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The mixed blessings of material progress: Diminishing returns in the pursuit of happiness

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Abstract

The progress of nations is widely believed to enhance the happiness of their people. However, whether progress, as currently defined and derived, is increasing happiness and well-being in rich nations is problematic. The paper explores the relationship between economic growth and human development and the use of subjective measures of both life satisfaction and social quality of life as indicators of progress, noting the complex nature of well-being and the differences between personal and social perspectives. It questions whether widely used, simple measures are adequate, and whether greater happiness should, in any case, be regarded as the ultimate goal of progress.

Key words: happiness, life satisfaction, progress, quality of life, subjective well-being

Introduction

Notions of progress are closely linked to notions of happiness. The Western worldview is dominated by these concepts, which are becoming increasingly global in their influence. Progress is about making life better, and a happier life is an important ingredient of a better life. Progress can take many forms: better health and education, greater equality and freedom, more choice and opportunity, less conflict and suffering, for example. However, progress in the modern era is principally defined in material terms – a rising standard of living - and measured as growth in per capita Gross National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

This paper is not primarily concerned with the nature of happiness. Rather it focuses on the measurement of progress, and the use for this purpose of measures of happiness and life satisfaction - and related (but not identical) qualities such as subjective well-being (SWB) and quality of life (QoL).

There are good grounds for equating progress with economic growth. On the face of it, many aspects of human development appear to be closely associated with material progress. For example, in a study of 101 nations, Diener and Diener (1995) found that wealth was significantly correlated with 26 of 32 indices of QoL, chosen to reflect a wide range of universal human values (including happiness, equality, human rights and social justice). Only two – suicide and carbon dioxide emissions (an environmental indicator) - were adversely associated with wealth. The correlation between per capita GDP and total QoL (the mean value of the 32 QoL variables) was 0.79 ($p < 0.001$). Almost two thirds (62%) of the variance in the total QoL of nations could be explained by income. In another study, Diener and Suh (1997) noted that per capita purchasing power of nations was so closely related to a composite Advanced QoL Index (made up of variables such as physicians per capita, savings rate, income equality and environmental treaties) ($r = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$), that many would be led to 'accept the notion that economic indicators are sufficient and that we do not need any further indicators'.

By the standard of material progress the world has done extraordinarily well over the past two centuries. Economic growth has been a global phenomenon since the early 19th century, raising living standards and life expectancy in all continents (Maddison, 1995; 2000). The average annual growth in world per capita real income has been about 20 times greater since 1820 than it was in the preceding eight centuries. Average world GDP per capita increased 8-fold between 1820 and 1992.

However, growth has been much faster in the West than in 'the Rest' (Maddison, 1995). Since 1820, per capita income has increased 13-fold in Western Europe, 17-fold in its Western offshoots (US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), 10-fold in Southern Europe, 6-fold in Eastern Europe (where income fell after the collapse of communism), 7-fold in Latin America, 6-fold in Asia and Oceania, and 3-fold in Africa. Africa's average per capita income was about the same in 1992 as that in Western Europe in 1820. There are, of course, marked differences between countries within the same region; Japan's per capita income rose almost 28-fold between 1820 and 1992 to rank third behind the United States and Switzerland.

It is in this pattern of growth that a fundamental problem with material progress emerges – growing global inequality. According to Maddison (1995, 2000), the economic 'edge' the

West had over 'the Rest' was about 2:1 in 1820 and it has continued to grow since. The ratio of incomes between the richest and poorest regions was less than 3:1 in 1820, and grew steadily to 16:1 in 1992. The long-term divergence between the richest and poorest countries is even greater, increasing from over 3:1 to 72:1.

This pattern of unequal progress has two important global implications for QoL. The first is environmental: along with population growth, the major causes of global environmental degradation are extreme poverty, on the one hand, and excessive consumption, on the other (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; pp. 1-23). The environmental sustainability of economic progress is important for long-term QoL. A wide range of indicators shows that, globally, we are still moving away from ecological sustainability, not towards it (Eckersley, 1998a).

For example, the Living Planet Index of the World Wide Fund for Nature (1998), based on an assessment of forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems, declined by about 30% between 1970 and 1995, 'meaning that the world has lost nearly a third of its natural wealth in that time'. WWF also says that, globally, consumption pressure, a measure of the impact of people on natural ecosystems based on resource consumption and pollution data, is increasing by about 5% a year. At this rate, consumption pressure will double in about 15 years. The United Nations Environment Program (1997), in its first review of the global environmental outlook, says that the earth's environment is continuing to degrade. 'Significant environmental problems remain deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of all societies in all regions. Progress towards a global sustainable future is just too slow.'

The second point about the current global pattern of growth is its striking inappropriateness given the evidence that material progress continues to have much to offer poorer nations, but appears to be increasingly irrelevant, even hostile, to well-being in rich nations. For example, Wilkinson (1994, 1998, 1999) has shown that in rich nations, health is influenced more by income distribution than average income levels. Diener and Diener (1995) found a 'ceiling effect' with many of their QoL variables, with increasing income conferring large benefits at low income levels, but little if any benefit at high income levels. Max-Neef (1995) has proposed a 'threshold hypothesis' for the relationship between economic growth and human welfare: for every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in QoL, but only up to a point - the threshold point - beyond which, if there is more economic growth, QoL may begin to deteriorate.

