Values and civic behaviour in Australia

Project report

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The National Engagement Project Trial
Values and civic behaviour in Australia

Project documents available on the Brotherhood’s web site <www.bsl.org.au>

Project report

Research method

Report of the in-depth interviews

Report of the focus group discussions
Foreword

I recall, on my return to Australia in the late 1960s from the United States where the ‘war on poverty’ was still being fought, being shocked to discover how little attention was being given to poverty and inequality in Australia. It was to take a massive campaign on the part of the Anglican Church to persuade the government of the day that an enquiry into poverty was needed. This inquiry led by Ronald Henderson found widespread poverty especially among large families and among the elderly. However by the time the Commission of Inquiry reported, the government wanted to move on to other issues.

The Brotherhood has always had to work very hard to persuade people that poverty exists in this ‘lucky country’ and that we should do something about it. In the 1930s, reformers like Father Tucker and the Methodist layman Oswald Barnett worked hard to create imaginative ways of representing their research on poverty. They used many different techniques to present their research, such as the use of statistics and graphs for the lantern slides at public meetings, as well as newspaper articles and radio and on very special occasions moving pictures such as Marvellous Melbourne. They were prepared to organise stunts and demonstrations seeking to dramatise the plight of the poor—whatever would get the mass media to help them get their message across. They were prepared to risk their reputations by associating with anyone who would back their cause. Barnett was regularly attacked as a communist because he advocated what were seen to be radical solutions.

This struggle is never won but has to be fought again and again.

The National Engagement Project Trial was a preliminary investigation into the values of a cross-section of Australians. Of course the trial found a proportion of ‘bleeding hearts’. However for many people questions about poverty and our attitudes to it are just too hard. It was hard for people to move from their own personal experience to the broader and more complex issues of how the obvious poverty that does exist might be addressed. There is also the difficulty—in a society in which we are constantly emphasising individual choice—of imagining what it must be like to face only constraints and ‘least worst’ solutions to seemingly intractable problems. It is only those who work directly with poor families who really grasp how complex are the problems that many people face every day of the week. Lack of money is often a key problem, but is by no means the only issue or even the most important constraint which people face.

However if our objective of an ‘Australia free of poverty’ is to take flesh, we need to find the most effective ways of communicating the damage Australians are doing to themselves by tolerating so much poverty and inequality in this fundamentally very wealthy society.

The research that the Brotherhood has been doing is important if only in illustrating how large the challenge we face. There needs to be a more effective engagement, greater empathy and understanding. Perhaps the way forward is not so different from that faced by Father Tucker. We need to challenge people’s values. Sometimes ‘a fair go’ is not enough. There is a moral question. However we also need to challenge people’s minds. To have nearly a million children living in families with no adult in the workforce is to create a problem not just for this generation but also for generations into the future. We need to understand where people are coming from. But we also need to challenge people to seek a better and fairer Australia.

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Thanks also to Deborah Patterson, for her tireless contribution to the editing of the research reports.

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‘While scholars differ on important details, all agree that the new approach ought to focus on finding effective ways to hear how members of the audience make sense of their everyday lives and how their personal actions are linked to both the messages they attend to and the social structures they live in.’

(Dervin 1989)
1. Project overview & method

Project overview

In 2001 the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) began an investigation to provide an improved understanding of Australians’ values, how values translate into a vision for Australia and the role of the individual in achieving social ideals. This study was undertaken to place the Brotherhood of St Laurence and other community organisations in a stronger position to engage with and advocate for Australians.

The investigation was called the National Engagement Project Trial and comprised three complementary components: a background paper, an in-depth interview study and a focus group discussion study. The background paper and in-depth interviews were undertaken concurrently, providing an understanding of the issues surrounding values that helped direct the focus group discussion to possible avenues for engagement with Australians. In addition to BSL staff, the project was guided by a research advisory group and had significant input from two independent researchers.

The objectives of the National Engagement Project Trial were to:

• provide insight as to whether there are in fact common Australian values, or a diverse range of different value sets in different parts of the population
• determine whether, and if so how, people’s personal aspirations are different from their aspirations for the nation
• review the types of policies that people believe are needed to achieve their aspirations for the nation
• point to ways of framing questions that will effectively identify Australians’ value and policy positions.

This report summarises the three research components of the National Engagement Project Trial. It especially reflects the learnings from the focus group discussions, which were influenced by the earlier background paper and in-depth interviews.

