

“For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem — how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.”

— John Maynard Keynes

“Progress is electricity, school consolidation, church remodeling, second farm tractors, second farm cars, hay bailers, corn pitches, field choppers and indoor plumbing.”

- Ollie McLellan (character in Hoosiers)

Chapter 6: How do we measure progress/success today?

Before we start our deeper investigation into how different groups in America are doing, it’s critical that we think deeply about the yardstick we are going to use. I’ve made that claim - that technology leaves us better off but feeling worse— several times now. It is time for me to back this up, and unpack my case.

First – better and worse off with respect to *what*? It should be a simple question, really – how is the world today, how well or not well are people doing? That deceptively simple question leads to very difficult ones that we must unpack – how do we *measure* people’s well-being? Are people achieving the things they *value*? How accurate is their *perception* of that? Is *technology* helping or hurting in that process?

While all of us are unique, there are some commonalities that tend to be shared by a large percentage of most populations. UN Secretary General Kofi Anan pointed out that we had encoded them in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in 2003 said “*The values of peace, freedom, social progress, equal rights and human dignity, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are no less valid today than when, over half a century ago, those documents were drafted by representatives of many different nations and cultures.*”¹

How are we doing with respect to these goals, globally?

¹<https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sgsm9076.doc.htm#:~:text=The%20values%20of%20peace%2C%20freedom,of%20many%20different%20nations%20and>

We'll need to build up a scorecard that can be used relatively consistently across very different populations. All of us want different things, and as we've discussed at length, even within ourselves, we have many needs and values we are pursuing. How is it possible for someone to judge how thought is doing for any given person, much less a system of people, within which there are numerous trends and various winners and losers? You can't. But if you are looking at populations of people, you can look for common denominators, shared by most people, most of the time.

Still, do we use objective metrics, like biological (lifespan, rates of disease), economic (average income, rates of unemployment and crime) or other cultural benchmarks (educational achievement, marriage/divorce rates); or do we use subjective reports of well-being, social freedom and equality? Are the "facts"² about a person's circumstances the important thing, or how they *feel* or *perceive* the "facts"? Fortunately, there are some baselines we can consider adopting.

Kofi Anan's talk focused on peace, freedom, social progress, equal rights, and human dignity, but the UN Declaration also details 30 rights in total:

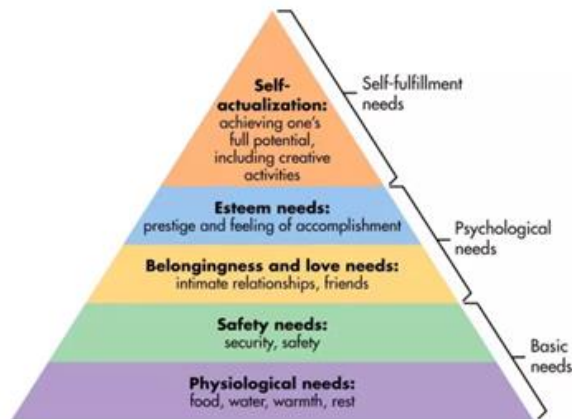
Article 1	Right to Equality
Article 2	Freedom from Discrimination
Article 3	Right to Life, Liberty, Personal Security
Article 4	Freedom from Slavery
Article 5	Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment
Article 6	Right to Recognition as a Person before the Law
Article 7	Right to Equality before the Law
Article 8	Right to Remedy by Competent Tribunal
Article 9	Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Exile
Article 10	Right to Fair Public Hearing
Article 11	Right to be Considered Innocent until Proven Guilty
Article 12	Freedom from Interference with Privacy, Family, Home and Correspondence
Article 13	Right to Free Movement in and out of the Country
Article 14	Right to Asylum in other Countries from Persecution
Article 15	Right to a Nationality and the Freedom to Change It
Article 16	Right to Marriage and Family
Article 17	Right to Own Property
Article 18	Freedom of Belief and Religion
Article 19	Freedom of Opinion and Information
Article 20	Right of Peaceful Assembly and Association
Article 21	Right to Participate in Government and in Free Elections
Article 22	Right to Social Security

² With the understanding that objectives "facts" are highly susceptible to manipulation. As the old quip of unknown origin goes, 'there are lies, damn lies, and statistics'

Article 23	Right to Desirable Work and to Join Trade Unions
Article 24	Right to Rest and Leisure
Article 25	Right to Adequate Living Standard
Article 26	Right to Education
Article 27	Right to Participate in the Cultural Life of Community
Article 28	Right to a Social Order that Articulates this Document
Article 29	Community Duties Essential to Free and Full Development
Article 30	Freedom from State or Personal Interference in the above Rights

