

Well-being, Happiness and Life Satisfaction in Australia

On the outside Australia is a reasonably well-off first world country that has survived recent global financial crises. However, as this chapter will show there are significant numbers of Australians who have failed to find happiness, satisfaction and meaning in their lives. As this chapter will demonstrate, Australia exhibits as much evidence of the existential “vacuum” as any other western country and possibly more so than most. Logotherapy has a place in helping to heal those who fall victim to this existential vacuum.

Social commentator Donald Horne (1964) described Australia as a “lucky country, run by second rate people who share its luck.” It was an ironic statement that provided the opening line to his book on 1960’s Australia. In Horne’s view other industrialised nations created wealth using their creativity and through their innovation. By contrast he saw Australia’s wealth as flowing from an over-supply of rich natural resources. In some ways little has changed. The nation survived the Global Financial Crisis in 2008/9 reasonably well. Unemployment in June 2010 stood at 5.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010) compared to a seasonally adjusted rate of 9.5% in the United States (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2010) and 7.8% in the United Kingdom (HRM guide 2010). This has largely been driven by export of minerals to Asian nations, notably China. Australia’s top four exports (DFAT, 2010) are Coal, Iron Ore, Education services and personal travel.

Happiness and Satisfaction in Australia

Given the material circumstances which Australians have enjoyed for many years one would suspect that Australians are content. Happiness however is a very difficult result to quantify. A national telephone survey undertaken in August 2006 (Henry and Yenken, 2006) identified that forty percent of those surveyed believed that life was “getting worse” despite economic growth. In 2006 there was also rising income and low unemployment to contend with. Each of these conditions have worsened somewhat since the global financial crisis.

Henry and Yenken (2008) conducted a national telephone poll on happiness and life satisfaction in 2006. Many respondents stated that personal relationships were essential to

happiness. Almost 60% of respondents believed that family and partner relationships were the most important factor contributing to their happiness. Only 4% rated money and their financial situation as the most important factor in happiness. On the other hand, 40% of those polled believed that life is getting worse, despite economic growth, low unemployment and rising average income.

Miller and Buys (2008) spread their net more widely in asking the question whether “Social Capital” predicts happiness, health and life satisfaction. Miller and Buys surveyed an urban Australian community and concluded that those who do not participate in social activities within the urban community are more prone to both unhappiness and reduced life satisfaction. Thus, it seems that happiness is as much dependent upon a person’s range of relationships and social activities rather than upon the level of material wellbeing that the person enjoys.

Relationships Australia annually surveys national relationship indicators. In 2006 respondents were asked what they believed to be the main reasons for people getting married these days. Well over sixty percent replied that it was to “signify a long life of commitment”. The respondents may not have realised the challenges that are involved in such a commitment. Life is not always an easy road and “commitment” may be difficult to sustain. Are Australians prepared for lifelong commitment? Thirty-three percent of the female responses believed that one reason for marriage was “a desire for a special occasion”. Almost 40% of females believed that it could be in “response to family pressure”. These answers should, of course, be interpreted in light of the prevalence in western societies for couples to enter into long term relationships without marriage. The same Relationships Australia survey (2006) asked why people chose not to get married. There were the following responses:

- Fear (86% mentions). Previous bad experiences (72%), fear of making a mistake (61%), fear of divorce (59%).
- Commitments (85% mentions). Avoidance of commitment (67%), a strong commitment does not need marriage (63%).

- Sacrifice (75% mentions). Desire for a single lifestyle (57%), interferes with working career (41%), desire for multiple relationships (35%), desire for travel (35%).

Successful relationships take both commitment and compromise. In their Relationships Australia (2006) survey 54% of respondents agreed that more relationships get into trouble these days because they have difficulty in finding a balance between work and family. A further 42% agreed that there was a lack of compromise between both men and women wanting careers.

We might well ask why so many Australian adults appear unable to sacrifice their own desire for career for the sake of a successful relationship. I suggest that it relates to the lack of capacity to recognise and utilise their noetic, self-transcendent dimension of existence and that this is evidenced by research into the values and spirituality of Australians.