Research considerations

A qualitative research approach was adopted to focus on the relationship between values, attitudes and beliefs, and behaviours. Using this approach the discussions delved past socially acceptable responses to gain insights not easily obtained from quantitative approaches. However, our qualitative approach does not permit extrapolation of findings to the Australian population, because of the small sample size and non-random sampling adopted.

Furthermore, focus group discussions were not conducted with Australians who had limited English language skills, so the research could be said to be biased towards English-speaking Australians. On the other hand, first and second generation Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and carers of and people with disability were intentionally included.

Project method

Background paper

A background paper reviewing ‘values’ literature was drafted by Mark Pegg between November 2001 and January 2002. It provided a brief ‘guided tour’ of the extensive work that has been conducted in the conceptualisation and investigation of values with a variety of audiences. It did
not specifically review literature on strategies that link communication about values with fostering social action.

The work touches upon conceptualisations of ‘values’ in various disciplines including sociology, psychology, political science and ethics. It canvases research that explains and defines values. It reflects on the Australian values that have been reported in the literature, with views on value stability across time and across Australian audiences including indigenous Australians.

Of note from the review is a discussion of changing cultural pressures, characterised as ‘lifestyle’ versus ‘values’. It is suggested that changes to lifestyle, as the Australian culture becomes more individualised, are creating tension with values of civic contribution. There is some unease among Australians about Australia’s future, as indicated by Eckersley (1998, 1999) and Johnson (2000). The confusion between what is termed lifestyle and values remained unresolved and future directions uncertain.

**In-depth interviews**

Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted in central and outer Melbourne and regional Victoria. Participants were recruited to include a range of ages, gender, education, household incomes and ethnic backgrounds. A natural confounder of recruitment according to income levels was the frequency with which participants had changed income brackets within their lifetime.

The in-depth interviews were completed during December 2001 and January 2002. Participants were recruited from market research databases and through cold calling (random selection of phone numbers from the White Pages directory). A quota was set to ensure some participants had not previously been part of a focus group or in-depth interview, to guard against a possible bias from seasoned research participants.

Interviews were convened either in the participant’s home or at a pre-arranged location, depending on the participant’s preference. Each participant was paid $75 for his or her involvement, which ranged from 2 to 2.5 hours.

**Focus group discussions**

Fourteen focus group discussions were convened during April 2002. The groups were segmented by lifecycle stage and their level of activity on social issues. The lifecycle segments were younger adults (singles and couples without children, under the age of 40 years), parents with dependent children, and older adults (over the age of 40 years). The behaviour change continuum (outlined below, and adapted from Prochaska and DiClemente’s Stage of Change Model (1983) was used to categorise activity on social issues. For each lifecycle category there were four groups, representing each of the following stages in the behaviour change continuum:

- pre-contemplation (when an issue is not ‘on that person’s radar’)
- sensitisation and contemplation (when the person has noticed an issue is considering a response)
- trial action (the person has tried an action)
- sustained action (the person has been involved in ongoing or recurrent action).

In addition to the 12 focus groups recruited according to the specifications described above, two mini-group discussions with teenagers aged between 16 and 18 years were conducted. Affinity pairs were selected to maximise the comfort of participants.

Focus group discussion participants were recruited from a market research database and by cold calling (random selection of phone numbers from the White Pages directory). Again, participants were again screened to ensure some participants had never been involved in qualitative research before.
Focus group discussions were convened at The Key Response rooms in South Melbourne, with the exception of four groups that were convened in community rooms in Melbourne’s outer suburbs. Participants were paid $55 for two hours of participation.
2. Findings and discussion

The purpose of the trial project was to address objectives relating to values, policy and communications. The trial was also to provide some indication as to whether a National Engagement—a conversation with Australians about their values and how they influence social directions and policy—was a viable proposition and if so, to ascertain the form the engagement should take. Our qualitative approach could not definitively answer whether a National Engagement project was feasible, but it did provide insights into effective and less effective methods of engaging Australians in a discussion about civic contribution and values.

Project objective 1: Provide insight as to whether there are in fact common Australian values, or a diverse range of different value sets in different parts of the population

Though the method adopted in this research could not provide a definitive answer for this objective, research was undertaken to provide some insight as to whether values among participants were generally consistent or whether different clusters of values appeared.

Values, as outlined in the background paper, can be considered as ‘abstract principles (e.g. equality, human dignity) which apply equally well as criteria that frame individual decision-making and shape institutional practices such as policy making’ (Pegg 2002). Rokeach (1974) defines an individual’s ‘value system’ as ‘an enduring organisation of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance’. In the present research, values were deliberately not defined, in order to understand the views of Australians rather than imposing a benchmark.

