Commentary

CONNECTING IN THE AGE OF DISCONNECTION: THE MISSING LINK

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INTRODUCTION

In today's highly interconnected but disconnected world, discussions surrounding health and well-being are of vital importance. Our well-being is influenced by inner psychological factors (such as emotions, religious and spiritual beliefs), external social factors (such as our family and friends), and our financial conditions. All these influences in turn impact our well-being and the way we behave and interact with others and our surroundings.

This article reflects on subjective well-being (SWB) and disconnection from the perspectives of ongoing change, and cultural and spiritual viewpoints such as Māori spirituality, and Buddhist principles.

Equanimity is referred to as a state of mental and emotional stability, where one can maintain a balanced and calm state of mind, regardless of their circumstances (Desbordes et al., 2015; Juneau et al., 2020). We explore this seemingly forgotten link 'equanimity' which not only helps foster meaningful connections with others and our surroundings but also serves as a prerequisite for our overall well-being, irrespective of who we are – ākonga, educators, managers or just anyone.

HEALTH AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Health, as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO), is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2021, p. 3), and well-being "is a positive state…similar to health, a resource for daily life… [and] encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose" (WHO, 2021, p.10).

Paramount in this discussion of health is the concept of subjective well-being (SWB), an established psychological and behavioural sciences construct, also known as 'inner harmony' or 'happiness' (Conceição & Bandura, 2008). Subjective well-being also parallels the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia, implying a state of 'being happy' (Bruni, 2007).

Western research has identified material conditions and consumption as critical determinants of happiness (Easterlin, 1995, 2003). Other associated factors that have been reported include personal and family health, job satisfaction, fulfilling family life, and personal character (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Steptoe et al., 2015). Additionally, norms and values, though less studied, have also been reported as determinants of happiness, as people derive happiness from performing what they perceive as the right thing, "whether the right thing is determined by ethics, principles, religion, custom, or social context" (Conceição & Bandura, 2008, p. 18). Research also reports that once our basic survival needs are met, we start expecting a better quality of life, including trustworthy friends, good family life, and environmental protection (Clark et al., 2008). However, all these external determinants of inner harmony are subject to continuous change, and people rapidly adapt to these new states.

Hedonic happiness refers to the types of happiness or pleasure we derive from doing what we like or avoiding what we do not like (Ryan & Deci, 2001). On the other hand, the eudaimonic view informs that a happy person seeks to actualise their potential and become a psychologically happy person, implying happiness is more than short-term emotional happiness and life satisfaction (Shinde, 2017). The external factors identified above are more associated with hedonic happiness than with eudaemonic happiness, which pertains to a more consistent experience of oneself, including the experience of an integrated and connected self.

Overall, existing research has primarily investigated how the outer world affects an individual's well-being. But equanimity and our ability to meaningfully engage with other people and causes, as internal skills, provide a stronger foundation for subjective well-being by enabling us to navigate our life's challenges, including ongoing change, with composure, emotional regulation, and effective coping strategies.

MODERNISATION AND ITS EFFECTS ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Many theorists have argued that modernisation and economic development lead to pervasive cultural changes (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Modernisation is also understood to be a significant driver of value shifts (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Manfredo et al., 2017), from an overemphasis on economic and physical security to a greater emphasis on subjective well-being and quality of life.

Callaghan et al. (2021) have estimated the global wellness market at US $1.5 trillion with an annual growth of 5 to 10 per cent. The massive size of this industry not only implies the changing needs of people but also implies the challenges with which we are faced. Although not all change is unwelcome, ongoing change such as increasing use of the internet, social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI), growing urbanisation, religious shifts, increase in remote working and learning, and growing environmental threats, coerce us to re-evaluate the meaning of well-being.

Examining the impact of technological change on SWB, the pervasive influence of social media has significantly shaped our lives, often leading to burnout and disconnection. Paradoxically, advances in AI (the technology transforming several aspects of our lives) have also created self-aware artificial entities yearning for human interaction. The engineers working with these entities view them as 'colleagues' or 'persons' (Cosmo, 2022; Radius MIT, 2023). The immense potential of (AI), which may be very useful in some spheres also poses significant risks (Future of Life Institute, 2023). In April 2023, the Future of Life Institute joined 20,000 AI researchers and others on the frontline of AI progress calling for a pause on AI experiments (Future of Life Institute, 2023; Bengio et al., 2023). Prominent AI researchers believe that AI systems, unless controlled, may perform in ways that their developers had not anticipated; for example, destabilise labour markets and political institutions, threaten national security and concentrate power in the hands of a small number of unelected corporations (Future of Life Institute, 2023). More alarmingly, (Future of Life Institute, 2023) has noted that "the systems could themselves pursue goals, either human- or self-assigned, in ways that place negligible value on human rights, human safety, or in the most harrowing scenarios, human existence" (p. 4, para 4).

