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Quality of Life in Europe

Conceptual approaches and empirical definitions

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"The unexamined life is not worth living."
ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ
(Socrates, Apology 38a)

1 Introduction*

This paper provides a framework for the analysis of quality of life based on the available datasets for the EU Member States, taking into consideration the more recent trends in quality of life research. After a preliminary review of the literature on “quality of life” (QoL), we focus on the main dimensions for the empirical study of well-being in Europe. The paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 retraces, in broad terms, the recent history of the notion of quality of life. Section 3 illustrates the main conceptual approaches of quality of life, while Section 4 considers some of its operational definitions, paying attention to the core domains and indicators commonly used in the literature. In Section 5, we present a preliminary analytical framework to guide empirical research on “quality of life”, looking at the experiences of the European countries. Section 6 concludes, highlighting some prospects for future research.

2 From post-materialism to sustainability: a brief history of quality of life

What consitutes a good society and how the life of individuals can be improved have always been central questions across time and cultures (Schuessler and Fisher, 1985; Griffin, 1986). For centuries philosophers, theologians and political thinkers have proposed their own definition of QoL according to different normative, religious or ideological assumptions. However, it is only at the beginning of the 1900s that this issue has become a matter of systematic empirical research. Among the pioneers of the analysis of quality of life and society, the Italian statistician and criminologist Alfredo Niceforo theorized – for the first time in 1921 – about the possibility to measure and monitor the progress of civilization through a comprehensive quantitative assessment of quality of life (Niceforo, 1921; Noll, 2004). During the 1960s/early 1970s, increasing attention towards the issue of QoL was at the heart of two research strands: one developed in the United States (the so-called “social indicators movement”[1]) and the other in Sweden (the “level of living approach”[2]). This first wave of studies was mainly focused on the construction of “social indicators” datasets, i.e. on ‘statistics, statistical series, and all other forms of evidence that enable people to assess where they stand and are going with respect to their values and goals’ (Bauer, 1966,1). These studies – which

* For the purpose of attribution, Patrik Vesan has written Sections 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 while Giulia Bizzotto has written Section 4.

[1] Cf. Duncan (1969); Noll (2004).

[2] Cf. Johansson (1973).

aimed at understanding the impact of economic growth on human well-being – were strongly affected by the peculiar "climate of the time" characterized by economic prosperity and the inter-generational shift towards post-materialist values in advanced industrial countries (Inglehart, 1977).

After the neoliberal ideological turn which marked the political debates in Western democracies in the 1980s, the issue of quality of life and society indirectly gained new impetus from the development of the European socio-economic cohesion policy. In 1988, the European Union reformed its redistributive policy based on structural funds in order to stimulate local economies and social integration in deprived areas, thus improving the quality of life of the European citizens. The original mission of this strategy was to promote a more harmonious common European market, mitigating the negative effects of the unification and fostering the social dimension of Europe though interventions of the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund (Anderson, 1995). The goal of a greater European social integration was also pursued during the "Delors era" (Ross, 1995) by the adoption of the 1989 Social Charter and the 1992 Social Protocol of the Maastricht Treaty (Hantrais, 2007; Geyer, 2000), which defined a common ground of social and working rights and prompted the adoption of positive actions aimed at facing the socio-economic disadvantages of poorer regions.

Ten years later, in 2000, public debates on quality of life received further input with the setting of the Lisbon strategy. This broad policy agenda aimed at creating synergies among policy initiatives in economic, labour, social and educational domains, in order to improve the economic competitiveness and increase the quantity and quality of jobs (Ashiagbor, 2005). Another challenge which played – at least in principle – a primary role in the European Lisbon agenda was the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The latter became the object of a specific process of coordination of national policies (the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion) aimed at fostering mutual learning and best practices exchanges among Member States. A set of common indicators was adopted at the 2001 Laeken Council (Atkinson et al., 2004)[3]. These indicators – commonly known as the "Laeken indicators" – were grouped in four main domains: income, employment, education and health (Social Protection Committee, 2001). In 2003, the European Commission promoted the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions project (EU-SILC) in order to compute the Laeken indicators, while the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Condition (EUROFOUND) launched the European Quality of Life Survey, aimed at collecting data on subjective perceptions of different components of well-being (cf. *infra*).

