



Editorial: Quality of Life Research in the Past Three Decades and Beyond

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In celebration of the 30th anniversary of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) in 2025, we are pleased to publish this special issue of *Applied Research in Quality of Life* (ARQOL), the official journal of ISQOLS, with the theme “Quality of Life Research in the Past Three Decades and Beyond”. As stated on the home page (<https://isqols.org>), ISQOLS is an international organization with the mission to advance interdisciplinary research and knowledge in the field of quality of life (QOL) studies. Founded in 1995, ISQOLS provides a valuable platform for various stakeholders, including academics, researchers, practitioners and policymakers to collaborate, share insights, and learn about the causes, concomitants and consequences of individual as well as societal QOL. It also promotes dialogue among these stakeholders on ideas, theories, methodologies, and micro- and macro-level practices, with the aim of enhancing QOL across different populations and geographical, cultural and societal contexts.

Over the past 30 years, ISQOLS has been a leader in advancing innovative research into QOL, happiness, and well-being, yielding invaluable insights that contribute to individual and collective life satisfaction and happiness. We have invited colleagues who have made significant contributions to ISQOLS or QOL research, such as ISQOLS award recipients, to contribute papers to this special issue. The papers included in this special issue offer unique reflections on the progress we have made, the challenges we continue to face, and the future directions for the QOL field.

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Based on a review of QOL research in the past three decades and topics covered in the articles of this special issue, we can highlight several observations and reflections. First, there have been changing conceptions of QOL and well-being as well as theories attempting to account for QOL development in different contexts. Primarily, many scholars have highlighted the limitations of pure economic models of QOL and proposed alternative perspectives based on interdisciplinary social sciences (Rojas, 2026). Similarly, there are many criticisms of the sole use of gross domestic product (GDP) as an indicator of QOL and there is a shift to wellbeing economics focusing on human and ecological welfare (Burger et al., 2026). Regarding conceptions of well-being, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of considering multiple domains of well-being, including physical, psychological, social, family, spiritual, community and global well-being. For QOL theories, there is a rapid development of micro theories on well-being (such as genetic and neuroscience accounts), macro theories (such as neo-Marxist and postmodern views), and ecological and systems perspectives on QOL. For example, in the paper by Sirgy and Lee (2026), they examine the predictors, mediators and moderators of purchase happiness. Finally, instead of relying on a single discipline to understand QOL, there is a growing number of research studies utilizing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to address QOL and well-being issues. Conceptually, one important reflection here is what constitutes a “good” conception or theory of QOL and well-being and what criteria can best be used to evaluate the related conceptions.

Second, different social indicator systems assessing QOL and well-being have been proposed and developed in the past three decades. On the one hand, there are indicator systems that give a broad-brush picture on the QOL in a country or a place, such as the Human Development Index of the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index. On the other hand, there are specific indicator systems focusing on specific QOL domains, such as freedom, corruption, rule of law, security, air quality, and economic development. Besides, different stakeholders including governments, non-government organizations (NGOs), and think tanks have developed and regularly disseminated QOL-related findings. Again, there are criticisms of using GDP to assess QOL (Rojas, 2026; Burger et al., 2026). Of course, we should continue to reflect on what constitutes a “good” indicator system of QOL and well-being, and which criteria should be adopted to evaluate such systems.

Third, for research methods, there are several observations that can be highlighted. First, QOL studies and indicator systems are predominantly quantitative in nature. With advances in statistics and artificial intelligence, an increasing number of studies utilizes advanced statistical analyses such as structural equation models, network analysis and machine learning. Second, acknowledging the limitations of quantitative methods, there are more qualitative studies addressing QOL issues in special populations, such as people with disabilities or chronic illness and people living in deprived communities and vulnerable societies. Third, with the gradual détente between the quantitative and qualitative QOL research traditions, there is a move toward integration of quantitative and qualitative methods and findings which can give us a “map” of QOL through quantitative methods and a “novel” about QOL through qualitative methods (Shek, 2026). One reflection point here is that as quantitative and qualitative

research have different philosophical roots (e.g., positivism versus social constructionism), it is important to explore how QOL researchers can mix the “water” and “oil”. As one common argument for using mixed methods research is pragmatism, we should understand whether pragmatic arguments are sufficient for mixing different QOL research methods.

Fourth, there has been progress in charting QOL issues in different domains, such as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. These include: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice, and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals. In this special issue, there are articles on education (Dou et al., 2026), family well-being (Leung, 2026; Zhu et al., 2026) and the work of Takashi Inoguchi on Asian well-being from different perspectives (Tonon & Lavolpe, 2026). Huebner et al. (2026) also focus on life satisfaction in children and adolescents. There are three reflections here. First, while these SDGs are inter-related, there may also be tensions amongst them (e.g., no poverty versus responsible consumption and production). Second, solutions for these issues require contextual considerations, such as gender equalities and reduced inequalities in different cultural background. Third, we need evidence-based programs to achieve the outcomes of the SDGs.