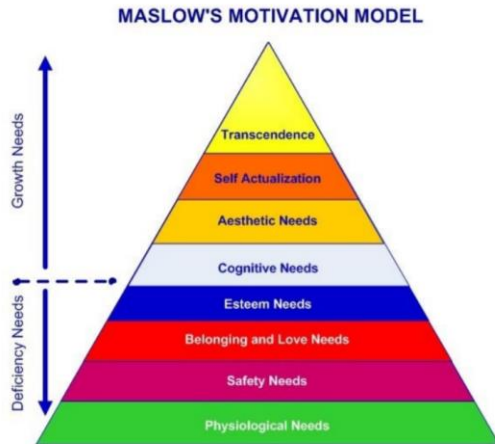
That's a pretty robust scorecard. But is it an accurate checklist of what people *actually* value, or just a reflection of global political concerns?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs is still frequently used in popular media, and simplifies things somewhat, and more interestingly shows that values might be hierarchical; my right to participate in the Cultural Life of Community (which serves my psychological needs of belonging) or my right to Rest and Leisure might be moot if I haven't eaten in three days:



Maslow himself revised and extended the Pyramid in his later work:³

³ Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-96; Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper and Row. Maslow, A. H. (1970a). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row. Maslow, A. H. (1970b). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. New York: Penguin. (Original work published 1966)



Usefully, Maslow was trying to understand how humans can grow towards a maximum potential. He looked at people as individuals as ever-changing and sought to understand them with respect to their own growth, and not necessarily towards some objective external standard.

However, academically Maslow's Pyramid has suffered from extensive criticism, and is now considered outdated. One criticism is that it is very hard to evaluate a person's status and needs in this model methodologically. For example, were Rembrandt and Van Gogh self-actualized, despite living in poverty throughout their lives?⁴

Field research did find support for universal human values, but suggested the hierarchical order was wrong. In one highly cited paper, Tay and Diener performed a large (60,865 people) and diverse (123 countries) survey on basic needs (food, shelter), safety, social needs (love, support), respect, mastery, and autonomy. Participants also reported on their perception of their well-being as measured by three subjective variables: life evaluation (view on life as a whole), positive feelings (day-to-day experience of joy or pleasure), and negative feelings (day-to-day experiences of sorrow, anger, or stress). The data showed that Maslow over weighted the bottom of the pyramid: you can be hungry and happy, if your other needs are met.⁵ The needs work independently, not hierarchically.⁶

Schwartz attracted even more attention with his work on human universal needs. Working with a variety of colleagues, he surveyed 25,000 people in 44 countries, and identified a list of fifty-six specific universal values, which he arranged into ten types:⁷

⁴ McLeod, Saul. "Maslow's hierarchy of needs." *Simply psychology* 1 (2007): 1-8.

⁵ Tay, Louis, and Ed Diener. "Needs and subjective well-being around the world." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 101.2 (2011): 354.

⁶ The ground truth may ultimately show that the dynamics are not that simple; there may be contextual partial hierarchical linkages/scenarios

⁷ Schwartz, Shalom H. "Are there universal aspects in the structure and contents of human values?." *Journal of social issues* 50.4 (1994): 19-45.

- Power: authority; leadership; dominance, social power, wealth
- Achievement: success; capability; ambition; influence; intelligence; self-respect
- Hedonism: pleasure; enjoying life
- Stimulation: daring activities; varied life; exciting life
- Self-direction: creativity; freedom; independence; curiosity; choosing your own goals
- Universalism: broadmindedness; wisdom; social justice; equality; a world at peace; a world of beauty; unity with nature; protecting the environment; inner harmony
- Benevolence: helpfulness; honesty; forgiveness; loyalty; responsibility; friendship
- Tradition: accepting one's portion in life; humility; devoutness; respect for tradition; moderation
- Conformity: self-discipline; obedience
- Security: cleanliness; family security; national security; stability of social order; reciprocation of favors; health; sense of belonging

And what about the US, specifically? Do we have stated common values, and do they conflict with Schwartz's? Do they deviate from the rest of world? Encoded in our culture via the Declaration of Independence is the statement that Americans have "*certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*" But the Declaration also details 27 insults that King George had done to the colonies, which presumably reflect other values. While most of them were of a legal nature, they also include more basic deprivations including "*harrass our people, and eat out their substance.*" And "*burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.*" The US Constitution set out to "*establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.*"⁸

The United States goals appear consistent with the global goals and values as articulated by Schwartz and the UN. But we still have at least two problems remaining with Schwartz/UN yardsticks.