Further evidence of a weakening nexus between growth and well-being comes from the development of new measures of progress, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) and Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), that adjust GDP for a range of social, economic and environmental factors that GDP either ignores or measures inappropriately (Eckersley, 1998a; Halstead, 1998; Hamilton, 1998). These include income distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and pollution. These 'GDP analogues' show that trends in GDP and social welfare, once moving together, have diverged since the 1970s in all (Western) countries for which they have been constructed. While per capita GDP has continued to climb, the GPI and ISEW have levelled off or fallen.

In contrast with this situation of developed nations, UNICEF says that for at least one billion people in the developing world, material progress holds out the hope of adequate food, clean

water, safe sanitation, decent housing, reliable health care, and at least a basic education (Adamson, 1993). 'This is a definition of progress which remains entirely valid', it says. 'And it is one with which the rest of the world must keep faith.' UNICEF says efforts by governments to meet basic human needs have been less than all-out. And yet by any realist standard, the progress made in the developing world in the last 40 years has been remarkable. In little more than one generation, average real incomes have more than doubled; child death rates have been more than halved; malnutrition rates have been reduced by about 30%; life expectancy has increased by about a third; the proportion of children enrolled in primary school has risen from less than a half to more than three-quarters; and the percentage of rural families with access to safe water has risen from less than 10% to more than 60%. The task to meet minimum human needs is, UNICEF says, more achievable now than ever before.

However, there are important qualifications to this conventional picture of the benefits of material progress:

- Not all the gains are a product of increasing wealth. Many social changes have accompanied economic growth, but have not necessarily been a direct consequence of growth, or have had impacts independent of growth. These include the growth of scientific knowledge, technological innovation, advances in social justice and equality, and an expanded role of government in improving living conditions (in health, hygiene, education and welfare support, for example). These changes contributed greatly to increasing human well-being.

- Some of the improvements in health and well-being have become cheaper with time as knowledge has increased and technology improved. Extra years of life cost less now than they used to (Wilkinson, 1998). Furthermore, it can take only a little wealth to produce improvements in health and education standards, as the oft-cited example of the Indian State of Kerala shows (Sen, 1993). Despite a low per capita GDP, Kerala has substantially increased life expectancy and literacy and reduced birth rates through a strong commitment to public health and education.

- Periods of rapid economic growth can be associated with diminished QoL, even in early stages of development. In a study of England during the Industrial Revolution, Szreter (1997) demonstrates that rapid economic growth, far from leading inevitably to development, can result in the 'four Ds' of disruption, deprivation, disease and death, because of its impact on social and political stability and order.

Some of these (and other) considerations are reflected in a study by Easterly (1997), using 95 QoL indicators covering seven areas – individual rights and democracy, political instability and war, education, health, transport and communication, class and gender inequality, and 'bads' such as crime and pollution – over up to four time periods from 1960 to 1990. Easterly wanted to see if, as he expected, 'life during growth gets better'. Consistent with other research, virtually all the indicators showed QoL across nations to be positively associated with per capita income. However, when he analysed the data further to take account of various 'country effects', he found growth had an impact on QoL that was significant, positive and more important than exogenous shifts for only a few of the 95 indicators. While Easterly speculates that the most plausible explanation is that there are long and variable time lags that prevented the detection of the 'true' relationship between growth and improvements in life, he admits disappointment: 'For the large majority of indicators, I am unable to detect a

medium-run improvement in life during growth'. Life is getting better, he says, not primarily because of growth, but because of time.

This said, my central concern in this paper is not to challenge concepts of progress as may be evident in differences between developing and developed nations today, or between developed nations 200 years ago and now. It is to examine whether the current dominant strategy of Western nations of continuing to base progress so fundamentally on economic growth is the best approach to improving human welfare.

Economic growth is the driving dynamic of modern societies. Current government policy is underpinned by the belief that wealth creation comes first because it increases our capacity to meet other, social objectives. This is a model of progress as a pipeline: pump more wealth in one end and more welfare or well-being flows out the other. However, any consideration of progress must address the core issue of whether, where and in what ways economic growth, as currently defined and derived, is making people happier. It must also ask if the pursuit of happiness is, in itself, a sufficient goal of progress.

Within this broad context of material progress, the paper examines in detail two different subjective measures of QoL - personal and social – and how they are shaped by objective social conditions. QoL relates to total well-being, the condition or state of being well, contented and satisfied with life. Personal QoL (or SWB) reflects an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life. Social QoL, however, may be a more diffuse perception, reflecting people's assessment of average personal QoL and/or how social conditions are affecting personal QoL – that is, how well society and social institutions are meeting human needs and desires. Social QoL might combine, say, a judgement of whether people in general are more satisfied with an observation on whether the gap between rich and poor is widening, or whether people are working harder, which will then affect people's personal QoL.

Subjective personal quality of life

Given that QoL includes how people think and feel about their lives, it has been argued that attempts to measure well-being must include people's own subjective judgement as well as the objective factors that influence QoL (Diener & Suh, 1997; Diener et al, 1999). As already noted, many QoL indices are correlated to economic performance indicators. However the correlations are much stronger for objective QoL measures than for subjective measures. Indeed, one of the most striking findings of research into SWB is the often small correlation with objective resources and conditions (Diener & Suh, 1997; Diener et al, 1999). One recent estimate is that external circumstances account for only about 15% of the variance in SWB (Diener et al, 1999).

