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ABSTRACT

Is the concept of "quality of life" potentially an important one for public policy analysis, or must it remain forever vague and controversial, resisting clear definition and scientific measurement? Everyday usage of the phrase is examined as well as its relation to other terms like "happiness" and "welfare." It is concluded that one reason for introducing the phrase "quality of life" into discussion of public policy is to have something to replace the now unfashionable terms "general happiness" or "social welfare." Various definitions of the phrase are examined, three objective and two subjective: (1) Quality of life in R is per capita gross regional income in R; (2) Quality of life in R is the degree to which people in R are provided with basic goods and services; (3) Quality of life in R is proportional to the fraction of R's population for which the necessary conditions for happiness are provided; (4) Quality of life in R is the level of happiness reported by the residents of R; and (5) Quality of life in R is the degree to which the preferences of individuals in R are satisfied. Three conclusions are drawn: (1) the concept of quality of life is an evaluative concept that embodies some theory about the nature of the good and how people should live their lives; (2) different definitions of the phrase will be appropriate at different times, depending on the nature of the decision and of the affected community; and (3) although no set of social indicators can be definitive of quality of life, social indicators are essential to informed decision making. They also serve to politicize decisions that are relevant to quality of life. (JB)

WHAT IS QUALITY OF LIFE

Dale Jamieson and Joseph D. Sneed

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The beginning of the 1960s ushered in a period of great optimism in American life. Millions enjoyed a level of affluence never before achieved by so many people in any other society. There seemed to be little we, as a nation, could not do if we put our minds to it. In 1964, President Johnson promised to lead us "not only toward the rich society and the powerful society but upward to the Great Society" a society in which progress toward our goals is not measured by "the size of our bank balances," but by "the quality of lives that our people lead."

But suddenly the dream ended. In 1965, Watts exploded to the surprise of almost everyone. As the 1960s wore on, it became clear that disaffection was not confined to the ghetto; it had spread to all quarters of American society. Social scientists reported that from 1947 to 1965 the number of people who said they were unhappy increased from 4% to 17%, while those who said they were very happy declined from 43% in 1949 to 30% in 1965. Most puzzling was the fact that these declines in reported happiness coincided with a period of unprecedented economic growth.

It was against this background that the phrase "quality of life" came into common use. Some people were saying that the postwar economic boom had been purchased at the price of a decline in the quality of American life. Planners and decision makers in the public sector began to view their role as extending beyond just delivering goods and services to preserving and improving the overall quality of life. Concern with quality of life was embodied in legislation and the concept of "quality of life" was viewed as "a potential new tool for decision makers."

This concern with quality of life as a public policy goal prompted efforts to explain what quality of life meant and how changes in quality of life can be identified. Many of those who viewed quality of life as an important new concept in public policy analysis were hopeful that empirical research in such areas as "quality of life indicators" would lead to clear objective ways of evaluating the effectiveness of public policy in enhancing the quality of life. Others were more skeptical, viewing the concept of "quality of life" as inherently "fuzzy" and incapable of clear, let alone quantitative, definition.

Who is right? Is the concept of "quality of life" potentially an important one for public policy analysis? Or must it remain forever vague and controversial, resisting clear definition and scientific measurement?

Here we attempt to provide a guide to the literature on quality of life that addresses these questions. We begin looking at our everyday use of the term "quality of life" and its relation to other terms like "happiness" and "welfare." Then we characterize summarily some different definitions of quality of life that have been proposed. Finally, we draw some tentative conclusions about the usefulness of the concept "quality of life" in public policy analysis.

How We Talk About the Quality of Life

It is easy to see that quality of life is often, perhaps most often, used to make comparisons. We say things like:

"The quality of life in Boulder is different from that in Durango."

The most common modern usage of "quality" carries an evaluative message. When we speak of "degradation" of quality of life, then we speak of "preserving" or "enhancing" the quality of life, we clearly have in mind evaluative comparisons of quality of life.

We think it's clear that valuative comparisons of quality of life are most relevant to public policy. Citizens and public officials are concerned about differences in quality of life just because they are "differences that make a difference" to somebody. That the comparisons of quality of life that most concern us are "value judgments" seems to be a point almost too obvious to be worth making. Yet failure to remember this simple, obvious fact appears to be the source of a good bit of confusion in public discussion of quality of life issues.

