"By nurturing people's dreams we encourage a more resilient, inspired and hopeful society…"

WISHFUL THINKING

Alessandra Buonfino
Silvia Guglielmi

DEM⊙S

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Preface

In Dickens' *Hard Times*, written exactly 150 years before the publication of *Wishful Thinking*, Thomas Gradgrind is teaching a class of schoolchildren. He demands to know the definition of 'a horse'. He turns to a girl, Cecilia Jupe, who is unable to satisfy him. He turns in contempt to a boy student, who rattles out a bloodless definition. 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring: in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' He rounds on Cecilia and says, 'Now... you know what a horse is.' Cecilia wants to draw or paint a horse as her way of representing what a horse is. Gradgrind exhorts her to banish forever any thoughts that are creative or imaginative. 'You are never to fancy', she is told. 'Fact, fact, fact!'

Dickens was describing a nineteenth-century world, and was reacting against utilitarian education, which emphasised rote learning and factual knowledge at the expense of the non-utilitarian virtues of creativity and imagination. In the twenty-first century, we are still seeing elevation of facts and mechanistic and linear learning above all else when it comes to schooling and universities. Individuality is stifled.

This pamphlet is a powerful statement of the virtue of dreams, which are by definition personal. An autocratic teacher or an all-encompassing state can command the body to be in a certain place at a certain time, but it can never dictate the dreams that occur in the minds of each person. As individuals we would be happier, and as a nation we would be more successful, if these dreams were celebrated more and, where practical and civilised, were acted out in reality. I would hope that such dreams become increasingly conscious. As human beings, we have the option to become increasingly aware throughout our lives. That consciousness, which is powerfully boosted by periods of stillness, does not increase the number of dreams, but it does increase our awareness of how much we are dreaming throughout each day.

In truth, multiple dreams are in our heads throughout the day, yet we are barely conscious of this fact. To become conscious of them is one of the highest duties in life. As Rudyard Kipling

wrote in 'If', 'If you can dream – and not make dreams your master... Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it.' If Gradgrind had been able to celebrate rather than censor Cecilia Jupe's dreams, he would truly have been a whole man, rather than a pale imitation.

Dr Anthony Seldon
Master of Wellington College and political historian

Introduction

'There is nothing like a dream', Victor Hugo once said, 'to create the future.'

He was not referring to the dreams we have while asleep, but to those that we are conscious of – our waking dreams, the things we imagine during the day, and what we wish for throughout our lifetimes.

Even unfulfilled dreams have a real and beneficial impact on our lives. Of course, dreams can also have negative connotations; excessive dreaming can be a sign of distraction or escapism, for instance. However, it is important to be able to have some dreams, for the following reasons:

· Dreams provide solace and a fleeting sense of wellbeing when we are depressed or in difficulty.
· They help us imagine new alternatives and directions that may inspire us to action and give us a sense of agency.
· Sharing our dreams with others allows us to create and achieve collective goals.
· Dreams build people's resilience and their ability to cope with the stresses of everyday life.

Whether they take the form of imagining a career change, thinking of starting a family, or wishing for a better world with less poverty and inequality, dreams help people find ways out of difficulty and provide a sense of *solace*, however briefly. Dreaming can have a therapeutic effect by providing a temporary respite from the daily grind, and positive images of good things to come. For a 30-year-old professional from Harlow, who was interviewed for this pamphlet, dreaming of a long holiday in the sun provides a short-term mental refuge from stress as well as something to look forward to. Imagination is one

of humanity's great adaptive tools, and its benefits should not be underestimated, particularly in the context of the UK's economic recession.

Individual dreams can help people, particularly young people, develop a sense of *agency*, giving people goals to pursue, and in the process perhaps finding new meaning to and direction for their lives. A 2009 Prince's Trust poll of over 2,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 25 revealed that one in 10 young people thinks that their life has no meaning or purpose. This is especially true for those who are not in education, employment or training.[1] Clearly there is room for more dreaming, and greater aspirations here. Dreams of success, happiness, relationships can in part provide purpose and direction to people's lives. These may be unrealistic, but they force people to think about who they want to be and what it would take to get there. Even very practical dreams – by a pensioner wishing for a new knee to be able to walk without pain, a commuter desiring a holiday with his family, or a student wishing to see the world — provide a reminder of what to strive towards. Personal agency is ignited by dreaming.

In some cases, people's dreams relate to personal development. In others, they may be more ambitious goals to change the world. Take any of the most revolutionary changes of the last two centuries, whether social – women's suffrage, the abolition of slavery, the furthering of equality between races – or technological – the creation of the jet engine, landings on the moon, or the birth of the world wide web. All of these started with a dream and became reality through the energy and passion of a few. From literature to politics, science to art, dreams have always occupied an interesting space between hope and agency. They embody what individuals and societies view as 'success' – the 'American Dream', for instance. They reflect aspirations, hopes and visions.

Perhaps surprisingly, people tend to dream about similar things. And sharing a wish, a goal or a desired outcome can lead to *collective action*. When individuals' dreams come together they can become powerful forces for change. From neighbourhood gardening collectives to student unions, to outright revolution,

dreams have inspired many to come together and act. Many people feel dreams are too personal to share; yet people's wishes actually have a surprising amount in common. Our research shows that dreams of a better world, including a desire to reverse climate change, for fewer wars and for greater cross-cultural tolerance, are widespread and occur across and throughout UK society, from the wealthy pensioner in Hampshire to the unemployed 40 year old in Harlow.

The dream that one day people would work together, struggle together, and stand up for freedom together, irrespective of the colour of their skin, once began as a hope. Although discrimination on the basis of gender, race or religion still persists in many parts of the world, including Britain and the US, and despite the dreams of icons such as Martin Luther King, the election of the first black president of the US is one more step towards realising these ideals. What may have seemed like an unrealistic dream only a few years ago is, with effort and collective action, slowly being turned into reality.

Dreams can also prevent individuals from giving up in times of stress and can build *resilience*. A young man from Harlow who reflects on his professional difficulties may dream of an accomplished career in the future; a middle-aged woman from Hampshire deeply fears old age but nonetheless imagines and plans for a happy and healthy future. People's dreams can act as buffers against uncertainty and anxiety, or provide an image of an alternative future, or just an injection of hope.

In today's recessionary Britain, where the incidence of anxiety, insecurity and fear is likely to increase, and in which trust in institutions remains low, dreams acquire a new importance. Dreams and wishes can represent an untapped source of strength as well as creativity in imagining new alternatives and lifestyles for the future. An aspiration is defined as the 'ability to identify and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to work towards these goals'.[2] In this way dreams can offer an opportunity for individuals to re-imagine themselves, to raise aspirations and think innovatively.

The research for this pamphlet was conducted over several months.[3] It took place in streets, homes, playgrounds and social

clubs across four areas of the country selected on the basis of their historical diversity, the backgrounds of their residents, their size and their location:

- *Harlow* was first built as an 'aspirational city', one of the 1960s new towns which offered the hope of a new life to many families living in overcrowded accommodation in London. Yet today much of Harlow's public space and original architecture is decaying and the population is still relatively low-skilled, with higher than average rates of unemployment; this despite Harlow's being the second most important town in the UK for research and innovation. The town has high levels of dependency on council services and housing (with almost 30 per cent of dwellings housing association and local authority owned) as well as on cars for transport. Many of the residents we spoke to stated that, as kids, they 'felt trapped', and that there was no expectation for them 'to go to college and leave Harlow – and many did not'.
- *Dummer* is a relatively homogeneous and wealthy village of 200 people near Basingstoke, Hampshire. The birthplace of Sarah Ferguson, for many years Dummer has attracted intellectuals, bankers, stockbrokers and artists, all now living side by side with established aristocracy. Organised around an active church life and many social clubs, Dummer is neighbourly and proud. It is a conservative area, where there is a strong interest in arts and culture, in village fetes, and in preserving village life as it always has been.
- The Norfolk market town of *King's Lynn* has a long history of heroes, seafarers and adventurers. But despite having undergone substantial investment, which has brought new infrastructure and renovated the town centre, the town still suffers from deep inequalities and a level of deprivation that is higher than the average for the east of England. Health inequality is high with a gap of nearly six years in the life expectancy for those in the healthiest ward compared with those in the least healthy. One in three youngsters suffers from obesity, a worsening problem in the area. With a growing Eastern European, Portuguese and Chinese population, the town faces significant issues around the aspirations and skills of its residents.

· The city of *Manchester* lies at the centre of the wider Greater Manchester urban area; it is Britain's third most diverse city after London and Birmingham and has a long history of migration, particularly from Ireland and central Europe. Today, migration still plays an important role in the life of the city, which has a large percentage of ethnic communities. South Asians are the largest ethnic group, making up 9 per cent of the population. The city attracts people from all walks of life, including a growing university population, bankers, management consultants, entrepreneurs and technicians.

In each of these areas, we spoke to pensioners, teenage mothers, wealthy professionals, academics, shopkeepers and many others. Perhaps surprisingly, their dreams were not dissimilar. The large majority of our interviewees wished for health and happiness, either for themselves or for their closest relations. The desire for healthy, strong and lasting relationships made up about 36 per cent of the dreams mentioned; 33 per cent of dreams represented an altruistic desire for a better world. Only 13 per cent involved financial security. These dreams were articulated as a desire to own a home, to be able to provide for a family, to secure a good retirement or, as one man put it, to have 'more money to help my ageing parents'. These are dreams that are likely to become more common as the economic downturn deepens. The few dreams about careers (less than 5 per cent of dreams) centred on job stability, around the hope to find an enjoyable job, or a job 'which I know will be there in the future'. Not a single respondent cited celebrity or fame.

This snapshot of British dreams illustrates their impact on people's everyday wellbeing, aspirations, agency and resilience in difficult times. Without dreams, children would not be able to imagine who they want to be when they grow up; scientists would not continue to push the boundaries of existing knowledge; people would not aspire to do better, socially, professionally and financially; and civic movements would lose momentum. Psychology and happiness research and British people's own hopes point to the fact that individuals are somehow hardwired to hope for a better outcome. If people were

encouraged to do more to fulfill their dreams and to imagine possible futures, society would certainly be healthier, more resilient and aspirational.

1   Aren't these just dreams?

My dreams were all my own; I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed – my dearest pleasure when free.
   Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

For centuries, dreams have been the subject of thousands of folk tales, poems, children's stories and parables. The Ancient Egyptians kept Dream Books throughout the ages to record thoughts and concerns of common people and Aboriginal Australians believe that we dream our way into the world and that we dream our way out of it. Dreams have been the engine behind much creativity, the space that one forgets with time or the space that inspires.

While across the world, anthropologists and ethnographers have given much importance to the world of 'dreams', wishes and daydreaming, dreams in the Western world have often been relegated to the side – to the so-called world of the 'creatives', poets and artists, or just appropriate to children. As many stories including Peter Pan's remind us, grown-ups 'just don't have the time to dream'. Perhaps wishful dreaming is just, as Sartre put it, in a different context, a 'useless passion' – without any fulfillment.

But are dreams really just for children, are they 'useless passions'? Drawing from different disciplines, including psychology and happiness research, this chapter makes the case for taking the dreams that we have during the day more seriously, and argues that they have a positive impact on real life.

Some dreams, some hopes are just pie in the sky. But there may be hopes that are attuned to reality, even when hoping is directed to an imagined future. A wishful dream is here defined as a *measured hope*, which can have positive impacts on people. We are not suggesting that too much dreaming is a good thing;[4]

rather we argue that more, measured, emphasis on imagination, hope and fantasies can provide individuals with a 'refuge' from a difficult time, can provide stimuli for creativity and optimistic goals in the real world, and at times the energy to drive change.

Imagination: a useless passion, or an interface to reality?

Neurophysiologists now know that of the hundreds of billions of cells in the human brain, only a fraction (approximately 2 billion) of them are used for conscious thought. The remaining cells may actually constitute the tangible network associated with the unconscious mind.

Work inspired by the Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry conducted to better understand the cognitive functions of the right and left hemisphere of the brain has deducted that imagination – like intuition, music appreciation and spatial awareness – is a right brain function.[5] Today it is common knowledge that the right side of the brain is responsible for creative thinking and imagination, and human responses that are more likely to be emotional or concerned with feelings. The left side of the brain hemisphere is instead responsible for logical thinking, usually where there is a 'correct' response. And imagination, as well as feelings and emotions, is significantly entangled with the way individuals perceive reality and interact with it. Imagination is the ability to conjure in our minds events that aren't happening and that didn't happen in the past. That usually means events that might happen, could happen or will happen.

Imagination influences our ability to plan, hope and think about the future – about what the 'good life' may mean to us and how we could aspire to it.[6] Our ability to imagine the future allows us to think about which futures will be better than others. In this way, we're able to select the good ones and avoid the bad ones. Imagination allows individuals to be the animal that learns from mistakes we've never made and is one of humankind's major adaptive tools. Many psychoanalysts have observed that an inability to fantasise is just as pathological as an excessive

immersion in fantasy. Acquiring the capacity to fantasise is a developmental achievement without which one's life is bloodless, passionless and sometimes lacking in hope and forward momentum.