This applies to income: there does not appear to be strong causal connection between income and happiness (Myers & Diener, 1995, 1996; Diener et al, 1999). Thus, the proportion of people in developed nations who are happy or satisfied with their lives has remained stable over the past several decades, even though they have become, on average, much richer. Only in the poorest countries is income a good indicator of SWB. In most nations the correlation is small, with even the very rich being only slightly happier than the average person. People in rich countries are happier than those in poor nations, but the differences may be due, at least in part, to factors other than wealth, such as literacy, democracy and equality. Increased

income matters to SWB when it helps people meet basic needs; beyond that the relationship becomes more complex.

In a recent review of research on SWB, Diener et al (1999) conclude that there is no simple answer to what causes happiness. Instead, there is a complex interplay between genes and environment, between life events and circumstances, culture, personality, goals and various adaptation and coping strategies. QoL has been defined as 'the gap between a person's expectations and achievements' (Calman, cited in Katschnig et al, 1997; p.10). The evidence suggests that people adjust goals and expectations and use illusions and rationalisations to maintain over time a relatively stable, and positive, rating of life satisfaction or QoL. In other words, as Cummins (1998, 2000a; Cummins & Nistico) argues, life satisfaction is held under homeostatic control. This does not mean that social, economic and political developments do not affect SWB, but that the relationship between the objective and subjective realms is not linear. For example, Cummins (2000b, 2000c) has shown that under normal conditions there is only a very weak relationship between income or health and SWB. However, under adverse conditions such as sustained financial hardship or chronic, serious ill health, homeostasis breaks down and SWB falls to below-normal levels.

The nature of SWB presents an important limitation on the use of standard measures of happiness or life satisfaction as a way of assessing and comparing national performance and progress: the measures represent a 'buffered' view of reality and so present a false, or at least incomplete, picture of social conditions (note how often the word 'illusion' occurs in this discussion). A detailed critique of the measures is beyond the scope of this paper. Veenhoven (for example, 1991, 1996, 1999) has presented a cogent and comprehensive defence of measures of life satisfaction and happiness as social indicators. However, I want to give several, different illustrations of their limitations as measures of progress.

Pusey (1998) asked 'middle Australians', who were the winners and losers from 'the economic change that Australia has experienced over the last 15 years or so'. The proportion saying 'people like me' were losers was considerably smaller than that for 'ordinary people generally', 'people in the middle' or 'wage and salary earners', while the proportion saying 'people like me' were winners was correspondingly higher than for the other categories. In other words, people responded more positively when they were asked to classify themselves as winners or losers.

Surveys of people's perceptions of health services consistently reveal widespread satisfaction (like surveys of life, about 80% claim to be satisfied). Yet qualitative studies have shown that many people mitigate negative experiences, which are then translated into expression of satisfaction, and so remain effectively hidden in patient satisfaction surveys (Williams, 1994; Williams et al, 1998). Many surveys of health services, Williams (1994) argues, provide only an illusion of consumer satisfaction, 'producing results which tend only to endorse the status quo'. Are surveys of life satisfaction doing the same?

The positive bias in life satisfaction measures is also evident if we compare satisfaction levels with other survey findings, including of mental health. Public surveys in Australia consistently indicate that about 5% of people, or less, say they are unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives (Eckersley, 2000a). Yet in other surveys, about 20% of people agreed their lives were 'coming apart at the seams' – a rather stronger statement about QoL than admitting to dissatisfaction, one would think (Eckersley, 1988). Mental health surveys show that almost

20% of Australians experienced mental health problems in previous 12 months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998).

To take another example, this time focusing on young people, a recent survey found 89% per cent of students aged 13-15 in Victoria, Australia, were satisfied with 'their life in general these days' (Gatehouse Project, Centre for Adolescent Health, Melbourne; personal communication with George Patton). However, another study, again in Victoria and undertaken at about the same time, found 25-40% of students 11-18 experienced in the previous 6 months feelings of depression, worries about weight, worries about self-confidence, troubles sleeping, and not having enough energy (Waters et al, 1999). A survey of students aged 11-15 in 28 mostly European countries reported similar findings: while the vast majority (over 90% in many nations) reported feeling healthy and happy, significant minorities (reaching majorities for some countries, ages and complaints) admitted to 'feeling low' and having headaches and stomach aches at least once a week, and to feeling tired most days of the week (Currie et al, 2000). To take 15-year-old American and Swedish girls as examples, 49% and 45%, respectively, reported feeling low at least once a week, 38% and 32% feeling tired in the morning four or more times a week, and 57% and 53% having a headache at least once a week.

In contrast to the findings of the stability of life satisfaction over time, there is good evidence that psychosocial problems including substance abuse, depression and suicidal behaviour have increased among young people in almost all Western nations over the past 50 years (Rutter & Smith, 1995). Some of these increases are large by epidemiological standards. In Australia, for example, the male youth suicide rate has more than tripled and the rate of drug-overdose deaths has increased more than six-fold over recent decades (Eckersley, 1997; 1998b). Implicit in notions of progress is the expectation that the young are the major beneficiaries; the evidence suggest they are, instead, paying most of the price.