Individual Quality of Life

What kinds of things do we compare with respect to quality of life? We sometimes talk about the quality of life of individual people. We might compare the quality of a specific person's life at different times. Last year your friend Sam was unemployed, broke and friendless. Since then, he's found a well-paying job and new friends. You might say:

"The quality of Sam's life is higher now than it was a year ago."

This might sound just a bit pretentious to some of us. Quality of life might seem like a somewhat "trendy" way of referring to a concept that people have been concerned about for quite some time. More commonly it's called "happiness." Perhaps what you mean to say is just this:

"Sam is happier now than he was a year ago."

One might wonder whether replacing the common name for this concept, "happiness," by the more scientific sounding term "quality of life" has contributed much to the discussion.

Group Quality of Life

Besides comparing the quality of life or happiness of individual people, we frequently compare the quality of life of groups of people. We say things like:

"Wheat farmers on the plains had a higher quality of life ten years ago than they do now."

Here again one might think that quality of life is doing the work of more familiar terms like "happiness." Perhaps we could just as well, and less pretentiously, say:

"Wheat farmers on the plains were happier ten years ago than they are now."

Perhaps we could also just as well say:

"The welfare of wheat farmers on the plains was greater ten years ago than it is now."

To those not steeped in the literature of economics, this formulation in terms of "welfare" may sound as arcane as the formulation in terms of "quality of life." But the term "welfare" has a long history of common usage. Indeed, promotion of "the general welfare" is one of the public policy goals sanctioned by our national constitution.

During the 19th century, the term "welfare" began to be appropriated by the welfare economists and their friends. Initially, welfare economists and their philosophical compatriots—utilitarians like Bentham, the Mills, and Sidgwick—used "welfare" or "social welare" in the broadest sense to mean the "general happiness." Gradually the term appears to have been narrowed in scope to mean something like "economic welfare." Writing in 1932, the economist Pigou distinguished welfare "that can be brought into relation with the measuring rod of money" from welfare that cannot. Now, when we speak of "the welfare of wheat farmers," we tend to think only of the narrowly material aspects of their living standard. The motivation for narrowing the concept of social welfare was avoiding problems in being clear about just what "social welfare" means. Restricting the scope of the concept tc "economic welfare" made it much easier to be precise and "scientific" about the goals of public policy — at least economic policy.

One reason for introducing the term "quality of life" into discussion of public policy is to have something to do the work of the now unfashionable terms "general happiness" or "social welfare." Those who believe the goals of public policy are conceived too narrowly need a term to characterize the goal they favor. The term "quality of life" does for them what "general happiness" and "social welfare" did for their 18th and 19th century predecessors.

Regional Quality of Life

We frequently appear to compare the quality of life in different geographic regions. We say things like:

"Colorado has a higher quality of life now than New York"

An obvious thing to say here is that talking about geographic regions is just shorthand for talking about the people in them. One might say what we really mean here is:

"People in Colorado have a higher quality of life than people in New York."

But this may not always capture the full meaning of our first statement. For example, someone saying this might have in mind some features of the natural environment, say the variety of flora, that are

relevant to the quality of life, happiness, or welfare of any individuals or group of people living in the states.

Apparently, few people would want to say that the quality of life of people living in regions was completely irrelevant to comparing the quality of life in the regions. But even the weaker view that it's not the only relevant consideration means that we can not regard "quality of life" in this usage as just meaning something like "happiness" or "welfare."

Definitions of Quality of Life

Various definitions of quality of life have been offered. Some are objective: they tell us to construct measures of the quality of life in a region from facts about the material and social environment in the region. Others are subjective: they tell us to construct measures of the quality of life in a region from facts about the psychological states of people in the region. First we shall examine some objective definitions, and then we shall turn to some subjective definition.

Objective Definitions

The first objective definition is this one:

1. Quality of life in R is per capita Gross Regional Income (GRI) in R.

This definition has three important advantages. It is easy to operationalize at reasonable cost, it is politically acceptable, and it makes explicit the connection between quality of life and economic welfare. But this definition also has some disadvantages. First, GRI is often a misleading measure of economic welfare. Since only monetarized goods are registered in GRI, many contributions to economic welfare, for example those of housewives and those obtained by barter, are not captured by GRI. Second, GRI is insensitive to distributional concerns. High quality of life on this definition is compatible with a state of affairs in which a few people are very rich and most people are desperately poor. Finally and most importantly, GRI does not exhaust what we ordinarily think of as quality of life. It doesn't include for example, equality, a sense of community, security, and other factors that we think are important in quality of life judgments.

