**Headline:** We Did Not Evolve to Be Selfish—and Humans Are Increasingly Aware We Can Choose How Our Cultures Can Evolve

**Teaser:** At this critical moment in human history, a new paper on multilevel cultural evolution shows how looking to our cultural evolutionary origins might help us improve society at many levels.

By April M. Short

**Author Bio:** [April M. Short](https://observatory.wiki/April_M._Short) is an editor, journalist, and documentary editor and producer. She is a co-founder of the [Observatory](https://observatory.wiki/Main_Page), where she is the [Local Peace Economy](https://observatory.wiki/Local_Peace_Economy) editor, and she is a writing fellow at the [Independent Media Institute](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/). Previously, she was a managing editor at AlterNet as well as an award-winning senior staff writer for [Good Times](https://www.goodtimes.sc/), a weekly newspaper in Santa Cruz, California. Her work has been published with the San Francisco Chronicle, In These Times, LA Yoga, Pressenza, the Conversation, Salon, and many other publications.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Interview, Social Science, Psychology, Climate Change, Environment, Community, Economy, Immigration, War, Human Rights, Activism, Gun Control, Science, Opinion

**[Article Body]**

Ours is a critical time in the cultural evolution of humanity that is likely to shape our long-term future, or lack thereof. As a species, we have been on a self-destructive trajectory that has led us to our current [polycrisis](https://observatory.wiki/Our_World_Is_in_a_Multifront_Crisis%E2%80%94It%E2%80%99s_Time_to_Cultivate_a_Local_Peace_Economy) of unlivable economic conditions, worsening climate disasters, and the potential of an unspeakably devastating war, as the World Economic Forum’s [Global Risks Report 2023](https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2023/digest) puts it. The changes we all need to make, if we want subsequent generations to enjoy life, will most likely require big shifts toward improving connections with each other and the planet, and away from extraction and individualism.

The good news is that humans evolved often as cooperative and “prosocial” beings, so looking to the past and better understanding our cultural evolution as a species might help illuminate the best ways forward across the board. This is the basis of a [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120) published in April 2023 in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) titled, “Multilevel Cultural Evolution: From New Theory to Practical Applications.” Rather than focusing on the genetic code and physical evolution of humans, the paper explores the advanced and groundbreaking—but seldom discussed—field of cultural evolution.

The paper’s senior author [David Sloan Wilson](https://www.binghamton.edu/biology/people/profile.html?id=dwilson), a distinguished professor emeritus of biological sciences at Binghamton University, New York, and the founder of the school’s [Evolutionary Studies (EvoS) program](https://www.binghamton.edu/evos/), told the Independent Media Institute in May 2023 that the authors of the [article](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120#body-ref-r68) wrote it “to show that a synthesis, which has already taken place for the study of biological evolution, is now in progress for the study of human cultural evolution, with wide-ranging practical applications.”

Looking at humanity through a lens of cultural evolution shows that “we are neither cooperative nor selfish,” Wilson says. “We are capable of both—so becoming cooperative requires providing the right environmental conditions. Also, cultural evolution helps us to recognize the common denominators that apply across all contexts of our lives—our families, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and so on, and at all scales, from small groups to the planet. This is very empowering.”

He shared the example of a [program](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0027826) for at-risk high school students that he helped to design in 2010 at Regents Academy in Binghamton, New York.

“By providing the right social environment, kids who flunked three or more of their classes during the previous year [2010] performed as well as the average high school student in the district [in 2011],” he says.

Wilson explained in an [article](https://www.binghamton.edu/news/story/4200/prosocial-world-how-the-principles-of-evolution-can-create-lasting-global-change) published on the Binghamton University website in April 2023 that evolutionary science is made up of a triad: variation, selection, and replication—and that triad is also visible in the evolution of culture, “from economics and business, to engineering and the arts, and the functioning of society at all levels.” He [added](https://www.binghamton.edu/news/story/4200/prosocial-world-how-the-principles-of-evolution-can-create-lasting-global-change) that “knowing how cultural evolution happens also means we can harness it for the larger good, creating a more just and sustainable world.”

While evolution has been at the core of biological sciences over the last century, evolutionary science is rarely part of the conversation when it comes to understanding culture and the modern-day problems of society.

As Steven C. Hayes, co-author of the paper, psychologist, and [professor](https://www.unr.edu/psychology/faculty/steven-hayes) emeritus at the University of Nevada, Reno, told the Independent Media Institute in May 2023, multidimensional and multilevel evolutionary theory “is now at a level of knowledge and sophistication where it’s ready to step forward and be part of that broader cultural conversation.”

However, he says that if you pick almost any area that might be important in our society, “from immigration to climate change, or economic justice, or the opiate crisis, or the impacts of the pandemic, or suicide in young people—and on and on it goes—” seldom will behavioral sciences and the behavioral aspects of the evolutionary sciences even be mentioned. The authors of the [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120#body-ref-r68) on multicultural cultural evolution sought to remedy this.

Hayes says that while he acknowledges the real atrocities humans have committed (like slavery, climate destruction, and much else), it’s imperative that people are able to see that humans have also done better, and are capable of doing better, going forward.

“It strikes me in doing this work that the narratives we tell ourselves about our history as a species are powerful in shaping the future,” he says. “We’ve created an economic system that is destroying the Earth. Think seriously about what we’ve supported just over the last 50 to 100 years, and how hard it is for us to step up to the challenges of just climate change, never mind economic disparities—we can do better.”

