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MYTHS AND TRUTHS OF ADVANCES IN WELL-BEING

Richard J. Estes and M. Joseph Sirgy

Considerable misunderstanding exists concerning the state of social, political, and economic progress in the world today as compared with that which characterized societies just 50 year ago and, certainly, during the late 19th and early to middle 20th centuries. Many of these misunderstandings are passed on via word of mouth and some fall into the category of collective “myths” which are widely shared

by a population, but which have little or no reference to the objective data that surrounds them.

Central to these global myths is that the world today is worse off than that which existed in the recent past... usually within the lifetime of the individual sharing the belief with others. Many of these myths refer to the quality of collective social life that existed in the recent past and are often shared through stories revolving around the centrality of family, the strength of communities, the absence of a sense of poverty even among the poor, and comparatively low levels of personal and interpersonal violence. While some aspects of the recounting of the past are true but, on balance, frequently are incomplete and even distorted. Rose-tinted glasses have for too long hindered our ability to see the dramatic and positive changes in human well-being that have occurred worldwide since at least the end of the second world war. The reality is that people rarely had the opportunity to share the negative aspects of their lives with others and, when they did, the true nature of collective life was not told fully, e.g., rampant patterns of violence against children and women, in the United States and elsewhere the persistence of racism (in Europe widespread discrimination against women, the elderly, immigrants, and religious minorities), premature death with considerable lower average years of life expectancy for all age groups, and recurrent illnesses that significant impaired large segments of the populations of all nations (especially infectious and communicable diseases

such as tuberculosis, polio, influenza and, until recent years, smallpox which has been totally eliminated),

The following table summarizes some of the most dominant myths concerning the nature and extent of social progress worldwide and presents a more accurate portrayal of their reality. The table is not intended to be encyclopedia in its construction, but it does cover some of the major themes that are discussed fully in our new book, *Advances in Well-Being: Towards a Better World*.

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Editor's Note: : This issue leads off with a review essay by Richard J. Estes and M. Joseph Sirgy. The essay takes the form of a blog of responses to various “myths” about the state of social, political, and economic progress in the world today as compared with that which characterized societies in previous decades and centuries. This is followed by a message from ISQOLS President Mariano Rojas and regular announcements.

A Review Essay Based On

Estes, Richard J., Sirgy, M. Joseph. (Editors). (2017). *The Pursuit of Human Well-Being: The Untold Global History*. Dordrecht NL: Springer.

Estes, Richard J., Sirgy, M. Joseph. (2018). *Advances in Well-Being: Towards a Better World*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Advances in Well-Being dispels 21st century pessimism when meticulously detailing how quality of life has improved for citizens living in both developed and developing countries over the century. Extraordinary gains in health, education and economic well-being have been achieved despite many social, political and economic set-backs. Drawing on evidence from around the globe, the book identifies the key drivers of this remarkable story of social progress. Readers of this richly illustrated and timely book will want to rethink their strategies for sustaining the momentum ‘to bring about the world we all want’ for future generations living on the planet.

Valerie Møller, Professor Emeritus, Quality of Life Studies, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

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Myth	Myth
MYTH: Judging by what the mass media portrays, the world is worse off today than in the past.	THE TRUTH: The evidence in support of this widely held myth is very weak. Rather, we have experienced enormous progress in the social, political, economic, welfare, and cultural sectors of virtually all societies. Sharp reductions in poverty rates, declining infant and child mortality rates, declining maternal mortality rates, rapidly increasing rates of economic growth among the majority of developing countries, and improvements in the emergence of participatory governance systems are improving at a dramatic rate virtually everywhere.
MYTH: Global poverty is at an all-time high today, and is increasing.	THE TRUTH: Poverty continues to be a major obstacle to achieving high levels of human well-being. The rate of global poverty is declining at an increasing rate, especially in the poorest countries of East and Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In China alone, more than 1,000 million rural poor people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990. Comparable rates of progress have been reported for India, Bangladesh and other countries that have traditionally been characterized by high rates of financial poverty. The global poverty rate in 2016, for example, was just 10.2% vs. 59.9% in 1980, a net decline of more than 49.7% in just 35 years.
MYTH: Global population growth rates are continuing to be out of control.	THE TRUTH: The global population is continuing to increase, but not as rapidly as during the last quarter of the 20th century. Child mortality rates have declined dramatically in many nations while population aging has emerged as a new reality throughout the world. Global population growth rates are expected to achieve an equilibrium between 2025 and 2050 followed by an overall decline in global population size during the last two quarters of the current century, especially as women become better educated and exercise greater control over their fertility.