The comparison between health and SWB can be taken further. The two conditions are related, but while it is, by definition, impossible to measure SWB objectively, this is possible with health. This gives us an insight into how and why subjective responses can differ from objective measures of the same thing. In general population samples, SWB correlates significantly with self-reported health, but not objective health (Diener et al, 1999). And subjective health does not necessarily correlate well with objective health.

People will claim good health even in the face of chronic illness and severe disability (Blaxter, 1997). Indigenous Australians report similar or better health than other Australians, but their death rates are about three times higher and their average life expectancy is 20 years lower (Mathers & Douglas, 1998). In the 1991-93 World Values Survey, 79% of people in the US rated their health as good or very good; in Japan, only 44% did (Basanez, 1998; variable 83). Yet the Japanese have a life expectancy about four years longer than Americans, placing them at opposite ends of the life-expectancy spectrum of developed nations. Self-reported health can vary across cultures and over time because of differences in perceptions and expectations of health, making comparisons between different populations problematic.

Beyond – or perhaps part of – the illusions and other cognitive devices we use to maintain life satisfaction is the 'mask' we all present to the outside world – the public face which hides a different private person. This mask may conceal most in those individuals who outwardly appear happiest and most successful, those whom modern society most celebrates and holds up for admiration. A review of a biography of the famous American entertainer, Danny Kaye,

described the book as ‘a thorough study of a cruelly mean-spirited, sadly insecure manic depressive who came across to the world at large as a generous, outgoing, happy and well-adjusted fellow’ (Gottfried, 1995).

Erikson Bloland (1999), in a study of her famous father, the celebrated psychologist Erik Erikson, contrasts the public man – charismatic, confident, concerned, compassionate, an authority on the psychological development of children and adolescents - with the private person – insecure, vulnerable, plagued by feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, stricken by his inability to soothe and comfort his own children. She notes how often fame and success mask a sense of personal failure and isolation, and are driven by a longing for human connection and intimacy. Erikson Bloland (a psychoanalyst) discusses the psychology of the need to idealise others as well as the need to be idealised. She suggests people hide behind the illusion that they are larger than life out of fear of acknowledging to others how needy and inadequate they sometimes feel. ‘The need to appear larger than life – like the need to believe in the superhuman status of others – helps us to cope in a frightening universe, but it also limits our capacity for intimacy.’ The difference between the public and private person raises an interesting question: if we measured, say, Danny Kaye’s or Erik Erikson’s SWB or happiness, which person would we be measuring?

I want to stress that my intention in raising these matters is not to argue that standard measures of happiness or life satisfaction are invalid or meaningless. The contrasting findings cited above are not necessarily incompatible. Life satisfaction is only one dimension of SWB, distinct from pleasant and unpleasant affect (moods and emotions) which are, in turn, partly independent of each other (Myers & Diener, 1995; Diener et al, 1999). So the studies are not measuring the same quality. Another factor is that life satisfaction surveys are measuring point prevalence, the mental health studies 12-month or 6-month prevalence. A third consideration is that, given that relatively high SWB is normal, we may need to regard the group in the middle of life satisfaction scales (5-15% of people), not just those who are unequivocally unhappy or dissatisfied, as being psychologically vulnerable. Nonetheless, the comparisons show that measures of personal QoL do not present a complete and accurate picture of the relationships between social conditions and well-being.

In summary then, there are several aspects of measures of SWB or happiness that present a problem for their use as indicators of progress – of whether life is getting better or worse. These are the relative stability of SWB despite dramatic social, cultural and economic changes in recent decades; the complex, non-linear relationship between objective conditions and subjective states; and the positive biases in measures of SWB.

Subjective social quality of life

The concerns about the use of personal QoL to measure national progress point to the need for other subjective measures of QoL. Social (or societal) QoL relates to people’s perceptions, not of their own lives, but of life in their community or nation, of how they think people in general are faring. I have argued elsewhere that this is a quite different category of measurement (Eckersley, 1999a; 2000a). Subjective measures of social QoL appear to have been used much less often than personal measures such as life satisfaction and happiness

Because it is an attempt to assess progress, the central questions about social QoL have been framed to identify trends, not states. This may be a crucial difference: we are not attempting to measure how full a glass of water is, but whether the level is rising or falling. This is what

matters in seeking to evaluate progress. It is also an easier judgement to make because the question includes a benchmark or standard – QoL at some time in the past – which is usually absent in questions about states.

In marked contrast to studies of how people feel about their own lives, polls of how they feel about social trends yield much more negative findings. A June 1997 national poll found that 52% of Australians believed 'the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends' was getting worse. Only 13% thought life was getting better; 33% said it was staying about the same and 2% did not know or did not answer (Eckersley, 1998a; 1999a; 2000a). In a May 1999 poll, the proportion of people saying life was getting better increased to 24% and that saying it was staying about the same rose to 38%, while the percentage saying it was getting worse fell to 36%; 2% did not know or answer (Eckersley, 1999a; 2000a). Demographic differences, small in 1997, also widened in some cases – for example, differences between low and high income groups in the percentage saying life was getting better rose from 10 to 21 percentage points (see Figure 1).

The same question was asked again in January 2000, this time by *The Australian* newspaper (personal communication with Mike Steketee, national affairs editor, *The Australian*, Sydney; at the time of writing, the poll results had not been published). The percentage saying life was getting better had again risen, to 31%. The percentage choosing worse was almost unchanged at 34%, while that saying life was about the same fell to 34%; 1% were uncommitted. The same market research company, Newspoll, conducted all three QoL polls, using a random telephone survey of 1200 Australians aged 18 and over in all Australian States and in both city and country areas. The results were weighted to reflect the population distribution.