The background paper highlighted the fact that conceptualisations of values have been quite divergent. Writers have differed in discussing the different levels in which values operate (for example Walzer’s ‘thick and thin morality’ (1988) and the influence of these values on ‘how we actually lead our lives’ (Mackay 1999). The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews did not provide evidence of distinctive values sets associated with Australians with different socio-economic, educational or family characteristics. Lifestyle, education, ethnicity as well as a gamut of other demographic characteristics included in the research did not appear to be associated with separate clusters of values.

In explicitly exploring the concept of values in the in-depth interviews, several observations were made:

- Different language was used by participants for discussing values, including principles and guidelines.
- Values were interpreted differently, for example some regarded ‘family’ as a value while others focused on care for others and justice for all.
- Values for most participants had not been thought through in great detail.

Emerging from the in-depth interviews was an understanding that democracy, justice, caring for others, equality, a less selfish society, loyalty and freedom of self-determination were widely shared values. These values, it should be noted, were mostly extrapolated from general conversation rather than being stated by participants, for the simple reason that they had not reflected on their values to make an articulate summary. For the same reason, this list of values should not be considered comprehensive.

The values that were identified in the focus group discussions were consistent with those from the interviews, including democracy, freedom, justice and care for others. These were broadly shared values regardless of gender, age, income or ethnicity.
The background paper examined a number of value surveys and studies in Australia and across time; results from the present study are largely consistent with earlier findings. A 1995 Australian survey (Braithwaite, 1998) identified the top ranking values with over 95 per cent endorsement from Australians as including human dignity, a world at peace, the rule of law, freedom, equal opportunity for all and preserving the natural environment. A more recent report by the National Multicultural Advisory Council (1999) suggested that Australia’s principles and values include commitment to Australia, freedom, a fair go, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, mutual respect, political equality, equal opportunity and non-discrimination.

This trial suggests that a number of general values for Australian society are held by Australians from diverse backgrounds and suggests that there is little evidence of different value sets aligned with socio-economic status, age, or household type.

Interviewees did differ in the emphasis placed on particular values and how these values impact on specific opinions and behaviours. Participants identified similar values but prioritised them differently. For instance, one participant who migrated to Australia as an adult was critical of Australia’s democratic systems while other participants expressed pride in the democracy Australia sustained. Regardless of specific opinions, all wanted Australia to have a democratic political system.

**The behaviour change continuum**

The behaviour change continuum as adapted from Prochaska and DiClemente 1983 Stage of Change Model is a useful campaigners’ tool to describe different audiences and develop techniques to create social change. Ironically, the same difficulties which prevented people from responding to values questions contributed to problems in accurately assigning participants to focus groups representing sections of the continuum.

When participants considered their social contribution and action in response to recruitment questions, participants understated their past civic contributions. As a result, some participants who had been involved in fundraising for various charities or had attended rallies were placed in ‘pre-contemplative’ or ‘sensitised and contemplating’ group discussions. People in ‘trial action’ focus group discussions—involvement in one to three socially active events in the last 12 months—also tended to believe that they had not been especially involved in their community.

Participants in the pre-contemplation, sensitised and contemplating and trial action stages of the continuum were surprisingly similar. The only group whose views on social contribution differed was the sustained action participants. These participants acknowledged their contributions and discussed strategies they used to avoid burn-out from their involvement.

The behaviour change continuum is useful as a theory from an engagement or campaigning perspective, but was too neat when relying on people’s self-assessment, as Australians simply had not thought about their values and their social action.

This research identified that compassion for others, participation in the community, assisting others and, to a lesser extent, civic contribution in a political sense are all underlying motives for these Australians. They are however mostly dominated by an individualised and materialistic society. The challenge for social and community sector agencies eager to engage Australians in action is to use creative communication strategies to start to alter this balance. Some suggestions to break down the barriers to action, as well as contribute to cultural change in Australia, are detailed under project objective four.

**Project objective 2: Determine whether, and if so how, people’s personal aspirations are different from their aspirations for the nation**

The interviews provided a clear finding in relation to this project objective. Personal aspirations and aspirations for the nation appeared to be largely unrelated. Specifically, participants could not see how achieving or failing to achieve one’s personal aspirations related to achieving one’s aspirations for society.
Interviewees spoke of having happy and healthy families, a comfortable lifestyle and material wealth and being in a job where they were treated well and enjoyed the work. Of the sixteen in-depth interviews, only one person noted she would not be satisfied with her life unless she had made a contribution to her community. A handful of older participants had been involved in community activity during their life and felt they had already contributed sufficiently.

