

Are young people having the time of their lives, or struggling with life in their times? Research findings and commentaries on young people are often a recipe for confusion.

RICHARD ECKERSLEY draws on his new book, *Well & Good: How We Feel & Why It Matters*, to argue that it is not an “either/or” situation, and to call for a greater appreciation of the causal layers and complexities behind the patterns and trends in young people’s wellbeing.

Separate selves, tribal ties, and other stories

Making sense of different accounts of youth



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In a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the American Pulitzer-Prize winning writer Ron Powers (2002) warns of an “apocalyptic nihilism” that is infecting the nation’s children. Americans need a “societal shift in consciousness” to recentre themselves and their children, he says. They must provide children with a sense of self-worth “through respectful inclusion; through a reintegration of our young into the intimate circles of family and community life”.

Powers focuses on the modern phenomenon of teenage killers – adolescents who murder their parents, teachers or peers for seemingly little reason. He recounts a story told by a young doctoral graduate in comparative literature, Theo Padnos, who took a job teaching literature to adolescent prison inmates. What struck Padnos was the “language of apocalypse” used by the kids, a message that “in a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can come to understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness”.

Padnos tells Powers: “They’re a community of believers, in a way. They come from all kinds of backgrounds. But what unite them are these apocalyptic suspicions that they have. They think and act as though it’s an extremely late hour in the day, and nothing much matters anymore.” The kids are drawn to the mythic violence of movies and television, the stories of people travelling “a rough landscape that is their true home”. “People who mete out justice to anyone who impinges on their native liberties. Post-apocalyptic heroes just like they want to be – violent, suicidal, the sort of people who are preparing themselves for what happens after everything ends.”

The research evidence for the link between media violence and real violence is about as good as that between smoking and lung cancer, and the debate about media violence has continued much longer than it should have (Eckersley 2004:126-39). But Padnos’ account is altogether different. It’s about something much more subtle, complex, pervasive, about a fusion of media images, global conditions, individual situations and personal states of mind. And in some ways, these effects are better expressed through literary metaphor and allusion than in the precise, objective language of science: they are so hard to pin down, and to try to do this risks losing their essence.

Other problems among youth, including eating disorders and deliberate self-harm, can also be seen as “attempts to intervene against the nothingness”, a deeply human need, as American professor of psychiatry and law Alan Stone (2004) wrote recently, “to transform the passive experience of suffering into something we can actively control”.

As an explanation, “apocalyptic nihilism” certainly has a dramatic appeal that we might expect from a literary scholar, but does it really help us to understand delinquency, violence and other problems? Does it have any scientific validity? I think it does; at least it is part of the picture. It is the very issue that first got me interested in young people’s wellbeing about 15 years ago when I was at the Commission for the Future, and came across surveys that revealed the bleakness with which many see the future of the world and humanity (Eckersley 1987, 1988).

Our 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 not denying these differences exist and are important, I want to focus, instead, on the different layers of perceptions and

understanding of young people and their world to assess the “net effects” of broad social changes. I want to show that competing views are not necessarily contradictory, but incomplete, and that changes that affect everyone can, nevertheless, affect people differently and contribute to specific problems that only some experience. In doing this, I want to draw attention, not so much to how young people are coping with, or adapting to, these changes, but to whether the changes are, in their overall effects, positive or negative: do they enhance, or diminish, human wellbeing and potential? Linked to this, but not discussed here, is the issue of how well the changes fit young people’s own social ideals and preferences; this is an aspect of wellbeing.

The British epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose (1992) has argued that the causes of individual differences in disease or disorder – for example, why one person and not another commits suicide – may be different from the causes of differences between populations – what explains patterns and trends in suicide rates. That is, causes of cases may differ from causes of incidence. Rose also noted that diseases or disorders and their causes are rarely binary – people have them or they don’t – but are distributed along a continuum – how much does a person have? As he demonstrated, there is a relation between the mean of a characteristic in a population and the prevalence of “deviance”. These observations strengthen the case for looking for those factors that influence the population mean, and so help to explain the prevalence of problems in populations.

