

The Life Quality Concept between Economism and Hedonism

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Abstract

Life quality is a special type of concept: an evaluative concept. The descriptive concepts that science currently operates with designate object classes, existing general characteristics. Nevertheless, the concept of life quality has an evaluative structure. It does not describe objects and states properly, but it refers to their value for man. With common people, the concept of “life quality” has been assimilated to the old popular concept of “happiness”. Happiness refers to an emotion-state, namely feelings of fulfillment, satisfaction, wholeness, whereas life quality refers to the conditions that create and contribute to the development of happiness.

Key words: *life quality, subjective well-being, life satisfaction*

The systematic research undertaken in the quality of life domain, came into existence in the field of social sciences only several decades ago. Before clearly defining the concept, economists, sociologists and other specialists had made research in the field of life quality, without really identifying the concept. If at first it seemed to be a figure of style, the notion soon proved to be a deeply scientific concept of society, which tackles, in an integrating manner, the issues regarding man's existence and development, starting from the demographic, economic, social, sanitary, juridical, political ones, to man's rights up to the ecological, cultural and psycho-social issues, turning this notion into a key issue of modern society. In economic science, as well as in other sciences, the motto “A better life” is regularly used. However, what is the meaning behind these words? What is “better”? What is “worse”?

Quality of Life: History and Significance

The message sent by the word “quality” complies with previously made judgments or are in compliance with some comparison standards. If one had never met the object or the thing one is asked to analyze, one cannot say if this is qualitative or not. When quality is referred to, this implies a comparison, objects are placed in parallel, the relevant characteristics are searched for and the disparities that arise are set in order. The term “life quality” refers to the description and evaluation of the nature of people's conditions of living in a certain country or region. Life quality is made out of exogenous factors, such as the production technology, infrastructure, relationships with other groups or countries, institutions of society, natural environment, as well as endogenous factors, which include interactions within society and values of a person or society. The outcome of these factors is not necessarily constant in time; for instance, a century ago, there was little attention paid to environment issues and information technology did not exist, while today ecology represents one of the most important preoccupations of mankind.

There are two well-founded reasons that triggered the analysis of life quality. Firstly, the finding that the economic progress does not necessarily mean general well-being and poverty eradication, that is a part of the population kept on living in precarious life conditions, despite the existence of a large offer of various values of use. Secondly, ecology triggered this kind of research; the disturbances of the environment alterations, as a result of uncontrolled industrialization and urbanization, had dramatic consequences upon the life quality. The third, the impact between economic, social, technical, political fields is direct and very violent.

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As individualities, people creatively assimilate and interiorize the cultural and social values offered by the environment they live in, granting them a certain personal touch. Taking part in the social life, people manifest themselves as personalities who possess their own conception about the world, with dreams and ideals they wish to achieve. In this way, the material component of existence, related to the biologic, natural status of man, is added the spiritual dimension, which results from man’s quality of social being that represents and promotes values. Taking into consideration these aspects, we must have in mind both the above-mentioned dimensions, so as the picture should not be incomplete or unilateral when such an analysis upon life quality is performed.

As complex being, man has to fulfill a set of needs that are both material and spiritual. To draw a parallel with the American psychologist H. Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs”, man needs to meet the requirements hierarchy that contribute to it in order to fulfill himself completely, to reach the life quality he desires. Similar to the needs of the population, the classification of the necessary requirements to reach the desired life quality starts from the material conditions and ends with the spiritual ones. However, although the two dimensions, the material and the spiritual one, work concurrently up to a certain extent, other asymmetries can occur between the two plans. In other words, a higher standard of living may not include the high values of the spiritual component of life quality and the other way round, a rich spiritual life does not obligatorily imply material well-being.

The beginning of the economic science was considerably motivated by the need to study the evaluation of the possibilities that men should live a better life. In the early works referring to national accounts and economic prosperity, lots of similar notions were used, the first to do it being William Petty in the 17th century, followed by Gregory King, Francois Quesnay, Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, Joseph-Louis Lagrange and others. While the national accounts founded by these leaders of the economic analysis represented the basis of the modern concept of income, their attention was never drawn by the concept of life quality. They made research of life quality without calling it its real name.