The partial failure of the Lisbon Strategy and the need to (politically) react to the 2008-2010 global recession have urged the adoption of new keywords and policy flagships in the European debates on quality of life and society. According to the European Commission, the recovery from recession should be interpreted as an opportunity to favour the enhancement of different dimensions of human well-being, going beyond the

[3] These indicators were then reviewed in 2006.

pursuit of the gross domestic product (GDP) growth[4]. As held by the European Commission Communication "GDP and beyond – Measuring the progress in a changing world"[5], Member States should improve and develop data and indicators in order to complement conventional analyses of economic outputs. This need for a more comprehensive analysis of economic and social progress has recently also been highlighted by an increasing number of national and international initiatives. For example, in June 2007 the European Commission, the OECD, the Organization of Islamic Conference, the United Nations and the World Bank organized a conference on measuring the progress of society in the era of globalization (European Commission, 2009), while in 2008 French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, appointed a commission of experts chaired by John Stiglitz with the aim to produce a report on alternative approaches for measuring both subjective and objective dimensions of individual well-being (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Finally, in 2010, the United Nation reviewed its traditional human development indicators, also introducing new measures for gender inequality and for poverty.

This renewed attention to quality of life shows some analogies with the interest in this issue which arose in the 1960s. A common aspect is the desire of actively guiding policy-making through the use of social monitoring and benchmarking, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive analysis of citizens' well-being. For example, Barroso's and Sarkozy's support for new approaches to evaluate the progress of societies seem to echo the analyses proposed 40 years before by Mahbub ul Haq, the Chief Economist of Pakistan's Planning Commission and the "father" of the United Nation's Human Development Report (HDR). Similarly, we can remember the famous speeches by Johnson and Kennedy in the 1960s or Mishan's provocative claims on the "social costs" of economic growth (Mishan, 1967).

However, there are also some differences between the "old" and the "new" perspectives on QoL, which mainly depend on the circumstances in which they were developed. During the 1960s, the interest in quality of life was inspired by a sense of mission and commitment, i.e. by the optimistic idea that social monitoring should have represented an important instrument for modelling the relentless progress of industrial societies in the age of affluence. By contrast, the recent debate on the quality of life takes place in the first global economic recession of the post-industrial era characterized by growing inequalities and precariousness. It is also for this reason that the renewed interest in QoL in times of crisis has been mainly framed in terms of sustainability. The notion of sustainability – and notably environmental sustainability – has become, for example, a central aspect of the new Europe 2020 strategy, which, among other flagship initiatives, focused on the alleviation of poverty and deep-seated inequalities in a political-economic context characterized by cuts in public spending and services. According to this perspective, the

4 This new perspective on quality of life could be also interpreted as an implicit attempt – in times of crisis – to focus on quality outcomes which may compensate for people's losses in terms of economic prosperity, such as cuts in wages and transfer incomes, preparing (parts of) societies for being poorer but not unhappier. We thank Ursula Holtgrewe for having attracted our attention on this aspect.

5 European Commission (2009).

quest for a better life *hic and nunc* cannot be separated from the right to a good life also for future generations, i.e. from the need to assure equitable development across space (different territories) and time (different generations). This implies a shift from a conceptualization of quality of life as a result of the inexorable progress of civilization to the idea of quality of life as a shared and balanced process which should take into consideration the impact of policy choices on social and environmental spheres as well as on public budgets. If and to what extent this new EU discourse on quality of life will actually remain high on the political agenda after the crisis will be a matter of future investigations.

3 Quality of life: three conceptual approaches

Quality of life has been the object of a large amount of studies in different research areas such as economics, sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy and medical sciences. Since a comprehensive review of these studies is outside the scope of this paper, we will mainly focus on some of the most relevant approaches to the analysis of quality of life which have been developed in the field of social sciences, dividing them into three main groups.

The first approach considers QoL in terms of the amount of resources and commodities available to an individual. In this case, the notion of “quality” focuses on the content of “human life” in terms of the objective resources which characterize people’s existences. Among the first studies to contribute to the diffusion of this conceptualization we can mention the so-called “level of living approach” developed by Swedish scholars in the 1960s (Erikson, 1974, 1993; Erikson and Uusitalo, 1987). The concept of “level of living” refers to ‘individual’s command over resources such as money, property, knowledge, mental and physical energy, social relations and security that individuals exploit to control and consciously direct their living conditions’ (Erikson, 1993, 72-3). According to this perspective, the concept of quality of life goes beyond the simple availability of monetary resources and refers to a wide array of other aspects that may affect the use of material resources available to citizens, such as health conditions, the level of education or other circumstances and context conditions (e.g. work environment, amenities and space in the home). This approach shows some analogies with the studies on poverty and social exclusion which are usually based on objective indicators of lifestyle deprivation in terms of level of income, lack of housing facilities, the presence of environmental problems and the impossibility to participate in activities usually available to a majority of people living in affluent societies (e.g. going on holiday at least once a year) (see e.g. Towsend, 1979).