We have barely begun to grasp how much globalisation and the media have expanded our spheres of awareness and so the range of influences on our wellbeing. As Australian psychologist Amanda Allan says, our relationships with time and space have changed markedly (Bradley 2003). “People are referencing themselves more and more in relation to global events, and social cultures beyond their immediate context.” In western societies, she says, there has been “a disembodiment of what we consider to be our intimate frame of reference”, resulting in a reorientation of who we are in relation to others.

The role of broad social change – both structural and cultural, objective and subjective – in shaping our health and wellbeing is obscured by several factors. One is the incompleteness of most, if not all, perspectives, their focus on only part of the picture. Another is the extent to which such changes are refracted through a host of other, more specific influences, including a person’s temperament and genes.

Fractured views

The fractured visions of youth create a confusing impression of the total picture. Research based on self-reported health, happiness and life satisfaction suggests most young people (around 90 per cent) are thriving; research based on studies of mental health indicates many are struggling. For example, a 2003 Australian survey of young people aged 10–17 years found them to be generally happy, confident, positive, optimistic, and socially liberal and tolerant

(Leadership Victoria et al. 2003). Noel Turnbull, a board member of Leadership Victoria, a partner in the study, says it smashes some stereotypes about young people. “You get this traditional stuff about alienation, depression, rebelliousness . . . but they don’t fit the stereotypes in lots of ways . . . they aren’t frightened, they are very optimistic about the future.”

Social researcher Hugh Mackay (2003) also sees a new, post-1975, “options” generation, flexible, open to change, cooperative – and the most tribal generation we have seen. “They are world champions at establishing intimate, supportive relationships with their peers, standing by each other, and staying connected.” Of the rising generation of young women, Mackay (2004) says they have truly found their feet: “They are bursting with a sense of their own potential: they feel strong, optimistic and confident.”

American writer David Brooks (2001) offers a similarly upbeat appraisal in an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, one which contrasts starkly with Powers’ piece a year later. Drawing mainly on interviews with students at Princeton and other Ivy League universities, he presents an approving image of happy, incredibly hard-working conformists who don’t have a rebellious or alienated bone in their bodies: respectful, obedient, responsible, clean, generous, bright and good natured.

Brooks sees them as the products of an era of parental protection, prosperity and peace. They are “the most honed and supervised generation in human history”, he says. In contrast to the freedoms granted young people in the 1960s and 1970s, this is a group whose members have spent most of their lives in structured, adult-organised activities. “The kids have looked upon this order and decided that it’s good.” Brooks admits he is writing about an elite, but he states that they are “not entirely unlike” other young Americans. Princeton reflects America, he says, and “in most ways it reflects the best of America”.

Yet epidemiological studies of young people’s mental health suggest that the prevalence of psycho-social problems, including depression and a general malaise (headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness), has risen through successive generations, transcending the much-discussed differences in generational attitudes and lifestyles (for example, Kessler et al. 2003). Currently, between one-fifth and one-third of young people are suffering significant psychological distress at any one time.

A recent American study casts an even less rosy light on our wellbeing (Keyes 2002). The study drew on a range of measures to construct a mental health continuum for a large sample of Americans aged 25-74. Mental health was seen not just as the absence of mental illness, but as “a syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life”. It found that 26 per cent were either “languishing”, depressed, or both – that is, mentally unhealthy; 57 per cent were moderately mentally healthy – neither mentally ill nor fully mentally healthy; and only 17 per cent of people were “flourishing” – that is, enjoying good mental health.

Consistent with other research, younger people were more likely to be languishing or depressed and less likely to be flourishing.

These findings may appear contradictory, but they are not necessarily irreconcilable (although some contradictions remain). What is important is to acknowledge the incompleteness of different research perspectives and the complexity of the human condition and how individuals respond to their social environment and personal circumstances. For example, qualitative research shows that when people rate their happiness or satisfaction in quantitative surveys, they tend to rationalise their situation and mitigate negative experiences. To some extent they take their situation as a given, and assess their wellbeing within that context. So these surveys tell us something about our quality of life, but not everything we need to know to evaluate it.

Another important, related, and often overlooked, distinction is that between personal optimism and social optimism. Most young people are, and have always been, optimistic about their own futures, but most are pessimistic about the state and prospects of society or the world. Most do not believe quality of life in Australia is improving, and they are more likely to think that, globally, this century will be a time of crisis and trouble than an age of peace and prosperity (Eckersley 1999). A recent survey I conducted at an independent girls' school suggests this pessimism may have deepened in the past decade.