In a follow up to the QoL trend question in the 1999 poll, people were asked 'in about what decade do you think overall quality of life in Australia has been at its highest': 24% chose the 1990s, 25% the 1980s, 23% the 1970s, 13% the 1960s, 6% the 1950s, and 2% before the 1950s. Not surprisingly, the results were strongly age-related, with people tending to spread their choice over the decades they have personally experienced (see Figure 2). There was a good fit between the responses to the two questions: most of those who choose the 1990s as the best decade also thought life was getting better; those who choose the 1980s as the best decade were most likely to think QoL was staying about the same; and most of those who thought the 1970s or earlier were the best time believed QoL was declining (see Table 1).

[Insert figures 1 & 2 about here]

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As already noted, QoL questions based on a social, rather than personal, perspective appear to be rare. The only comparable question I have found so far was used in the US in 1999 as part of a wide-ranging survey of Americans' views on the last and next century (Pew, 1999). Despite a generally upbeat mood, only a minority (44%) said life in America had got better since the 1950s (30% worse, 26% same/don't know). Consistent with general differences between personal and social perspectives, however, 63% said their own lives were better than the lives of their families in the 1950s.

While the Australian polls do not offer an explanation for the improvement in public mood in the past 2-3 years, the result is consistent with other recent survey findings (Eckersley, 1999a). Electoral anger and resentment, pronounced in the mid-1990s, appear to have abated,

turning instead into indifference. The public standing of different occupations suggests that trust in those with financial and political power and influence – politicians, lawyers, business executives, bank managers and journalists – bottomed in 1997-98 and is now rising again.

Mackay (1999) says that, superficially Australians are quite chirpy, but the mood is fragile and co-exists with a pessimism that still runs deep in the national psyche. He attributes the better spirits to a tendency to disengage from a difficult and complex national agenda and focus on the personal domains of life; an adaptation to the changes reshaping Australian society; the long-awaited pull of the new millennium; and Australia's continuing strong economic performance. These trends could explain, not only the overall lift in social QoL, but also the widening income gap in perceptions, with those who are well-off showing less concern for the worse-off, better able to enjoy the 'good life', and reaping more benefits from the economic changes taking place.

The improvement in public perceptions between mid-1999 and early 2000 could reflect a continuation of the longer-term trend and/or the effect on people's mood of the holiday season and celebration of the new century and millennium. The 2000 poll was conducted on 14-16 January, in the middle of Australia's summer holiday season, which extends from Christmas to Australia Day on 26 January. It is a time when Australians focus on the beach, parties, international cricket tests, the Australian Open tennis competition and other pleasant distractions from the business of life (so reinforcing the trend Mackay has detected).

To summarise, it would appear that questions about social QoL are tapping public perceptions about long-term trends. However, people's opinions are influenced by personal attributes and circumstances and relatively short-term shifts in social conditions and public mood. Ideally, we would like to measure some 'baseline' perception about social QoL that does not fluctuate too much over the short term. But perhaps there is no such thing, and subjective assessments of overall QoL are just that, with people's views of the long term varying over the short term as their moods and perceptions alter. Only a long time series will allow us to determine if there is a long-term change in perceptions.

Social quality of life and progress

While subjective measures of personal QoL are biased towards the positive, it is possible those of social QoL are biased in the other direction (Eckersley, 1999a; 2000a). Perceptions of social QoL could reflect a worldview jaundiced by dystopian images of the future, the media's focus on bad news, and a tendency to take improvements in QoL for granted and to focus instead on aspects of life that have deteriorated or have not met rising expectations. Nevertheless, there is evidence that perceptions of social QoL are grounded in changes in the nature of modern life, both fundamental and specific, objective and subjective. Even the often dark visions many people have of humanity's future could be, in part, an expression of anxieties about the present which may be ill-defined, but nonetheless deeply felt; by projecting these concerns into the future, they can described in fictional, more concrete forms (Eckersley, 1999b).

Diener and Suh (1997) note that the central elements of well-being are based on the context of people's most important values and goals: 'SWB is most likely to be experienced when people work for and make progress towards personal goals that derive from their important values.' Similarly, perceptions about social QoL appear to be fundamentally about values, priorities and goals – both personal and national – and the degree of congruence between

them. The relationship between social QoL and values emerges from both quantitative and qualitative research in Australia and the US, which I have described elsewhere (Eckersley, 1999a; 2000a).

Some research makes this link explicit; more usually it is implicit in people's unease about the moral state of modern society. The research suggests a deep tension between people's professed values and the lifestyle promoted by modern Western societies. Many people are concerned about the greed, excess and materialism they believe drive society today, underlie many social ills, and threaten their children's future. They are yearning for a better balance in their lives, believing that when it comes to things like freedom and material abundance, we don't seem to 'know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

Recent polling in the US has added to this picture of moral angst (Gallup, 1999). It found that 49% of Americans believed there was a moral crisis in the US, while another 41% believed there were major moral problems. Asked about the changes in moral and cultural values since the 1960s, 32% thought that on the whole the changes had been good because the country had become more tolerant, while 64% thought they were bad because it had become too permissive. Only 23% admitted to being optimistic about future moral and ethical standards in the US, while 43% were pessimistic. Another survey, of Americans' assessment of the last and next centuries, also found that their misgiving about their country today were focused on the moral climate, 'with people from all walks of life looking sceptically on the ways in which the country has changed both culturally and spiritually' (Pew, 1999).