Myth	Myth
MYTH: Hunger, malnutrition, and infectious diseases among vulnerable populations is on the rise.	THE TRUTH: The world today is a less hungry and less malnourished one than that which existed at any point in history since the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 1850s. Indeed, many traditional food-importing nations, such as India, are now major exporters of food, especially of high quality and otherwise hard to secure agricultural products.
MYTH: Child birth remains one of the most dangerous experiences for women in developing countries and is continuing to be so at the same pace as occurred during earlier generations.	THE TRUTH: Rates of maternal mortality remain much too high, especially among women living in remote, rural communities. But, in fact, maternal mortality rates have declined by 27% over the past decade and are expected to decline even more as access to improved pre- and post-natal care becomes available to them.
MYTH: Rates of infant, child and early youth death rates remain high throughout much of the developing world	THE TRUTH: Sadly, too many infants and children continue to die prematurely each year. Many of these deaths are associated with inadequate prenatal care, the absence of clean and safe drinking water, and the absence of skilled personnel to assist with especially difficult birth, and the remoteness of the villages in which many people live. Today, rates of infant and child mortality have declined by 50% and are continuing to fall at an escalating pace. The major gains for infant, children, and early- to mid-youth have been one of the most central achievements of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals as well as the innovative outreach initiatives developed by privately-funded international development philanthropies and assistance organizations.
MYTH: Much of the world continues to be characterized by low levels of education, high levels of illiteracy, and access to even basic education continues to elude most of the world's developing countries.	<p>THE TRUTH: This myth is totally false. More than 90% of children worldwide have access to primary school education and 70% to secondary education. Previously illiterate adults also are being exposed to primary education and, at the same time, colleges and other institutions of higher education have emerged all over the world. Remarkably, women now make up the largest share of the student population and are represented at near parity levels in graduate degree programs.</p> <p>Advances in education, in turn, have fueled significant improvements in health, economic growth rates, and dramatic innovations in agriculture and industry. True, though, is that computer literacy has reached only a small majority of the populations of these nations as has the possibility of accessing the internet on a regular basis.</p>
MYTH: The global economy is stagnant and shows no indication of progress for rich and poor countries alike.	THE TRUTH: While economic growth rates have slowed considerably for economically advanced countries who eagerly pursue 3%-4% rates of economic growth, those of developing countries are increasing at rates ranging from 5% to 8% and even higher for selected countries like China. The reality is that economic growth in developing countries is driving global economic growth in all sectors. This pattern is expected to persist well into the future as the economies of many developing countries, thanks to early development assistance from advanced countries, continue to mature and enter the global economy as full partners.