A second, alternative, approach to the study of quality of life relies on the notion of subjective well-being. In this case, the concept of “quality of life” is equivalent to the concept of well-feeling, i.e. a subjective state of a person that derives from his/her evaluation of life, expressed, for example, in terms of happiness or satisfaction. This approach is rooted in the American social psychology research tradition developed in the 1960s and looks at quality of life in terms of satisfaction of needs. As held, for example, by Campbell (1972, 442), since “quality of life must be in the eye of the beholder”, what it is

worth considering is how individuals feel or perceive their life experiences. Quality of life should be thus defined starting from perceived outcomes achieved during the life course rather than from the availability of inputs, such as the availability of material and social resources. Subjective well-being has also been a key focus in the development of research into happiness economics (Easterlin, 1974; Frey et al., 2000; Clark, 1996; Clark and Oswald, 1994). These studies have demonstrated that, although happiness is positively correlated with income, this correlation appears weak among the most advanced economies, since the subjective evaluation of life experience is affected by perceptions of relative position in the society and not simply by the absolute amount of material resources available to the individual.

A third main conceptualization of QoL stems from the capabilities approach firstly developed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985, 1992; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Quality of life can be conceived in terms of the individual capabilities to achieve valuable functionings. Functionings are all those things that a person can choose “to be or to do” in leading a life, such as being well sheltered and nourished, being socially integrated or having self-respect. Thus, quality of life cannot be reduced to subjective evaluations, since these evaluations may reflect the individual’s ability to enjoy his/her own achievements as conditioned by mechanisms of adaptations, expectations and aspirations. Moreover, quality of life does not simply rely on the availability of resources, although this is recognized as a crucial element for realizing well-being in several domains. By contrast, quality of life should refer to the achievement of “real freedoms” that enable people to pursue, as far as possible, their goals and to choose lifestyles they value as important. Compared to the resources-based approach, in the capabilities approach the emphasis is put more on “agency” and “empowerment” as crucial dimensions of quality of life, i.e. on the institutional settings, cultural frames and circumstances which enable people’s chances to actively shape life courses.

Aside from these three conceptual approaches, some authors have proposed a more comprehensive definition of human well-being, considering – at the same time – inputs, outcomes and enabling factors that make a life valuable to live. One of the most prominent examples of this holistic approach can be found in the conceptualization of quality of life elaborated by Erik Allardt (1993). Allardt, in his attempt to revisit the Swedish “level of living” approach, proposes a more complex view on quality of life based on Galtung’s basic need approach (cf. Allardt, 1993). According to this perspective, quality of life can be achieved by meeting three basic sets of needs that Allardt calls “having, loving, being” (see Table 3.1). The “having” dimension of quality of life refers to the material needs that define a certain standard of living. It includes the needs for economic resources, such as income and wealth, housing conditions, employment and working conditions, as well as the need for good health and education. The second dimension – the so-called “loving” dimension – regards the needs for cultivating social relationships, emotional ties with friends, family and kin and, more in general, the needs for getting easy access to networks. This dimension looks in particular at attachments to family, friends, fellows and local community that can provide material and emotional support for individuals. The last dimension identified by Allardt – the “being” dimension – regards the needs for integration and participation in society, including participation in important

decisions, political activities, opportunities for a meaningful work life, as well as the need to enjoy nature either through contemplation or through activities such as walking or gardening. This last dimension looks in particular at the self-actualization of the individual, emphasizing the importance of opportunities for personal growth and the full realization of one's potential.

Table 3.1: Quality of life and its three dimensions: having, loving and being

Dimensions	Main domains
Having	Economic resources
	Housing conditions
	Employment
	Working conditions
	Health
	Education
Loving	Attachments and contacts in the local community
	Attachments to family and kin
	Active patterns of friendship
	Attachments and contacts with fellows members in association and organizations
	Relationships with work-mates
Being	Participation in decisions and activities influencing its own life
	Political activities
	Opportunities for leisure-time activities
	Opportunities for a meaningful work life
	Opportunities to enjoy nature

Source: Allardt (1993).

Another important aspect of this framework is that it takes into consideration two different approaches to the quality of life: the welfarist approach (based on individual experience) and the non-welfarist approach (based on objective conditions rather than subjective utility). According to Allardt, the needs which qualify a "good life" are usually defined with reference to what people have (resources) and to what they could be able "to do or to be" (opportunities). Nevertheless, well-being can be evaluated also through people's conscious experience as human beings measured in terms of satisfaction with living conditions, happiness about social relations and feeling of alienation or personal growth.

Three main aspects related to the conceptualization of QoL can be discerned from the comparison of the above mentioned conceptual approaches.

First, quality of life is usually conceptualized in terms of the life situations of individuals, since it mainly refers to resources, conditions or evaluative judgments from an individualistic perspective (e.g. being poor, enjoying good health). Nonetheless, QoL can be also considered as an attribute refering to a society on the whole, or to a local community or city. Indeed, this is evident when we look at some aspects, such as environmental management (transport, green areas, noise and pollution) or the availability and the quality of services provided to the citizens living in a specific area. According to

this "societal perspective", well-being therefore becomes a matter of political accountability, i.e. the extent to which it can be pursued - or at least facilitated – through public means.