These concerns persist despite a more buoyant public mood in the US today compared to the mid-1990s – 71% of Americans were satisfied 'with the way things are going in the US at this time' in February 1999, an all-time high and up from 24% in January 1996 (by May 1999, the proportion had dropped to 51%, but rose again to 69% in January 2000) (Gallup, 1998-2000). There is a prevailing sense that the past century has been one of economic and technological triumph for America, and an optimism that this will continue in the century ahead (Pew, 1999).

The moral qualms may not, however, be new. The Gallup data suggest that moral pessimists have always outnumbered optimists, at least as far back as the 1970s, although the gap between them has widened (Gallup, 1999). And while, in another survey, only 32% professed to be satisfied with the honesty and standards of behaviour of Americans, and 63% were dissatisfied, the results do not reveal a marked shift in sentiment between the early 1960s and late 1990s (Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard, 1998). On the other hand, in the same survey, the 1950s easily top scored as the decade, between the 1920s and 1990s, in which people thought American values and morals were particularly good: 28% chose the 1950s, with nominations declining on either side (only 3% chose the 1990s). And asked if young people today had as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did, say, 50 years ago, 78% of Americans said 'no' in 1998, compared to only 34% in 1952.

A confounding influence on these results is that most people tend to see themselves as more moral than other people (Halpern, 1995; see Eckersley, 2000a, for examples of this). When they see others transgress, they tend to hold them morally responsible; when they themselves transgress, they tend to blame the circumstances, and to regard the transgression as an exception rather than a 'falsification' of their values. Halpern says this tendency might help to explain the historical tendency of most generations to see the world in a state of moral decline. This illusion – perhaps another of those used to maintain SWB – could be an

important source of negative bias in social QoL. Nevertheless, the moral trends that worry people, such as increasing consumerism and individualism, are also real.

So if perceptions about QoL are linked to perceptions about morality and ethics, and while survey results indicate a widespread dismay about moral standards today, the evidence is mixed about whether this dismay is increasing. We also have to remember that being subjective assessments, the benchmarks are also likely to change over time: what is considered moral today is not necessarily what was considered moral in the past. Indeed, given the general trend towards greater moral autonomy, plurality and tolerance, we might have expected perceptions of moral standards to have improved (that they haven't might be further evidence of a negative bias in moral judgments about society).

Beyond the abstract dimension of morality, surveys reveal more tangible dimensions to people's concerns about 'progress' and its impact on QoL, both personal and social. These are consistent with findings about perceived overall social QoL, but are not apparent in the trends in personal QoL.

The 1999 survey of QoL in Australia asked people to rate the importance of several factors in improving their own personal QoL (Eckersley, 1999a). It found that 75% rated as very important 'being able to spend more time with your family and friends' and 66% 'having less stress and pressure in your life'. Only 38% rated as very important 'having more money to buy things' and 36% feeling they were 'doing more for the community'. The 2000 survey by *The Australian* newspaper framed this question in a different way, asking people if there was more or less of these factors in people's lives now compared to ten years ago (Steketee, personal communication). Despite the festive season, 91% said there was more stress and pressure; 68% said people had less time to spend with family and friends; 51% said there was less caring for the needs of the community; but 49% said people had more money to buy things (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

In response to other questions in *The Australian* poll, 55% said the distribution of wealth in Australia was less fair now than 10 years ago (10% more fair, 28% no difference); 83% agreed the rich were getting richer and the poor poorer (13% disagreed); 57% said there was a greater proportion of rich people in Australia now compared to ten years ago and 70% a greater proportion of poor people; 70% said they would prefer 'the gap between the rich and the poor to get smaller' over 'the overall wealth of Australia to grow as fast as possible' (28% preferred growth); 79% said Australians workers were less secure in keeping their jobs compared to ten years ago (10% more secure, 9% no difference).

There are other streams of research that also raise, although more indirectly, questions about contemporary social conditions and trends and whether they represent 'progress'. Modern western culture is characterised by individualism, consumerism, economism and the 'postmodern' qualities of relativism, pluralism, transience, ambivalence, ambiguity, fragmentation and contingency. Many of these characteristics would appear, on the basis of the psychological literature, to be harmful to well-being through their influence on values, goals, expectations and other qualities important to well-being such as hope, purpose, meaning, belonging, predictability and coherence (Eckersley, 1999a; 2000b).

Arguably, modern Western culture promotes inappropriate and conflicting values and goals, encourages unrealistic expectations, and makes other qualities harder to achieve. As consumerism (which drives economic growth) reaches increasingly beyond the acquisition of things to the enhancement of the person, the goal of marketing becomes not only to make people dissatisfied with what they have, but also with who they are. A great deal of consumption today (beyond meeting basic needs) is morally located within what have traditionally and universally been regarded as vices: pride (self-centredness), envy and avarice, to say nothing of lust and anger. Virtues such as moderation, patience, prudence (good sense) and compassion have little place in a world of hyper-consumerism.

Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996; Kasser, in press) have shown that people for whom 'extrinsic goals' such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall well-being than people oriented towards 'intrinsic goals' of close relationships, self-acceptance and contributing to the community. People with extrinsic goals tend to have shorter relationships with friends and lovers, and relationships characterized more by jealousy and less by trust and caring. Referring to 'a dark side of the American dream', the authors say that the culture in some ways seems to be built on precisely what turned out to be detrimental to mental health.

In more recent research, Kasser and a colleague have also demonstrated significant correlations between materialistic values and social alienation (Khanna & Kasser, in preparation; personal communication with Tim Kasser, Knox College, Illinois). One of the two measures of alienation they used was a 12-item scale that included statements such as, 'In order to relate to others, I often have to put on a mask', and 'I'm not in tune with most people around me'. Similarly, Saunders and Munro (2000) found consumerism and materialism were positively correlated with depression, anxiety and anger; materialism was also negatively correlated with life satisfaction. While these correlations do not prove that materialism and related values cause a deterioration in well-being, they do suggest their cultural promotion is not conducive to it. The cause-effect relationship is likely to be complex and two-way. In any event, these findings are hard to reconcile with the belief that material progress in already rich nations is improving QoL.

There is often an assumption, explicit or implicit, in the SWB literature that happiness is an unqualified good, and the more happiness the better. While the desire for happiness seems to be part of human nature, the importance attached to happiness, what we believe it to be and how it is found are shaped by culture. The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, and later philosophers such as John Locke, stressed the importance of prudence to happiness. Today, as Csikszentmihalyi (1999) observes, our notion of a happy life 'amounts to little more than a thoughtless hedonism, a call to do one's thing regardless of consequences, a belief that whatever feels good at the moment must be worth doing'. Even if this is not the path to 'true' happiness, there can be no denying the power of the deception. And even if we accept that the pursuit of happiness is a legitimate goal, we should still question the extent to which we focus on maximised happiness (like maximised wealth) as the bottom line of progress, the supreme good.

Part of the conflict inherent in modern notions of progress concerns the social contract on which all societies rely - the ever-present tension between individual and social goals, between private and public good. From a social perspective, for example, is the individual pursuit of happiness compatible with the preservation of liberty, the price of which, the proverb tells us, is eternal vigilance? Democratic freedom relies on a sense of collective, not

individual, agency, on pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising individual choice in order to maximise personal satisfaction.

Individualism is closely correlated with SWB (Veenhoven, 1999). But while individualism can be personally liberating and socially invigorating, taken far enough it can also be personally isolating and socially fragmenting. Balance is crucial for optimal social functioning: individual freedoms, rights and privileges, however much they might contribute to personal happiness, need to be balanced by social bonds, obligations and responsibilities.

The tension between happiness and other qualities is also apparent at the individual and species level. Consider some of the qualities associated with SWB and happiness (Myers & Diener, 1995, 1996: Diener et al, 1999; Cummins & Nistico). From an evolutionary perspective, if happiness is the goal towards which we strive, and if it is as closely related to extroversion as research suggests, why aren't we all highly extroverted? Conversely, given that neuroticism makes us unhappy, why wasn't it selected out of human nature long ago? Clearly introversion and neuroticism - characterised by a more cautious, questioning, doubting, brooding, worrying approach to life - have survival value. Self-esteem, optimism and autonomy – all associated with SWB and happiness - can become counter-productive or dysfunctional when they become too detached from the realities of life and an individual's abilities and circumstances; they need to be kept in check. The depressive phase of bipolar depression is undoubtedly debilitating; but the mania, with its wildly exaggerated self-regard, can be even more destructive to individuals and those close to them.

Headey and Wearing (1988) argue that a sense of relative superiority appears to be a normal and important aspect of human psychology, crucial to well-being. However, they note that it can have costs as well as benefits in that people might filter our information about poor performance and consequently fail to take corrective action. They point out that research has found that depressed people are more realistic in assessing their own performance than people who are not depressed. Diener et al (1999) cite a range of research that links SWB to positive illusions such as self-deceptions, excessive optimism and over-estimated personal control. It seems, then, that life demands we maintain a balance between a realistic and fantastic view of ourselves. We should be sceptical of any notion that doing 'the right thing' - for oneself, for others, or for society as a whole - is always compatible with wanting to be happy.

In summary, social QoL measures appear to reflect social conditions and trends that personal measures of SWB tend to mask. These broader issues are relevant to measuring national performance and progress. The marked difference between the personal and social measures does, presumably, tell us something important. While people's perceptions of social QoL may be distorted by media and other influences, the evidence suggests they are not distant and detached, but reflect deeply felt concerns about modern life.

The short-term fluctuations may limit the usefulness of social QoL as a measure of long-term progress; only further research will answer this question. However, it is worth noting that the volatility is less marked than with the question about satisfaction 'with the way things are going in the US', mentioned above. The effect of asking about QoL trends, as opposed to states, also warrants examination. Finally, the broader view of QoL represented by the social perspective raises the issue of whether greater happiness is, in itself, an adequate goal of progress.

Conclusion

Surveys of people's attitudes highlight different dimensions of public perception depending on their focus and the wording of the questions asked. How people feel about their own lives is different from how they feel about society in general. Views on trends can differ from those on states. Some attitudes to life are remarkably stable, changing little over decades; others are volatile, swinging from troughs to peaks in cycles of a few years, even less. Public opinion can reflect people's personal resilience, adaptability and capacity to find a measure of fulfillment and satisfaction whatever their circumstances; it can also reveal their tendency to 'edit' what they will admit about themselves – even to themselves.