It is within the right side of the brain and the realm of imagination that we dream. The dreams that we have when awake allow individuals to wish for a future that has not happened yet (and which may never happen). They are not *illusions*, as illusions imply fantasies that *will never* materialise. Dreams are instead inspired by an element of possibility and hope: 'I may dream of writing a bestselling book one day' or 'I may dream of being happily married with many grandchildren by the time I am 85 but I am currently single'. Perhaps this may never happen but the hope is there that perhaps, one day, it might. The opportunity may still be open for me, however remote. Instead, I may have an illusion of living in a different age and time and as much as that may provide me with an escape from my everyday existence, I am aware that it will never happen. Dreams are, in a way, aspirations, wishes for the future.

Nick Baylis in his study of daydreaming among young adults[7] differentiates between two types of dreams:

- *wishful daydreams*, which are the 'pleasurable images and narratives about anticipated future scenarios that the daydreamer thinks are quite possible and even likely'; they include the dream of one day writing a bestselling book
- *escapist fantasies*, which are 'pleasurable images and narratives about desirable scenarios that the fantasist never expects to happen in real life – the individual is fully aware of their total unreality';[8] dreaming of living in another era or imagining life with someone who has died a long time ago would fall into this category. These fantasies may provide temporary solace but they are just illusions.

In this pamphlet, we are interested in finding out more about people's wishful daydreams: what do people dream about? How do they see the future? What do they wish for? In some cases, these daydreams will reveal creative fantasies and

awareness that these dreams are impossible, but they will none-theless reflect aspirations and wishes for a brighter tomorrow. But before we turn to them, let us have a look at why wishful dreams or creative dreams matter and how they can be explained.

Wishful dreaming

In Hesiod's Works and Days *we find the myth of Pandora's Box.*

It tells us about Pandora, the first woman on earth; the gods made her out of clay and gave her life. They endowed her with many talents: Aphrodite gave her beauty, Hermes persuasion, Apollo music. Finally Hermes gave the woman a name: Pandora – 'all-gifted'.

When Prometheus stole fire from heaven, Zeus took vengeance by presenting Pandora to Epimetheus, Prometheus' brother. With her, Pandora had a jar, containing 'burdensome toil and sickness that brings death to men', diseases and 'a myriad other pains'. Prometheus had warned his brother Epimetheus not to accept any gifts from Zeus but he did not listen. He accepted Pandora and she, impelled by her natural curiosity, opened the jar and all the evil contained escaped and spread on earth, except for one thing, which lay at the bottom. Hope.

Counting hope with all humanity's sufferings can be understood in different ways. On the one hand, hope can damage people by deceiving them, endowing them with futile expectations and delusions; and on the other, it counterbalances humanity's evil.

The latter is the way in which the utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch interpreted the story of Pandora. Hope was the only good thing left in the jar as hope preserves human beings' capacity to strive for good things that are not currently present: 'Hope is the good thing that remains for men, which has in no way already ripened but which has also in no way been destroyed.'[9]

Like fear, hope aims at the unknown future but, differently from fear, hope can give people courage to act on the foundations of the hoped future. Hope is not only passively waiting for a new future to occur, but it can also be a motive for action. Dreaming about the future is a form of hope – wishful dreaming enables people to imagine and wish for a better tomorrow, and prepare themselves for it at the same time.

Trying to explain how it happens psychoanalytically, one would be naturally inclined towards Freud. And Freud does provide an answer. He proposed two different methods for understanding the function of conscious fantasy, one in which he related daydreams to dreams (in *The Interpretation of Dreams*) and a second one in which he connects fantasy to children's play (in *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming*). Each of these models has a significant place in understanding different functions of conscious fantasy, but their focus is very different.

Freud's dream model primarily describes fantasy as substitute wish fulfillment for repressed wishes. But Freud's play model of fantasy proposes another function for it. Fantasy, like play, is often invoked to master unpleasant feelings to plot future dreams. Various childhood games are pleasurable because they help the child with uncomfortable feelings, including dependency and powerlessness. Such games permit the young child to feel more in control, to reverse passivity into activity, helplessness into mastery. Gradually such childhood games evolve into the fantasy play or make-believe games that focus on role playing.

These more advanced pretend or make-believe games have a developmental function: not only are they invoked as a mode of mastery in response to emotional disequilibria, but they can also serve as rehearsals for future adaptations insofar as they project the child's goals and an image of what the child wants to be. Freud saw that one of the primary motives in make-believe was the wish to be 'big' and one certainly observes children spending a lot of time trying on adult roles, playing at being mothers, nurses or firefighters.

Wishful dreaming first occurs for most people before age three and these early daydreams set the pattern for future daydreaming. Children who have positive and happy daydreams of success and achievement generally continue these types of mental images into adulthood. For them, daydreams become the impetus for problem solving, creativity or accomplishment. On the other hand, children whose daydreams are negative or scary, or visualise disasters are likely to experience anxiety, and this pattern will carry over into adulthood as well. These together with other factors like criticism or life events can impact on how

optimistic or pessimistic children will be later in life. As Martin Seligman argues, 'On the whole, prepubescent children are extremely optimistic, with a capacity for hope and an immunity to helplessness they will never again possess after puberty, when they lose much of their optimism.'[10]

At some point in childhood, fantasy subsumes the functions of play. As the psychologist Eric Klinger puts it, 'play and fantasy reflect current focal concerns of the individual – unresolved current problems, unfinished tasks, role conflicts, and prominent affective responses, as well as the challenges of identity and commitment posed by the individual's social relationships'.[11] Whereas Freud's dream model focuses on the source of daydreams in the infantile past, his play model emphasises how current events and hopes for the future trigger daydreams and how daydreams in turn play a role in modifying the present and shaping the future.

Daydreams can lend solace in times of sorrow and pain. Fantasising for a better future may permit us to bear an untenable present rather than be overwhelmed by depression and feelings of hopelessness. Therefore fantasy's chief benefit may be that it allows the 'fantasiser' to hope, and to trust in the future even in a seemingly hopeless situation. The unhappy or abused child who can imagine more loving parents, happier times, a different world, for example, may grow up relatively unscathed, the good life still within the realms of imaginative possibilities and thus an actual possibility. But even in everyday, normal environments where there are no instances of pain, fantasy can be necessary, helpful and healthy. We argue that depending on their context, when not abused, fantasies and daydreams can have three main benefits:

· *They can have a positive effect on wellbeing* They can be therapeutic; they can help achieve mental relaxation against everyday stress; they can provide solace, continued hope and wellbeing; and, as Baylis suggests, they can provide psychological self-protection from a potentially damaging reality.
· *They can lead to personal agency, and build one's capacity to act* Daydreaming can be self-motivating. Fantasy can make the

future possible, insofar as our expectations and hopes for what is yet to come, much of which is encoded in fantasy, fuel our behaviour and thinking in the present. Thus, in addition to creating a general ambience of hope, fantasy may lay a practical foundation for it. It can influence aspirations, action and ambition if the hope is seen as realistic in the future. However, this can have significant side-effects in terms of anxiety and stress, when for example dreams of success lead people to work longer hours and become stressed.

· *They can – when shared – lead to collective agency* When shared and expressed, personal dreams can become collective dreams and lead to real change if they become self-motivating. The vision and wish of a leader can become the vision of a whole organisation; a political vision of equality can stem from one and be taken up by many until change has happened. There are many examples of collective agency and change that start from a person's dream. The key is for dreams to inspire new ways of engaging with the real world rather than simply replace or undermine everyday activities.[12]

In the next chapter we will draw out more explicitly from the research around Britain how these three benefits actually play out in practice, and we will also argue that there are never dreams for dreams' sake, but that dreams also have the innate capacity to bridge everyday life's tensions, in providing a form of natural hope that can prevent people from giving up when times are tough.

2 Dreaming Britain

We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations.

Anais Nin

Everyday lives are full of ups and downs, they are about satisfactions and disappointments, moments of joy and moments that just go by without notice. We see our lives through the mood of daily encounters; we have good days and bad days and our perception of life changes according to our moods. Life is largely governed by experiences, emotions and encounters with others, and thoughts about the future are intimately connected with the present.

It is often to dreams or aspirations that people turn in hard times, imagining new opportunities and different futures. They can act as fantasies, but also as guiding lights, as reference points that we keep changing as life moves on. Sometimes these possible futures lead to the creation of new expectations and a new drive for change and agency, and at times they just provide temporary solace and a hope that things may improve. As Aristotle once argued, hope is the 'waking dream' – something that helps people to dream their way out of difficulty.

This chapter focuses first on what people dream about, by drawing on the research we conducted in four areas of Britain. The dreams uncovered through the research tell a story of a relatively practical and idealistic society, for whom companionship, love and recognition are still the most important things in life. It will also show that although people keep their dreams private, individuals tend to dream about similar things –

happiness, wealth and, for a majority, a better world for future generations. Second, the chapter will focus on the role that dreams play in people's lives: what is their function? In what way are they beneficial to people? In the previous chapter we identified three key benefits of dreams: they provide solace and positively impact wellbeing; they build on individuals' capacity to act; and they can lead to collective agency when dreams are shared. What this research shows is that people share positive dreams for happiness and health as well as for a better, more peaceful world – yet in many cases, they do not know whom to turn to in order to help them realise their dreams.

Finally, the chapter will argue that dreams have another key function. They are natural ways to manage tensions. Every life has tensions: tensions between what I think my life is like now and what I fear or expect it to be tomorrow; or between what I perceive my family to be compared with other families in Britain, my neighbour's families or families I don't know. Dreams have a very important function in providing people with hope, and ways of imagining alternative futures. They afford us with scenarios that can help us manage everyday tensions, look ahead and not give up. Wishful dreams are the flexible interface between present and future, and between the perception of our life and those of others. The key 'tensions' experienced by people will become clear in later chapters, but let us now turn to their dreams.

What do people dream about?

Jean is 80 and lives in Harlow. She came to Old Harlow in the 1960s with her family and could not ever imagine herself living anywhere else. She spends most of her time in local clubs and societies where she frequently meets others for a cup of tea and a chat. Jean is quite content with life; she is not worried about herself but rather – like many of her friends – she fears the future for her kids who are struggling to pay their mortgages and look after her grandchildren. And she worries for her health, which, at 80, is likely to deteriorate. Despite her fears, Jean considers herself lucky – she has a good family and lives in a nice home, 'a

better deal compared to what others have in this country'. When asked what her dreams are, Jean is initially reticent to share them: 'at my age, I shouldn't be dreaming any more; I have had all the time I needed', but then after all, she tells us how she often closes her eyes and dreams about waking up with a new pair of knees and being able to walk like she used to… And 'I can see myself thinner, and I hope my children are happy after I have gone and an end to wars.'

Justin is 23 years old and studies medicine at Manchester University. Like many students, he lives far from his family and rents a student house with other flatmates. He is in a long-term on-and-off relationship, juggles demanding course work with an active social life and plays rugby competitively. His lifestyle is very similar to that of many students across Britain. When probed, Justin has 'no clue' about the last time he felt lonely and he attributes that to 'a family I am so close to, and great flatmates and friends'. His life and certainly his future are very different from Jean's. Yet, when asked about them, Justin's dreams are, just like Jean's, altruistic and pragmatic. He wishes for a better world and an end to wars; for humanity to embrace ethical travel as a norm, and for enough money to support his parents through old age.

One would imagine that dreams are all too complex and varied to discuss, and that there would be too many to count. But people are down to earth in their expectations and quite realistic about their dreams. Our research resonates with LSE Professor Don Slater's work on 'dreams and the lottery' carried out for the Camelot Foundation: it is rare to encounter dreams of fame, or celebrity or unrealistic wealth.

Britain shows itself as a nation of pragmatists – generous when it comes to others and rather realistic when it comes to themselves. Our research uncovered a variety of wishes, dreams and aspirations that related to a desire for recognition, love, happiness and stability for themselves and others, and for a more pleasant physical appearance and a better world: 36 per cent of dreams concerned happiness for the family and themselves; a perhaps more surprising and impressive 33 per cent of total dreams focused on wishes for a better world, free from conflict,

poverty and environmental disasters; 13 per cent of dreams were ones of financial independence and security; while personal achievements like learning a language, moving abroad or finishing a degree featured in 6 per cent of the dreams recorded. These dreams were not wholly unrealistic, although they were often articulated as something that 'would never happen' because of their present circumstances – in many ways, as the quote by the writer Anais Nin at the beginning of this chapter suggests, past, present and future mingle and often pull us back from our dreams.

Yet, similarly to Don Slater's findings, dreams of financial independence were most often associated with stability for the family, and the need to be more relaxed and able to spend time with children and in other meaningful activities (13 per cent in the 'money' category – see table 1). Money was often mentioned as a means to an end and a route towards financial and emotional security with very few people considering money and luxury per se as a dream. In many cases, and particularly among young professionals, career dreams were dreams of recognition – being valued in a job, and being recognised as a success, which was often measured in monetary terms.

