

Quality of Life from an Evolutionary Perspective

A Workshop Organized by the Evolution Institute

November 4-7, University of Memphis

What is Quality of Life and Why is it so Difficult to Achieve?

Evolution is supposed to adapt organisms to their environments, but the human species seems bent on its own destruction. The drumbeat of potential calamities is familiar to everyone: violent conflict...weapons of mass destruction...overpopulation...economic collapse...extreme inequality...environmental degradation....

We have created these problems for ourselves because of the way that we see the world, which is both a biological and a cultural construction. Our minds evolved by genetic evolution to adapt us to life in small nomadic groups coping with immediate problems. Part of our genetic endowment is an impressive capacity to adapt to our environments by cultural means. It is largely cultural evolution, not genetic evolution, that enabled us to leave Africa and colonize all climatic regions of the globe, eventually learning how to produce our own food, which led to an increase in the scale of human society by several orders of magnitude in only a few thousand years.

Our genes and cultures have served us well in the past, but that is no guarantee for how they will work in the future. Some of the most prominent beliefs and practices of western culture are the most problematic for our long-term welfare. A premium is placed on economic growth and individual advancement without regard to societal consequences. Burning non-reusable carbon for energy is highly consistent with this emphasis. The future is today, and the near-term is what counts the most. This is an integral aspect of our cultural lens and the way we think about what is important and what is not. A major risk to our species is being unable to agree upon a course for our future because there is no consensus for what it should entail other than immediate economic growth at all costs, even when it is unequally shared.

Many people have recognized the need to develop a new set of cultural beliefs and practices better adapted for the long-term welfare of our species and planet. Instead of maximizing economic growth over the short term, we should be maximizing quality of life (QOL) over the long term. But what is QOL? A lively field of inquiry has developed around this question, including an International Society for Quality of Life Studies ([ISQOLS](#)) consisting of over 300 scholars. QOL indices have been developed and employed by governments and agencies, including the [United Nations](#). The American Psychological Association has recently recognized the new field of [positive psychology](#), which makes QOL the central focus of inquiry.

QOL is not just a matter of individual psychological wellbeing but also of social equality.

Martha C. Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, makes this point by referring to Amartya Sen, winner in 1998 of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his development work. Sen makes the case that no theory of development based on the satisfactions of individual preferences could ever be normatively adequate because such a theory would always be an unwitting accomplice of an unjust status quo. There can be no QOL without mechanisms that insure social equality.

While QOL is being approached from many perspectives, it has not yet been approached from an explicitly evolutionary perspective. This is unfortunate, because evolutionary science can make a number of fundamental contributions to the study of QOL, including the following:

- The way we see the world is *both* a biological *and* a cultural construction. The biological component cannot be ignored. In many respects, our minds are still adapted to life in small groups coping with immediate challenges. Our genetic heritage must be understood to maximize QOL in a modern setting.
- Equality is not just a social construction but is deeply embedded in our genetic heritage. The reason that our species became so different from other primate species is because we evolved the ability to suppress inequality within groups, causing the group to become the most important unit of selection. Equality within groups is the signature adaptation of our species and the basis for most of our other distinctive psychological and cultural capacities. Understanding the significance and deep history of equality in our species can transform the way that we think about equality in a modern setting.
- For decades, “culture” and “learning” have been conceptualized as alternatives to “evolution”, “biology”, and “genes”, as if our species has mysteriously escaped the orbit of evolution. This polarization has made it possible for serious thinkers to accept evolution for the rest of life, our physical bodies, and a few basic urges such as to eat or have sex, yet to ignore evolution when thinking about cultural diversity and change. This tired formulation is now thoroughly obsolete. Understanding cultural diversity and change requires a sophisticated understanding of biological and cultural evolution, or rather biocultural evolution, since the two processes are thoroughly entwined.
- A sophisticated knowledge of evolution is required to understand the complex relationship between adaptation in the evolutionary sense and adaptation in the sense of long-term QOL. Evolutionary processes often result in outcomes that are not adaptive in any sense. When adaptations do evolve, they frequently benefit some individuals or groups at the expense of others or short-term welfare at the expense of long-term welfare. The economic metaphor of the invisible hand, which asserts that individual self-interest automatically results in well-functioning societies, is profoundly false from an evolutionary perspective. Lower-level striving becomes part of the problem for higher-level welfare unless carefully constrained with the welfare of higher-level units in mind. These basic evolutionary considerations are essential for why we are such a destructive species at large spatial and temporal scales and what we can do about it.