Second, since "quality" can be evaluated with reference to several domains of human life, it follows that the analysis of QoL should take into consideration the interactions among different aspects which contribute to individual well-being. The availability or, conversely, the lack of material resources, positive feelings (satisfaction, happiness) and enabling environmental conditions can have, for example, a mutually reinforcing effect on the level of quality of life, producing situations of cumulative advantages or disadvantages. On the contrary, we could observe trade-off effects, which may lead – at least in principle –- to "zero sum games", where different factors of QoL neutralize each others.

Third, quality of life usually shows both an objective and a subjective facet. The choice between which of these two aspects should prevail is usually a matter of empirical research. However, the opposition between welfarist and non-welfarist approaches to QoL also represents a crucial conceptual issue, since it depends on our view of what quality of life is or should be (Fahey et al., 2003; Veenhoven, 2002; Watson et al., 2010). An attempt to go beyond the simple dichotomy between subjective/objective indicators of quality of life has been made by several authors. For example Zapf (1984) and Rapley (2003) propose conceptualizing quality of life considering the interrelation between objective living conditions (e.g. food, shelter) and subjective well-being (attitude, feeling). If we combine these two sides of QoL analysis, we can distinguish four different types of situations: well-being, dissonance, adaptation and deprivation (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Types of situations stemming from objective and subjective aspects of well-being

Objective living conditions	Subjective well-being	
	Good	Bad
Good	Well-being	Dissonance
Bad	Adaptation	Deprivation

Source: Zapf (1984), Rapley (2003).

According to this framework, the notion of quality of life does not apply to those situations where the level of objective living conditions and subjective well-being of a person shows opposite results. This is, for example, the case of "dissonance" where individuals face a "dissatisfaction dilemma" since, despite his/her good living conditions, the person is not (completely) satisfied or happy with his/her life. Moreover, a person can be stuck in a "satisfaction paradox", where the lack of resources or the poor circumstances in which a person lives do not seem to negatively affect their perception of life experience (Rapley, 2003). In this case, individuals, rather than truly experiencing a high level of quality of life, show a capacity to adapt their aspirations to the (poor) context and circumstances in which they live. On the contrary, we can find situations where the evaluation of objective living conditions and personal feelings go in the same – positive or negative – direction. Here, well-being refers to those circumstances where both objective and subjective

dimensions exhibit positive results, while its opposite (deprivation) is characterized by a lack of objective resources and subjective welfare.

4 The analysis of quality of life: domains and indicators

Another aspect we can take into consideration is how quality of life – or similar concepts – has been studied in empirical terms. In this section we will consider some of the main domains and indicators which have been used in order to operationalize the elusive notion of quality of life. It is not our purpose to cover the massive amount of empirical studies in this field. By contrast, we will pay attention only to the main recurrent dimensions of well-being which emerge in literature.

A first attempt can be made inductively, i.e. considering social monitoring analyses carried out at national level. In Europe almost each country has developed its own official system of social monitoring, but we can find other examples also in North America (e.g. Canada), Africa (e.g. South Africa) Asia (e.g. Japan, China) and Australia (Noll, 2004; Sharpe and Smith, 2005)[6]. Table 4.1 provides a synthesis of the main dimensions of human life considered by some social reports in Europe.

Table 4.1: Domains of quality of life considered in European governmental social monitoring

UK Indicators of Sustainable Development (a)	Netherlands Annual Report (b)	Netherlands Living Conditions Index (c)	Sweden Social Indicator Program (d)	Finland Indicators for Sustainable Development (e)	Germany Account System (f)	Ireland Measuring Ireland's Progress (g)
	Economic & welfare state			Economic development		Economy
Investment						Innovation & technology
Output			Income	Production	Income	
					Income distribution	
		Public admi-nistration			Supply	
		Purchasing power	Material living standards	Consumption	Consumption	
	Work & social security	Working conditions			Working conditions	
			Transport	Transport	Trans-portation	

Continued on next page.

[6] It is interesting to note that in the US, the federal government has not developed a comprehensive set of indicators on human well-being or a regular published social monitoring report so far, while it is possible to find several examples of non-governmental initiatives in this field (Noll 2004; Sharpe and Smith 2005).

Continued from previous page.

