own lives.

I think that this creation of a separate self could be a very important fundamental dynamic in modern life today impacting on such things like meaning in life which is very often linked to being attached to something larger than the self: family, community, nation, God or some other spiritual entity or belief system. Impacting also on things like citizenship, social trust and cohesion and the intimacy of friendships and the quality of family life. An American psychologist Jean Twenge **(refer to Slide 13)**has actually done some very interesting research that shows in fact these shifts are actually detectable.

When you look at personality tests over time we do actually see among young Americans increased self-esteem over decades but also a decline in sense of control over their lives and also increasing anxiety.

Now this brings us then to the issue of values.

When you look across societies and over time basically what most societies have tended to do is encourage those values that promote harmonious personal relationships and strong social attachments and also the strength to endure adversity. Vices on the other hand are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires and the capitulation to human weaknesses.

In other words societies more or less universally have regarded as virtues those values that promote social behavior, that are pro-social and have regarded as vices those things that are essentially anti-social. To give you just one example of that something that would be very familiar to you if you've been to Sunday school the famous list of deadly sins and cardinal virtues and its pretty brave in this free wheeling age of moral relativism and pluralism to actually put up a list like this. On one occasion a church minister got up after I'd given a talk like this and said: "I'm glad you can talk about vices and virtues Richard because I can't".

I really do want to make a couple of points about this that values are essentially abstract principals to guide our lives - they don't necessarily highly prescribe or proscribe behavior. If I can talk about lust, for example, because that is the one that everyone's interested in. The idea of lust as a vice, it doesn't tell you how often, with whom, when and how you have sex. It basically says that human wellbeing personally and socially tends to be enhanced if you put some bounds around sexual desire. And if you want a good example of that then you need look no further than the recent sex scandals involving footballers both here but particularly amongst the rugby leagues footballers in NSW.

Another important point about values is being that they are abstract, that they are generic and they are flexible and they're internalised, they are a much better way for providing rules for our lives than highly specified, detailed laws and regulations. Peter Costello (in his speech) this morning quoted Edmond Bourke a number of times and one of the other things that Edmond Burke said: "The less control there is from within the more there must be from without".

So there is the value of values. **(refer to Slide 17)**Likewise if you look at what the sages have said about happiness over the centuries a number of important themes emerge and I went through this exercise a number of years ago. One is that happiness is not a goal but a consequence, a

result of how we live our lives, it's not found by focusing narrowly on our own personal desires but by bringing others into the equation of our concerns and goals as well. It comes from balancing wants and needs, in other words being content with what we have.

I want to suggest then that what we experience in western societies today is a form of cultural fraud. In other words we see the promotion of cultural images and ideals that serve the economy but actually do not meet human psychological needs or reflect the social realities of our life. We have a marketing / media complex that's creating an artificial or alternative reality that's providing quite an anti-social dynamic in at least several important respects that I've listed there (refer slides):

The fractured femoral images and the focus on personal, often material goals, and then reinforcing that the images of a mean world out there that we are retreating from as the surveys I discussed early show.

I want to suggest then that this media / marketing complex has become a much more important dynamic in our life than the military / industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned against back in the 1950s.

To give you one example of that I read recently that large American corporations spend one trillion dollars, that is a thousand billion dollars on marketing each year which is about twice what Americans spend on education - private and public - from kindergarten through to the end of college. It gives you an idea of the dynamics that are working within our culture at the moment and the way they influence our lifestyle choices and our values.

I want now to turn to some of the consequences of that and this unless you understand what it is all about is really quite a dramatic slide **(refer to Slide 19).**

Basically what it does is show the way suicide rates increase with increasing age for different groups of men born between the 1930s through to the 1980s and effectively what it shows is that for each successive group of men born after the second world war the suicide rate has increased more steeply to a higher level than the previous birth cohorts or groups.

Where I had the indicator (referring to slides) shows the youngest group that isn't following the trend. This is the group that have only just hit their twenties now and that trend appears to have been arrested and that's shown up in the fact that youth suicide rates for males are now actually dropping. But when you look at the data in more detail it shows that the suicide rates have started falling because more young people are

seeking and getting help rather than it being the case that there are fewer young people who are needing help.

Likewise on the next slide **(refer to Slide 20)**, which is based on American data, shows the cumulative risk of experiencing major depression during your lifetime for different cohorts or generations. You can see that for each successively younger cohort the risk increases more steeply to a higher level. That graph probably exaggerates the increase because of the flaws in the research but probably the pattern is broadly consistent.

It's just worth noting that these age groups correspond with the major sort of generations that we hear a lot about. So this is the pre-war Civics Generation (referring to slide), the Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y or the Millennials. It's worth pointing out because Hugh (Mackay, during his speech) was talking about the terrific tribalism and connectedness of the youngest generation - its clearly not enough to offset these sorts of trends in mental health problems that are spanning generations.

Likewise with this one here **(refer to Slide 21)** again American data from the famous sociologist Robert D. Putnam of social capital fame which looks at trends in malaise for different age groups. Malaise is the experience of headaches, indigestion or stomach aches and sleeplessness and what it basically shows that again for successively younger age groups from those over 60 and then moving up to younger age groups, you are seeing this increased experience in malaise. And another way of putting it is that for this youngest group here, again this is Generation Y or the Millennial effectively at the moment, about 45% of them are experiencing relatively high levels of malaise today compared with back in 1975 when only about 30% of that age group were experiencing these sorts of patterns.

The consistency of those trends clearly indicates that there is something quite fundamental and profound about the way our society is changing that is driving those sorts of things. And not only impacting on individuals but feeding back then into community and community resilience and wellbeing because obviously if you are feeling chronically tired or crook or depressed then you are not going to be participating too much in the community.