The Evolution Institute and its Workshop on Quality of Life

The [Evolution Institute](#) (EI) is the first think tank to formulate public policy from an explicitly evolutionary perspective. We have a rapidly expanding [portfolio of projects](#) on focal topics such as education, risky adolescent behavior, ethics, and economics. We also have a rapidly expanding range of [partner organizations](#) that appreciate the value of evolutionary science for public policy formulation.

Although all of our focal topics bear upon quality of life, we are making QOL a focus in its own right with a workshop that will be held at the University of Memphis on November 4-7, 2011. The workshop will bring leading scholars and policymakers who are already studying QOL together with leading evolutionists to explore what an explicitly evolutionary approach to QOL can add to the excellent work that is already being done.

We expect the workshop to result in a new agenda for basic scientific research, policy formulation, and policy implementation that can begin immediately. The fact that organizations such as the ISQOL and United Nations will be represented at the workshop means that the results will be quickly disseminated throughout the existing QOL community. In addition, the workshop is being held in Memphis to interface with the University of Memphis's [Graduate Program in City and Regional Planning](#) headed by Prof. Ken Reardon, so that Memphis can serve as a research and implementation site. Other potential implementation sites include the city of Binghamton, New York, based on the [Binghamton Neighborhood Project](#) directed by David Sloan Wilson, and East Tampa, Florida, based on EI projects directed by Jerry Lieberman. Still other opportunities for research and implementation are afforded through our partnerships with organizations such as the [Promise Neighborhood Research Consortium](#), the [Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce](#), and the [Equality Trust](#). In this fashion, we expect to make immediate progress defining, measuring, and increasing the QOL of real-world human populations.

Major topics covered during the workshop will include the following:

- **The relationship between equality and QOL.** Books such as *The Spirit Level* (Pickett and Wilkinson 2009) document a strong positive relationship between social and economic equality and QOL at large scales (between nations and between states within the United States)—not only for the “have nots”, but for the “haves”. A theoretical foundation needs to be provided for this impressive body of empirical research. The importance of equality also needs to be investigated at smaller social scales, such as the workplace or a city.
- **The nature of work.** Meaningful work is an integral part of QOL. People “come alive” when engaged in work that is clearly important for individual and collective welfare. Behind this commonplace observation is a lot of complicated psychology that needs to be understood from both a proximate and ultimate evolutionary perspective. There is a

notable absence of meaningful work in the lives of many people in modern society. Paid work is often not meaningful, or at least does not appear meaningful to the employee, and in many cases even diligent and conscientious work is not rewarded. Meaningful nonpaid work is also at a low ebb, as books such as *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2001) richly document. Providing more opportunities for meaningful work, both inside and outside the workplace, is critical for increasing QOL at all scales.

• **Increasing QOL by managing the cultural evolutionary process.** Cultural evolution works best when people respond to tangible challenges in ways such that successful solutions are easily distinguished from the failures. These conditions occurred automatically for small groups of people living a hunter-gatherer existence, but they must be created for large groups attempting to maximize something as diffuse and long range as QOL. First, QOL must be made *tangible* in the form of a suitable index that is recognized as important by the norms of the society. Second, there must be *variation* in attempts to increase QOL. Variation need not be random and can be guided by theory whenever possible. Third, there must be a way to *select* the best solutions and *replicate* them elsewhere. Only when these conditions are established can QOL evolve by cultural evolution in large-scale society, in the same way that cultural evolution takes place spontaneously in small-scale society. A major objective of the workshop is to review current indices of QOL, revise on the basis of the workshop if necessary, and discuss how a managed process of cultural evolution can be created at a variety of scales, including our implementation sites of Memphis, Binghamton, and East Tampa.

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