The dreams largely reflected what people felt they felt lacked from their lives. For those many people who, as we will see in later chapters, talked of nostalgia for a bygone era where communities and families were stronger and tighter, dreams were likely to be about a better, friendlier world, or happiness for their family and friends. For those commuters who regretted missing out on family time, not keeping up with old friends or being able to make new ones, dreams were largely a response to their desire for relatedness. For people who were single, dreams were likely to be about finding love, or having a family. Indeed, in general, individuals' dreams were about other people – no man is an island, as the saying goes, and it is certainly relevant that people's 'measured hopes' were about themselves as part of a unit. Dreams are about hopes for the future and this future in most cases was not for them alone: 24 per cent of respondents mentioned dreams that involved some kind of actual or desired relationship with others, whether children or friends and

relatives. They are by and large generous dreams with positive and hopeful thoughts about other people.

Overall, the dreams could be subdivided into 10 broad and overlapping categories, as shown in table 1.

Table 1 **Categories of dream**

Happiness and health	Desire to be content, happy and healthy, eg a new pair of knees, not having to worry about health in the future, having a nice life with little stress	12% total dreams
Relationships	Desire for a relationship (find friends, a wife or husband); desire to get married and have children; dreams desire for children and relatives to be happy and healthy and have a good job; desire to have grandchildren; wish to have a better relationship with family than they currently have	24% total dreams
Career	Success in present career or future career; find a good job that 'people will be impressed with'; for many this included positions of responsibility, stability in their job position (particularly when they have experienced redundancies), recognition and monetary rewards	3% total dreams
Money	For most people, 'money' signified stability throughout their lives, owning their own house and not having to worry 'about money', debt and mortgages; for some – mostly professionals – desire for money meant buying a new luxury car, having a house abroad to enjoy with the family or, as one respondent said, 'I would like a million pounds'	13% total dreams
Personal achievement	Dreams of personal achievement included wanting to meet a personal challenge (finishing a course or a degree; sports); learn a language that they have always said they would learn; move abroad; do voluntary work; become philanthropists; move back home; be accepted	6% total dreams
Personal appearance	This mostly concerned women and was particularly to do with losing weight and being thin.	1% total dreams
Travel	Travel as a specific aim: 'to see the world'	3% total dreams

Table 1   **Categories of dream** *continued*

Better world	World peace, a better place to live for future generations; an end to poverty and conflict; 'make the world Christian'; more friendliness, tolerance and civility in society; better mass media; a cure for cancer	33% total dreams
Other	Other dreams included more unrealistic wishes like seeing Jesus come back; winning the lottery; bringing a parent or a child back from the dead; recording the memories of a dead grandmother or the abstract yet possibly realistic wish of dying before their children	2% total dreams
No dreams	Claims to have no dreams whatsoever; one respondent said 'I am too old to dream', another said 'God provides'	3% total dreams

Dreams are not wholly unrealistic – they are made of the stuff of everyday life.[13] They are about expectations and hope, which is most often contra-posed to the present existence and uncertainty about the future. People who find that Britain is no longer a good place to live are more likely to dream about moving abroad or of a more friendly society. People who have recently been made redundant or have felt insecure in their job are more likely to dream about money and secure employment. Essentially, people tend to dream about what they feel they do not have in their lives. Dreams become the way in which people mediate between the present and their vision and hope for the future.

People's dreams can be better understood if organised along two axes based on how likely these dreams are to be realised, and whether they concern the 'dreamer' or the world more in general (figure 1).

In figure 1 two clear clusters emerge in the top right 'idealist' quadrant and the bottom left 'pragmatic' quadrant. What the two clusters reveal is that on the one hand people dream about very practical and realistic desires for their own lives, things that they can achieve if they bought them, or worked hard at them. On the other hand, they also have

Figure 1 **The axis of dreams**
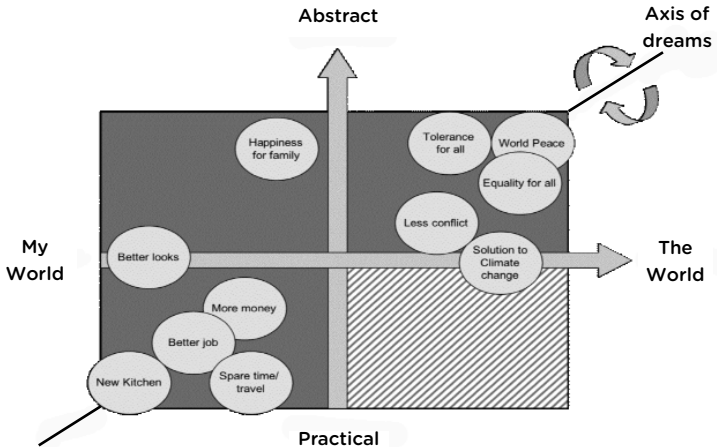
idealistic dreams for the world to be a better place, to have less conflict and more tolerance. Although there is some difference across the case study areas, with the more deprived areas (42 per cent for King's Lynn and Harlow) being slightly less concerned about the world than the wealthier areas (58 per cent for Dummer and Manchester), there is very little variation across age groups.

The gap between the two clusters is also very telling. On the one hand, people wish for practical things, things that they can control themselves. For example, someone's dream for a better job could be realised if the dreamer learned new skills; equally, another's dream to lose weight could become a reality for some if the dreamer took more physical exercise and kept an eye on the calories. On the other hand, people wish for very abstract things that are beyond their immediate control, like a better world with less conflict, and more equality and justice. These are often ideals and wishes that they consider to be absent

or deteriorating in society today. However, the gap in the bottom right-hand quadrant stands out: people wished for better mass media and less litter in the streets, but very few people mentioned dreaming about other practical improvements for the world.

The paucity of dreams in the bottom right-hand quadrant of figure 1 reveals a lack of politics in people's lives. Individuals are able to wish for things that they feel they can somehow influence, but when it comes to areas that they see as outside their control, they can only wish for more abstract concepts – often underlined by a belief that unfortunately these are 'just dreams'.

The reason for this is a widespread confusion over whose responsibility it should be to improve the state of Britain, to provide a cleaner globe for their children, or to stop world hunger. Politicians do not feature in people's discussions of their life and their world, and there is a vacuum of power and responsibility over who can make dreams come true. While articulating them, people realise that 'ending world hunger' is desirable but also unrealistic: it would be great, but it will never happen. On the other hand, having a close family may indeed happen, one day, 'if I work at it'.

Martin Seligman suggests that a person can be happy while confronting life realistically and while working productively to improve the conditions of existence. But this is not always possible. Uncertainty over who has the power to change things can prevent people from being able to imagine an alternative future easily, except for things that are seen to be directly within people's control. This can affect people's confidence about what's to come, particularly when things go wrong. Dreams can provide hope but dreams are about *measured* hope. They reflect reality as we see it: even the most unrealistic dreams like 'seeing Jesus come back' relate to a need for a solid reference point, which is currently not there.

Thus, the dreams reveal a surprisingly unselfish society that strives to live better and relies on connectedness and relationships. But it is also a society that needs more reference points to make sense of the tensions, risks and shocks out there;

dreamers want to feel more confident about who can help them make their dreams come true.

What are dreams good for? Three benefits and one capacity

Our research reveals that people take their dreams seriously even if they assume that they may never become reality. This is because dreams can serve important unintentional functions when it comes to wellbeing. For someone who is going through a tough time, dreams can provide temporary solace; professionals who feel that they don't have enough time with their kids may dream of buying a holiday home and spending more time with their family; people dreading retirement may dream about a healthy, relaxing and 'easy' retirement without difficulties. These mental images provide temporary happiness, expectation and a measured hope that life may soon turn out to be like that after all. It is certainly the case that dreams of success and financial security may lead people to work harder, and perhaps become more stressed, or even to take up habits like gambling.

There are no dreams for dreams' sake. Dreams and imagination bring clear benefits to people. They can positively impact wellbeing and raise aspirations; they can build people's capacity to become 'authors of their own script', and they can lead to agency. Not all dreams have to change the world. A dream that provides a temporary escape during a difficult time can still be a good dream.

Dreams and personal wellbeing: providing solace, and raising aspirations

Human kind cannot bear very much reality.
  TS Eliot

The impact of dreams on the way people think and feel about their lives (the only person who can really judge whether life goes well or not is the experiencing self) is quite substantial

yet not very well documented. Although too much dreaming may lead to dysfunctional escapism, in moderation, hope, imagination and wishes for a better future can get us going, make the day slightly brighter and prevent people from 'giving up' during difficult times. There is evidence that this changes with age and that young people are more hopeful about the future than older people[14] – as one of our interviewees from Harlow put it, 'I am far too old to dream.'

Dreaming about a better future can have an impact on the health, mental wellbeing, ambition, productivity and creativity of most people. It can – even temporarily – relieve stress and inspire optimism. As Seligman's work on 'learned optimism' shows, for example, teaching optimism can have positive results on health – for example by increasing life expectancy of terminally ill cancer patients.[15] Happy people tend to live longer lives. This was also illustrated by a study of longevity of nuns where the written statements of young nuns were analysed. These statements were then compared with how long the nuns lived for. The authors found that the happier young nuns lived on average longer than their less happy colleagues despite living in the same environment and with the same facilities.[16]

Dreams, therefore, have a therapeutic value. They can provide a hopeful and temporary escape from everyday stress and a good coping mechanism against anxiety and unhappiness. A man in his 30s from King's Lynn told us:

I get very frustrated when there are delays on the trains and I am trying to go back home for dinner. It happens quite often. And sometimes I just sit back, and try to imagine our next holiday, perhaps by the sea, away from the filth of the station and away from my email. I can even feel the sand under my feet if I concentrate enough. It puts a smile on my face.

This man is not alone. We found elderly women who, relaxing at home alone, would dream about being reunited with their husbands who had died many years before; and we heard students telling us that their dreams of becoming successful doctors would motivate them and provide relief during stressful exam times. The use of dream work has also been adopted

successfully in some cases in counselling with cancer patients. The clinical work seems to indicate that the use of dreams helps create a safe environment for therapy by encouraging clients to discuss the emotional aspects of their disease and introducing topics like death and dying, which are normally difficult to discuss. Visualisation techniques are also used in sport.[17] In the book *The Inner Game of Tennis,* for example, Timothy Gallwey argues that by rehearsing the game in one's mind, one could improve one's game in the court.[18] When a mind rehearses a motor skill, the neural tract through which impulses are sent from the brain to the muscles is better defined. In addition, athletes began to use visualisation in mental training programmes to decrease competitive anxiety and to improve motivation and self-esteem through the use of positive affirmations.

Dreaming improves personal wellbeing also by providing the space to imagine alternatives and raise aspirations. Some of our interviewees across all four areas aspired to have more money, own their own home, have better jobs – but about one-quarter (24 per cent) still wished for better relationships, to be good parents in the future, or to be able to leave a legacy. A mother from Dummer dreamt about going back to work one day after a long maternity break and that wish would motivate her to plan her future with more care and more purpose. A student from Manchester would instead dream about making his parents proud in the future, and that would inspire him to prove himself. Dreams can create, feed and reinforce aspirations. As studies show, people with more hope and higher aspirations, as well as ambition, can go on to enjoy greater career success than those with low aspirations.

A longitudinal study of children started in 1958 as part of the National Child Development Study (NCDS)[19] collected over 13,000 essays written when children were 11 in 1969 asking them to imagine their life at 25, their interests, home life, work, as well as to complete a survey on their current expectations on leaving school. The essays were later compared with the lives of the 42-year-old 'former children'. The study found a clear link between what people aspired to do at 11 years of age and what they ended up doing later on in life. Of those children with professional

aspirations at age 11, ranging from becoming vets and lawyers to becoming architects, half were in professional occupations at the age of 42, compared with only 29 per cent of those who had had no professional aspirations. The same can apply to relationships. Dreaming about one day finding love may prevent people from giving up on finding the right person, as was the case of a 50-year-old man from Dummer whose dream was to find love and companionship; and dreaming about being happily married in the future may lead people to reflect on their current relationships, and decide whether to work harder on them or move on.