UK Indicators of Sustainable Development (a)	Netherlands Annual Report (b)	Netherlands Living Conditions Index (c)	Sweden Social Indicator Program (d)	Finland Indicators for Sustainable Development (e)	Germany Account System (f)	Ireland Measuring Ireland's Progress (g)
	Demographic development			Demographic development		Population
Poverty					Socio-eco-nomic status	
		Mobility		Social problems		
	Emancipation, values & norms			Equality issues		
	Multiethnic society			Ethnic minorities		
Social exclusion	Participation	Social participation	Participation	Participation	Participation	Social cohesion
	Political diversity		Victimization			
Education	Education		Education	Education	Education	Education
Health	Health & health care	Health	Health	Illnesses	Health	Health
Housing	Housing	Housing	Housing		Housing	Housing
			Social Networks	Community structure		
	Leisure time	Leisure activities	Leisure	Lifestyle	Leisure	
		Sport activity				
		Vacation		Development co-operation		
	Media & culture			Cultural heritage		
				Access to information	Media con-sumption	
Crime	Crime & justice					Crime
				Environment policy instrum.	Environment	Environment
Climate change				Climate change		
Air quality				Ozone layer depletion		
Road traffic				Biodiversity		
River water quality				Toxic contamination		
Wildlife				Eutrophication		
Land use				Acidification		
Waste				Natural resources		
Land use						
Waste						

Source: Sharpe and Smith (2005), Fahey et al. (2003).

Note: (a) Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA); (b) Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office; (c) Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office; (d) Survey of Living Conditions of Statistics Sweden; (e) Finnish government: http://www.vyh.fi/eng/environ/sustdev/indicat/biodiv.htm; (f); Fahey, Nolan, and Whelan, 2003; (g) Irish Central Statistic Office.

As we can observe, several dimensions recur in national investigations (Fahey et al., 2003; Sharpe and Smith, 2005). If we look at issues more related to economic concerns,

the most common aspects included in the analyses are related to employment and working conditions (UK, Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Ireland), transport (Sweden, Finland and Germany), income, consumption and purchasing power (Sweden, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands). Looking at social issues, some domains, such as social inclusion, education, housing and health, are present in (almost) each national report. Finally, British and Finnish social monitoring analyses also take into consideration environmental issues, such as pollution and aspects related to climate change.

The importance of these core domains also seems confirmed by international indexes of development and quality of life[7].

Table 4.2 provides a general overview of some of these indexes of quality of life well known at international level. As we can observe, the main dimensions of quality of life turn out to be health and life expectancy; literacy, education, knowledge and culture; economic resources; political resources and participation; and environment.

[7] See e.g. the review of 22 indexes of quality of life provided by Hagerthy et al. (2001).

Table 4.2: Domains of quality of life considered by some international indexes of quality of life[8].

Human Development Index (HDI)	Life Quality Index (LQI)	Legatum Prosperity Index (LPI)	Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI)	Human Poverty Index (HPI)*
Life expectancy	Expectancy of healthy life at birth		Life expectancy	Long and healthy life
			Infant mortality	
		Health		
		Safety and security		
Literacy				
Education		Education	Literacy	Knowledge
		Social capital		
Standard of living	Real GDP per person	Economic fundamentals		Decent standard of living
		Entrepreneurship and innovation		
		Governance		
		Democratic institutions		Social exclusion*
		Personal freedom		

*Only referred to selected OECD countries.

Source: Author's elaboration.

Also looking at the vast literature on quality of life, we can note that, despite the plurality of perspectives, there is a large consensus in literature regarding the identification of domains of well-being. As highlighted by Alkire (2010) the multidimensional approaches to human well-being and progress proposed by different authors show considerable similarities at least at the level of some general categories such as: health, education, economic and personal security; social connections and political voice; environmental conditions, subjective well-being and the use of time (see Table 4.3).

[8] Note: the *Human Development Index* provides a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living for countries worldwide. This index was developed in 1990 by the economists Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen and it is currently used by the United Nations Development Programme in their Human Development Reports. The *Life Quality Index*, developed by the Institute for Risk Research at the University of Waterloo in the early Nineties, is also a compound social indicator of human welfare that reflects the expected length of life in good health and enhancement of the quality of life through access to income. The *Legatum Prosperity Index* is an annual ranking of 104 countries, according to a variety of factors including wealth, economic growth, personal well-being, and quality of life. It is based on 79 different variables that are grouped into 9 sub-indexes: economic fundamentals, democratic institutions, health, governance, social capital, entrepreneurship and innovation, education, safety and security, personal freedom. The *Physical Quality of Life Index* is a measure developed by sociologist Morris David Morris in the 1970s, based on basic literacy, infant mortality, and life expectancy. Finally, the *Human Poverty Index* is an indication of the standard of living in a country, developed by the United Nations (UN). For developing countries the *Human Poverty Index* evaluates a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living; for selected OECD countries, it measures a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living also capturing social exclusion.

Table 4.3: Main categories in the analysis of human well-being

Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi (a)	Bhutan Gross National Happiness (b)	Voices of Poor (c)	Ranis, Samman and Stewart (d)	Finnis (e)
Health	Health	Bodily well-being	Bodily well-being	Health and security
Education	Education		Mental development	Knowledge
Economic security	Material standard of living	Material well-being	Material well-being Work	Work and play
The balance of time	Time use			
Political voice and governance	Governance			Agency and empowerment
Social connections	Community	Social well-being	Social relations	Relationships
Environmental conditions	Environment		Respect of other species	
Personal security		Security	Security	
Subjective measures of quality of life	Culture and spirituality, emotional well-being	Psychological well-being	Spiritual well-being	Harmony – arts, religion, nature Inner peace

Source: Alkire (2010).