Values and Spirituality in Australia

For the purposes of this dissertation, the concept of “spirituality” is defined as the external manifestation of the innate human spirit (*noos*) that Frankl contends is the inner essence of every human being. Frankl has a three dimensional concept of humanity that comprises body (*soma*), mind (*psyche*) and spirit or essence (*noos*). Chapter 5 describes Frankl’s dimensional ontology in detail. Chapter 6 suggest that there is a uniquely Australian way of expressing that human spirit, an Australian spirituality. Chapter 6 will suggest that this can be in capsulated succinctly in Rolheiser’s (1998) approach, namely that our “spirituality” is our personal response to life. However there is a danger that this response may not be recognised as being an expression of our noetic dimension.

The suppression of expressed spirituality in Australian society is brought home in recent surveys on values orientations. Hughes and Bond (2003) identified four values orientations in the Australian community: social well-being, self enhancement, order and spirituality. Their work shows that the “spiritual life” ranked last among a long list of guiding principles for life among Australian adults.

The reality and uniqueness of the human spiritual dimension has been expressed in different ways by many authors. Hardy (1966, 1979) suggests that our capacity to be “spiritual” or “religious” has survival value for the human species and is hard-wired into the brain. More recently the brain scientists, (Albright & Ashbrook, 2001; Newberg & Waldman, 2009; Newberg, D’Aquili & Rause, 2001; Ramachandran, 2011; Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998) confirm this reality in their own research.

Table 1 – Guiding Principles for Life among Australian Adults

(Raw scores %)

	Most Important	Very Important
World at peace	68	18
Honesty	61	29
True Friendship	55	30
Equality	49	26
Social Justice	49	31
Politeness	48	34

Meaning in life	41	33
Enjoying life	40	29
Wisdom	39	34

Success	26	36

Spiritual Life	16	16

The most telling part of the survey of values among Australian adults is the factor analysis that relates each of the guiding principles in table 1 above to the 4 values orientations outlined. The top five (World at peace, Honesty, True friendship, Equality, Social Justice) all related most strongly on the factor analysis to the value of self enhancement, although Honesty also related with equal weight to the value of Order. Of the others listed in the table above, all except for the value of Spiritual Life, related in some way to self enhancement. The one exception is "Politeness" which related to the value of Order. "Wisdom" also related to Spirituality, but more strongly to self enhancement. "Meaning in life" related most strongly to the value of Social well-being with Spirituality being a minor factor.

