

Editorial

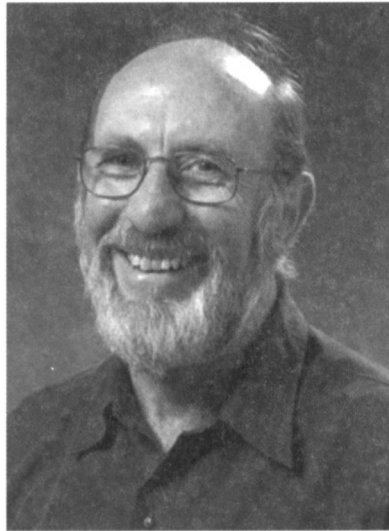
Lloyd Owen

Once again we find ourselves in the closing stages of a tumultuous year. Australia's population has just reached the 20 million mark. A small group of people in comparison with many other places, but nonetheless we are all very significant to each other. Each of us in our uniqueness and inherent complexity as sentient beings contribute to the national identity, to the image of being Australian. Each of us can also make a difference to the way others feel included rather than excluded. It does seem that one of the things which affects our subjective well being, our happiness, is the feeling of being included.

One of my mentors three or so decades ago, the late Dr Len Tierney, suggested from time to time that the things we were inclined to measure about our society were often dubious in their value. Some data are easier to collect than others, the collection of data is often a partisan enterprise, hence the adage – lies, damned lies and statistics. Len was an advocate of practical research to capture the concerns and issues impacting on and important to the welfare of people at a disadvantage. He would sometimes muse about whether we would ever get to measuring the amount of happiness in Melbourne. Among the recent deluge of email (somewhat inflated this year by spam, virus attacks and enterprising salespeople) were some inviting curiosity and a hunger to follow up, if one ever has the time.

One was from George Ortega of White Plains, New York, who produces and co-hosts, he says, *The Happiness Show* on cable television. In his email, he discusses at some length the current state of research on subjective well being, quoting a variety of research statistics which demonstrate how unhappy many people in the US are, despite ever increasing wealth. Apparently, Nigeria is the 'happiest' nation in the world, the US being ranked 16th (World Values Study Group, in press¹). It appears, however, that happiness can be 'learned', and Ortega promotes the idea of happiness training programs. He concludes:

A more extensive and authoritative body of happiness increase experiments would likely encourage businesses to take notice and offer happiness increase instruction as a product, in a manner similar to how health spas offer fitness as a product, and governments to use published methodologies as blueprints by which to develop happiness increase courses for school curriculums. These two vehicles alone could produce substantial and lasting happiness increases for many millions of individuals throughout the world. Psychologists have a profound responsibility as professionals uniquely qualified to encourage and conduct research needed to assist the world in better succeeding with our most fundamental desire – happiness.



Please seriously consider the world's marginal happiness a problem greatly in need of remedy, and happiness increase experimentation an indispensable prerequisite to the remedy.

What better gift can one give another than to help them become happier? What better gift can psychology give our world than to help us all become happier? Happiness increase research appears the most direct and effective means by which our world can become much happier. If this work is beyond your research interests and commitments, please forward the idea to colleagues or students whom you believe might be able to conduct or promote happiness increase experimentation. At the very least, I hope you will find this issue

important enough to discuss with your fellow psychologists. Thank you for your time and consideration.²

Perhaps Len's question is coming to the surface again. Certainly much is appearing on the web site of the Australian Centre for the study of Quality of Life at Deakin University, sparked in some measure by the needs of people who are ageing and people who have disabilities (<http://acqol.deakin.edu.au>). Another site with similar interests in Canada is the Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, which has developed an interesting approach to a Quality of Life model based on the subject's sense of being, belonging and becoming (www.utoronto.ca/qol/).

The second set of material of great interest involves the reports emanating from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Of particular interest is *Australia's Welfare 2003* and *Australia's Young People: Their health and wellbeing*. These reports can be purchased:

- Over the counter at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
6A Traeger Court, Fern Hill Park, Bruce, ACT 2617
Contact: Publications officer, AIHW, tel. 02 6244 1032
AIHW publications purchased from AIHW reception will receive a \$10 discount (AIHW Bulletins \$5 discount)
- Over the phone (CanPrint): tel. 1300 889 873
- CanPrint Mail Order Sales
PO Box 7456, Canberra MC ACT 2610
- Fax order: 02 6293 8333
- E-mail: support@canprint.com.au

AIHW publications are available on-line and free from their website (www.aihw.gov.au).

In this issue of *Children Australia*, some of our local researchers and practitioners share details of their work as they dig in to issues to do with health and well being, and some of the snags in the way of free flowing service delivery. Kellie Grant and Fred Gravestock pick up a very neglected area of interest and practice for disadvantaged children, the area of speech and language impairment and the compounding interaction of communication problems with issues of abuse and neglect. Getting speech pathology services into these areas is of vital importance, but often difficult to achieve in our tightly targeted and rationed world.

Leonie Gibbons and Jan Mason take up some of the challenges posed by the surging interest in kinship care. Care by relatives has grown in most Australian jurisdictions, driven by attractive cost considerations as well as positive ideology. There are many reasons to not see it as a panacea, and research of this nature based on experience in New South Wales is much needed.

Problems with corporate/government/state/public parenting are also now well recognised. A report titled *Public Parenting* has just been published by the Victorian Department of Human Services (www.dhs.vic.gov.au/publicparenting). Michael Clare reflects on the notion of 'good enough parenting' in relation to state care and the use of the *Looking After Children* materials in a number of Australian States and the UK. He also gives attention to the significance of commissioned research in service improvement and the need for more work on developing common understandings and counting rules in relation to the fairly complex issues and multiple jurisdictions facing the field of child and family welfare.

The issue of placement stability in home based care and the impact of placement disruption has always been a pressing concern. It has burst into greater prominence with recent new appreciations of the impact of this instability. Robyn Gilbertson and Jim Barber from South Australia have been involved in a major study of foster care processes and outcomes. The component they report on here reveals some powerful experiences and perceptions of placement processes and factors related to breakdown.

Children's perspectives and voices are the salient theme in the next article as well. In this, Amanda Shea Hart addresses the frequently unheard voice of the child in the context of family law processes. She raises a challenge to contemporary constructions of childhood and the competencies of children.

Finally, Cas O'Neill has reviewed a book published this year by the British Association of Adoption and Fostering, *The role of concurrent planning: Making permanent placements for young children*.

Lloyd Owen

¹ World Values Study Group (in press), *World Values Surveys, 1999-2001*, Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.

² Websites of interest mentioned by George Ortega include the website of Martin E P Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, who in 2002 published *Authentic Happiness*, New York: The Free Press (www.authentichappinesscoaching.com).

Season's
Greetings
to all our readers
and
a safe and happy
New Year