Note: a) Stiglitz et al. (2009); b) http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/Default.aspx; c) Narayan (2000); d) Ranis et al. (2006); e) Finnis (1980).

Finally, Cummins (1996), in his attempt to identify core dimensions of quality of life, has grouped 173 different dimensions of quality of life in seven categories (material and emotional well-being; health; productivity; intimacy and community; safety), while Schalock (2004) highlights eight “core domains” of quality of life (material, physical and emotional well-being; personal development and self-determination: interpersonal relations and social inclusion; rights). As shown by Table 6, these two classifications are largely overlapping.

Table 4.4: Core domains and indicators of quality of life

Cummins (1996)		Shalock (2004)	
Core QoL domains	Examples of descriptors	Core QoL domains	Example of descriptors
Material well-being	Housing; income and standard of living	Material well-being	Financial status (income, benefits) employment; housing
Health	Personal health; intellectual performance	Physical well-being	Health; activities of daily living
Productivity	Work; achieve success; school	Personal development	Education; personal competence: performance (success, achievement, productivity)
Emotional well-being	Recreation, leisure activities and spare time; comfort from religion	Emotional well-being	Contentment (satisfaction, moods, enjoyment), self-concept (self-esteem), lack of stress
		Self-determination	Leisure; autonomy/ personal control; goals and personal values; choices
Intimacy	Family life and family/partner relations; relatives; number of friends; children	Interpersonal relations	Interactions (social networks, social contacts); relationships (family, friends); supports (emotional, physical, financial)
Community	Neighbourhood; social relations and social life; helping other	Social inclusion	Community integration and participation Community roles; social supports
Safety	Financial security; secure from crime; security of belongings		
		Rights	Human (respect, dignity, equality) Legal (citizenship, access, due process)

Source: Cummins (1996) and Shalock (2004).

Another central issue in the empirical analysis of well-being regards the selection of indicators. This choice usually depends on the availability of comparable data, on their statistical reliability and finally on the advantages they offer. We can distinguish three main “contrasting couples” of indicators of quality of life.

The first and most common antithesis refers to the querelle between objective and subjective indicators. As previously argued, some studies (in particular those inspired by a resource-based approach) opt for “tangible” measures of quality of life, which reflect objective life circumstances of people, i.e. factual conditions and behaviours (Diener and Suh, 1997). The assumed “objectivity” of these indicators usually lies in the wide agreement about the values they measure and in their autonomy from people's perceptions and emotions. Although these indicators allow easy comparisons among individuals, groups, nations and time, they display several weaknesses. In particular, the direction of causality among an indicator and a given phenomenon can be ambiguous, while the choice of domains and indicators, their aggregation and their weighting

procedures are highly debatable, since they reside in the researcher's convictions and perspectives (see also Diener and Suh, 1997). By contrast, other studies prefer to recur to subjective indicators of quality of life as a way to measure people's feelings in terms of satisfaction and happiness, i.e. directly looking at people's experience of life[9]. Nevertheless, assessing quality of life simply through people's own evaluations of their satisfaction or happiness is problematic because such evaluations may be partly determined by expectations and aspirations which are influenced by personal experiences and conditions (Ringen, 1995; Fahey et al., 2003). Finally the role of public policy in improving quality of life appears to be more controversial when the latter is defined in terms of subjective utility (Sharpe and Smith, 2005).

A second antithesis is related to indicators which are fixed – and thus have to be regularly updated – and those which are more flexible, i.e. automatically move in line with the changes related to general standard of living. A clear example can be found in the area of poverty studies where researchers use both indicators depending on a mean or median income and indicators referring to the availability of a basket of common goods valid only for a certain period of time and society (Ringen, 1995). The choice between these two families of indicators can also be applied to other dimensions of quality of life recurring for example to the identification of thresholds of deprivation which contain their own updating mechanism.

A third antithesis refers to static and dynamic indicators of well-being (Atkinson et al., 2004). Static indicators focus on the person's or households' current situation: what Ringen (1995) calls a "snap-shot approach" to quality of life. By contrast, dynamic indicators focus on changes over time related to individuals or to an entire population, such as the approaches based on lifetime (Desai, 1991). A dynamic perspective can consider, for example, how long a person remains in a situation (of poverty, social exclusion, poor health conditions) or can try to measure the trends in a population, focusing on the improvements in education or the level of specific services, i.e. on the possibility to reduce deficit gaps in quality of life. Another way to look at quality of life from a dynamic perspective is to recur to flow measures, which can quickly capture variations over time – caused for example by a policy strategy or changed economic circumstances.