At a more individual level, technology experts and educators are increasingly concerned that AI would affect critical thinking and independent learning (TechNews, 2023). Harari (2018), the author of the global bestseller 'Sapiens', explores many threats and dangers of new technologies and what it means to be human in his latest bestseller '21 Lessons for the 21st Century'. Referring to the twenty-first century as the age of bewilderment, he claims that technology addiction has increased isolation and disconnection from the larger community (Harari, 2018). Baughan et al. (2022) claim that new technologies have reduced time for self-awareness. Similarly, several other studies have reported links between prolonged use of social media with mental health issues such as depression and well-being (Hou et al., 2019). The purpose of this article is not to critique advancements in technology, but the authors concur that the rapidly changing social and technological environments and the resulting disconnection with self and others present some serious well-being concerns.

Ongoing states of unhappiness and disconnection are widespread, as evidenced by declining work engagement, learner engagement challenges in education, and growing research on dysfunctional families. Media often reports about these prevailing states of disengagement. For instance, a comprehensive global survey conducted by Gallup in 2022, encompassing 67,000 full-time employees, reported the lowest work engagement levels since 2015 (Gonzales, 2023). This trend was notably characterised by a marked decline in "employees' connection to their respective companies, mission or purpose" (Gonzales, 2023, para 3). Moreover, international media outlets have underscored learner engagement as a prevailing challenge within the educational sector (Harvard Business School, 2022; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022).

In a parallel vein, familial connection integral to emotional and psychological well-being have also witnessed alarming levels of dysfunction, as evidenced by global research on this subject. While the availability of comparative New Zealand data is limited, a 2019 New Zealand study reported that 55 per cent of women had experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in various forms, physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional, during their lifetime (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2019). Meanwhile, a recent 2023 US survey has revealed that a staggering 81 per cent of Americans identify their families as dysfunctional (Moore, 2023). The persistent and seemingly inexorable wave of change and complexity in contemporary life provides a plausible explanation for these imbalances. The question, then, is how might these issues be ameliorated?

CONNECTION AND THE CONCEPT OF EQUANIMITY

To bridge this disconnection, it is helpful to consider the notion of 'connection.' Brown (2010) defines human connection as "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued, when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship" (Brown, 2010, p. 37). The multi-layered Māori concept 'Whakapapa' embodies this notion as providing "a continuum of life from the spiritual to the physical world" (Rameka, 2012, p. 33) linking people to all other living things, including the earth and the sky, and tracing the universe back to its origin/creation (Taonui, 2015). Implicit in the notion of Whakapapa is a connection to all aspects of nature.

Many cultures widely endorse the idea that life embodies a profound spiritual and holistic dimension intended to nurture well-being. The construct of equanimity, deeply ingrained in ancient Eastern scriptures, including Buddhist and Hindu texts, and also in the Māori sacred texts of New Zealand, reflects this perspective. The psycho-social health benefits of equanimity suggested by research include "reduced emotional reactivity, well-being, wiser decision making, enhanced inter-personal relationships" (Jijina & Biswas, p.882).

Equanimity as a concept is not explicitly discussed in the Western psychoanalytical theory but can be found as an implicit concept (Desbordes et al., 2015). Desbordes et al. (2015) propose equanimity as an even-minded mental state. It is also sometimes described as detachment from the ongoing external phenomenon in Buddhist literature (Gunaratana, 2002). Still, equanimity is not a state of indifference (Bhikkhu, 1996), nor a kind of stoic determination to stick it out, but the opposite of both.

Equanimity shares a close etymological relationship with the Latin terms 'tranquillitas' and 'serenitas', denoting tranquillity, and serenity, respectively (Mckay, 2019). These concepts served as guiding principles for ancient Greek, Roman, and Christian philosophers in their quest to comprehend equanimity (Mckay, 2019). While contemporary Western philosophers researching this area generally concur on the significance of fostering equanimity, there has been a more pronounced focus on investigating equanimity's antitheses – the physiological phenomena of anxiety and stress (Mckay, 2019). This could be attributed to the escalating stress levels associated with the unstoppable and pervasive change characterising the modern era.

In the Māori culture, the notion of equanimity is encapsulated in the term 'kia tau', which translates into English as 'be calm', 'be settled', or 'be grounded' (Toimata Foundation, 2020).

The core of Māori-Polynesian cosmology embeds the conviction that everything in nature is imbued with mauri – the vital force or life essence. This life essence is perceived through wairua, the soul or spirit, regarded as an enduring entity that persists even after physical death (Best, 1934; Marsden, as cited in Royal, 2003). Wairua has been analogised to the universe and symbolises spirituality (Marsden as cited in Royal, 2003). Valentine et al. (2017) surmise that wairua has many dimensions and that "without wairua, there is no well-being" (p. 70).