Myth	Myth
MYTH: People living in developing countries are innately more violent than those living in more economically advanced societies.	THE TRUTH: There is absolutely no foundation in truth for such a myth. While poor people may be disproportionately represented among the criminal class, in fact, the same pattern exists in economically developed countries. Excessive poverty often serves as a stimulus for violence, but most poor people wish to live in a congenial, peaceful, and conflict-free environment as well.
MYTH: The world continues to be enmeshed in growing violence and acts of terrorism targeted at richer by poorer countries.	THE TRUTH: This myth has not been true for decades since rates of collective violence have fallen nearly everywhere in the world, even in countries engaged in civil wars and diversity-related social conflicts. The work of Steven Pinker and Neil Halloran offer persuasive evidence of the profound changes that have occurred throughout all regions and countries of the world who are enjoying unparalleled levels reduced violence, peace and security.
MYTH: Modern achievements in technology benefit only the rich or, at least, those are well off.	THE TRUTH: Day to day observations offer ample evidence that advances in technology benefit all groups of people and at all levels of society ranging from the very rich to the very poor. Examples of such widely available technologies that have emerged since 1960 that impact the quality of life everywhere include the internet, the availability of affordable computers, wi-fi networks that span the globe, more efficient and safer transportation systems and, of great importance, the unparalleled advances in biology, medical technology, and bio-engineering. Nearly these important technological innovations are reaching more people each year and at lower costs virtually every year.
MYTH: Because of wars, civil strife, poverty, and disease incidence our lives are cut short.	THE TRUTH: Data from the United Nations Development Programme show significant gains in life expectancy--from a world average of just 48 years in 1950 to a world average that exceeded 69.1 years for men and 73.8 years for women in 2015. This increase represents a major achievement on the part of the world community in advancing health well-being. The country with the highest current life expectancy rates is Japan, with an average number of 86.8 years of life expectancy for both sexes. Average years of life expectancy increased for all world regions: It rose from a high of the late 50s and early 60s to the late 60s and low to the middle 70s in just 43 years. Life expectancy growth rates are especially impressive for East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. This pattern is expected to continue well into the future. The average years of life expectancy for sub-Saharan Africa is expected to approximate those reported for other regions.

Myth	Myth
MYTH: Governments are falling behind on healthcare and healthcare expenditures.	TRUTH: Public health data show that all countries currently are spending, on average, approximately 10.1% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on health and health services as of 2011 (World Bank, 2017). This percentage has increased significantly from the 4.7% of GDP allocated to the sector in 1990 and from 5.6% of GDP allocated for health services in 1998. Thus, steady and somewhat higher levels of GDP are allocated to health and health services for each period studied and are likely to continue to increase as the world's population ages. The region with the highest levels of investments in health in 2011 was Latin America and the Caribbean (7.6%) followed by Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, sub-Saharan Africa, and North America, each of which invested an average of approximately 6.3% of their GDP in health and health care. The United States is an outlier among the region's countries in that it spends somewhat more than 17%, or approximately 1/6 of its national economy, is allocated to health and health care.
MYTH: Our educational system is in ruins; student dropout rates are at an all-time high.	TRUTH: Data between 1970 and 2010 collected by the World Bank and were able to show a positive world trend in levels of educational attainment. The gains are indeed remarkable, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, Oceania, the successor states of the former Soviet Union, including the Russian Federation, and North America. Furthermore, the data for all of these regions show a positive trend in educational attainment in both their developing and developed countries.
MYTH: Girls are not given the same opportunity as boys do in education; illiteracy and lack of educational attainment among girls is at an all-time high.	TRUTH: Gender disparity in educational attainment is narrowing—female students are catching up with their male counterparts in both developed and developing countries, which is positive news. South Asia and the MENA regions are lagging other world regions, but even so the gap in gender disparity is narrowing significantly.
MYTH: Students are not interested in learning. Science and math education is faltering.	TRUTH: The data from the World Bank show that proficiency in mathematics in the developed countries is high but remained flat between 2000 and 2012. In contrast, improvement in proficiency in mathematics in the developing world is both positive and remarkable. The data also show little disparity between boys/men and girls/women in proficiency in mathematics in the developing countries.

ISQOLS PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

From all corners of the world

ISQOLS just held its XV Conference in the charming city of Innsbruck, Austria. Annual conferences constitute an essential mechanism for attaining the Society's goals. ISQOLS looks for organizing fruitful, friendly and relaxed conferences that allow for scholars and practitioners to enrich their own research and practices by meeting and exchanging ideas, findings, and experiences.