Finally, dreaming about a better future can lead to continual improvement at home and at work. More focused and positive workers tend to be more productive, creative in their thinking and reach accurate conclusions faster.[20] Dreaming of the future projects individuals onto tomorrow, and can help them to be focused on what they can achieve, as well as what it will take to get there. It is widely documented that although people commonly dream about having more money, this does not lead to an improvement in their wellbeing – it has the opposite effect. Studies have shown that dreams of having more money can lead people to take up gambling, which can cause stress and anxiety.[21] This is related to what has been called the Easterlin Paradox, whereby people in richer countries are much happier than in poorer ones, but in wealthy countries such as the UK and the US, decades of economic growth have not led to an increase in levels of happiness. Once a country's GDP per capita passes about £10,000, the relationship between income and satisfaction largely disappears. For example, a study in the US by the psychologist Ed Diener shows that lottery winners and the Forbes 100 wealthiest Americans were only slightly happier than the average American: 'Making it big brings temporary joy. But in the long run wealth is like health: its utter absence can breed misery, but having it doesn't guarantee happiness. Happiness seems less a matter of getting what we want than of wanting what we have.'[22]

This is partially reflected in the findings of this research. People rarely dream of money for money's sake; instead they

dream of financial stability, owning a home, and having more resources to care for their families. Their dreams are more often than not responses to what they feel is lacking in their lives. By dreaming about realistic goals and one day achieving what they do not have, people can create new hope and often dream their ways out of difficulty. In so doing, they can build aspirations and strive for a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Dreaming prevents people from being overcome by risk and falling at the first hurdle or when times get tough.[23]

Dreams and personal agency

Dreams often remain dreams, but as Carl Sandburg once said, 'nothing happens unless first we dream it'. Some wishful and realistic dreams stay unrealised and just provide private solace, while some can inspire some form of action and perhaps even push individuals to strive to make their dreams happen. Among our interviewees, many expressed very practical dreams like 'buying a new kitchen' or 'being thin', which could be simply actioned on by, for example, saving money for their new kitchen or by starting a diet. But other dreams were more complex, for example, 'finding love' or 'happiness for my depressed sister'. These more complex dreams could never be simply actioned in one go – but if strong, they can result in a series of actions aimed at making them happen – by, for example, starting to date again, having a make-over or visiting a sister more frequently.

Dreams can therefore strengthen personal efficacy, the belief that our thoughts and actions have the power to bring about improvements.[24] Personal efficacy is likely to be a key construct[25] in determining how much we invest in wishful dreaming and how much we evade reality through illusions. This is because our level of motivation to take action towards real life and everyday goals is largely governed by our expectancy that such action will result in success.[26] So for example, expressing a dream that we know is completely unrealistic will not inspire action, while dreams that are thought to be within reach (wishful dreams) – whether immediate or not – are more likely to be actioned on. Wishful dreaming can therefore be effective in

enhancing personal efficacy when people are aware of ways in which their dreams could come true. For the student from Dummer, for example, the dream of one day being able to live in a nice cottage in a village like the one she is originally from makes her question her future career and plan to train as a teacher to work in a rural school. Dreams lead to action only when there is an element of realism to them. Similarly work done on the aspirations and wishes for the future among teenagers who are not in education, employment or training shows that an effective way to raise their aspirations is to help them to think about how their dreams could be practically realised.

Martin Seligman advocates the learning of a 'flexible optimism' whereby the deliberate overestimation that a positive outcome will result from one's actions will itself encourage an individual's increased investment in his or her endeavours.[27] By these means, optimism in conjunction with self-efficacy can act as a determinant of the type of dream people will try to make happen. Wishful dreaming points to what still needs to be realised and testifies that the horizon of the human reality is still open and changeable, while at the same time it motivates people into action.

We are not arguing that daydreaming or fantasising should be enough for action, but rather that they can *inspire* people into action. This can only happen if the dreams can be broken down into practical steps. Dreams like wishing for the world to be friendlier or more peaceful will hardly inspire personal efficacy as, in order to be realised, people will need to feel practically in control of their actions. And the expectations that people hold on the attainment of their dreams are also important. As Aspinwall argues, based on evidence from weight-loss programmes, employment after college and dating, those who fantasised about future outcomes were consistently less likely to achieve them than those who held expectations of their attainment.[28] Simply fantasising about a positive future is not enough to generate expectations.

Although more abstract dreams can be harder to turn into reality, they can still be valuable in helping people to maintain hope, and to keep them engaged with important outcomes. A 22-

year-old student from Manchester had a dream to spend more time with members of her family, who live far away. This prompted her to make more of an effort to visit or at least phone her family more often. Human beings are persistent, and at their best agentic, inspired, striving to learn, to extend themselves, master new skills and apply their talents responsibly. But without motivation this is impossible[29] – intrinsic motivation is the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore and learn. Motivation combined with dreams can reinforce the ability of human beings to make their dreams and hopes come true, continually to renew their lives and exert control over them. Building aspirations on their own is not enough: the ability to control situations and maintain motivation in the face of failure, and having the support structures able to support people's dreams, are the bases for positive change. The hope that one day I may be able to have a happy family and a good job needs to be based on realistic opportunities and encouragement for me to continue to strive for a good job, a good life–work balance and the possibility and confidence perhaps to retrain later on in life.

Dreams and collective agency

Many successful leaders are visionary. They have a dream and are able to make others reflect their own dreams in it. Most of the time, private dreams remain private, they are not spoken of until a catalyst brings together the dreams of the many and turns them into a vision.

Our interviewees' dreams of 'world peace', 'a better mass media in the UK', 'the end of hunger' and 'more tolerance' are values which are hard to act on alone, as individuals. A 23-year-old man from Manchester said, 'I know it sounds cheesy, but I would want world peace and equality for everyone. People need to make a commitment to these values worldwide.' A 60-year-old woman from King's Lynn instead shared her dream of 'happiness for everyone. There is too much sadness in life. It would be so much nicer if people were nice to one another. I would love for everyone to enjoy fairness and justice in their lives.' These may

sound unrealistic to many people – and certainly impossible for one person alone to realise. But throughout history there have been examples of personalities who have in their own way started to articulate a dream that many others already had… an end to poverty, a solution to climate change, race equality, the fight against AIDS/HIV. If there was a power that could bring together all of the dreams across the globe, many of the world's problems would be solved. Collective agency inspired by an ideal happens on a smaller scale every day – from neighbours' collectives recycling together to dreams of a better community spirit taking shape through village fetes and neighbourhood schemes. They happen all the time across Britain.

One-third (33 per cent) of the people we spoke to had dreams for a better world and many had similar dreams. But dreams are often unspoken and they remain private. In Dummer, many people told us of how they had managed to transform their village into a dream home for themselves and their families by coming together with their neighbours to establish crèches, art societies and reading clubs. As we have shown earlier in this chapter, people tend to have similar dreams, and there is significant potential in translating private dreams into collective agency. Sharing dreams with others and coming up with collective solutions would go a long way to solve many social problems.

Dreams and the capacity to hope

Finally, dreams have a further innate capacity. As they project people into the future, in the world of alternatives and possibilities, dreams provide hope. For the 60-year-old woman who dreams 'to never be ill – be healthy and with a roof over my head; that would be my first and foremost dream' and for the 50-year-old man who dreams about 'never worrying about taking care of my family, financially', dreams provide an escape route but also a measured hope about the future.

People never live in the present or the future, but rather present, past and future are entangled. Dreams act as a flexible buffer for people to live in the present but project themselves

into a possible future based on their past experiences, to manage tensions as they come and to wish for the best. Dreams can help people to manage difficulties, uncertainties and fears. They add an element of possibility to life, which at times prevents them from giving up. For the Harlow resident, who had just been made redundant, the dream of one day being able to pay off her mortgage and have a stable job keeps her going. It may not take away the disappointment and shock of not having a job, but it gives her hope for the future.

In the following chapters, we will analyse in detail two key tensions that people experience in their life. The first tension is between what we perceive our life to be like, and what we perceive the life of others to be like. The second tension is between what we see our life to be now – with its ups and downs – and what we hope or fear it to be like in the future. In both cases, dreams fill the gaps between us and others, present and future; they blur the boundaries and allow us to be flexible in our thinking, active in our hopes and open to possibilities.

3 My life is good, but Britain isn't

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream.
    English nursery rhyme

For many around Britain, life is not a positive dream. At times it is merry, at times dramatic and periodically challenging. Life tests people and very few would say that throughout their lives 'they are living a dream'.

The statistics are telling. At any moment, 1.5 million people aged between 16 and 75 are suffering from depression, and 2.7 million from anxiety. In spring 2008, a quarter of British adults felt that local areas were losing their sense of Britishness because of immigration[30] and economic confidence continues to fall. Many say that others cannot be trusted, and in a BBC poll in 2006 nearly half (47 per cent) of those questioned claimed that Britain was worse then than it had been 20 years ago.[31] Although today people can live longer and healthier lives, life expectancy still varies dramatically in many parts of the country. But while surveys and statistics can indicate the mood of society, what are people's stories and what do people really care about? What makes them happy and unhappy? What would they dream of changing?

In a brief snapshot of Britain, people in Manchester, King's Lynn, Harlow and Dummer told us stories of 'life as we know it', with plenty of ups and downs, challenging times and personal satisfactions. They were not stories of doom, but humane and rich stories of everyday experiences, emotions and hopes. As Carl Jung once said, 'There are as many nights as days, and the one is just as long as the other in the year's course. Even a happy life

cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word "happy" would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.'

But despite their ups and downs, overall people seem reasonably content with their lives. In our research we found that across the four areas, when we asked people to mark their level of happiness from 1 to 10 (where 1 is low, 10 is high), the average result was over 8, a marked improvement compared with five years earlier and, according to Ed Diener, a 'moderate' yet acceptable level of happiness.[32]

Although the self-reported happiness scores were high in all four areas,[33] the variations across the areas were significant. The wealthier areas, Dummer and Manchester, were on top of the list of 'happiest' places (Manchester with little change compared with five years earlier and Dummer showing the biggest jump from relatively unhappy five years earlier to the happiest place of all four). Harlow maintained third position, while King's Lynn was, by a small margin, the unhappiest of the four. While these self-reported scores are just indicative, they still give some perception of the quality of life of those surveyed in the four areas.

The media headlines that often portray a clinically unhappy Britain[34] sensationalise something which is much more complex and deep seated than it seems at a first glance. People in Britain may be leading lonelier and more segregated lives, as Danny Dorling's 2008 research shows,[35] but the capacity of people to adapt to new circumstances is striking. No matter what personal events may affect people's lives, in most cases, people are able to grow stronger and bounce back.

Through the process of finding out how people talked about their lives, what they saw as obstacles to realising their dreams, and what they would like to change, two major tensions emerged.

The first tension is related to a 'spatial' gap in people's lives:

Me   Britain

This tension induced people to differentiate between their own happiness and 'good life' and the happiness of everyone else. This is echoed by many MORI polls – for example when it comes to economic concerns, 86 per cent of British people surveyed by MORI in 2008 thought that an upcoming fuel crisis was likely and 60 per cent thought that it was likely that someone they knew would lose their job in the next 12 months.[36] However, people were more optimistic about their personal circumstances, with just 8 per cent thinking it likely that they themselves would lose their job in the next 12 months, and fewer than one in five (18 per cent) thinking it likely that they would not be able to afford to buy enough food for themselves and their families. The disjunction is seen by many to be characterised by a complex mix of personal optimism and national pessimism. In their private lives, people appear comfortable and confident in their dreams and aspirations and they feel in control of their lives, but in their public perceptions they are less so. People's views on their own families are positive, while perspectives on families in general are negative. This is an example of what has been called 'cognitive polyphasia', the ability to hold conflicting ideas on the same thing, at the same time.[37]

The second tension is related to a 'temporal' gap in people's lives:

Today   Tomorrow

Irrespective of where people live, there is a noticeable disconnect between what people perceive as their life today and what it may be like in the future. The inability and unwillingness to predict how their life may turn out to be is all too often dominated by an intense fear of the future and what is awaiting them and their families behind the corner.

Understanding what people dream about and what dreams can do to address the two disconnects between 'us and others' and 'our life now versus our life tomorrow' is central to any discussion on wellbeing. People of all ages, backgrounds and income may feel at some stage in their lives uncertain about their

future, about who is responsible for solving their problems, about who to turn to. People's dreams, wishes and aspirations can shed light on these disconnects; they can provide a vision and a possible direction for what kind of future we would like tomorrow, or what kind of relationship we would like to have with others. At other times, these dreams just reflect frustration – anger about a life that does not 'provide' quite enough. But before turning back to dreams, let's delve in more detail into people's lives, the tensions they feel and what matters the most to them. This and the next chapter are dedicated to this topic and the findings of our inquiry into people's lives.

My life and your life

Agnes[38] is in her late 70s – an active woman who spends a lot of her time with friends at social gatherings such as coffee mornings and church events. She lives in a nice residential part of Harlow and like many of her friends she moved to Harlow from London in the 1960s. Back then life was exciting: a new job for her ex-army husband, two young kids and life outside the overcrowded city. Harlow was the dream come true for Agnes and many like her: a chance for a bigger house with a garden and a new life. And Agnes enjoyed it.

Since those days Harlow has changed a lot, Agnes says. Neighbours have come and gone, her children have grown up and her husband has died. But Agnes, who retired years ago, still has plenty of friends through volunteering and social clubs. She describes herself as a happy person, 'a mother hen' to her grown-up kids and the five grandchildren who live within two hours of Harlow.

She tells us that she 'can't complain', life has been good to her and 'she wouldn't change a thing'. But as she makes clear, she belongs to her family, she doesn't belong to Britain: 'the country is too crowded, and people nowadays claim too many things'. She tells us that change has upset many people. Yet, 'not in my group of friends, not in my neighbourhood – it is still lovely… The local area is safe, but down the road, there is bother with kids. Britain has changed, and people don't care any more.'