Overwhelmingly, interviewees presented a positive perspective of their current situation despite, in some instances, quite serious employment, relationship and health problems.

In relation to social aspirations, they aspired to a less selfish and materialistic society. They also wanted a safe and environmentally friendly society. Many hoped Australia would be tolerant of diverse cultures. They believed government should provide more support to Australian businesses because they provided employment for Australians, and therefore tax revenue for the government. Participants wanted businesses to value their employees above profit.

The focus group discussion participants emphasised similar social goals. Safety emerged as a key concern as did education and family support as these were thought to be avenues through which many social problems such as drugs and crime could be resolved. Perspectives on a tolerant and a multicultural society in the focus group discussions, which coincided with ongoing refugee debate and Woomera Detention Centre protests, differed somewhat from the earlier interviews. There was some concern that new cultures would introduce values that present Australians did not approve.

Participants believed their personal aspirations, and the achievement thereof, were separate from their social aspirations. This implies a media and communications task that should embrace the finding that people are more engaged with their community when messages can be personally linked. It is suggested that agencies attempting to create community mobilisation should attempt to bring social aspirations ‘into the homes’ of Australians, revealing how personal behaviour can influence society and how society and its structural problems affect their lives. Strategies for establishing those links are suggested under the project objective four summary.

**Project objective 3: Review the types of policies that people believe are needed to achieve their aspirations for the nation**

The focus group discussions provided the most direct understanding of participants’ opinions of important policy areas for Australia. In addition to a specific policy-rating task where participants were invited to propose budget allocations for a pre-determined list of policy areas, there was a free-flowing conversation about visions for Australia and Australia’s future.

On average, participants allocated more than one-eighth of a ‘hypothetical’ spending budget to each of public education (14.3%) and public health (14.1%), the two highest rating areas. The next largest spending areas were age pensions (8.4%), assistance to unemployment (8.4%) and the environment (8.2%).

In spontaneous comments participants made when reflecting on this exercise, the public education and health systems were raised first and discussed at length. It is interesting to note that few participants discussed their allocations to social welfare and the environment, even though these were moderately high.

The next largest policy spending areas of defence (7.7%) and police (7.1%) frequently prompted comment. Receiving modest budget allocations were the arts (2.8%), private education (3.0%) and sports and leisure (3.1%).

Several surveys monitor the perceived importance of policy areas in Australia. Some of these are detailed in the background paper. Overall, education, health, social care and safety, with a slightly lower rating for the environment, emerge most strongly in policy ratings in the last few years and are therefore confirmed by the findings of this research.

Few participants in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions believed that Australia would become their ideal society. Yet participants believed they could achieve their
personal aspirations, as they felt powerful and motivated to make them happen. Social aspirations seemed much less achievable because “others might not want what I want” and not all Australians would be willing to contribute to the ideal society. As the belief that not all Australians would be willing to work towards the same goals is presented as a barrier to civic contribution, projects and communications that address this barrier are recommended.

Two such strategies that could be explored further include discussion of human rights and responsibilities, and trust of others, in formal education settings when students are exploring their own identity and can be guided through the process by trained educators. A second project would focus on strengthening cooperation between government, community organisations, and the ‘general public’. Building a belief that all areas of society are committed to working towards an ideal may encourage more people to become involved in action for social change.

The findings in relation to objective three suggest that agencies engaging the community in advocacy or social action will receive support from Australians if they are seen to be working in the areas of education and health. In the interviews and focus group discussions, education in particular was seen as a means by which society can improve. Health care, on the other hand, was seen as a necessity as it was unacceptable for the sick to not receive care.

Project objective 4: Point to ways of framing questions that will effectively identify Australians’ value and policy positions

General communication findings

The focus group discussions provided rich information suggesting possibilities to improve communication with Australians about involvement in action. Community trials are required to assess which communication approaches have maximum effectiveness.