The best research does bring out this complexity and ambiguity. For example, the Life-Patterns Study, which has followed a large group of young people since they left school in 1991, has found that as they approach age 30 many still lead unsettled lives: changing jobs, renting, unmarried, childless (Dwyer et al. 2003). The traditional pattern of a linear transition from education to work to marriage and children no longer applies. The break with the past is not sharp; rather the group is attempting to blend or balance traditional expectations with new life circumstances.



According to study director, sociologist Johanna Wyn, the post-1970s generation has made a realistic adjustment to an unstable world (Horin and Moses 2003). They value a multidimensional life based on self-discovery, personal autonomy, fitness and continuous learning; they are self-reliant and self-focused. "This is the new way of being an adult," Wyn says. "This generation is showing the rest of us how adult lives will be lived in the future." (See Wyn's article on youth transitions elsewhere in this edition of *Family Matters*.)

The positive aspects of this more prolonged journey include more time to explore and assess the demands of adult life, to sort out and balance for

themselves their priorities for the future. Most of those in the Life-Patterns Study (about 90 per cent) express "real satisfaction" with their personal development, believing they have made appropriate choices. But, as I've already argued, such findings can't be taken at face value. Whatever the pluses of the "new adulthood", the study also shows it comes at a cost to many young people.

The young men and women in the Life-Patterns Study are a "success cohort" (with most undertaking further education), but by 2002 they themselves had concerns about their health; less than 60 per cent regarded themselves as physically healthy, and a similar proportion as mentally healthy. They admitted that the need for constant reflection, reinvention and flexibility required a lot of effort, toughness and self-confidence. Maintaining the right balance in life remains a real challenge; life is still a struggle with uncertainty. And one of the consequences is a weakening of links with collective causes and identities.

Reinforcing the costs of social change, the Women's Health Australia study has found that young women (aged 18-23 when first surveyed) reported higher levels of stress than middle-aged and older women, were often tired, and were over-concerned with their weight and body shape (Lee 2001). The young women scored highest of the three age groups on the physical health measures, but the lowest on the mental health scales. Annette Dobson, the director of the study, says the young women reported even higher levels of stress when surveyed a second time four years later, when they were aged 22-27 years (personal communication). "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 35 . . . they feel more pressured and rushed than previous generations."

The studies raise important questions about the extent to which this way of life is "chosen" and life-enhancing – a matter of making the most of the choices and opportunities available to young people – or "imposed" on young people by the forces of economic, technological, social and cultural change (including, for example, the growth in part-time, casual and project-based work). Or rather this "new adulthood" may demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing between the voluntary and involuntary as new values and norms become accepted, and perhaps even internalised, by a new generation. As sociologists have noted, the individualised life is now a fate, not a choice; we can't choose not to play the game (Dwyer et al. 2003).

British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2003) says the modern preference for transience and impermanence – for connections over relationships, networks rather than partnerships – doesn't solve the problem posed by freedom. "Being on the move, once a privilege and an achievement, becomes a must. Keeping up speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore." Most

importantly, the nasty uncertainty and vexing confusion refuse to go, he says. "The age of disengagement does not reduce the risks; it only distributes them differently."

From this perspective, then, the tribal connectedness of today's youth that Mackay and others have identified is an understandable response to the desires and demands that define their world – but not necessarily a solution. It may offer some consolation, without addressing the deep structural and cultural causes of the problem, and the vagaries of an uncertain, unstable world and the isolation of the individualised self. What the research is showing is that just as the ideal of commitment is different from the reality, so too is the ideal of freedom different from its reality.

This situation is not confined to the young; it is, to a greater or lesser extent, a characteristic of our whole society. Some of the key findings of the Life-Patterns and Women's Health Australia studies – the striving for balance, busyness, self-focus – also emerge from other studies of the population as a whole (Eckersley 2004: 105-25). But the young are at the cutting edge of social change; they reveal most clearly the tempo and tenor of the times. The message seems to be this: when skating on thin ice, it's best to keep moving; speed is the essence.