Agnes' story is not unique. Over and over, people across the country have told us stories of personal satisfaction and contentment, challenges and pitfalls, coupled with a general resignation to the tensions, indifference and change that they observe directly or indirectly in wider society. But what has changed and how new is this change?

Polls and statistics seem to indicate that although nostalgia may play a part, change is taking place. More mobile family units have progressively led to a segmentation of the family. For example, estimates suggest that 17 per cent of over 65s are currently socially isolated, with predictions that this figure could increase by a third by 2021 if current trends continue.[39] Working patterns have broadly changed lifestyles. Commuting time is growing and working hours in Britain are relatively high compared with other European Union countries. In 2003 the RAC Foundation reported that British commuters have the longest journeys to work in Europe, with the average trip taking 45 minutes, almost twice as long as the commute faced by Italians and seven minutes more than the EU average.[40] According to the report, the average distance travelled by UK workers is 8.5 miles – 17 per cent further than a decade ago. An Amicus survey of over 3,000 of its staff in the UK in 2003 showed 57 per cent of respondents saying that long working hours mean they are too tired to enjoy time off with their family properly.[41] The effect on home life is considerable. In their research in 2006 Buonfino and Hilder found that negative impacts because of commuting times were reported on 'my involvement in family life' (40 per cent), on 'enjoyment of my social life' (38 per cent), on 'my relationship with my children' (35 per cent) and on 'my relationship with husband/wife/partner' (33 per cent). Work not only takes us away from neighbourhood interactions and reduces our free time, but can also affect people's ability to bond when they are home.[42]

And crime has changed, too. Although the British Crime Survey involving over 40,000 respondents every year shows that overall crime rates have fallen by 40 per cent or so over the past decade, it also shows that the types of crime have changed. For

example, violent crime has failed to fall as quickly as other crime; and violent offences recorded by the police have actually increased since 2001, weapon offences in particular having increased by almost 40 per cent. Teenage killings in London have risen from 15 in 2006 to 27 in 2007 and stood at 21 halfway through 2008.[43] A general perception that Britain is not as safe as it used to be 10 years ago is widespread, although when asked whether their local area is more or less safe most people consider that it has not changed.[44]

People's response to change and life events can be understood through three layers, each representing a particular aspect of an individual, which contributes to his or her ability to respond to change and be resilient:

· *an individual's character* whether the person is genetically wired to be optimistic or pessimistic, open minded or not; this layer can change with time – people can learn to become optimistic or shaped by their lives and relationships, but it does influence the general outlook that people have on life
· *personal relationships* the influence and support that come from families, partners, peers, friends and mentors; when character is not enough, these informal support structures and our social and emotional capital is there to pick people up, give them hope and support them
· *formal structures* institutions like schools, hospitals, social services; the ability (and knowledge of their existence) of being able to fall back and be 'caught' by the state can help to provide hope and a safety net in times of need

Although character and outlook on life varies from individual to individual, informal support and formal structures are present in anyone's lives. Some are dormant, some are distant – some give support and some are supported. The strength that these layers can give to an individual's ability to respond to change and bounce back in adverse circumstances (such as a period of transition or depression, or a breakup) are key to understanding people's attitudes to dreams, hope and aspirations.

Personal relationships

The story that emerges from the interviews and conversations is in many ways one of timeless humanity. For most people, life is still and primarily determined by close family and friends. No matter how much money one has or whether life is lived in a city or a village, having a functioning and supporting family and strong relationships with others is still at the core of wellbeing.

Maslow's theory of personality, for example, sets five fundamental needs for human beings: physical health, security, self-esteem, love and belongingness, and self-actualisation. Maslow suggested that people need to feel that the biological requirements of their physical organism are satisfied, that they have a sense of order and predictability within their lives, a sense of personal worthiness and importance, a sense of love and affection with important others, and that they are moving towards an ideal world or version of themselves.[45] And Charles Taylor suggests that the intimate sphere is key for individuals feeling a sense of recognition in their lives – the intimate sphere is 'where we understand the formation of identity and the self as taking place in a continuing dialogue and struggle with significant others'.[46] Many studies show that relationships matter more than money in securing people's happiness and in helping them to overcome adversity. In the US, in 2008 North and colleagues from the University of Texas at Austin analysed data from a study involving 274 married adults living in the San Francisco Bay area who were followed from 1981 to 1991. The survey indicated that although happiness was strongly tied to changes in the quality of family relationships over time, it was much less strongly tied to changes in income.[47] Money may come and go but relationships – if strong – do not decay. Economists have calculated the monetary value of being married (versus being single) at £72,000 per year, for example, with separation, on the other hand, equivalent to around minus £170,000 a year.[48]

Although this may appear to be commonsense, and it is certainly recognised in the literature, the effect that changes in family relationships have on people's perception of their lives, their self-esteem and their hopes is significant. Statistics show that in the last decade families have become smaller and more fragmented and the effects that this has indirectly on people's

emotional wellbeing and support structures cannot be ignored.

When a family is happy, its members are much more able to cope with financial stress, redundancies or sad events. Family can provide a buffer to cope with shocks. In the case of a woman in her 60s from Dummer, for example, having a young grandchild on the way gave her the strength to overcome depression: 'It was only the fact that my youngest daughter was expecting a child that kept me going. I needed to be there for her.' And family members can provide practical help and a safety net in times of trouble. As a 59-year-old woman from King's Lynn told us, 'My children have got families now, but they know that if they needed anything, I would get in a car and come and help.' People with a strong family were by and large people who, despite financial difficulties, or jobs uncertainties, had a positive outlook on life. They knew that if they fell, someone would be there to help them and pick them up.

It is when family is absent, distant, broken or just failing to provide help that wellbeing is hugely affected. In the case of a young professional from Harlow, family can provide a safe space and strength: 'My mum is my best friend. We have a better relationship now, since I came out as gay, better than ever. I tell my mum everything and I know she would never judge anything.'

And when family fails to provide the buffer against difficulties, life events can take over, and can have very negative effects on people's resilience and their ability to bounce back. An absent or dysfunctional relationship with family or friends can be a most significant source of loneliness and can generate anxiety about future relationships. In our interviews, family problems, no matter how old, caused the deepest unhappiness and feelings of guilt and blame. A 30-year-old single man from Harlow was a case in point. Despite longing for a family, he had to go through long periods of unemployment and a mental health condition and instability all on his own: 'I haven't seen my dad in years and years. I have aunts and uncles but I don't see too much of them… I speak to one of my cousins occasionally but not much… We have a very dysfunctional family.' The word 'dysfunctional' is also used by a 40-year-old twice-divorcee who told us,

when I was a child I had a very dysfunctional family. There was no love in our house, and I was all too often alone. I thought no one loved me or cared for me. Perhaps looking back that wasn't quite true, but I don't know… One thinks that it's never going to affect you but then I don't have stable relationships as a grown up, and have two failed marriages behind me. Perhaps I am just bad at relationships?

Failed relationships were significant for all age groups; from the elderly, whose children had moved on, to young people who found it hard to have a close relationship with parents. Good family relationships give mutual support, advice, a good word in time of difficulty – and they are 'just there' when one needs them. When this is not possible, the feeling of loneliness and of having been 'let down' is dominant and can have the deepest impact on the most vulnerable. A young single mother from King's Lynn told us,

The worst thing for me is just being by myself really. Not having either of my kids' dads there really. The baby's dad isn't really present as I'd like him to be. My daughter's dad is in Birmingham now so… And she misses her dad. And you see her crying and you know you can't do anything about it… That really breaks my heart. Also, just generally being alone, emotionally.

Family burdens – whether caused by absence, arguments, the need to care for vulnerable relatives – can make people wish for a better situation in life. As a girl from Dummer told us, 'I would like a more close knit family. We are not close... and I'd like family meals – we've tried to have them, but they are very tense.' And equally, the worry of caring for a relative – particularly when elderly – can cause quite a lot of strain:

I am cross with my mother: she is old and alone and still lives in London. She is all alone there, far from her family. She won't move out of where she is because of her memories. But she is too far from her children and she is old with no support. There is a point when you have grown up kids but still parents to care for. It's a function of the age we live in, people who live longer and families who move further.
King's Lynn, woman

The stories we heard were stories of the ups and downs of families and relationships. They were dominated by hope that they would eventually function again, by satisfactions as well as resentments and guilt, but overall it was clear that despite studies suggesting family breakdown in Britain, people eventually adapt. Mobility, longer lives, distance, the difficulty in maintaining a life–work balance all cause strain to relationships, but people eventually find ways to overcome them. In many of the stories we heard, if someone felt lonely, he or she would go out and join a social club, volunteer, get a part-time job, visit their relatives more often. If people had had a difficult relationship with their parents, they would work hard to find a supportive partner, a close group of friends and to become good parents themselves. Very few people talked about loneliness; although the challenges were certainly present, individuals were able to be resilient by responding in new and creative ways. Yet when asked about the state of society and even the state of family values in Britain, people had very different views – as we shall see later.

Money and work

Many have argued that money does not buy happiness but this is only partially true. According to Richard Layard, for example, happiness is inversely related to income at higher levels of income because of the declining marginal utility of getting richer.[49] Essentially, income rises over a certain level do not have much impact on personal happiness. What they do instead is create more anxiety and a 'want more' mentality – a luxury fever, as the economist Robert Frank calls it.[50]

People earning under around £10,000 are measurably, permanently happier when they are paid more. Over that mark, the impact is only temporary. More than anything, money makes people unhappy when they compare their own income with that of others. Richer people are happier – not because of the absolute size of their wealth, but because they have more than other people. But the wider the wealth gap, the worse it harms the rest. Rivalry in income makes those left behind more

miserable than the degree to which it confers extra happiness on the winners.

In pursuit of money and wealth, working ever harder, people find themselves on a 'hedonic treadmill'. Throughout Europe people report more stress, harder work and greater fear of insecurity as they chase ever-elusive gains. And this is very much reflected in the interviews we conducted in the four areas. The feeling of not having enough money was predominant across all groups and case studies. People in the more deprived areas we visited (Harlow, for example) were as concerned about not having enough money as the former stockbrokers in Dummer. In general, very few people thought that they had 'enough money' to live happily. In King's Lynn many told us about feeling the strain, as did this man in his 40s: 'The last 18 months I have been going through a continual financial struggle. I do feel that I seriously am in a chronic state of financial distress.' In Manchester, families told us of the difficulty in juggling childcare with not working. For example, a 30-year-old mother said, 'The worst thing about being a mother is that you can't work. I miss earning money – I feel that I can't go shopping and get the clothes I want.' In Harlow, financial insecurity was very common, with people worried about the food they bought and about debt. A 60-year-old woman admitted: 'I dread my gas and water bills coming through the letter box... I have stopped opening them, I just can't afford to pay them.' In Dummer, the needs were different, although the emotional aspects of feeling financial pressure were still present, as a mother of four illustrated: 'It is really hard when your kid's friends go on skiing holidays and you tell him, "No, dear, this year we just can't send you."'

Stress at work did not seem to feature very highly as a source of unhappiness; when it did, the unhappiness was related not so much to lack of free time and the amount of work as to the lack of challenge in people's jobs. This supports research that shows that one determinant of wellbeing is the match between the challenge of the activity and people's ability to meet it.[51] Stress in a job that we generally find challenging is probably more of an indicator of life satisfaction than unhappiness. Lack

of security at work, however, was a significant source of frustration, anxiety and pressure. A Harlow resident in her 40s told us about her job insecurity:

It went on for a couple of months... It's terrible, particularly if you have a family. You start – all of a sudden – contemplating what matters the most for you, and you are forced to prioritise and essentially rethink how you live.

Financial worries were exacerbated at the time of the research by the beginnings of the economic downturn, as observed by a 60-year-old woman from Harlow, 'the prices and the taxes are going up. People who are vulnerable like me, single, over 50, jobless, get punished. It's the system, which is responsible for this. And the world is overpopulated.' Most people worried about rising costs of food and fuel and were ready to adapt in any way they could: some by shopping around for the best prices, some by changing their lifestyles and some by moving abroad like this 70-year-old man from Dummer:

I have been going to France for 20 years and I have friends there, both British and French. All the English are there because they are fed up with this country. I will join them soon. It is the financial pressure that is the problem. There is no value for money here – and this has been the case for the last 10 years.

Coping mechanisms were imaginative. People struggled and tried to make ends meet in a variety of ways and in many cases the most significant impact of financial insecurity was emotional. Money problems and insecurity in employment can create the most intense and relatively short-term unhappiness – as Clark and Oswald's work recognises;[52] being without a job appears to be associated with markedly low levels of wellbeing. Yet, in most cases people were ready to pick themselves up. For example, people who had been made redundant spoke of the emotional and financial costs that they would just have to live with. Some would take up redundancy insurance and cut costs. Some would start taking cognitive behavioural therapy classes to enhance their self-confidence. And some would

proactively try to find a job, despite the blow to self-esteem inflicted by redundancy.