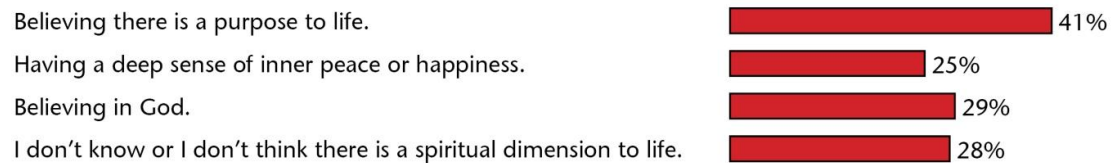
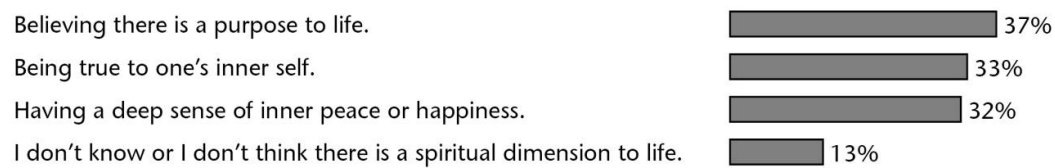
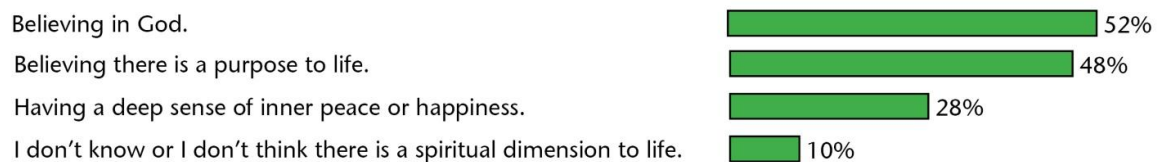
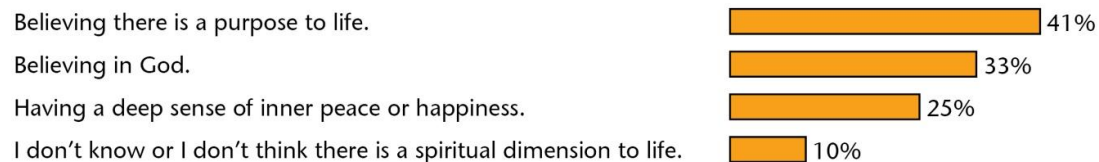
The conclusion that can be drawn from this survey is that self enhancement is by far the most significant underlying value in Australian society among adults. Spirituality as a value is suppressed to be among the least of values that individuals see a need to express. How will these attitudes of an adult population affect future generations? If Vygotsky (1986) is correct and a large amount of our metacognition depends on nurture, then it is unlikely that Australian society will nurture among its youth the capacity to be aware of and express their innate spirituality and most likely that it will suppress both its expression and recognition. Hay and Nye (1998) have called this capacity to transcend the self and be aware of our spiritual dimension, "*relational consciousness*." Hay (2006, Ch. 9) believes the suppression of this natural instinct is a historic trend in Western society.

Among youth in Australia, this suppression of *relational consciousness* appears to be a fact. Recent research from the Center for Spiritual Development in Minneapolis (2008), adds weight to these signs of the times. In a survey of 6,800 young people between the ages of 13 and 25 across eight countries and a further 77 focus groups in 13 countries (including all of the significant English speaking countries) the project explored the spiritual development of young people.

Specifically, the survey asked young people "what does it mean to be spiritual?" This received a remarkably similar set of answers. For the purpose of those working in youth ministry in Australia it is certainly worth noting that 28% of Australian young people

responded by saying “I don’t know” or “I don’t think there is a spiritual dimension to life”. This was only 1% behind (at 29%) the number who were prepared to state that they had a belief in God. The corresponding numbers in other English speaking countries for a belief in God as the defining feature of what it means to be spiritual were 33% (USA), 43% (Canada). In these countries only 10% could not see a spiritual dimension in life. United Kingdom respondents were similar in many ways to Australian youth but only 13% responded that they either did not know or did not think there was a spiritual dimension to life.

The responses must be treated cautiously, particularly those of Australian youth. The question attempts to measure the external expression of a natural human capacity and questioning Australian young people directly about this may not always elicit an open response. Chapter 6 will explain in more detail the delicate nature of an Australian spirituality which tends to remain hidden in the heart rather than expressed openly. Posing direct questions about it may risk trampling on delicate flowers while searching for the blooms. However, the comparative results with other western countries do tend to strengthen the points made above about the suppression of *relational consciousness*.

Table 2 “What does it mean to be spiritual?” – Responses of youth in various countries.**AUSTRALIA****UNITED KINGDOM****CANADA****UNITED STATES**

As has been stated above, Hay & Nye (1998) believe that the core of spiritual development is a category they term *relational consciousness*. It is the capacity to engage with and express our natural spirituality. This is more than alertness or attentiveness. It is a distinctively reflective consciousness which they link to metacognition. Metacognition (see Woolfolk 1993, p.261), is an individual's awareness of the cognitive machinery within themselves and how it works. Metacognitive ability, the capacity to be aware of our thought processes, begins in children from around 5 to 7 years of age. There are differing capacities among individuals but all children have the capacity. This is precisely the sort of

development that Piaget measured but in only one dimension. Hay and Nye have been successful in measuring it in another.