Some of the general communication lessons, applied to the issue of poverty, are highlighted below:

- **Communications connect best with the person by pointing to an impact on their life.** This stimulates greater interest and will minimise the risk that people will ignore the problem.
- **Messages should invite people to see for themselves that poverty exists in or is close to their own communities.** It should be acknowledged that this approach should avoid stereotyping.
- **Messages can link to other issues of community concern, as ‘poverty’ is not well understood or is not widely seen as a problem in Australia, compared with other countries.** Partnerships with education, health and environmental bodies would be a means of reaching new audiences.
- **Messages need to provide opportunities for others to assess differing perspectives, including the views of government, welfare groups, unions and academics.** This open approach will ensure community agencies are seen to be fair and their messages believable.
- **Messages should include achievable solutions to avoid people being overwhelmed by the problem.** Linking one cause with other causes will increase the perceived benefit for the same effort, providing positive reinforcement for those concerned about the sheer number of worthy causes.
- **Specific projects may be the most promising means of attracting support and action from Australians because they seem manageable, do not require open-ended involvement and are likely to bring the satisfaction of a result.** This was the strategy adopted by sustained action individuals who focused on a specific cause in order to achieve a defined, rewarding outcome. Reducing an overwhelming smorgasbord of problems and providing safe and outcome specific projects counters many barriers for participants.
- **The term ‘poverty’ is generally seen as financial and material and so should not be used to refer to non-material situations of disadvantage such as isolation and loneliness.** The emotional and spiritual dimensions of deprivation need to be explored and discussed—ideally in face-to-face situations—rather than presumed as understood.
Findings that relate particularly to written communications include:

- Statistics must be recent and accurate.
- Statistics must be adequately supported with references and explanations.
- Communications that might generate the most interest and impact would highlight health, children, education, basic needs such as food, and contrasts in life expectancy.
- Given that participants had difficulty accepting the term poverty within an Australian context—the word had third world connotations—it is recommended that where possible the word ‘poverty’ be avoided. Instead, words like ‘disadvantaged’ or messages that refer to specific circumstances like going without a meal could be trialed.

**Barriers to action**

The research found that the major barrier to taking action on an issue of concern was the ease with which a person can manage, or control, their emotions. Hence they resolve their reaction to the problem, rather than the problem itself—waiting for the advertisement to finish or the moment to pass, or allowing themselves to be distracted.

The communication task is to bring the problem into the daily sphere of the person, while providing them with actions to address the concern. Key barriers to action are listed below, along with suggestions for how agencies keen to create social change in the area of poverty could structure their communications for maximum impact.

**Table 1. Barriers and suggested responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feel uninformed</th>
<th>Suggested responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe media coverage is selective and sensational</td>
<td>Provide a range of perspectives on an issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide opportunities for people to assess the problem for themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel those in power know more about an issue</td>
<td>Educate about how political and policy decisions are made and how to effectively contact and lobby political representatives.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Work with governments to foster open communication channels so when people do convey their opinions, their thoughts will be welcomed and included in directions for Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know how to start an action</td>
<td>Develop an action kit that could be posted on a website or distributed at conferences and training sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide clear information about what community organisations already do to address relevant issues, with details of contact persons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know what action is required</td>
<td>Provide information about possible forms of action, supported by information about the issue that positions the agency as credible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feel disempowered</th>
<th>Suggested responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe one voice would not have an impact</td>
<td>Provide case studies of how a single voice has created social change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educate about political processes and provide training on the rudiments of how one person can make a change.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide training and tools that will assist people to gain the support of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe action wouldn’t make a difference</td>
<td>Promote actions with a focus on small and specific changes with clearly assessable outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present the issue and the action with a local and personal focus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide support for action so it will be a positive experience.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A separate and small group of activists were identified in the focus group discussions. They were motivated into action over big issues. These people had reflected on their own contributions and had developed strategies to deal with being overwhelmed by the number of worthy causes: specifically, they often chose to devote their time to just one cause, so they could be both better informed and more effective. They were heartened to hear other activists devoted to different (also important) causes. Agencies keen to benefit from the enthusiasm and dedication of such activists should develop partnership projects that will achieve benefits for multiple causes without increasing demands on individuals' time.

**Benefits of action**

The main driver of action was the fulfilment of the basic need to show compassion for others and contribute to the community. This drive is being largely suppressed by self-interest. Once a person is involved in action the sense of satisfaction is well understood to be the true prize and may not need to be emphasised heavily in communications. To engage those who may be considering action, other rewards could be presented, including:
• self-efficacy and response efficacy from feeling you have made a difference
• gaining appreciation from others
• the use of skills learnt and evidence of motivation for professional purposes
• the development of social networks and relationships
• potential for reciprocity if required
• the positive feeling that comes from setting a good example for your family.