Hayes says as a species it is time for us to choose to “evolve on purpose,” and he believes “we can use the tools of evolutionary science to do that.”

**Humans Evolved as Prosocial—Not Individualistic**

One key point the [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120) makes is that humans evolved most often through cooperation and we are, at our foundations, prosocial—meaning that we’ve evolved to care about the welfare of others and behave in ways that support the greater good.

The [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120) explores in detail three hallmarks of cultural evolution that include: 1) prosociality, 2) social control that enforces prosocial behavior, and 3) symbolic thought, which includes an adaptable catalog of symbols with shared meaning.

Hayes, who is also president of the [Institute for Better Health](https://www.ibh.com/), has worked for four decades on developing a new behavioral science approach called Contextual Behavioral Science and studying how to ease human suffering by empowering them to live values-based lives.

“We did not evolve as selfish primates,” Hayes says. “We evolved as social primates, we reined in selfishness, we fostered community, and we made sure that every voice matters.”

He notes that from his perspective, having researched cognitive functioning and psychology there is an “alternative view of human functioning that will foster human beings who are whole and free.”

From a psychological perspective, which evolutionary science supports and the [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120) details, individualism is simply not good for us.

“Thriving… almost always means collaborating with others,” Hayes says, noting that one point that should give people hope is that when one moves in an individualistic way, toward selfishness and narcissism, they move toward unhappiness.

“Narcissists are not happy,” he says. “People who lie, cheat, and steal are not happy. There’s a deep-down yearning for love, connection, and belonging that is there at birth.”

Hayes sees the cultural biological evolution toward traits that benefit the common good over individual gain show up not just in human history, but in today’s world, by way of his work as a clinical psychologist. The afflictions that are most prominent today of narcissism, loneliness, and actions that harm others, and how they are intertwined with negative impacts of social media, for one example, all could be said to varying degrees to have a solution to focus more on building interpersonal relationships and communities. And individuals who partake in this positive socialization often have better mental health as a benefit.

“It’s time for us as mental health professionals and scientists to speak about the importance of relationships and of empowering our young people to learn how to have relationships that matter.”

**An Alternative to the “Greed Is Good” Paradigm**

The “Economics and Business” section of the [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120) is focused on the ways multilevel cultural evolutionary theory can provide an alternative to the “greed is good” economic narrative. It expands upon the Nobel Prize-winning work of political scientist Elinor Ostrom, which proved that groups can effectively self-manage common-pool resources like “forests, pastures, fisheries, and the groundwater,” without falling into self-serving behaviors when they follow a specific set of design principles she puts forth. Ostrom’s work disproved the well-known economic myth of the “[tragedy of the commons](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/5699198/)” that insists privatization and top-down regulation are necessary to manage resources.

The paper proposes that Ostrom’s concepts have the potential to be effective across “contexts and scales” rather than being confined to the discipline of economics. And the paper [predicts](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120#body-ref-r68) that by using cultural evolutionary theory, “[v]irtually all functionally oriented groups can benefit” from implementing the principles Ostrom laid out for economics.

**Expanding the Conversation**

Hayes says that if readers were to take one thing away from the [paper](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2218222120#body-ref-r68), he would want it to be an understanding that modern evolutionary science is not just what you learned about in high school.

“My message to people would be: When you know how to evolve on purpose, who knows what your ceiling may be? You as an individual, you as a couple, you as a family, you as a company, you as a community, us as a world.”

While individualism and “survival of the fittest” were the takeaways from the study of evolution that were widely upheld in modern culture, Hayes notes that Charles Darwin was among the first to talk about the role of multilevel selection and cooperation in evolution.

“There are economic and social forces that took advantage of the competitive view, and it started very early on in the field [of evolution],” he says. And Hayes says that it wasn’t long after Darwin shared his theory of evolution, along with other prominent thinkers at the time, that corporations began to take hold of the narrative.

Hayes says he thinks society has been slow to adopt a more realistic understanding of human evolution because doing so would not appeal to certain economic and social interests. The paper on multilevel cultural evolution offers that alternative perspective, Hayes says.

“This paper says, modern, multidimensional, multilevel evolutionary science is ready to step forward as both a basic and applied field. It has a number of successes it can point to right now,” he says. “It is on sound ground that we can begin to think about how to evolve on purpose… in the real way that culture, companies, individuals, couples, communities, neighborhoods, and fields of study have always done: through healthy variation that’s selected, retained, and fitted to context in a multidimensional and multilevel way.”

Hayes notes that a principled alternative way of culture is “one in which we begin to see that it’s our obligation as citizens, as family members to create a context in which trust sharing and cooperation can grow,” he says. “That isn’t namby-pamby, it’s not weak, it’s not Pollyanna, it’s not anything goes. It’s the salve on the wounds that are created by selfishness, and a vision that we can live out.”

We humans do our best, he notes, when relationships, families, businesses, and groups cooperate.

“Why wouldn’t you want to scale that? Why wouldn’t you want a model for how to do that? The problem is that our models have been mostly part of [colloquial] wisdom and spiritual traditions, and they’ve been sliced and diced by the modern world,” Hayes says. “People with narrow interests have stepped forward and have sold humanity a bill of goods that is false.”