Hay and Nye (1998) see *relational consciousness* as metacognitive awareness, first of the self as a unique individual and secondly of others as also being unique and other than the self. There is also an awareness of the world around us, nature in all its wondrous forms, and the awesome vastness of the cosmos and finally, an awareness of “the mystery” that is life. While the religions might provide a framework to describe and engage with “the mystery”, the importance of the Hay and Nye and earlier Hardy (1966, 1979) research is that the capacity for such engagement, whether through the religions or in another form, is natural to human beings. We are spiritual by nature.

Woolfolk (1993) believes that most psychologists understand that a child’s culture shapes their cognitive development. They have modelled cognitive developmental theories on Vygotsky (1986) who believed that the child’s development depended significantly upon the people in the child’s world. If we accept this, there is immediately one obvious source of suppression of *relational consciousness*. If the child’s family, and those with whom they associate, do not allow this metacognitive *relational consciousness* to develop, then it will remain stunted and not grow to fruition. Indeed, it is likely that if *relational consciousness* is suppressed by those within the child’s world, then there will be a learned suppression at an early age.

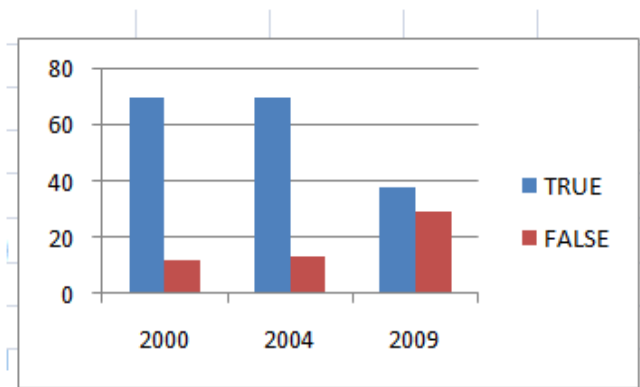
McQuillan’s (2004, 2009) research among senior high school students in Australia appears to bear out this accelerating trend towards a lack of development of *relational consciousness*. Surveys were done in 2000 and again in 2004 among 212 and 178 senior high school students in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The core of the survey was to determine the level of recognition and reporting of those experiences that, perhaps in earlier times, many would have interpreted as being “religious”. The capacity for *relational consciousness* Hay (2006) sees as central to the recognition of these experiences. The recognition and reporting of such experiences had diminished slightly from 2000 to 2004. By 2009, the decline in response to some questions had become significant. For

instance, the capacity to touch the noetic dimension could be measured by the level of response to the statement “some of the most important things in life can never be proven”, a thoroughly non-religious but noetic question. The responses are compared below:

Table 3 Responses to the statement “Some of the most important things in life can never be proven”

Responses on a five point scale. True = Combined total of “Certainly true” and “Probably true” responses.

False = Combined total of “Certainly false” and “Probably false” responses.



Difference 2004 vs 2009 not significant

Difference 2000vs 2009 sig @ .05 level

Wellbeing and Meaning in Australia

A quick web browsing on “wellbeing” could well turn up the dictionary (Ask.com, 2010) definition of “wellbeing” as “a good or satisfactory condition of existence; a state characterise by health, happiness, and prosperity”.

Despite what seems a simple definition the very understanding of what constitutes a “good” or “satisfactory” condition of existence provides a subject of debate for counsellors, health professionals, economists and philosophers.

As an example, the Australia institute (AI,2010), a group of economists and sociologists with a focus on research into government, society, the economy and the environment has produced a wellbeing manifesto. This list includes, among other factors, a good marriage, the company of friends, rewarding work and sufficient money along with relationships and spiritual wellbeing as enhancing individual wellbeing. They base this list on studies of “happiness”.

Using “happiness” as a pointer towards “wellbeing” raises a question that could be endlessly debated. In Frankl’s (1986) overview of logotherapy, he would look at happiness as a possible but not necessary outcome of the intrinsic search for personal meaning in life. The Australia institute (2010) manifesto does admit that the “ingredients of a happy life” are more than a matter of personal choice. They are also determined by the social conditions in which people live and these in turn are influenced by government policy. They do, however, recognise that wellbeing is even more than this. They define it as being “about fulfilling our potential” and “having meaning in life” (p.2).