There are many reasons to consider the Innsbruck conference a major success, which even surpassed our own expectations. For example, the academic dialogue was rich and enriching, we all learned from outstanding speakers, the conference was full of young and highly motivated scholars, and we were surrounded by students who reminded us about our major task of transmitting fresh knowledge to the next generations while encouraging them to work in favor of better societies. I would like to emphasize in this message another valuable contribution of our Innsbruck conference: We had scholars from all corners of the world.

Sixty-eight countries were represented in our Innsbruck conference. I believe that by providing a setting for people from different countries and cultures to exchange their perspectives and research ISQOLS is making a major contribution to the study of well-being, quality of life and happiness. Quality of life researchers do benefit from listening to scholars who provide perspectives from different countries and cultures; in most cases these perspectives reflect the values and wisdoms of ancient civilizations. This is an important contribution in a world where globalization tendencies have pushed for homogenizing everything, even academic approaches and perspectives—there is a risk for academic approaches to end up neglecting cultural diversity within this tendency to homogenization. Rather than holding an attitude of going to teach everybody, in the study of well-being it is important to strengthen an attitude of going to learn from everybody. The study of well-being benefits from learning from all; as researchers of well-being we really need to go and enrich our perspective from the lives and values of people from different corners of the world, and ISQOLS—as an international society—provides the appropriate setting to do so.

Now we are looking forward to our XVI ISQOLS conference June 14-16, 2018 in Hong Kong. We thank the Hong Kong Polytechnic University for acting as our host and we are looking forward to gathering in such a special place that combines tradition and modernity (see the ISQOLS homepage for additional information: <http://www.isqols.org/>). I am sure that surrounded by millenary wisdom we will have an extraordinary opportunity to learn from all people and from all cultures.

Looking forward to meeting everybody next year,

Mariano Rojas

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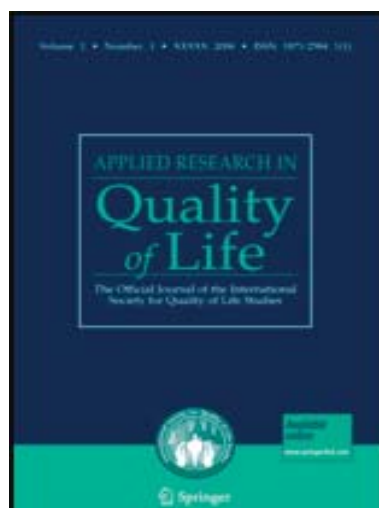
**THE
INTERNATIONAL
SOCIETY FOR
QUALITY-OF-
LIFE STUDIES:
CENTRAL OFFICE AND
WWW HOMEPAGE**

Applied Research in Quality of Life (ARQOL) presents conceptual, methodological and empirical papers dealing with quality-of-life studies in the applied areas of the natural and social sciences. It aims to publish papers that have direct implications for, or impact on practical applications of research on the quality of life. The articles are crafted from interdisciplinary, inter-professional and international perspectives. ARQOL guides decision making in a variety of professions, industries, nonprofit, and government sectors, including healthcare, travel and tourism, marketing, corporate management, community planning, social work, public administration, and human resource management. It helps decision makers apply performance measures and outcome assessment techniques based on such concepts as well-being, human satisfaction, human development, happiness, wellness and quality-of-life. ARQOL is the official journal of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS). www.isqols.org

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The International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) was formed in the mid-1990s. The objectives of ISQOLS are: 1) to stimulate interdisciplinary research in quality-of-life (QOL) studies within the managerial (policy), behavioral, social, medical, and environmental sciences; 2) to provide an organization which all academic, business, nonprofit, and government researchers who are interested in QOL studies can coordinate their efforts to advance the knowledge base and to create positive social change; and 3) to encourage closer cooperation among scholars engaged in QOL research to develop better theory, methods, measures, and intervention programs. For more information, see the ISQOLS webpage: www.isqols.org

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Social Indicators Network News

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