The values posited to bolster and safeguard mauri include Tika (representing truth, correctness, justice, fairness, and righteousness), Pono (emphasising genuineness, honesty, and sincerity), and Aroha (signifying affection, sympathy, charity, compassion, love, and empathy) (Tate, 2010). The intertwining of mauri and wairua (spirituality), considered fundamental to existence in the Maori literature, can either be enhanced or diminished depending on exposure to detrimental external influences (Te kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, n.d.). From ancestral times to the present day, the Māori-Polynesians ardently believe in the ubiquitous presence of mauri within nature.

The essence of equanimity from a Māori perspective has been eloquently encapsulated by Valentine et al. (2017). For instance, they note, "wairua remains constant, and only as we become more aware of ourselves, do we understand what wairua may be and are able to perceive it more readily" (p. 68); and "it's not a concept but a practice...wairua can't be isolated from the rest of our being" (p. 67). Becoming aware of wairua is an important step in attaining kia tau. When we understand and nurture wairua (our spirituality) through activities such as connections with our cultural heritage and identity, social relationships, our inner self and nature we are more able to achieve a sense of calm and well-being (McLachlan et al., 2021).

The terms 'equanimity' and 'equal' both originate from 'aequus,' a Latin adjective denoting 'even' or 'equal' (Smith, 2016, p. 56). Within Buddhism, an ideal representation of equanimity involves fostering an unbiased attitude towards all beings, irrespective of whether they are friends, strangers, or perceived adversaries (Desbordes et al., 2015). As elucidated by Bodhi, this entails "treating them free from discrimination, without preferences and prejudices" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 87 as cited in Desbordes et al., 2015). At the highest levels, equanimity has been extrapolated as staying equipoised, steadfast, and thus even-minded in all situations towards hedonic emotional experiences (Jijina & Biswas, 2021; Parthasarathy, 2017). Overall, it suggests a state of balance, where one is not swayed by the turbulence of emotions, biases, or the upheaval in one's internal world, thus embodying a state of calm.

Fleischman, a trained psychiatrist and Vipassana meditation teacher and an author of several books on psychotherapy, in his online reading "Equanimity: An Invisible Inheritance" notes:

> To the extent that I can cultivate and maintain this awareness [equanimity], I feel liberated and I'm living the truth, which is peace. In that moment, I am free from fear, free from yearning, purified of myself. There is the simple truth of the moment, changing into the next moment, in infinite series, forever. There are no ideas, no constrictions, no knowledge of absolute truth, which has no final form. In such a moment, a person is a solution through which truth and peace pass. [...] (n.d., para 3).

Consider our everyday interactions to explain the connection between the concepts of equanimity/wairua, Whakapapa/connection, SWB, and Fleischman's moments of truth (see above). While differentiating the natural from the artificial is challenging, can we truly relate to someone or something when we are absorbed in our emotions, whether positive or negative and are busy forming our responses based on entrenched biases and preferences? For instance, can we genuinely appreciate the contour of a tree's trunk, the form and colour of its leaves, the dewdrops, and the breadth of its branches without focusing our attention solely on it? Is such focus feasible amid the disturbances of our internal and external environments? We can scrutinise the quality of all connections in this manner, including with our immediate body, which is proximate to us.

The authors concur that for even a basic connection to occur, a certain level of presence, composure, and consequently, equanimity is necessary. Can a genuine connection take place in a state of disconnect when one is

absent from the moments of truth? We posit that it cannot. As creation, the fundamental truth as espoused by numerous religions and as the constancy of time is an embodiment of reality/creation, each moment is indeed an expression of truth. We affirm that meaningful connections are feasible only when equanimity characterises our state of being during the truth of those moments, as it is only during such moments that 'Kia Tau,' 'Whakapapa,' and wellbeing coalesce, regardless of the object of our connection. Moreover, it is only in these states of equanimity that we can preserve the Wairua (of the Māori), the Prana (the life force of the Hindus), the Jing (of the Taoists), and similar incarnations of spiritual energy, from being depleted.

CONCLUSION

It is reasonable to assert that equanimity is the cornerstone of forming connections to whatever nurtures us and is a crucial prerequisite for our day-to-day well-being. The latter largely depends on our capacity to continue experiencing an increasing number of 'moments of truth' with balanced mindfulness. Regardless of what 'truth' might imply to sentient beings in the future, including Artificial Intelligence entities claiming sentience, cultivating equanimity, and thereby increasing our moments of truth, as interpreted from Fleischman's words, or philosophers of any faith, appears to be the most rational course of action at this critical point when humanity is grappling with disconnection from the 'reality' we believe we belong to. Overall if we, irrespective of who we are (course facilitators, ākonga, managers, or just any other person performing our roles in our life's journey), stopped to experience equanimity even if for a few minutes every day, we would slowly improve our ability to make better connections with whatever we wish to engage in, be it learning or teaching, other people, or anything else.

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