The first is that they are quite long, and it's frankly harder to get the data and assess across groups on such lengthy lists of attributes. Secondly, the values are historical, or backwards looking. Just because they are the goals we have previously enshrined, do they reflect the goals we value now, or may have in the near future? The UN attempted to address this second issue by publishing its Envision 2030 program, which contained 17 goals for a sustainable global future:⁹

GOAL 1: No Poverty

GOAL 2: Zero Hunger

⁸ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDOC-106hdoc216/html/CDOC-106hdoc216.htm>

⁹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html>

GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being
GOAL 4: Quality Education
GOAL 5: Gender Equality
GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality
GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
GOAL 13: Climate Action
GOAL 14: Life Below Water
GOAL 15: Life on Land
GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

But when we attempt to reconcile these with Schwartz, we find our third problem- they are very different. Schwartz' concept of power, especially with respect to authority, leadership and social power, are not contained in the UN goals, nor in the US charter documents. And while we could argue that that the US conception of Liberty comports at a high level with Schwartz Self-direction, and perhaps with UN Article 3 and 19, the truth is Schwartz' criteria is far more specific than either of those two, and the idea of self-direction is missing from UN 2030 goals.

In a nutshell, the various charters of universal human values still appear to be too complex, too different, and even at odds with each other to be used in our quest for understanding human wellbeing in our modern niche

Other researchers attempt to quantify social progress. Opdycke and Miringoff, for example, created a scorecard with which they ranked the social health of all US states; it has 16 criteria, evaluated against different demographics:¹⁰

Children:

- Infant Mortality
- Child Poverty
- Child Abuse

Youth:

- Teenage Suicide

¹⁰ Opdycke, Sandra, and Marque-Luisa Miringoff. The Social Health of the States. Vassar College, Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, 2008.

- Teenage Drug Abuse
- High School Completion

Adults:

- Unemployment
- Average Wages
- Health Insurance Coverage

Aging:

- Poverty Among the Elderly
- Suicide Among the Elderly

All Ages:

- Homicides
- Alcohol-Related Traffic Fatalities
- Food Stamp Coverage
- Affordable Housing
- Income Inequality

With this work they were able to show how the states stood relative to each other; generally southern states did poorly relative to northern states – but there are exceptions. New York fared as poorly as most southern states, as did Montana. The scholars found that three criteria were particularly salient to good performance: Child poverty, High school completion and Health insurance coverage. A state couldn't perform well without doing well in all three of these categories.

Wilkinson and Pickett set out to study inequality across countries, and, perhaps suffering from the limitations of the light from their lamppost, settled on nine criteria that quantified 'social problems' for which "we could find reliable figures for":¹¹

- level of trust
- mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction)
- life expectancy and infant mortality
- obesity
- children's educational performance
- teenage births
- homicides
- imprisonment rates

¹¹ Wilkinson, Richard, and Kate Pickett. "Greater Equality: The Hidden Key to Better Health and Higher Scores." *American Educator* 35.1 (2011): 5-9.

- social mobility

We face the same challenges that Wilkinson and Pickett had – finding reliable and consistent data in the criteria we choose; across all the segments we might want to evaluate.

Their social mobility score brings us back to this idea of human development, which is what Maslow set out to understand. The idea is that the direction of your life's overall progression is just as important as where you are at any one time.

Dr. Mahbub ul Haq set out to understand this part of the puzzle, starting in the 1970s, while working at the World Bank. He noticed, for example, that Pakistan and Vietnam had the same GDP per capita in the 1980s, but Vietnamese lived eight years longer than Pakistanis. Working with Amartya Sen, a Nobel prize winner in Economics, he developed the Human Development Index (also known as the American Human Development Index), which was subsequently adopted by the UN Development Program. Their scorecard combined measures of health, education and income (with equal weight to each) to create a total index score, which they felt was the beginning of a discussion, not the final answer.

Health index scores in America, as reported in the annual Measure of America, are reported using life expectancy at birth using mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control / National Center for Health Statistics and population data from the American Community Survey. Access to knowledge is measured using two weighted scores based on data in the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey: school enrollment for the population 3 to 24 years of age (1/3 weight) and educational degree attainment for those 25 and older (2/3). Decent Standard of Living uses the same American Community Survey data, but looks at median earnings of all full- and part-time workers ages 16 and older from the same American Community Survey.

The combined score gives the ability to track and compare progress in these measures across time for Americans, across ethnicities, age, gender and geography.