Neighbourliness and belonging

Rosemarie from King's Lynn is a woman in her early 40s, with two kids. She has lived in King's Lynn all her life, her kids go to school there and she manages a care home not far from her house. In her opinion the town has changed a lot:

There are more shops, the centre is nicer, there are lots of new faces around but there are some serious problems with crime in some estates. There aren't many children playing in the street any more and nothing to do for them, so they end up doing mischief. When my mum was alive there were lots of children and it was all so much friendlier, people used to chat in the street; now we are all too busy.

The area where Rosemarie lives is not too far from the centre and very residential – she drives to work as most of her neighbours do. When asked whether she would be interested in regaining the local sense of community she recalls from the past, she said 'yes, that would be nice. But what can I do? I have my family and my work and I am too busy.' Because she drives to work (alone) and is a busy mother and worker, Rosemarie doesn't have much time to dedicate to broader networks – and there are many people like her.

Many studies show that the quality of our networks (social capital) can make a significant difference to people's ability to live happy lives.[53] Yet increased mobility and longer working hours have perhaps weakened the traditional 'web' of social relations and have made Britons increasingly suspicious of each other. In the late 1950s, 60 per cent of the population believed that other people could be 'generally trusted'. In the late 1980s the figure stood at 44 per cent – it has now dropped to just 29 per cent and is thought to be falling even lower.[54] As a result, children now have less freedom to play outside and there are fewer activities for them in their local area.[55] For adults, instead, the warmth of companionship and

neighbourliness is often missing. One in five say that they hate people living nearby and have, to use the current cliché, 'neighbours from hell'.

This was not so much the case in Dummer, where the strength of the community was the source of pride and joy for most residents. Neighbours depended on each other for companionship (particularly when alone or elderly), for babysitting, dinner parties and membership of arts clubs and theatres. Dummer, like many other small places around the country, is a place to which people 'chose' to move in order to have a village life with neighbours 'worth knowing'. And it worked – the involvement in social clubs, crèches, village fetes, church groups and the choir was outstanding. As many told us, the village was a place where you 'would never feel that there is no one to turn to' or where there was 'no role to play'. But very often, the down side of a strong community spirit is that some people are bound to feel excluded. As some residents told us, too much neighbourliness can feel claustrophobic: 'everyone tries to give off this beautiful and perfect community spirit but at the end of the day, your problems remain strictly your own and no one gets involved or helps you out unless it directly affects them', and the separation between people was obvious. One resident said: 'The people who go to church are mostly the rich. My family does not get involved in the church and the parish council. And that creates a divide. I know people from school and from the pub, and people are nice to me, but sometimes I wonder what they really think about me and where I come from.'

In Manchester, King's Lynn and Harlow neighbourliness took different forms. In a more urban environment it is often hard to feel a sense of community, but for many, neighbourliness still mattered. For the elderly, neighbourliness often meant 'knowing that if you needed help, they would be there' and seeing friendly faces in the local shop. For young students, neighbourliness signified 'feeling safer from crime'. In different ways, most people cared about this ill-defined notion of community – even if this was based on fleeting encounters.

Statistics show that people are generally satisfied with their local areas and our encounters and conversations with people

generally confirmed this finding. However, those living alone and those who because of unemployment, age or disability spent significant time in their neighbourhoods were also those who seemed most concerned with change in neighbourliness and community spirit. As we were told by some, for example:

There used to be a much closer community there, more friendly. Now you shut the door and that's it. I make [it] my business to see who they are though. People die and people move on and that upsets me.
Harlow, woman, 60

I am disappointed with Harlow. It is really dirty now and it has died in a way, because it has been overrun by big corporations. Everyone travels by car, you don't see anyone walking places.
Harlow, woman, 79

On average and reflecting many things nowadays, I would say that the nicer bits keep getting progressively nicer whereas the rougher bits get worse.
Manchester, man, 22

Lack of intergenerational contact, distrust and feelings of insecurity were recurrent, although the biggest effects were seen in areas that had changed quickly and among those people who were most dependent on local ties, particularly if their relationships with family were weak. Communities are particularly important for people who have weak support structures and would otherwise find it hard to 'bounce back' in times of need. For example, many studies that use cross-sectional data have shown that individuals with rich networks of active social relationships, that do not include people living in the same household, tend to be happier with their lives.[56] One explanation for these findings is that happiness tends to increase with the number of people available to discuss important matters.

Britain: where is the country going?
In Manchester, as in Dummer, King's Lynn and Harlow, people are broadly happy with their lives. Despite the ups and downs,

people understand that life is to be taken as it comes and one cannot always be happy.

Yet when it comes to Britain and to where the country is heading, people are not as positive and hopeful. People live private lives, which are generally happy, in a country seen to be steadily descending into gloom. As a 30-year-old professional from Manchester told us:

Britain is a much worse place really. I have a nicer house than my parents had, and I suppose that my kids will have a better education than I had. But it's not a safe and clean country. It's full of dodgy places and people who try to cheat the system to get by.

For very few, Britain has changed for the better. For most, it is markedly worse, for four reasons:

- Britain is seen to be looking 'more squalid' with litter, crime, graffiti – indicative of a visible decline.
- The media is consistently negative about the country and unclear about what the future holds, increasingly suggesting that Britain's golden years are over, without providing a solution.
- There is a belief that Britons are locked in a long-term cycle of post-war decline.
- There is a public lack of understanding of what Britain and Britishness is and how they should be understood.

It is hard to be positive about a country that you do not recognise and that does not feel like your own. Many told us that it is impossible to be proud or even loyal to a Britain that does so many things wrong, that starts so many wars, that does not care for British people or that may label them as racist or too nationalistic for saying so. People recognise that public services have broadly improved, there are more opportunities for work and development, and that there is more choice out there if one has the money to afford it. Yet, overall there was a deeply felt pessimism about Britain. People understand changing Britain in their private lives because they directly experience it, but at a broader level, they cannot easily make sense of what Britain has

now become. Hence, an inflow of new migrants to King's Lynn shapes the negative views on the European Union of some of its residents, and everyday encounters with teenage mums walking down the street and not working contribute to the negative views of young people held by some elderly residents in Harlow, who feel that they are competing with them for state support:

Sadly I think Britain is becoming a worse place to live and I just really think that the EU is to blame. I mean, I completely understand that the influx of immigrants is good for the economy in many instances – however, I think that it is too much and I think it might be why there isn't the same sense of community in Britain nowadays. It just seems people led happier lives in the past though I am sure they had their fair share of problems as well.
King's Lynn, man, 32

Changed for the worse… People are too concerned with safety and security – we have all that security everywhere but it's expensive and too over the top. People are frightened to do anything – even the schools are different from when my kids used to go. The discipline is different. Parents don't smack their kids any more and that's a problem. All these young parent families are bound to go in the wrong direction. There are no role models, no values. Especially in Harlow where there are so many young mums. They had the wrong start in life; their kids will think it's normal. Look at those young people: they have no shame; they want want want all the time and think that it is their right to get stuff. They demand services and services are too soft on them. So people who really need help don't get it even if these young people have never worked in their lives
Harlow, woman, 61

I think it's a bit sad, I think what I hate the most is this health and safety and 'nanny state'. Nobody can do anything. It seems to me that all the freedoms that we once fought for in two world wars now seem to be totally restricted. I sometime feel that one isn't free. You can't drink more than half a glass of wine or you'll get sclerosis of the liver, or so they say; you can't eat an apple when you're driving along in the car or you get points taken. There are so many things that we all did perfectly happily, but now you can't.
Dummer, woman, 79

It has changed hugely. It's difficult to think about it and to be able to say in what way… On the one hand it's incredibly rich compared to other countries, but the change in families and communities has done a lot of damage. It's very hard to build aspirations in a place like Harlow. You constantly feel that you need to create communities with clear support and resources. It's so hard to build aspirations in these communities when it can just take one of the corporations which are based in Harlow to move offices, and [it] would make Harlow collapse.

Harlow, woman, 40s

One may wonder whether people in the 1950s would have said the same about a Britain changing for the worse. It is possible. But negative perceptions are still important as they uncover a major confusion about what Britain stands for and what the relationship between individual lives and wider society actually is.

Changing Britain was repeatedly explained to us in terms of a decline in fairness, civility and friendliness, three core values seen by many as traditionally central to British society. In the past, etiquette, politeness, manners, deference and respect dominated certain sections of British society; they provided a learned and accepted grammar of sociability. As Edmund Burke once observed, 'manners are of more importance than laws. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.'[57] Nowadays, relations with strangers are all too often mediated by distrust, while mutual help and empathy have largely disappeared from everyday encounters. The gap between the practices and values motivating the private sphere and those that are displayed in public life is widening. For example, Dummer is a place that most residents find safe, friendly and civil, but many who live in Dummer would argue that Basingstoke – down the road – is unfriendly, disorderly and uncivil. Outside the boundaries of the immediate social network, relations with strangers appear frightening, unpredictable and confused. A 40-year-old woman from Manchester told us:

The other day, my son who is only seven was pushed over by a man in a shopping centre. He fell, the poor thing, and the man never even stopped to say sorry and help me out. Same with me… I drive to work every morning and you should see how rude people are when they are in their cars. People are always pushing over, so rude… I think people should be more polite and more respectful.

Mind the gap

Why such difference of views? Why do we tend to be broadly happy with our private lives, but have negative views about the state of society?

The answer is quite simple. We are broadly in control of our lives and, within reason, if unhappy, we can try control our relationships: we can change job or move town. We can – to an extent – be authors of our own script. But it is becoming increasingly difficult for many to influence what is not within their direct control – the public space for example, or the behaviour of others. And the mechanisms for influencing the worlds that are just outside the immediate private sphere are often unknown to us, or do not seem to have an impact. Apathy in voting at elections and decline in the numbers volunteering show that the hope to make a difference through political or civic participation has, for many, been replaced by a retreat to the private sphere.[58] Increasingly, our families seem remote from families in general and our personal experience seems detached from the experiences of others; my Britain may not be your Britain. People may not feel lonely, but they feel let down by the state, and by institutions. Their voice is often so lost that it disappears in the noise.

If finding one's own identity means, as Erik Erikson suggests, achieving the 'feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of knowing where one is going, and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count',[59] then many in Britain today are experiencing a deep crisis of identity. Perhaps humans are condemned to be permanently dissatisfied and to feel that there is constantly 'something missing'. However, much lies in their expectations. As Theodore Zeldin suggests, 'how

people have felt about pleasure has depended on what sorts of pleasure they imagined to be possible, what exactly they considered to be missing and how far their horizons stretched beyond their own personal problems'.[60]

But let us now turn to the second tension, the tension between what we perceive our life to be 'now' and what we fear or expect it to be in the future.

4 How will my life be in the future?

I would sum up my fear about the future in one word: boring. And that's my one fear: that everything has happened; nothing exciting or new or interesting is ever going to happen again... the future is just going to be a vast, conforming suburb of the soul.
   James Ballard, science fiction writer

People are afraid of the future, of the unknown. If a man faces up to it and takes the dare of the future he can have some control over his destiny.
   John Glenn, astronaut and US senator

In the previous chapter, we identified two tensions affecting people's perception of life. The first one, discussed earlier, relates to the felt disconnect between our life, which is broadly not so bad, and 'life in general', which is not as good as it used to be. The second tension instead relates to the disconnect between how people feel about their lives today and how they feel about their future. This chapter focuses precisely on this temporal disassociation.

At times people will reflect on their lives and hope for a better future than their current present. And at times people will reflect on their present and predict that the future may be much worse. But most of the time people just 'don't know' what the future holds. The inability and unwillingness to predict how life may be in the future is often dominated by an intense fear of what is to come.

Fear of the future is a common human phenomenon and certainly not new. In ancient Rome, for example, many Romans driven by a fear of growing old chose to adopt adult sons to ensure they had support in their later years. In Ancient Egypt, fear of death and afterlife was instead fought through mummification or by writing appeals of the dead on funerary

stelae asking passers-by to utter a prayer on behalf of the deceased.[61] And fear of the future did not just apply to death and old age. For example, Eric Hobsbawm reminds us of the lack of a safety net for workers who lost their employment in Victorian England – which could have happened at the end of the job, the week, the day or even the hour:

They had nothing to fall back on except their savings, their friendly society or trade union, their credit with local shopkeepers, their neighbours and friends, the pawnbroker or the Poor Law, which was still the only public provision for what we now call social security. When they grew old or infirm, they were lost unless helped by their children, for effective insurance or private pension schemes covered only a few of them. Nothing is more characteristic of working-class life, and harder for us to imagine today, than this virtually total absence of social security.[62]

Throughout history, religions, philosophy, political ideologies, science and even psychotherapy (for the more serious cases) have all in different ways provided an answer or a way to counteract fear of the future among groups, communities and individuals across the globe, with varied results.