Fifth, attempts to enhance QOL in different populations and in different contexts have increased in the past three decades. For individual well-being, novel intervention methods and programs have been developed, such as therapies involving novel drugs and gene therapies. Besides, psychotherapies ranging from positive psychology to constructivist intervention paradigms have been proposed. For example, Benison et al. (2026) discussed the contribution of arts to well-being. For family well-being, there has been a significant advance in family therapies and family-based interventions to enhance the well-being of families and family members. There is also a call for enhancement of family resilience in the context of COVID-19 (Shek, 2025). For organizational and community well-being, researchers have developed measures to assess related well-being measures and programs to enhance well-being in the organizational and community contexts. Finally, there are policies in many places to enhance the QOL of people such as children and adolescents. In this special issue, Graham et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of well-being monitoring to predict public health crises. Huebner et al., 2026 summarized the correlates of children's and adolescents' QOL across different ecological systems. Two reflection points are intrinsic to applied QOL. First, we need rigorous evaluation to ascertain the effectiveness of related intervention programs. Second, we need good research and understanding before interventions can be effectively applied. For practitioners focusing on the enhancement of QOL, these two reflections are particularly important.

Sixth, the use of technology has substantially influenced QOL in the past three decades. With the advance in Internet technology, web-based well-being intervention programs have grown, such as computer-based psychotherapies and telemedicine possibilities. Besides, smart phones have enabled different stakeholders to enhance well-being through real life monitoring and assessment. With the emergence of gen-

erative artificial intelligence, AI-powered assessment and intervention programs such as chatbots have been developed. Besides the advance in digital technology, progress in robotics has also enhanced the QOL of different populations, particularly the aging and disabled populations. Advances in life sciences have provided more solutions to the development of interventions involving neuroscience and genetic therapies. Finally, green energy development such as using more solar power and wind energy has helped to address the challenge of climate change. In this special issue, Höfer (2026) discussed the role of artificial intelligence in promoting well-being. Rossouw and Greyling (2026) also used machine learning to examine the role of general trust, happiness, and traditional economic factors in the prediction of compliance. There are two reflections here. First, technological advance may not be always good for QOL. For example, with e-trading, one can have stock trade around the clock, which can reduce work-life balance and challenge individual and family well-being. Second, there is tension amongst different technological advances. For example, while generative AI is helpful, it consumes much electricity which may create energy problems.

Seventh, there is a rising awareness of the importance of QOL and well-being. In the past three decades, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of work-life balance and family friendly policies. Besides, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of wellness within organizations. Furthermore, instead of focusing on well-being “pathologies”, there is a tendency to focus more on the importance of positive well-being, such as a focus on resilience, hope, forgiveness, kindness, and acceptance. In this special issue, Clark and Lepinteur (2026) examined the well-being impact of own and others’ unemployment; Sarracino and Slater (2026) examined how to promote sustainable well-being for all, arguing for the unsustainability of the current economic model and a cultural shift to Neo-Humanism. There are two reflection points here. First, it is not easy to talk about well-being within a capitalistic “winner takes all” culture that emphasizes profit maximization and achievement. Second, there is a need to reflect on what values should guide one to examine the QOL priorities in life, such as putting spiritual aspirations above material possessions.

When we celebrate the 30th anniversary of ISQOLS, it is also a prime time for us to think about the possible development of QOL in the next 30 years. Echoing the reflections outlined above, there are several challenging tasks in front of us. These include: (a) development of ecological QOL models particularly through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary lenses; (b) review and refinement of the existing QOL systems with particular reference to generalizability across different contexts; (c) strengthening qualitative and mixed-methods QOL research; (d) examination of QOL in different domains using different outcomes; (e) stepping up micro- and macro level QOL interventions; (f) examination of the role of technology (particularly generative AI) on QOL; and (g) increasing the awareness of the importance of QOL and QOL research.

While we do not have a crystal ball, we anticipate that there are several challenges of QOL around the globe. With the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, one would expect that pandemics due to new viruses and the reduced treatment effect of antibiotics would pose QOL threats to the world. Unfortunately, society appears to be unprepared for this threat (Shek, 2026). Economically, the world will face economic crises arising from recurring economic cycles, declining trust in the US cur-

rency, and growing debts in almost all countries and places. Besides, the obsessive emphasis on increased consumption to boost GDP is also a challenge. Politically, geopolitics such as conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East pose a threat to people not just in the affected areas, but also to the world. Reduction in oil supply because of the conflict in Iran is a good example of this. Geographically, climate change is an obvious threat to QOL around the globe, particularly when we witness the melting of ice on the North Pole and the existence of extreme temperatures in recent years. Regarding social issues, the rich-poor gap has increased tremendously in the past decades which is further complicated by the growing world population. Finally, the rapid development of artificial intelligence is expected to have a tremendous disruptive impact on the work force, work-life balance and related ethical issues that would have repercussions on QOL and well-being. These anticipated challenges exactly highlight why we need more QOL research.

Competing interests The authors declare there are no competing interests as per journal submission guidelines.

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