The first of these approaches, “fulfilling our potential” has similarity with Maslow’s approach. (Schulze, 1977) For Maslow, human beings are born **with instinctoid needs** that motivate them to grow and develop, to actualise themselves and to become all they are capable of becoming. Maslow believed that the prerequisite for achieving self actualisation is to fulfil the needs that stand lower in his hierarchy: 1.physiological needs; 2. safety needs; 3. belonging and love needs; 4. esteem needs. Frankl accepted that, under normal circumstances, this requirement to fulfil lower order needs first was indeed valid. While

accepting Maslow's concept, he believed it was not absolutely necessary have all of these needs fulfilled in order for individual self-actualisation. In fact Frankl (1988, p. 32) saw self-actualisation as not the ultimate destination for human beings, nor even their primary goal in life. For Frankl the "will to meaning" is the highest human need and having a meaning for life will overcome anything else. Indeed, the Australia institute approaches this concept in some way by quoting Nietzsche; "he who has a *why* to live can bear with any *how*". (p.6)

The institute admits that in pressuring the "how" of life we can indeed neglect the "why". However they do not go as far as Frankl. Although they recognise that "one source of wellbeing can compensate, at least in part, for another" (p.3) they would not conclude that meaning in of its self is sufficient.

The conclusion reached by the Australia institute (2007) is that the focus on material wealth as providing a foundation for wellbeing is mistaken. Frankl would agree with this. They quote what they term "a growing body of research" (p.10) that shows that materialism, which they define as pursuit of money and possessions, leads only to dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation. They see that people oriented towards "intrinsic goals" which they define as close relationships, personal growth and self understanding and making a personal contribution to the community have the potential to be more satisfied and have a higher development of personal wellbeing and those who have "extrinsic goals" - fame fortune and success.

As I understand Franklian psychology, he would endorse this view. However, he would see that the basic intrinsic goal is that of finding meaning and purpose in life. The contribution to the community is made through life itself as the person continues to search for meaning and direction.

As part of the Australia institute's (2010) "Wellbeing Manifesto", Eckersley (2010) states that "economic measures have seriously failed to provide a full account of quality of life". This seems difficult to dispute. They finish their overview by endorsing Diener and Seligman's (2004) "partial" formula for wellbeing which includes having "a philosophy or religion that provides guidance, purpose and meaning" in life. The logotherapeutic approach would be a slight reverse of this. It would see meaning in life, which could well be provided by a religious or other philosophy, as being central. Certainly, individual "spirituality" which

is common to human beings (see Rolheiser 1998) can form the basis of a religious view of the world, although it may provide a different perspective. Spirituality as a central development of the human person is also placed at the centre of the five “life tasks” defined by Witmer and Sweeny (1992) who see spirituality in development as central in their “wheel of wellness and wellbeing”. Unfortunately, however, it seems to be largely neglected in counselling and therapy in the Australian context.

The task of full development of a human person across the lifespan is a lifelong commitment. Physical capacity and cognitive capacity are both learned abilities and each can have its development altered, stunted or even reversed in some way. This chapter has shown that spiritual development, the capacity to engage with and express our spiritual reality, the *noos*, is not being given due importance in Australian society. In fact, although according to Frankl (1988) this spirit is never unwell, the human capacity to recognise it and engage with it can indeed be under developed.

In summary, Australian’s life satisfaction and happiness is often superficial and relates strongly to their own vision of self enhancement. There is little focus on the spiritual aspects of life. Among the young, this capacity to engage with the spiritual is even more limited according to the various surveys quoted in this chapter. Both of these factors seem to indicate that there is a place for Logotherapy in working with a country that is subject to the “existential vacuum”. On a more hopeful note there is a growing awareness among some groups (see Australia Institute, 2010) that wellbeing is more than physical and fiscal resources. Growing this awareness would provide a place for Logotherapy among the various therapies to assist in growing the real wellbeing of Australians.