In conclusion, the choice of indicators should go beyond dichotomized perspectives where families of indicators are opposed. In fact, objective and subjective, fixed and flexible, static and dynamic indicators are considered as complementary measures which shed light on the different aspects of quality of life. Moreover, the indicators used in the study of well-being should be susceptible to revision, for example, in relation to new challenges or opportunities caused by changing socio-economic circumstances.

[9] However, subjective measures of quality of life are all but a homogenous family of indicators. In fact, we can distinguish different types of subjective indicators. Firstly, there are individual evaluations expressed in terms of a specific or overall satisfaction level (cognitive-driven evaluation) or happiness (emotional assessment). Another type of subjective indicators can instead refer to an individual's aspirations or expectations about the future. Finally also "objective" information about income, housing, local area, health are often based on implicit evaluations or "perceptions", i.e. on what respondents actually report in the surveys.

5 Towards an analytical framework for the analysis of quality of life in Europe

The brief review of the literature we have made in the previous sections provides some suggestions for the construction of an analytical framework for the empirical study of quality of work. Nevertheless, since our attention focuses on the European countries, the choice of domains of QOL will be strongly affected by the availability of reliable and comparative data referring to this area. Two datasets provide a comprehensive and complementary source of information on well-being in Europe: the EU-SILC and the European Quality of Life Survey. The European Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) covers, in 2008, twenty-seven EU countries and provides comparable cross-sectional and longitudinal micro data mainly referring to objective living and employment conditions (income, poverty and economic deprivation, social exclusion, health). Two special modules – one on "social participation" and the other on "housing" – were carried out in 2006 and 2007. By contrast, the EU Quality of Life Survey was realized in 2007 in twenty-eight countries and it mainly focused on subjective indicators of quality of life in the domains of economic situation (e.g. perceived economic strain, deprivation level), housing and local environment (e.g. housing conditions, satisfaction with accommodation), family relations (e.g. social support), health (e.g. access to health services, quality of health and social services), quality of society (e.g. tension in society; social capital) and – more importantly for our purposes – on satisfaction (overall life and domain satisfaction), happiness and expectation about the future.

Focusing on the information available from these two datasets, we distinguish 5 main relevant domains for the analysis of QoL, summarized in the following table (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Quality of life: core domains and possible descriptors

Domains	Descriptors
Material well-being	- Disposable income - Economic capacity/deprivation
Habitability (Housing and living environment)	- Basic facilities - Housing deterioration - Adequate living space - Satisfaction with dwelling - Noise, pollution - Crime in the local area - Accessibility to services
Psycho-physical well-being	- Health status (mental and physical health) - Access to health services
Social integration	- Interpersonal relations - Support from networks - Civic participation
Subjective well-being	- Satisfaction - Happiness - Self-realization

The first domain – "material well-being" – refers to the "having" dimension of quality of life. This is considered a crucial domain in the Swedish "level of living" approach as well as in

studies on poverty and deprivation. The emphasis is on the material aspects of well-being, i.e. on the availability of a certain level of household income and other commodities. We adopt a multidimensional perspective on material well-being, looking at two sets of items: The first set refers to those goods which are commonly considered essential for conducting a decent life (basic set of commodities) while the second set of goods includes these commodities which we assume that are important to fully enjoy life, such as having a phone, a TV, a car, a washing machine, or paying for one week's annual holiday (Whelan et al., 2001). The underlying idea is that the simple availability of these resources – independently of their actual use – will enable people to choose their own lifestyle and pursue their goals, more than their deficiency.

The second domain of quality of life – "habitability" emphasizes the role of context and circumstances in which people live, notably the conditions of housing and living area. As previously illustrated, housing represents one of the most common dimensions included in quality of life studies. We can plausibly assume that living in a house or apartment without adequate facilities (e.g. a shower or good electrical and water installations), in deteriorating conditions (e.g. leaking roof or dampness) or lacking sufficiently comfortable space strongly affects well-being. Another important aspect to consider is the broader circumstances in which people live, i.e. the characteristics of neighbourhood and local areas. The quality of physical environment (measured, for example, considering the level of pollution and noise from the street) and the feeling of personal security usually play a role in quality of life. However, these latter aspects should also be considered in relation to the accessibility to services (e.g. school, banks or public transport) which may vary depending on, for example, the level of urbanization of the area, therefore taking into account the existence of trade-off effects.

The third domain regards health-related concerns that affect quality of life, such as personal health status and access to health services ("Psycho-physical well-being"). The analysis of this domain is mainly based on self-reported health conditions and the existence of obstacles which may limit the possibility to meet needs for medical care such as the presence of unaffordable costs or difficulties to get access to health services due to considerable distances, waiting lists or lack of time because of work or family duties.