Closer examination of the more positive images of youth today does, then, reveal a darker side to the "net effect" of social change. What appears as confidence, optimism and autonomy at a personal level, can, at the social level, emerge as doubt, apprehension and isolation. Even Brooks (2001) qualifies his positive view of being young today. He notes the growth in medicating disruptive children and the rise in the proportion of college freshers who say they feel "overwhelmed". The rules grow stricter by the year. The students appear to be instructed on just about every aspect of life, except character and virtue, he says, and they are lively conversationalists on just about any topic, except moral argument. Perhaps the busyness and the striving are to compensate for what is missing, he suggests.

The students are highly goal-oriented. Activities are rarely an end in themselves, but the means for self-improvement, resumé-building – for climbing, step by step, "the continual stairway of advancement". There is little time or energy for serious relationships, it seems, or for national politics and crusades. "People are too busy to get involved in larger issues," a student journalist tells Brooks. "When I think of all that I have to keep up with, I'm relieved there are no bigger compelling causes."

Brooks spoke to those who have thrived on a regimen of supervision. But even among these high-flyers, we can detect the danger signals. They are under enormous pressure to meet their own, their parents' and society's high expectations, leaping through the hoops that are being set ever higher. The past few years have seen a surge in public and

professional concern in the United States over the harm to children associated with "hyper-parenting" and increasingly organised, structured lives – a trend also apparent in Australia. More teachers and parents are calling a halt to the cult of speed (Honore 2004). We need to acknowledge that children and adolescents need, at least some of the time, freedom from adult intervention, supervision and worries; freedom from media intrusion, manipulation and exploitation; and freedom to be themselves, to explore their world, to take risks, to set their own pace.

So while the most obvious explanation for different pictures of youth is that they are describing different groups of young people (the nurtured and honed elite student with the world at his or her feet, and the abandoned and disenfranchised delinquent, to whom it seems the world offers nothing) we can also look at the pictures in another light. We can take the view that what is happening at the top and bottom margins of society says something about society as a whole. In times of radical social change, we may be able to gain sharper insights from observing what is happening at the margins or extremes of society than from studying the centre. It is at the top and the bottom that the pressures are greatest and the stakes are highest.

Even Brooks' young "winners" are likely to wonder, sooner or later (and especially when they stumble on the stairway of advancement), what they are striving so hard to achieve, and whether it is worth the effort. They will ask what their lives mean. So in the lives of these privileged, clever students – just as in the lives of the poor, dispossessed and despairing – we see the inimical impacts of social change.



Refracted images

Broad social shifts do not, therefore, affect all individuals equally or in the same way. They interact, in producing their effects, with the particular qualities and circumstances of individuals and groups. Young people are one such group because of their social and biological development. For example, most researchers believed until recently that the major "wiring" of the brain happened in the first three years of life – hence the current emphasis on the early years in intervention advocacy – and that the brain was fully mature by about the age of ten or twelve. New research, however, shows that the greatest changes to the parts of the brain responsible for functions such as self-control, judgement, emotions and organisation occur between puberty and adulthood (Spano 2003).

Other research has shown that older people regulate their emotions more effectively than younger

people; in the words of the old song, they are better able to “accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative” (Anonymous 2003). In older adults, the part of the brain concerned with emotions, the amygdala, responds equally to positive and negative images; in younger adults, it reacts more to the negative (Anonymous 2003). These findings may explain youth’s greater vulnerability to many risks – from the effects of alcohol on learning and memory (Spano 2003) to global fears (Eckersley 1999, 2004: 185-201).

Questions of genetic and temperamental vulnerability also come into play. Recent research on the human genome, the 30,000 genes that make up our genetic endowment, has identified genes for addiction, anxiety and depression. However, the research is confirming that genes are vulnerable to experience, and that the environment influences how they are expressed.

For example, the study that linked depression to variants (alleles) of a specific gene found no difference in the risk of depression in the absence of stressful life events. However, among people who had experienced in the preceding five years four or more adverse events (related to employment, health, relationships, finances and housing), those with two “short” versions of the gene were more than twice as likely to have suffered major depression in the previous year than those with two “long” forms of the gene (Caspi et al. 2003). Those with the “short” genes (17 per cent of the sample) also had a higher average score on a depression scale, were more likely to have felt suicidal, and more likely to have experienced a depressive episode if they had been abused as children.