Yet, today, fear of the future is playing an even more significant role in people's lives. From economic insecurity to fear of old age, increasingly people are uncertain of how their future may pan out. Although fear of old age and death may be natural, fear of losing a job and not being able to provide for the family later on in life, or of not being able to live well during retirement, are indicative of a wider problem. Future anxiety is a state of apprehension, uncertainty, fear, worry and concern of unfavourable changes in a more remote personal future. Bandura specifically defines this kind of anxiety as a state of anticipatory apprehension over possible deleterious happenings.[63]

Understanding people's perspectives on their present and their future in conjunction with what they dream about (and what they do about realising their dreams) is the subject of this pamphlet, but it is also central to wider societal understanding of what upsets and motivates people, how they approach agency and take decisions over their future. This chapter looks at the

tension between life 'now' and life 'later' and at the spheres of
life that seem most uncertain, and 'out of control'.

Looking into the crystal ball

Kate is 19 and lives in King's Lynn. She appears to be a
traditional teenage girl – into music, fashion and friends. But
there is a lot more to her than that. We meet her at a youth club
in King's Lynn where she spends most of her time, volunteering
with children, every day. Kate is also a single teenage mum of
two; there are many like her in King's Lynn. Despite the
difficulties of being a young mum, not being able to go out when
she likes, living with her parents because of the need for help
with childcare, Kate knows what she wants: 'I couldn't think of a
better job – I spend time with these children, form relationships
with them here at the youth club and I help them. I am now
planning to train in child psychology.' But this certainty about
life and her purpose is somehow affected by fears over what is to
come. In her case, these fears are financial: 'I worry about the
future. When my kids turn 16 and they want their driving lessons
and I can't pay for them. And other kids' mums will be able to
pay for them and not me. That, I worry about.'

   She is not the only one. Throughout the country, thinking
about the future triggers fears as well as expectations that one
may or may not meet. Irrespective of what lives people lead and
where, the uncertainty about the future affects everyone at some
point in their lives. But it is particularly relevant when it affects
judgement about 'today', when it impacts wellbeing by creating
worries and anxiety about the future. There may not be an
optimal level of fear of the future, but there is certainly a tipping
point over which fear of the future can affect people's existence,
their outlook on life and the decisions they make about the
future. Irrespective of where people live, whether they are
professionals in Manchester, unemployed in Harlow, young
people in King's Lynn or retired stockbrokers in Dummer, fear of
the future is in great tension with people's perception of their
lives today. Although broadly happy with their own family, job,
neighbourhoods and the direction of their lives, anxiety over

possible negative turns in the future can seriously affect people's ability to think positively about both the 'now' as well as 'the future'. For example, in Manchester, Mark's thoughts of his happy relationship with his wife today were clouded by his inability to think about their future together:

My wife has a genetic disorder and we take every day as it comes. But thinking about the next 10 years is hard – I wish I could see us as we are now, with our children, but it may be very different, unfortunately. She may be sick and I would be there for her. But the future is not good.

Similarly, Sam in Dummer is looking towards old age fearing possible immobility and isolation. And Jane, a social worker in Harlow, does not know whether she will be in a job in the future.

Over the course of the research, fear of the future expressed itself most strongly in three main domains: work and careers, changing lifestyles and old age. All of these areas have a strong financial underpinning – whether relating to pensions during retirement or to providing for children in the future. For many people, money represents an easy way to articulate anxieties – even when in most cases anxieties are deeply emotional and psychological – and arise from issues of self-esteem, lack of autonomy, fear of old age and fear of being alone.

Work and career

A recent survey work by Youthnet[64] showed that nearly nine in 10 (87 per cent) school-goers felt pressure to achieve academically and almost half (44 per cent) were scared they would fail to meet their parents' expectations. When it comes to future career, expectations are incredibly important to motivating people to do better but can also exacerbate and reinforce fears of failure. The geographical distribution of the case study areas did not affect this finding, but age groups showed considerable variation: for young people, parental and peer expectations were significant, while for adults, personal expectations and fear of failure played a stronger role. A medical

student in Manchester, for example, satisfied with his life and focused on his studies, expressed anxiety about 'not making it as a doctor'; he was the first in his family to go to university. And a young professional in Manchester admitted to waking up in the middle of the night and thinking:

'What if I can't find a job? What if I can't actually earn as much as I would need to repay my student debts…? What if I can't show people that it was worth it?' Terrifying – as it is not up to me.

Research by Youthnet shows that this young professional is not alone. When asked what their greatest fear for the future would be, respondents to the survey were equally likely to name their own death or the death of a loved one as financial insecurity and debt (14 per cent).

When young and ambitious, expectations are important – but they can terrify people, they can disappoint and they can motivate people to work harder. In some cases they spoil the enjoyment of a degree, or a job; and at times they can generate more stress and induce people to work harder and longer hours. John, a 32-year-old commuter from King's Lynn, said:

It's hard to balance family life with work but it's important for me to earn more, have a nice house and provide for my family and do well in my job. It is a difficult balance and sometimes it gets to me. I love my family but I also feel that I constantly need to prove myself in my job and need to be my own person, proud of myself for what I do. But I still don't know what I want to do in two years' time, where will I be, what will I do? I wish I could see myself in five years and know. I am very confused, I never thought I would feel like this in my 30s, and it's affecting my family.

When people are older, on the other hand, responsibilities can add extra pressure. Crises and negative past experiences can influence people's ability to imagine a positive future and instead influence them to predict a negative outcome. Across the case studies, we met people in their 40s, 50s and 60s who were looking for a job, had been made redundant or were affected by job insecurity; the future seemed bleak for all of them. Margaret

from Harlow, for example, turned 60 and was made redundant by her company after eight years in the job. She feels uncertain about the future and is focused on finding any kind of job to support her through her old age, with very little savings and a mortgage to pay. But, she says, 'who wants a 60 year old? They all want qualifications, and I am bitter about having been made redundant after eight years, at this age.' A young man in King's Lynn goes back and forth to the job centre daily, a trip filled with regret, 'I should have paid more attention to my studies when I could, perhaps that would have helped, rather than messing around. I am now paying the price.' Job insecurity made a 40-year-old mother from Harlow 'contemplate what matters the most to you… but it's terrible, particularly if you have a family… every day, not knowing whether by the end of the day you would find yourself redundant'. And uncertainty about the future does not necessarily have to be experienced directly to matter, as a 30-year-old man from Harlow suggests:

You can't speak about London without hearing about knife crime and killings. I think the government can do more about that… it's unacceptable that 22 or so young people have been stabbed in London this year… I mean where is the world going?

Lifestyle and growing older

Fear of the future can often be a fatalistic response to life. It can be a reaction to change and life events – redundancy, becoming single, retiring. Coping with change can be hard and destabilising, and when combined with life uncertainty and feelings of unease and lack of control, it can lead to anxiety and fear. It is, however, extremely common.

Across the board and throughout the research, fear of old age and 'managing retirement' made people feel extremely vulnerable – no matter what income they had or where they lived. Planning and being able to maintain a good life was of primary concern for many and the fear (and prediction) of not being able to do so was particularly relevant. As a 40-year-old woman in Dummer said, 'My husband is 60 this year and it

would be nice for him to retire, but it is difficult with the kids – they may want to go to university, so how do we manage the future?' For a couple in King's Lynn, thinking about retirement felt like a positive scenario after many years of work but the difficulty of taking the decision to leave work, planning the savings for retirement and the lifestyle change made it far too daunting a prospect:

No idea what it would be like. What if we do it, and then after so many years of hard work, we need to cut down on everything? We would have to sell the house, sell the car... and we may get ill. And with the downturn, it may all get worse. Our children will have to provide for us and that would be awful. We probably need to work harder for a few years before we even think about this... scary prospect.

Planning for the future implies clarity over the kind of future one would want to have, and this is a worry that increasingly affects numbers of people of all backgrounds: 'Old age worries me... It is difficult to plan. I had a pension with Equitable Life and lost lots of money. I would really like to have enough money in my pension to be OK in old age. It is worrying though' (Dummer, man, 50s). Rising prices and the effect of the economic downturn on pensions alongside the negativity and pessimism of media headlines have worsened pre-existing fears, and have raised more questions and doubts and made the future more uncertain. A 50-year-old woman from Dummer told us that prices going up will influence her lifestyle and needs:

I am very worried about the future. We have an oil tank here (the oil bill used to be £90/200 and now is always £200). We only put hot water on for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening because we cannot afford otherwise. All three of us depend on my husband's small pension and it is not enough.

Interestingly, worries about growing older were more frequent among young people than among people in their 50s and 60s. The younger generations, more mobile and less dependent on informal social networks, are increasingly affected

by uncertainty. This is not just about jobs or money, but also about how to balance work and family, cope with stress, and care for elderly parents. This is a kind of uncertainty that is independent of how wealthy someone is or where one lives. It is experienced by people across Britain, people who live far from families, who live in cities where social networks are often dispersed, and households who balance family responsibilities with busy careers. One can find these people anywhere – north and south of the country. For these people, the points of reference have often weakened or altogether disappeared, and solid advice is often hard to come by. For Philip, a young father and professional from Manchester, life is overall happy – with a wife he loves, a house in Manchester, hobbies that he can pursue and a good job. But thinking ahead, Philip worries about when and how to start a family:

My parents are far away and my wife has a job she loves. Who is going to care for a child if we decide to have one? I have a serious genetic disorder in my family and I have been resisting having children for many years for fear of having a child with serious problems, and I am not sure how my wife and I would cope with that. And in any case, I think deep down I just don't know what the future holds, and whether I would and could be a good parent. Perhaps what I want is just to travel around the world and be young, without many responsibilities?

The world today, viewed by some as affected by conflict, crime and slipping values, for many is not the same world that there used to be. And not a good place to raise children:

I don't want to bring children up in a world like this. What if there is a war or more terrorism? It is not a safe place to be for them. I am happy with my life as it is, but what will the world be like when they are older?
King's Lynn, woman, 20

Worries about the future were in many cases not just personal: jobs, family lifestyles and health were central to people's fears, but future fears of terrorism, climate change and the economy were also influential in shaping people's outlook on

the future for themselves and their children. In the Youthnet survey,[65] almost as many young people expressed concern about the effects of global warming as about war, with seven in 10 respondents agreeing that they were concerned about each of these issues (72 per cent and 71 per cent, respectively). This was certainly confirmed by our own research, as discussed in the next chapter, which revealed that 33 per cent of the sample dream of a more peaceful, tolerant world.

What do you want from life?

Purpose and direction are hard things to find in people. Parents often ask their children: 'What do you see yourself doing in five years? What do you want to do when you grow up?' And for many adults themselves, this is a very hard question to answer. For some it is a question of character and circumstances. Children who have lived through uncertainty (foster children, for example) can suffer from feelings of reduced permanency in their present life and also in the foreseeable future.[66]

Answers to these questions also vary with age. Research by Susulowska on the types and frequency of different fears in people aged 5–60 showed that fear of the future was first experienced by young people aged 11–14 (2.8 per cent), increased among those aged 15–19 (15.7 per cent), has its highest frequency among those aged 20–29 (51.4 per cent), and is hardly experienced by those in older age, when the fear for their children became stronger.[67] It is interesting that 20–29-year-olds are more likely to be anxious about the future than younger or older age groups. The record of previous successes and failures, the level of cognitive functioning, and the deeper understanding of the relationship between present actions and their future outcomes constitute a fertile basis for incorporating the future time perspective into one's psychological present.

On the other hand, increased fear of the future may also be a function of the age we live in. In his studies among youth in Finland, for example, Nurmi[68] showed that 11-year-old pupils expressed more fears in 1987 than five years earlier. Their fears at the time were about future war, linked to the politically charged

atmosphere between the superpowers the USSR and the US. Risk plays a less significant role factor in our daily lives than it did a few generations ago – for example, we are much less likely to be killed in work-related incidents or to die from a whole range of diseases. But, as Ben Page argues:

as we increase control of our individual destinies, the world outside starts to look, by comparison, more uncertain. And the risks out there have become harder to judge – we have far more information but fewer reliable authorities (or so we think) to guide us through it.[69]

Many of our interviewees mentioned that it is hard to know what to believe any more and who is responsible for taking care of them in times of need or for solving the world's problems. The media report conflicting and often extreme views, and in the midst of an information overload, individuals find it hard to navigate, judge situations that are seen to be beyond their control, and know who to turn to and who to trust. World events like the war in Iraq, the attacks on Gaza, and 9/11, alongside persistent social and economic problems, result in some people having

a sense of the world becoming more chaotic, even when in our own lives we have a good chance of living long, safe and comfortable existences. We have become more sensitised to the small risks that may collapse the whole edifice of security we have built around ourselves.[70]

The result is often nostalgia for a more stable past.[71]

Today, with increasing media messages about the future of the economy, job insecurity and crashing housing markets, coupled with a declining trust in politicians (a British trend as much as a European one), fear of the future is becoming more relevant to understanding a general sense of confusion among people – a confusion over what people want from life, what they can feasibly achieve and how they can go about reaching their goals. And goals, as Jung suggested, are a life necessity:

Life is teleology par excellence; it is the intrinsic striving towards a goal… The end of every process is its goal. All energy flow is like a runner who strives with the greatest effort and the utmost expenditure of strength to reach his goal. Youthful longing for the world and for life, for the attainment of high hopes and distant goals, is life's obvious teleological urge which at once changes into a fear of life, neurotic resistances, depressions and phobias if at some point it remains caught in the past, or shrinks from risks without which the unseen goal cannot be achieved.[72]

People respond to fear of the future through dreams and measured hope about tomorrow. Dreams can be an indicator of what people feel a need and hope for – as a result, they can reveal a lot about people's understanding of the shortcomings of their lives and society as a whole and, more than anything, they embody hopes. By filling the space between present and future, for us and others, dreams enable us to be projected to the future; they may not lead to action or change, but they can provide a therapeutic escape from discontent, and can inspire us to consider alternative futures.