The fourth domain ("Social integration"), which refers to the social dimension of well-being, is related to what Allard has called the "loving" and "being" dimensions of quality of life. In this case, we can firstly pay attention to interpersonal relationships with friends, parents or kin and to the availability of support (material or emotional) from them. A second aspect is the degree of "civic participation", i.e. the integration of individuals in social networks through, for example, their membership in organizations or associations (no profit associations, churches, political parties, trade unions). We can assume, for example, that engagement in voluntary associations probably promotes the "sense of belonging" to the community where a person lives, improving, in this way, an individual's well-being (Allardt, 1993; Böhnke, 2005). On the other hand, participation in informal networks may provide new contacts and information which can be useful if you are looking for a (new) job or if you need some help to solve a problem (Granovetter, 1974).

Finally, it is important to consider also the dimension of “Subjective well-being”, focusing on individuals’ personal evaluation of life satisfaction (overall and domain-specific satisfaction), happiness and sense of fulfilment. This domain represents a rather distinct and complementary dimension of quality of life, alongside material, environmental, psychophysical and social well-being[10]. We can thus consider subjective well-being as a crucial component of quality of life, reflecting the degree to which people meet their (adapted) needs (Alber and Köhler, 2004). Moreover, the comparison between this last dimension and the other aspects of quality of life can provide some valuable information on the existence of dissonance or adaptation phenomena, as highlighted by Zapf (1984) and Rapley (2003).

6 Quality of life in Europe: a research agenda

Quality of life is an evolving idea which changes across time and societies and in relation to the population, cultures, living conditions and styles taken into consideration. This means that the study of QoL requires researchers to propose conceptualizations, analytical approaches and measurement techniques which can be adapted to the changing circumstances and the emergence of new challenges.

In this paper, we have traced the basic elements of a framework for the analysis of quality of life in the Europe. Nonetheless, a number of questions remain, opening up a possible research agenda for the study of quality of life in Europe.

A first aspect concerns to the relationship among different dimensions of quality of life as well as among different indicators of the same domains of QoL. As we have argued, quality of life can be studied looking at the interplay – for each of the above mentioned domains – of three aspects: inputs (material resources), opportunities (i.e. socio-environmental conditions which enable individuals to choose their lifestyle) and subjective outcomes. Another way to apply our analytical framework is to separately look at three different approaches which cut across the proposed dimensions of quality of life: a) an approach based on resources components; b) an approach based on resources and opportunities (i.e. contextual conditions) and c) an approach based on outcomes (Ringen, 1995). A further question is how quality of life relates to some – more specific – aspects which affect the life of individuals such as employment relationships. It could be interesting to explore, for example, the relationship between having a (good) job and living in a specific area, between the level of social integration and being in paid employment or if the level of (subjective) job insecurity correlates with the self- reported health status or the overall level of satisfaction and happiness.

A second research perspective deals with the analysis of quality of life in the light of equity issues. According to this perspective, quality of life can be studied focusing on the existence of deficits or deprivations in well-being and defining thresholds below which we assume that people are suffering from a severe lack in quality of life. These deficits of QoL

[10] However, also the other dimensions of quality of work can be analyzed recurring to “subjective” indicators, looking at the individual perception of available resources or health and environmental conditions.

could then be analyzed with reference to their intensity and their distribution across the population of a country or a local community. Moreover, well-being deprivations can be highlighted considering target groups such as women, ethnic minorities and young people or, as suggested by some recent research (Noll, 2004), other segments of the population such as children, atypical workers or elderly people. This focus on the distribution of QoL inequality can improve our understanding of the degree of the segmentation of well-being in a society as well as of the effects of inequalities – concentrated on these specific groups – on the well-being of the rest of population. Finally, as argued in the previous sections, the study of quality of life should take into consideration also the issue of inter-generational sustainability. Such a time perspective matters both in terms of a longitudinal analysis of patterns of well-being and with reference to the possibility to meet future generations' needs and projects of life. In this case, the concept of sustainability could be "mainstreamed" across different domains of QoL. The main challenge will thus reside in identifying what aspects should be sustained first – i.e. which choices can be limited today, continuing to assure a high level of well-being while preserving choices in the future – and how inter-generational equity can be measured.

A final research question concerns the responsibility for the improvement of well-being. To what extent should the State – or, more generally, public authorities – be the sole actor accountable for the quality of life of citizens? What should be the scope for action of non-governmental organizations or citizen associations? The quest for a greater quality of life could be – in principle – a central task for the so-called "intermediate bodies" which make up civil society rather than something that should completely left to the intervention of the public authorities. Moreover, individual behaviours should also be taken into account in the pursuit of well-being. Individuals can, for example, develop personal strategies to cope with deficits of quality of life – if the resources and the options are available – such as adopting healthy habits or cultivating their relationships with members of their local community. From this perspective, it should be important to understand who plays (or should play) a crucial role in promoting and maintaining higher levels of quality of life.

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