These interactions between genes and environment are consistent with American psychologist Jerome Kagan’s view that personality is shaped by an inherited temperamental bias that determines the individual’s response to uncertainty and the unfamiliar, but how that bias is expressed depends on the individual’s upbringing (Watson 2002). About 20 per cent of children, he says, are “high-reactive”, prone to becoming fearful and introverted. Brought up in academically supportive homes, high-reactive children become conscientious students and accomplished adolescents; but raised in less supporting homes, they turn into shy loners or even violent delinquents.

The genetic research helps us to understand individual differences in susceptibility, but it does not explain the adverse trends in the rates of health problems among young people, which are too rapid to be due to genetic changes and the causes of which are clearly environmental. This is something we need always to keep in mind given the undoubted potential of this research to lead to better, or better-targeted, treatments. We cannot just treat as clinical diseases of individuals what are fundamentally social problems. As the research shows, the social environment interacts with the biological in producing health outcomes. This environment goes beyond the family. In the wider domain, most attention has focused on socio-economic disadvantage and

inequality (Eckersley 2004: 60-76). But cultural trends such as increasing materialism and individualism are also relevant.

Inequality, materialism and individualism

Inequality has increased in Australia and many other countries in recent decades, so this represents one broad social change with implications for young people’s wellbeing (Eckersley 2004: 32). Generally speaking, there are socio-economic gradients in health, with worse health at the lower end of the social scale, better at the top. However, the relationship is not consistent and clear-cut, and can vary according to the cause of death and gender (Turrell and Mathers 2001). For example, suicide rates are higher among young men of low socio-economic status than high status men, and the difference – or gradient – increased between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. With drug-dependence deaths, however, the status difference apparent in the mid-1980s had almost disappeared a decade later. Among young women, the differences for both suicide and drug deaths were reversed over this period. For all causes of death, the socio-economic gradient increased for young men but declined for young women (Turrell and Mathers 2001).

So the evidence does not support the view that those young people whose health and lives are at greatest risk are all located, or even heavily concentrated, within the most materially disadvantaged group. (This is in no way to deny that there is in Australia today a group of young people who are marginalised, excluded, disadvantaged, seriously “at-risk”, and who need special care and attention; nor are health and behavioural problems the only criteria for evaluating disadvantage.)

Even where social gradients in health problems exist, the vast majority of cases will occur outside the most disadvantaged groups because this is where most of the population is located. As Rose (1992) points out, the way risk is distributed in a population means that a large number of people at small risk can give rise to more cases of disease than the small number at high risk. Accordingly, a small reduction in risk across the entire population will yield the greatest health gains. Rose favoured interventions that addressed the more distal social causes of disease because of their preventative potential, even though these causes were often less scientifically certain.

Beyond increasing inequality, other social changes include a growth in materialism and individualism, both of which also affect wellbeing. Research that shows that materialism (the pursuit of money and possessions) seems to breed not happiness but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation (Kasser 2002). In short, the more materialistic we are, the poorer our quality of life. Other studies that have shown that 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 than people oriented towards “intrinsic goals” of close relationships, self-understanding and acceptance, and contributing to the community.

We have only to look at Hollywood-style celebrities to see this: both the promoters of the hyper-consumer lifestyle and often its victims, they are icons of excess whose outward success so often hides deep insecurities, addictions and self-absorption. As consumerism reaches increasingly beyond the acquisition of things to the enhancement of the person, the goal of marketing becomes not only to make us dissatisfied with what we have, but also with who we are. As it seeks evermore ways to colonise our consciousness, marketing both fosters and exploits the restless, insatiable expectation that there's got to be more to life.

If materialism or consumerism is one problem, another is individualism (placing the individual self at the centre of a framework of values and beliefs). One aspect of western individualism that may be particularly problematic is its expression of autonomy as independence or separateness (Eckersley 2004: 77-96). Autonomy is a matter of volition, the ability to act according to our internalised values and desires. Its opposite is not dependence, but heteronomy, where we feel our actions are controlled by external forces regardless of our own values and interests. Recent psychological research suggests that expressing autonomy as independence may not only reduce belonging or relatedness, it might also reduce our sense of control over our lives. Both belonging and control are vital human needs, crucial to wellbeing.