Conclusion

Dreaming and wakefulness are the pages of a single book. To read them in order is to live and to leaf through them at random, to dream.
Arthur Schopenhauer

Dreams have a real and positive impact on people's lives. They provide solace and hope, inspire visions of and direction for the future, and help people find new meaning in life. This, according to Martin Seligman, contributes to happiness; being happy is often about being more engaged and having higher hopes for one's life. Dreams of success, happiness or relationships can in part provide meaning and direction to people's lives – and although these may be unrealistic, they force people to think about who they want to be and what it would take to get there.

Dreams contribute to feelings of agency and foster aspirations and can therefore encourage professional mobility and performance. With young people, for example, the evidence shows that educational and career aspirations developed during adolescence can have lifelong significance. Young people with higher educational aspirations, or whose parents have greater expectations of them, are more motivated and attain higher levels of education than their peers.[73] Given that less than half of 16-year-olds in the UK gained a Grade C in both Maths and English in 2007, that 30,000 left school without a qualification, and that almost 40 per cent of those in apprenticeships failed to complete their course,[74] the potential importance of dreams in educational attainment is not insignificant.

But this is not enough. Without robust support structures and clear ways and incremental steps towards making dreams turn into reality, dreams become meaningless. As many studies have shown,[75] the secret to success is not necessarily having high

intelligence, but rather having passion, motivation, self-discipline and a capacity to persist – to follow a dream. These 'soft skills' – self-discipline, confidence and a level of realistic acceptance for oneself[76] – can be learned and enhanced through schooling. Academic, cognitive and, to an extent, imaginative skills should fall within the school's remit, equipping young people with a space for shaping aspirations, plans and dreams for the future.

The education system clearly has a role to play in shaping the aspirations of young people. However, schools are not the only institution that can encourage people to dream and to take their dreams seriously. Family support is of critical importance to cultivating children's interests and encouraging them to follow their dreams. But dreams are something that we have throughout our lifetimes – and employers, trade unions and career advisers can increasingly play a role in encouraging people to think creatively about their futures. This could be particularly helpful during periods of transition – going back to work after a sabbatical, becoming unemployed, leaving prison.

Imagination can help shape possible futures, inspire new directions, and retain hope when times are difficult. As this research has shown, the main barrier for people to realise their dreams is often a fear of failure, uncertainty over the future and a lack of clarity over who is responsible for helping them achieve these dreams. Understanding what people want, what they wish for, and how to support them in making new plans will become increasingly necessary for a society that can dream, with the aim of enriching one's prospects and continuing to hope. Although there is no clear recipe for success, building aspirations and the ability to think of long-term goals is crucial in fuelling a more mobile society and a happier Britain.

Surely there can be no policy for dreams. A minister for dreaming or a new government task force for imagination will never, and should never, exist. What can and should exist are public and private institutions that appreciate and cultivate imagination and wishful thinking and are able to lift the barriers that prevent them – institutions that allow the space, encouragement and support for individuals, groups, children

and their families to realise their dreams and not give up on the future. A culture of imagination will lead to a more aspirational society and, with the right support, a stronger and more resilient Britain. Imagining a better future for oneself or for one's community is never just a dream.

Notes

1 'One in ten young people consider life meaningless'; and Jones, 'Life "meaningless" for one in 10 young adults'.

2 Quaglia and Cobb, 'Towards a theory of student aspirations'.

3 There were 55 in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours with members of the public in the four case study areas.

4 There is much evidence that living in a world of fantasy can be a sign of a serious mental health condition like schizophrenia, for example. Fantasy, imagination and dreams should not lead to a loss of contact with reality or interfere with an individual's ability to develop a coherent and integrated life experience.

5 See Seaward, *Managing Stress*.

6 Kasser, 'Personal aspirations, the "good life," and the law'. See also, Kasser and Kanner, *Psychology and Consumer Culture*.

7 Baylis, 'Relationship with reality'.

8 Ibid.

9 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.

10 Seligman, *Learned Optimism*.

11 Klinger, *Structure and Functions of Fantasy*.

12 Baylis, 'Relationship with reality'.

13 Echoed in Don Slater's research for the Camelot Foundation.

14 Hayden et al, *Attitudes and Aspirations of Older People*.

15 Seligman, *Learned Optimism*.

16 Danner et al, 'Positive emotions in early life and longevity'.

17 Visualisation is a type of mental imagery; this started with Carl Jung, who described the ability of the unconscious mind to generate images that have a calming, healing effect on the body.

18 Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis*.

19 For example, Morrow and Elliott, 'Imagining the future'.

20 Huppert et al, *The Science of Wellbeing*.

21 See, for example, Casey, 'Women and UK national lottery play'.

22 Myers, *The American Paradox*.

23 The work of Demos in 2008 on enterprise culture suggests that fear of failure is one of the main barriers that stops young people from realising their dreams of becoming entrepreneurs.

24 Bandura, *Self-efficacy*.

25 Similarly to White's concept of mastery or Atkinson's concept of achievement motivation. See White, 'Motivation reconsidered'; and Atkinson, *An Introduction to Motivation*.

26 Baylis, 'Relationship with reality'.

27 Seligman, *Learned Optimism*.

28 See also Oettingen and Mayer, 'The motivating function of thinking about the future'; and Oettingen, 'Positive fantasy and motivation'.

29 Deci and Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*.

30 Ipsos MORI, 'Rivers of blood survey'.

31 47 per cent thought that the quality of life in Britain had declined, with 47 per cent blaming a 'lack of respect' and 46 per cent citing crime; see BBC News, 'Britain "worse than 20 years ago"'.

32 Quoted in Nauert, 'A moderate level of happiness is best'.

33 Of the four case studies, Dummer residents reported the highest current happiness level, with an average of 8.34 out of 10. However, they also reported the most marked change in their happiness from five years ago (5.6 out of 10). Manchester residents were second happiest at 7.91, an averaged figure, which is quite similar to the 7.81 happiness level five years prior. Harlow followed, with an average happiness level of 7.82. Residents from King's Lynn had the lowest self-reported level of happiness – an averaged 7.46.

34 See for example, 'Unhappy families'; and 'We're scrooged'.

35 Dorling et al, 'Changing UK'.

36 See www.ipsos-mori.com/content/fear-uncertainty-doubt-survey-for-schotts-almanac.ashx (accessed 2 Apr 2009).

37 The term 'polyphasia' comes from the physics of electricity where the adjective 'polyphasic' refers to the existence of alternative and simultaneous currents; however, they can be out of phase with one another. The hypothesis of cognitive polyphasia refers to the possibility of using different and

sometimes diverse ways of thinking and knowing, such as the scientific, common sense, religious, metaphorical and so on. It was first introduced by Serge Moscovici in the 1960s to mean 'diverse and even opposite ways of thinking', suited and articulated in the different contexts in which they are part. See Moscovici, *La psychanalyse, son image, son public*; and Moscovici and Duveen, *Social Representations*.

38 For reasons of anonymity, all the names have been changed.

39 See McCarthy and Thomas, *Home Alone*. There is also an increasing propensity to live alone among people of working age as well as older age groups. Research by Malcolm Williams (2005) shows that although the population has grown by 5 per cent over the past 30 years, the number of households with just one occupant is up by 31 per cent. The research points out the propensity to live alone among working age men (25–44) and women (40–50) as well as older people. Findings from the study 'Baseline study of solo living and long-term illness'.

40 RAC Foundation, 'Commuting'.

41 The sample included workers in the NHS, manufacturing and financial services sectors. See Shifrin, 'Workers "too tired to celebrate Christmas"'.

42 Buonfino and Hilder, *Neighbouring in Contemporary Britain*.

43 Page, 'Does Britain need fixing?'.

44 Most people in Britain think that the country is a less safe place to live than 10 years ago (66 per cent); see Ipsos MORI, 'Fear, uncertainty, doubt survey for Schott's Almanac'.

45 Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*; and Sheldon et al, 'What is satisfying about satisfying events?'.

46 Taylor, 'The politics of recognition'. The term 'significant others' was originally used by Harry Stack Sullivan in 1953 to describe those people who have a most significant effect on an individual's sense of self, cited in Thompson, *The Political Theory of Recognition*.

47 North et al, 'Family support, family income, and happiness'.

48 Clark and Oswald, 'A simple statistical method for measuring how life events affect happiness'.

49 Quoted in Jeffries, 'Will this man make you happy?'.

50 Frank, *Luxury Fever*.

51 Challenge and the stress associated with trying to master a challenge can lead to satisfaction and a feeling of achievement. Csikszentmihalyi, for example, talked about 'flow', a term often used to describe active participation and absorption in a challenge. When people are absorbed in the flow, they tend to experience feelings of satisfaction. Csikszentmihalyi describes it in the following terms: 'being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.' See Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*.

52 Clark and Oswald, 'Unhappiness and unemployment'.

53 See, for example, Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

54 Buonfino and Hilder, *Neighbouring in Contemporary Britain*.

55 Hannon et al, *Seen and Heard*.

56 See, for example, Phillips, 'Social participation and happiness'; and Burt, 'Strangers, friends, and happiness'.

57 Burke, E, 'Letters on a regicide peace', letter no 1, 1796.

58 This trend is not just a British phenomenon; there has been much discussion on the democratic deficit in many European countries. As argued in *The Everyday Democracy Index*: 'Many Europeans share a collective disappointment with democratic *institutions* and are pessimistic about the future of society as a whole. They are less likely to vote, join political parties, or trust their elected representatives than they were 30 years ago. On the other hand, their commitment to democratic *values* and their desire to shape the decisions that affect their lives – to be "authors of their own scripts" – has never been stronger. This disconnect between personal and collective life is not coincidental: it is the product of democracy itself. The same emancipatory experience that has enlarged personal freedom has made governing more difficult, and disappointment with democracy more pervasive… There is a very strong relationship between a country's performance on the Everyday Democracy Index and aggregate measures of life satisfaction. [The Everyday Democracy Index (EDI) measures electoral and procedural democracy, activism and civic participation, aspiration and deliberation, family democracy, workplace democracy and democratic public services.] This is consistent with psychological research at the individual level linking happiness to a sense of control over one's life. We also find that people in countries with high EDI scores are much more trusting of each other, and that their governments tend to do a much more effective job of tackling poverty and gender inequality.' See Skidmore and Bound, *The Everyday Democracy Index*.

59 Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*.

60 Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*.

61 Lange and Schäfer, *Grab- und Denksteine des Mittleren Reichs im Museum von Kairo*.

62 Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*.

63 Bandura, 'Self-efficacy conception of anxiety'.

64 Youthnet, 'Fear and hoping in UK'.

65 Ibid.

66 Molin, 'Future anxiety'.

67 Susulowska, 'Tresc lekow w przebiegu zycia ludzkiego'.

68 Nurmi, 'Experience of threat of war among Finnish adolescents'.

69 Page, 'Does Britain need fixing?'

70 Ibid.

71 See Krauss, 'Anxiety': 'one might argue that man can directly and totally experience only the now. It is impossible in the present to feel the pain of four years ago or ten years from now. Therefore, all that "exists" is the present.'

72 Jung, *Collected Works*.

73 Cabinet Office, 'Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities'.

74 HM Government, *New Opportunities*.

75 See, for example, Murray, *Real Education*; and Gladwell, *Outliers*.

76 See Seldon, 'Lessons in life'; and Seldon, 'Teaching happiness is no laughing matter'.

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TESCO

In today's recessionary Britain, where the incidence of anxiety, insecurity and fear is likely to increase and where trust in institutions remains low, dreams acquire a new importance. Dreams and wishes can represent an untapped source of strength as well as creativity in imagining new alternatives and lifestyles for the future.

The research for *Wishful Thinking* was conducted over nine months in four different areas of Britain: Harlow, Dummer, King's Lynn and Manchester. It took place in streets, homes, playgrounds and social clubs in areas selected on the basis of their historical diversity, the backgrounds of their residents, their size and their location. The wishes of the nation paint a picture of generosity, pragmatism and hope for the future.

This snapshot of British lives illustrates people's potential to increase their wellbeing, agency and resilience in difficult times. Wishful thinking means individuals can re-imagine themselves and create innovative solutions for their futures. By neglecting creative thought, children would not be able to picture who they want to be when they grow up; people would not aspire to do better socially, professionally and financially; and civic movements would lose momentum. If people were encouraged to cultivate their imagination, society would be healthier, more resilient and more aspirational.

Alessandra Buonfino is Programme Leader at the Young Foundation and a Demos Associate.
Silvia Guglielmi is a researcher at Demos.