The quantitative power of this model has numerous benefits, especially the ability to track progress over time. But the objective nature of this misses an important aspect: how do the people *feel*? How do they perceive their quality of life? And where in the HDI are most of Schwartz' universal values, and many of the UN goals?

Perhaps a different approach is needed here. Maybe something simpler? Let us return to the phrase 'life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. Life might seem objective, and perhaps even Liberty, especially when viewed through the more detailed UN liberties above. Happiness, though, seems important, but is subjective; and missing from HDI.

Fortunately, the world researches happiness, and publishes an annual report.¹² The 2020 World Happiness Report analyzed the Gallup World Poll data and found that high life evaluations were strongly driven by subjective measures of experienced well-being (especially positive emotions), supplement life circumstances, and the social environments. Negative emotions have risen significantly in recent years, mostly driven by worry and sadness rather than anger, and undermine self-reports of well-being. The researchers found that more than 75% of the variation in happiness from country-to-country was accounted for by just 6 variables: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption. To our earlier question – it is a mix of objective and subjective measures, weighted towards subjective criteria. Within social support, the report found strong influences from underlying factors - especially inequality, and most especially the inequality of well-being, but also a general climate of interpersonal trust, and the extent and quality of personal contacts, as well as trust in the quality of public institutions in which personal and community-level interactions take place. Fortunately, these measures also re-incorporate the concepts of ‘life’ and ‘liberty’ that we find in the US Declaration of Independence.

Are there any other rocks to turn over, as we search for a simple scorecard with which we can assess people’s success in our modern niche? Something relatively simple, and that integrates with or at least is not inconsistent with the rubrics we’ve looked at so far? Measures for which we can find reliable data, or make directionally accurate subjective assessments?

Research into the question of ‘what motivates us?’ may have some potential.

Deci and Ryan performed seminal work on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and in a model called Self Determination Theory (SDT) they defined 3 core areas of internal (intrinsic) motivations. They found that these needs were universal, and had to be satisfied to promote a person’s psychological health and well-being. SDT states that generally 3 things are necessary for a person to be satisfied with our lives: Competence, Connectedness, and Autonomy.

Surprisingly, these three categories cover the previous work in a comprehensive, consistent, and exhaustive way. These are listed below, cross-referenced to the frameworks we’ve looked at so far:

- 1) Competence: A sense of personal progress, mastering tasks and skills

¹² The World Happiness Report was written by a group of independent experts (Sustainable Development Solutions Network) acting in their personal capacities. Powered by data from the Gallup World Poll, and supported by the Ernesto Illy Foundation, illycaffè, Davines Group, Blue Chip Foundation, the William, Jeff, and Jennifer Gross Family Foundation, and Unilever’s largest ice cream brand Wall’s.

- Schwartz- Encapsulates Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Security and some of Conformity
 - Happiness- relates to GDP per capita, and healthy life expectancy
 - UN Declaration of Human Rights- Art 1,3, 23, 24, 25, 26
 - UN 2030 - Goal 1-4,6,7,8
 - US goals - Life, pursuit of happiness (life progress) and domestic Tranquility
- 2) Connectedness to others: a sense of belonging
- Schwartz- Universalism, Benevolence, Power, Tradition, and the obedience aspects of Conformity
 - Happiness- relates to social support, generosity
 - UN- Art 14-16, 20-22, 27-29
 - UN 2030- Goal 5, 9, 10
 - US goals- common defense and promote general Welfare
- 3) Autonomy: a need to feel we control our own life and act in harmony with our own needs
- Schwartz – captures Self-direction
 - Happiness – informs GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, and freedom from corruption
 - UN- Art 2, 4-13, 17-19, 30
 - UN 2030- Goal 11-17
 - US goals- Justice, Blessings of Liberty

A note on what might be missing here. The previous pages detail the classic benchmarks of a successful life: wealth, health, happiness, freedom, power, family, etc. However, Steve Jobs famously is supposed to have said, “*It’s really clear that the most precious resource we all have is time.*”¹³ It has also been said that ‘money buys time; time is what’s valuable’. Elsewhere, attention is a new criterion, one that has been called the “*world’s most valuable resource*”,¹⁴ and “*the currency of achievement*”.¹⁵ Still other scholars make the case that our mindset or attitude has a dramatic effect on how we see the world and use our energy and resources to benefit ourselves. Frameworks like Grit and Growth Mindset can be the difference between us seeing the same exact life experience as a success or a failure.