A second objective definition of quality of life is this one.

2. Quality of life in R is the degree to which people in R are provided with basic goods and services.

This definition has two of the advantages of the former. It is easy to operationalize at reasonable cost, and it is politically acceptable. But it too suffers from some disadvantages. First, it is far from clear what counts as a basic good and what counts as an adequate level of provision. Is public transportation a basic good, or just streets? Is a 45 minute average travel time adequate provision, or must it be 30 minutes? Second, it is far from clear what counts as an adequate indicator of a basic good. For example, it is widely believed that health care is a basic good and that nurses are important in its delivery. Yet studies have shown that cities

are ranked very differently in health care delivery depending on which of the following indicators are used:

number of nurses per 1000 hospital beds.
number of nurses per 100 full-time doctors.
number of nurses per 100 doctors, full or part-time.
number of nurses per 100 persons of auxiliary nursing staff.
number of nurses per 1000 patients.
number of nurses per 10,000 patient-days.

This also suggests another problem with social indicators. What we are really interested in is the output of the health care system: health. Yet what is measured by these indicators are the inputs to the system. A third and final objection to this definition is that once we have a set of social indicators they must still be weighted and aggregated into a quality of life index. But how do we weight the relative importance of movie theaters with respect to nurses, for example?

A third objective definition of quality of life is this one.

3. Quality of life in R is proportional to the fraction of R's population for which the necessary conditions for happiness are provided.

This definition takes distributional considerations into account, and it makes explicit the relation between quality of life and happiness. But it also has several disadvantages. First, the way it takes distributional considerations into account is extremely controversial. It follows John Rawls (in A Theory of Justice, 1971) in supposing that what is important is not the total welfare of society, but rather the welfare of those who have least. Do we really believe that it is better to have a society in which the necessary conditions for happiness are satisfied, but just barely, for 80% of the population, than a society in which life is a great deal better than that for 79% of the population? Second, the necessary conditions for happiness may not be universal even within a region. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often cited as a plausible specification of the necessary conditions for happiness. Yet it has been shown that the structure of the hierarchy and the importance of various needs varies radically across social class. Finally, this definition of quality of life would be difficult to operationalize at reasonable cost, and it might well be the case that the provision of the necessary conditions for happiness would go beyond the responsibility of the public sector.

Subjective Definitions

The first subjective definition we shall consider is this one.

1. Quality of life in R is the level of happiness reported by the residents of R.

This definition would be easy to operationalize at reasonable cost, and it makes explicit the connection between happiness and quality of life. But it also has its disadvantages. First, people may be mistaken about their happiness. Second, people's responses to questions about their happiness

may be unstable due to irrelevant considerations. But third and most importantly, people's reported happiness levels are relatively consistent across race, gender, geographical location, and even across physical health. It seems that reported happiness studies discover little about quality of life. Rather they tell us the degree to which people's circumstances match their aspirations.

A second subjective definition of quality of life is this one.

2. Quality of life in R is the degree to which the preferences of individuals in R are satisfied.

This definition is attractive because it transforms the study of quality of life into a branch of welfare economics. But again, there are problems. First, whose preferences count? Do we count those of past generations? Future generations? Those living outside the region? Those of the higher animals? And second, people's manifest preferences may be based on incomplete or defective information. And third, once information about relevant preferences has been obtained it must still be aggregated, and any aggregation presumes some value laden principle.

Conclusions

This survey of quality of life definitions suggests three conclusions. First, the concept of quality of life is an evaluative concept which embodies some theory about the nature of the good and how we ought to live our lives. It is not a "scientific" concept that can be clarified once and for all by a panel of experts. Second, since each conception of quality of life focuses on some things people care about to the exclusion of others, different definitions will be appropriate at different times, depending on the nature of the decision and the nature of the affected community. Finally, although no set of social indicators can be definitive of quality of life for both technical and theoretical reasons, social indicators are essential to informed decision making. They also serve to politicise decisions that are relevant to quality of life, much as government publication of economic statistics serve to politicise economic decision-making. This is all to the good, since quality of life is as we have argued, an inherently evaluative concept.