There are two possible, and related, mechanisms by which increased individualism might reduce control. It encourages a perception that we are separate from others and the environment in which we live, and thus from the very things that influence our lives. And second, independent individuals require high self-esteem, and one way to prop up our self-esteem is to believe that the things that threaten it are beyond our control. The creation of the “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.

These possibilities suggest that the autonomy that young people prize, and which some research identifies (Dwyer et al. 2003), 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 and work, to be only loosely attached, independent. The connectedness of the tribe that young people are embracing may be a very human response to the isolation this separation produces.

An important means by which cultural qualities such as individualism and materialism affect wellbeing is through their influence on values (Eckersley 2004: 49-56). Values provide the framework for deciding what is important, true, right and good, and have a central role in defining relationships and meanings, and so wellbeing. Most societies have tended to

reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. Virtues are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. Vices, on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires, or the capitulation to human weaknesses.

A similar picture emerges from reading what the wise and famous have said about happiness through the centuries. A couple of themes recur. One is that happiness is not a goal but a consequence: it is not something to be sought or pursued, but a result of how we live. Related to this, it is not found by focusing just on ourselves and our own needs, but on those of others as well. A second theme is that happiness comes from balancing wants and means, from being content with what we have.

Our materialistic, individualistic culture undermines, even reverses, universal values and time-tested wisdom. This situation amounts to what I have called “cultural fraud” (Eckersley 2004: 180, 255): the projection and promotion of cultural images and ideals that serve the economy but do not meet human psychological needs or reflect social realities. Only by acknowledging these pervasive social impacts can we begin to understand why young people's wellbeing appears to have declined in recent decades despite the psycho-social benefits that should have flowed from increased social tolerance, diversity and pluralism, including greater gender, religious, ethnic and racial equality.



Winds of change?

Getting a true picture of life for young Australians today means examining both the social breadths and psychic depths of our lives, and understanding the relationships between them. At both the “macro” social level and the “micro” psychic level, we are pressing against the limits of our scientific capacity to discern and define patterns of cause and effect. In both domains, we are dealing with complex systems comprising many entities that interact in often weak, diffuse and non-linear ways. Synthesis – integrating knowledge, not just from a wide range of research fields, or even disciplines, but from across the natural and social sciences and humanities – allows us to enhance that research capacity, to improve its power of resolution (Eckersley 2004: 8-15).

At a more personal level, I think we need, especially if we are well-educated, middle-class professionals, to go beyond a tendency to “look outward” at social problems as problems of marginalised minorities such



as the poor, jobless or indigenous (which, as I've already noted, is not to say these groups do not need special attention), and also "look inward" at our own lives and how the self is being moulded by the social, economic and cultural pressures of our times.

Nothing I have said should be taken as a prediction of a social cataclysm, nor to imply the situation is irreversible. The current state of flux and instability offers promise as well as peril. The promise is probably not a return to institutionalised, collective forms of meaning – of identity, belonging and purpose – but a different sort of individualism. It is an enlarged, socially connected individuality that offers us the opportunity to become truly moral beings, perhaps for the first time in history.

As Bauman (1995: 43) points out: "The denizens of the postmodern era are, so to speak, forced to stand face-to-face with their moral autonomy, and so also with their moral responsibility. This is the cause of moral agony. This is also the chance the moral selves never confronted before." These new orientations create "something like a cooperative or altruistic individualism," say German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 162). "Thinking of oneself and living for others at the same time, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal, substantive connection. Living alone means living socially."

Maybe – just maybe – the conjunction of what some see as youth's self-focus and autonomy with what others describe as their intense tribal connectedness reflects the emergence of this new individualism. (The counter-trend is the resurgence of fundamentalism, a retreat to old certainties, where the self is totally subjugated to religious and nationalistic forms of identity and moral authority.)

So the complexities and ambiguities of our situation reflect not just our fractured and refracted understanding of it, but also parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic contest as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human struggle for definition and acceptance. This is perhaps the ultimate choice confronting us, especially young people. Their potential and wellbeing hang on the outcome.

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