One last consideration comes to us from the work of Hans Lenk, who looks at the “meta” characteristics of humanity. In a 2022 paper he notes that many ‘human rights’ frameworks like the 1948 and 1966 Universal Declaration of Human Rights were

¹³ Attributed; interestingly, the authors have not been able to find the source to cite

¹⁴ <https://www.marketingmag.com.au/hubs-c/attention-worlds-valuable-resource/>

¹⁵ <https://medium.com/the-mission/why-attention-is-the-currency-of-achievement-851add1ccfba>

constructed as legal rights protecting individuals from the state or those with power.¹⁶ But more recently, Lenk observed that protective or preventive human rights have been broadened to include self-determinative and participatory rights – the ability or potential for an individual to design their own lifestyle. We see these “informational self-determination” rights appear, for example, in the German Constitutional Court. These social opportunity rights are intended to provide life-improving benefits which Lenk views as developing legitimate moral or ethical claims towards human dignity.

He believes it is important for humans have a quasi-right or at the very least an ethically legitimate claim to participate in social acts, like creative activity, volunteering, or other “freely chosen, personally engaging non-alienating meaningful activities (eigen-achievement, i.e. authentic personal activities and creativeness).”, and that older human rights frameworks should be developed or modified to accommodate these important dimensions of quality of life.

These additional considerations – of the value of time, attention, and opportunities for meaningful engagement are not codified in the early rubrics, but are worth considering as additional lenses on our search for measures of human well-being. But we have to remember not to try to boil the kitchen sink here. The exercise is to find out if there is something critical left out of our search. At the very least we need to make sure we don’t omit items that would give us counter-intuitive flawed conclusions.

Here in this chapter we’ve found that the question of how we evaluate a person’s success in life, against the values that are universal or at least widely held, turned out to be quite complex.

While Maslow’s Hierarchy appears simple and intuitive, the data doesn’t support it. Politically derived goals are unwieldy, and appear to be inconsistent with other leading models, such as Schwartz’s 10 categories, which are supported by empirical data, as reported by large number of actual people saying what was important to them. Research into other potentially subjective stated goals, like happiness, uncovers other influential criteria affecting a person’s self-assessment of the quality of their life. In Deci and Ryan’s SDT, we have a simple set of 3 broad needs which work independently to inform a person’s self-perception of their well-being, and these three also are consistent with and cover (or at least are not mutually exclusive to) the criteria expressed in other work that is supported by data.

We’ll use these Deci and Ryan’s three general categories then, to evaluate how advances in Technology and changes in cognition affect some groups of people in the US and around the world that may have been left behind in humanity’s purported advance. Along the way, we’ll pull in some of the more detailed values or goals from statements of human values

¹⁶ Lenk, Hans. "Humans as “meta”-beings: Meta-interpretive, meta-ethical and meta-technical." *New Techno Humanities* 2.1 (2022): 47-58.

from the two UN statements, the US founding documents, World Happiness Report and Schwartz, where that additional nuance or detail provides more rigor or insight than the more general SDT categories. And, as we'll see, there are the opportunities to see that this framework, especially when we fold in Ryan's other work on agency, are not inconsistent with the additional considerations of, say, Lenk's 'eigen-achievement'.

The next section of the books provides a short summary of each of a number of select demographic groups. A fuller review that leads to the conclusions below can be found in the associated appendices.

Plain language summary of this chapter

This chapter finds that it is surprisingly difficult to measure human well-being. We take for granted what “success” means. In America, it’s often associated with money. In this chapter we examine various potential scorecards for measuring success, including those that are “ideal driven” like the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the US Constitution, and some that are “data-driven”, because they start with available data and try to back into measures of success. Some of these are objective, like lifespan and educational achievement, and others are subjective, like self-reported measures of happiness.

Ultimately, too many of these differ from one another, or are too complicated to be able to assess consistently, across time and people.

I adopt a relatively simple set of 3 measures from Deci and Ryan: Competency, Connectedness, and Autonomy, after showing that these subjective measures effectively capture a significant number of measures from other scorecards I looked at, without conflicting with any of them.¹⁷

¹⁷ A note on the personal journey of this chapter - This chapter was a déjà vu, all over again: I asked a simple question – “how do you measure success for us in our modern niche?” I found myself falling down another rabbit hole.

It was very much a case of the fish realizing it is in water. I was surprised that I wasn’t able to find research that examined this question comprehensively. It’s probably out there, but after a lot of looking, I wasn’t able to find it.

Some colleagues scratch their heads at the time I spent on this question, and on the whole of Part 2 of the book. The truth is, if this material existed and was well-understood by the people who might read this book, I could have condensed this section into a few pages. Not finding the answers, I felt compelled to write this chapter and document Part 2 of the book.