There may not be a simple, easy way of measuring QoL in a way that allows us to say whether, on the whole or all things considered, life is getting better or worse. GDP does not do it, nor life expectancy. Subjective measures are important, supplying a crucial dimension missing from objective indicators, but we need to be very clear about what they are measuring. The standard questions about life satisfaction and happiness tell us something - but not everything we need to know. Asking about overall social QoL, as distinct from personal QoL, may be useful, but this remains to be established.

Modern notions of progress centre around economic growth. The problems with growth, as it is currently measured and derived, are that it is increasing inequality among nations; it is environmentally unsustainable; and, contrary to its central objective, it does not seem to be making people happier, at least in nations that are already rich. Measuring progress needs to take many things into account: economic gains must be assessed against environmental losses; issues of equity between and within nations and generations need to be addressed; measures of personal happiness and SWB should be weighed against perceptions of social conditions and trends; a path of progress that is appropriate and beneficial at one stage of human development can be inappropriate and costly at another.

At a time when governments the world over seem to be captive to an ideology of growth, this is an important message to heed.

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Figure 1 Percentage saying life is getting better, by household income (Eckersley, 1999a)

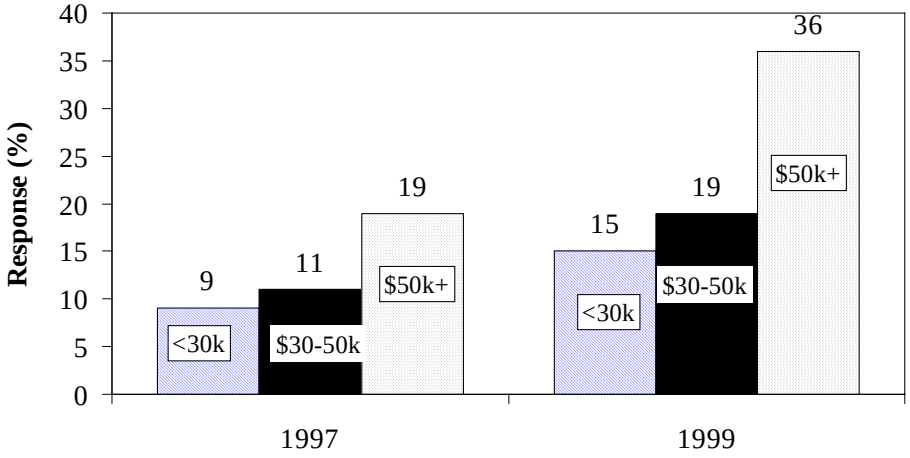

Figure 2 Choice of decade of highest quality of life, by age (Eckersley, 1999a)

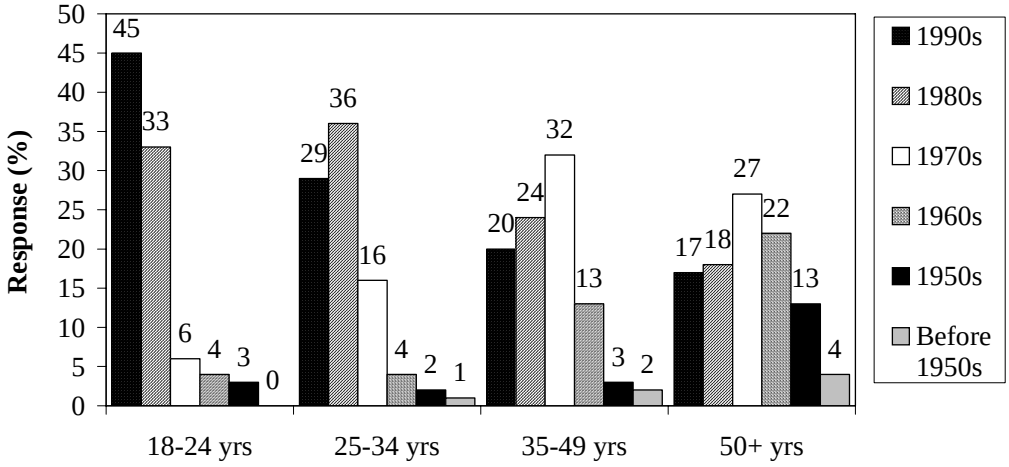

Table 1 Perceptions of quality of life and best decade, 1999

Decade Response (%)	1990s	1980s	1970s	1960s	1950s	Before 1950s
Better	51	18	11	14	10	11
Same	40	47	34	33	33	21
Worse	9	34	54	50	55	66
None/don't know	1	1	2	4	3	2

Percentage choosing each decade who think life is getting better, worse or staying the same (Eckersley, 1999a).

Table 2 Perceptions of trends in QoL factors over last 10 years

Response	Stress and pressure in people's lives	Money to buy things	Caring for the needs of the community	Time to spend with family and friends
Lot more	66	16	10	7
Little more	25	33	24	14
Total more	**91**	**49**	**34**	**21**
Little less	1	20	24	34
Lot less	2	19	27	34
Total less	**3**	**39**	**51**	**68**
Uncommitted	6	12	15	11

Percentage saying there is more or less of each factor in Australia now compared to ten years ago (Mike Steketee, *The Australian*, Sydney; personal communication).