

Chapter 30

Social Connectedness and the Declining Life Satisfaction of Australian Females

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ABSTRACT

Research into subjective well-being suggests that happier people are healthier and more professionally productive, achieve goals more easily and are more often successful in personal relationships. Unfortunately, studies in the USA and Britain suggest that there has been an overall decline in self-reported well-being since the 1970's, particularly for females. Data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey appear to corroborate the international evidence. Using HILDA 2001 to 2011 data, this chapter investigates: levels of life satisfaction; association between life satisfaction and social connectedness; and whether declines in life satisfaction can be explained by declines in social connectedness. A positive association is found between life satisfaction and almost all measures of social connectedness for both genders. This association, however, only partly explains observed declines in life satisfaction. This research emphasises the importance of frequent, meaningful social connections and the urgency for governments to address declining well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The desire to thrive and progress within a meaningful life is not a recent concept. Buddhism has promoted inner peace and mental well-being for over 2,500 years and in ancient Greece, Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia, or 'human flourishing' was held as the ultimate goal, achieved only by giving oneself up entirely to the superior activities of knowledge and virtue (Vivenza, 2007). Across a range of aca-

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demographic disciplines well-being is defined in varying complexities: from the realisation of bare necessities and functional health, through fulfilling relationships and hedonic pleasures, to realising one's 'higher purpose' – or a complex amalgamation of all of these (Diener, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Malthus, 1798; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Today, research into subjective well-being (i.e. wellbeing indicators based on personal opinions, interpretations, points of view, emotions and judgment) suggests that happier people tend to be more productive in their professional life, are more likely to be healthy with better immune systems and shorter healing times, achieve goals more easily and are often more successful in personal relationships (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Grant, Wardle, & Steptoe, 2009; Penedo & Dahn, 2005; Scheier & Carver, 1987; Tov & Diener, 2013).

Economics has traditionally shied away from the study of subjective measures of well-being, focusing instead on the concept of 'utility', most easily understood through a consumer's willingness to pay for a preferred item and, therefore, presumably feel a proportionate increase in happiness thereafter (cf. Edgeworth, 1881; Jevons, 1871; McCloskey, 1989). Despite an inherent understanding that well-being is important and is more than just a ratio of utility to happiness, societies have moved away from using well-being to gauge national success, instead focusing on measures of market-based production such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

While the simplicity of GDP is appealing, and the movement of money is commonly presumed to gauge human progress, GDP does not necessarily indicate societal progress. Indeed, many countries with increases in GDP during the late 20th Century have found that their citizens report declining levels of happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Easterlin, 1995, 2009; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). Despite this, economic growth continues to be reaffirmed as the highest priority among many world leaders and is enduringly and fallaciously regarded as being synonymous with progress and inclusive of development. At an individual level, the belief that comfort and positional goods will make one happier is often misplaced and neglects the phenomena of changing aspirations, hedonic adaptation and social comparisons. For these reasons, higher incomes and higher economic growth do not necessarily accord with greater happiness or well-being (Daly, 1987; Easterlin, 2003). Hence, both males and increasingly females spend much of their lives working to make money, at the expense of other life domains such as family life, relationships and health, even though attaining one's goals in these domains has a more enduring impact on happiness.

The purpose of this chapter is to extend earlier work that reports declining life satisfaction for females in Australia and to investigate if perhaps a concomitant decline in social connectedness presents an explanation for this trend. In doing so, this study will investigate, over the period 2001 to 2011: (1) trends in female life satisfaction; (2) the link between social connectedness and life satisfaction; (3) how the link between social connectedness and life satisfaction differs between males and females; (4) how measures of social connectedness have changed; and (5) the degree to which declines in female life satisfaction can be explained by declines in social connectedness.

A positive association is found between life satisfaction and almost all measures of social connectedness for both genders; declining social connectedness, however, explains only part of the observed declines in life satisfaction. Nonetheless, these results suggest that declining social connectedness is an important social issue, particularly for females, and that there may a role for governments to create conditions that foster social connectedness within communities.

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