I want to now turn to the way that we look at the world and this is very relevant to the way that both Peter Costello and Larry Anthony were talking about this morning. Materialism and individualism are deeply embedded in this view of progress as a pipeline. In other words you pump more wealth and more wellbeing or welfare flows out the other.

According to that view of the world economic growth is paramount, it's fundamental and both speakers this morning stressed that. Because not only does it increase our personal choices, our ability to consume what we want and so on, it creates the wealth to reach social and environmental goals as they both indicated.

So we have for example the Prime Minister a few years ago saying that the overriding aim of his governments agenda was to deliver economic growth rates of over 4% per year. Paul Keating in his day to be politically bipartisan about this sort of thing said that if you couldn't grow the economy at over 4% a year that you might as well give the game away.

It's really a quite outdated view of the world and we really need to move away from this industrial metaphor of progress as a pipeline to instead replace the world view with one around the notion of sustainable development where we might replace the metaphor of the pipeline with progress as an evolving ecosystem such as rainforest that recognises the dynamic and complex nature of social systems and what really forges how well we are and how content and fulfilled and so on.

Sustainable development basically seeks a balance and integration of social, economic and environmental goals to produce a high, equitable and lasting quality of life while living within the limits of the ecosystem. We haven't heard a lot at this conference about environmental and sustainability issues so let me just stress that it has to be an integral part of communities in control that if our way of life isn't sustainable or environmentally healthy then nothing else about our lifestyle can be as well.

I want to now look at the way in which things might in fact be changing in positive directions. **(refer to Slide 29).** Here is another quote from Hugh Mackay again on the issue that he touched on yesterday where the upside of the disengagement that he was describing is a fact that people are using this retreat time to explore the kind of moral and ethical basis of their life in order to try and eliminate this sense of unease about the gap between the values they espouse and the lives they lead.

There are a number of other surveys that encouragingly suggest about one quarter of us are what these researchers call 'cultural creatives' and that's up than less than 5% in the 1960s. Cultural Creatives are basically disenchanted with these fundamental drivers of our lifestyle: the consumerism, the me first-ism, the status displays and so on and they are putting much more emphasis in their lives on environmental sustainability, intimate personal relationships, social justice and some form of spiritual expression. The researchers say of this group that it

represents a coalescence of social movements not just trying to influence governments but really the way we look at the whole world and understand the world.

This is reflected in some interesting writing that is emerging in some different disciplines at the moment.

One is the sense that we now perhaps in the first time in history have the opportunity to become truly moral beings. In other words making our own moral choices and accepting responsibility for those choices we make as indicated by this quote **(refer to Slide 25)** by the British sociologist **Zygmund Bauman** and likewise the German sociologists Ulrich and Elizabeth Beck make the similar point about the possibility of seeing a different form of individualism emerge, what they call a form of altruistic or co-operative individualism where thinking for oneself and thinking about others are not seen as a contradiction in terms but actually a new way of forging relationships.

Another interesting perspective on this is that of a moral philosopher in Sydney, **Dennis Kenny (refer to Slide 24)**, who says that all our moral orientations are based on one or other cosmology or view of the universe and that humans particularly in the west have been through a number of different cosmologies over the last 100,000 years and I've put up there (refer to slides) briefly the four that we've experienced and there is obviously overlap and shards of the old cosmologies continue into the new but the point that Kenny makes is that we are now poised on the brink of a fifth cosmology, the creative cosmology which sees the universe as a self organising and creative process.

He says that under this cosmology that rather than searching for meaning that we will create it. In this design there are no fixed points to satisfy our longing for ultimate foundations. But while they've gone they do give us an enormous opportunity that we have this capacity to take full control of our future rather than handing this responsibility as he suggests there (refer to slides) either back to God or to nature or to science or history or the market. He makes that point that the biggest obstacle that we face at the moment in fact is the imperial ambition of the global market whose foundations and justification lie in the obsolete cosmology of the mechanical universe and that is reflected very much in that pipeline metaphor that I was talking about before.

To basically sum up the situation when we have a culture that celebrates a self-centred, competitive individualism and a world view framed around material progress we actually have a very shallow democracy basically where we see citizenship as voting once every three years or so, largely in our own self interest where political parties compete to give us the

biggest tax cuts. That then clearly weakens community, which increases ill being which weakens community even further so you get these feedback loops.

What we need to see as I've suggested there **(refer to Slide 31 & 32)** is an altruistic or co-operative individualism framed around notions of sustainable development which is reflected in a deep democracy and by deep democracy I mean a form of citizenship that I reflected in the whole way we live our entire life not just something we do once every four years when we vote. That obviously will deliver communities that are really in charge or control of their destiny and improved wellbeing.

Now to finish, that's fairly abstract stuff so let me get a little more grubby or tangible about it and this is one suggestion from a mob called Fair Share International **(refer to Slide 33)**about how individuals can respond to the sorts of issues that I raise through this Five Ten, Five Ten Formula which involves giving money to charities or environmental groups to do their thing; reducing your own resource use for environmental purposes to at least 10 per cent below per capita averages but hopefully keep going beyond that; contributing to voluntary work and taking democratic action at least 10 times a year such as not only just voting but writing letters to politicians or newspapers or corporations and so on.

I think to wrap up we live in times that are obviously anxious and confusing where it is difficult to see a clear pattern or trend emerging and I think the reason that we see that or feel that way is that we see parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal so we're seeing old ways of being human fail and new ways of thinking about ourselves struggle for definition and acceptance. So they are troubled times but they are also times that offer us enormous hope and excitement because of the potential that is there and does appear to be emerging.