**Actions profiled**

Participants in the focus group discussions were asked what actions they could take when they were concerned about an issue. Opinions relating to the ease and effectiveness of various actions were explored. When certain actions that were not identified spontaneously they were introduced by the facilitators. It should be noted that preferred actions were issue and circumstance dependent with policy action involving more letter writing behaviour as opposed to an ongoing and identified need for which volunteer work may be the appropriate response.

Forms of engagement that represent the greatest promise as indicated by participants in the research include:

• letter writing
• petitions
• private forums
• phone calls and possibly personal visits
• volunteer work
• special events and novelty activities, particularly for younger Australians.

Forms of engagement that represent less promise include:

• protests
• public forums, though the concept was well received as an opportunity for dynamic debate
• donating money, as participants expressed a growing annoyance about constant requests for money even though it was an easy means of satisfying a sense of contribution.

Other suggestions about action:

• Action would be best performed through existing organisations and groups as they are perceived to have greater expertise, and would reduce concerns about standing out in a crowd.
• Feedback (both negative and positive) to media, government and organisations should be encouraged. Positive feedback was seen as a somewhat novel but engaging idea.
• Connections between a person’s own daily behaviour and social issues must be forged. This connection is presently missing even though participants resonated with the concept of looking after your own backyard.
3. Conclusions

The National Engagement concept
The research suggests that at present there are too many barriers to support a discussion about values with Australians. Barriers include:

- an insufficient level of self-reflection on values
- diverse interpretations of the term ‘values’
- a disconnection between personal values, personal behaviour, opinions and visions for society
- uncertainty among Australians about whether they are able or willing to contribute to social change.

Hofstede (1991) offers that, because values are established by the age of 10:

Many values remain unconscious to those who hold them. Thus they cannot be discussed, nor can they be directly observed by outsiders. They can only be inferred from the way people act under various circumstances.

This is consistent with the present study, in which most detail about participants’ viewpoint was gained not from their discussion of values but rather by inferring values from more general viewpoints on society and from their behaviours. Phillips and Smith (2000) also concluded that:

People find it difficult to explain why they support these values [such as freedom and tolerance], beyond the fact that they foster solidarity and a sense of community’.

Participants in the focus group discussions did raise the notion of values, discussed with varied language, during the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The focus of the spontaneous comments about values was how values were changing, generally for the worse, in Australian society. Concerns included that Australia was becoming too selfish and materialistic. Participants expressed a desire for cohesive communities and support for education and families.

While the research suggests that a National Engagement about values with all Australians is not appropriate at present, the broad idea of ‘values’ being critical to Australia’s social directions is one that received support. People would not be opposed to hearing others talk of this notion at a broad level.

The design of this trial project does not permit a definitive finding for or against community support for a National Engagement. This outcome could only be determined from a representative surveying approach. However, the research does point to some potential directions for further work to develop civic contribution, social influence and values exploration, building on the following findings:

- Targeting of values issues to youth is an approach that resonates well with younger and older Australians alike.
- Some students seem disempowered and require more knowledge and confidence to take action.
- Parents would be supportive of actions taken by their children.
- Students endorsed social actions they had heard about or been involved in through their schools.

Based on these findings, if community agencies are interested in building an understanding of active democracies contributing action-oriented projects into primary and secondary schools is an avenue to be explored. From the feedback about barriers to action, a personal project for students where an issue of concern is selected and relevant actions undertaken appears to be an ideal way to develop knowledge of civic involvement and build self-efficacy. Involving parents would be a means of spreading messages and action from students into families.
Another opportunity is indicated by the following findings:

- Students watch their parents’ behaviour to understand why they are taking action.
- As the literature review suggests, key values are developed by age 10.

These findings suggest work with young or expecting families to focus on values would be a means of creating cohesion between messages for young Australians at home and at school. Opportunities that could be investigated include forums with groups of parents and the provision of information packs.

These are potential avenues to create a cultural change so that values could be discussed.

In summary, this trial has offered some interesting insights into the lives of some Australians, their wishes and ambitions and how personal aspirations relate to social aspirations and involvement in Australian society. The general disconnection between the personal and the social has been a key message from this research. It links to the findings that people are aware, to greater or lesser degree, that they manage, or control, their reactions to social issues so they can maintain a comfortable and self-focused life. These insights are significant pointers for agencies eager to create community mobilisation and engagement about social issues.
4. References


