

Well-being in consumer culture and the 'new poor'

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"We are living longer, but are no happier. We do not believe life is getting better...

Modern Western culture seems to be based on the very things that are detrimental to health and happiness."

(Richard Eckersley 2006)



Modern cultural values

CONSUMERISM INDIVIDUALISM

MATERIALISM

ECONOMISM



People maximise their well-being through making rational choices, so the more choice we have, the happier we are

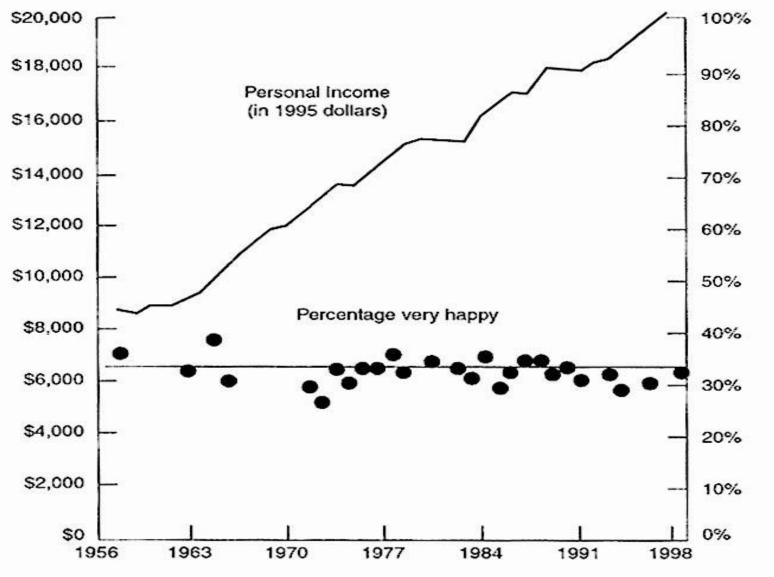
Changes in average levels of happiness in a society can be equated to changes in its purchasing power

More is better for all of us!





Or is it?



(USA life satisfaction & personal income 1956-1998, Myers and Diener [1996])



The Easterlin Paradox:

- Average levels of well-being increase up to middle income levels and then rapidly level off.
- After basic needs are met, extra income produces diminishing returns for well-being.

The Schwartz Paradox:

- The tyranny of choice
- More is just too much (Affluenza)



The modern economy gives us...

An individualised, materialist, consumer culture

Ambient anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty

the new poor



Are we consumers – or commodities?





The 'St Andrew's Fault'

Children of the breeze or the hurricane?

(Neal Ascherson, 'Stone Voices')

"In this city you've got families growing up with no expectations of ever working and any jobs there are, are crap work for crap money. In days gone by when you had manufacturing or mining, you had your union which was strong, and you were part of a community. But now the only jobs you can get are call centres where there are no unions. So you just look out for yourself." (Health Promotion Group)

"To some extent you've got to help young people live their lives on the minimum basic income, taking into account that they'll maybe never get a job, that those children won't be able to afford a nice gym, won't be able to afford Nike this and God knows what else unless they acquire them by some other means or going into debt." (Public Health Network)



"People live in their own bubble, getting in their own car to drive to work, staying in their own home. Community spirit has gone and this compounds the issue. We're all in debt. You're stressed, you go to work, you go home. You sit in front of the TV. There's no family dinner, no time to talk problems through, sort things out. You're just working to afford that TV. There's no time for your children when you come home at night. No time to talk.'

(Prisoner group)



"In a third world society I would be a millionairess with money, a home, warmth. I'm low down in my society because I don't work and live on benefits."

"It's symptomatic of a kindae society that doesn't value people but does value possessions. I think it may be that for a certain group of people it's becoming okay to sneer at the poor."

(Mental Health Advocacy Group)



"People everywhere live busy, consumer-driven lives. Their energies are devoted to money, mortgages and there's no time for emotional energy.

Parents round here want to be something, they're conscious of material wealth and income and have worked hard to get here. They have more stuff - cars, washing machines – but they're still dreadfully poor, because it's relative.

They know that educational qualifications are what allow you to make that step up, so they push for results.

Their children are the same. It's very much 'I want to be a lawyer, doctor or dentist'. They're very materially focused."

(Headteacher)



"Our focus needs to go down to the spiritual – to the value and worth of a human being. Virtually nothing in society promotes that. We are exploitable because we are fearful."

"We're all trapped in the cycle of consumerism. And powerful groups can't be expected to support anything that will counter techniques for maintaining social dominance."

(Prisoner Group)



"The market economy **is** the prevailing culture and ideology of the modern world, including Scotland.

Alternative social models tend to be coercive and corrosive of freedom so there really is no alternative to market capitalism. It's the least worst option. All we can do is find mechanisms to mitigate the excesses.

It's better to make people pay for their choices, rather than restrict them. Markets remain the most efficient and least unjust way of organizing society, even though this involves great disparities of wealth."

(Consumer Council)



"Life is easier for parents who can't afford to give their kids stuff. It's harder for those who have money to say no, when they can afford it."

(General Manager)



The modern economy also gives us...

individualised materialist consumer culture unsustainable visions of the good life

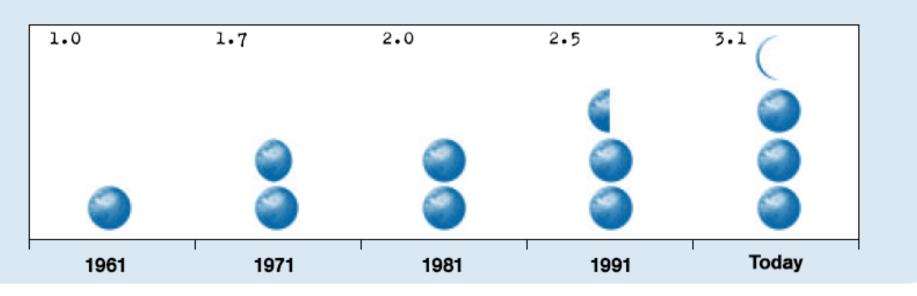
the new poor

ambient anxiety insecurity uncertainty

LARGER GLOBAL PROBLEMS



The UK's growing ecological footprint: number of planets needed to support the whole world at UK levels of consumption



The nation's high-consuming lifestyles are only possible because the rest of the world supports us with large supplies of their natural resources. The way we live also sets a model of materialism that many people in much poorer countries understandably seek to emulate. Forty years ago, if the whole world wanted to copy the UK, the Earth could just have supported the demand on its ecosystems. But the UK's consumption levels have risen steadily. Today, if everyone consumed as much as the average UK citizen, we would need more than three planets like Earth to support them. To live within our overall environmental means, and give people around the world a chance to meet their needs, means the UK will have to reduce the burden its lifestyles create.



Possible Responses

We're all doomed!! Society is going to hell in a hand-basket!!!



Fact

Current levels of consumption in affluent societies cannot be sustained globally and contribute little to human well-being



How can we live differently - in ways which promote and sustain well-being for individuals and all societies?



Contraction and Convergence

Industrialized and post industrial nations must make substantial reductions in carbon use (contraction).

Development for poorer nations will involve increased carbon use.

Eventually, carbon use across all nations will converge.

AETERNOON What's next for the health of society?

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