In the developed societies, the concept of life quality has been analyzed and developed starting from the fact that material richness cannot stand for everything so that men should consider themselves pleased with their life style. There are needed more extensive global evaluations of people’s life problems.

The phrase “life quality” refers to a relatively recent idea that has become more complex in time. The first studies in this respect were made in the United States in the 50’s, and life quality was defined as a good standard of life in the new consumption society: ownership of modern equipment, motor vehicles and houses. Leisure time, savings for holidays and recreational activities were introduced later on. In 1960, the commission of the American president Eisenhower extended the concept of life quality by including education, health and well-being, economy and industrial growth, as well as the defence of the free world.

The concept of life quality was launched in the 60's in the societies with a high level of development, whose purpose was the more rapid increase of well-being. The developed countries had to face, on the one hand, the issue of directing the available material resources in order to assure a quality level of living and, on the other hand, the unpleasant outcomes of the economic system, such as poverty, environment degradation etc.. In this context, the policies of life quality were a sort of coercive measures of the social-economic system. In the first analyses of life quality, the concept referred, at the same time, both to the individual well-being, and to the society quality. The oil crises in 1973 and 1979 seemed to confirm the darkest predictions of the economic growth criticism. Nevertheless, the development of Western societies followed a new path that also influenced the debates regarding life well-being and quality. The oil crises proved to be the result of the political sector and not of resource depletion. The finding that economic progress does not necessarily mean general well-being and eradication of poverty was one of the reasons that led to a new research direction that is so praised today, namely life quality. Ecology also triggered this kind of research; the disturbances of the environment alterations, as a consequence of uncontrolled industrialization and urbanization, had dramatic consequences upon the life quality.

The phrase "life quality" started to be used on a large scale after a speech of the president of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967, which he highlighted the fact that the targets to be achieved cannot be measured in bank terminology, but in terms of life quality. "The great society" was preoccupied "not with the quantity of goods, but with the life quality".

There were vivid and numerous discussions in the 80's regarding life quality. However, the concept itself turned "individual". Life quality started to be more and more conceptualized by "individual well-being", which is determined not only by good objective standards of life, but also by "subjective well-being". The research by means of opinion surveys became the favourite method, because it allows the combination of objective and subjective features at individual level (for instance: income and the satisfaction of income). Opinion surveys proved to be a flexible instrument for multinational companies regarding well-being, and panel surveys allow the shaping and analysis of life.

Today, the research regarding life quality represents a preferential domain of activity that brings together specialists from social sciences. The explanation consists not only in the practical, political interest of this topic, but also in the ontological status of life quality and its corresponding concept within its social reality and its sciences. The purpose of the entire social activity, of society in itself, is to guarantee mankind's existence. Considered to be the ultimate aim of the social body's activity, life quality has a privileged position within society. This is where the synthetic character of life quality results from, that is why all the other aspects of the social system are focused on and connected with it. "Life quality is like a coin in which the whole social universe is minutely reflected." In W. Zapf's analysis (W., Zapf, 2002) regarding the reference to the social field, the controversy concerning "the state of nation" and people's well-being comes out again. According to Hrischmann's theory (which stipulates that the marginal usefulness of public duty decreases over years, and the market actors head towards the private profit), this could be the beginning of a new stage of the public interest and commitment. The poverty of the controlled socialist economy discredited the planning on a large scale and budgetary programs. The expansion of material infrastructure, of the educational system and, above all, of well-being hushed all the detractors of public poverty, or the phenomenon was labeled as special issue of the United States. Ecologic inventions maintained the notion that "the ecologic issue" could be sorted out in the same successful way in which the "social problem" had been dealt with before.

The content and management of life quality issues play an important part within the original conception, according to which individual well-being and society quality influence each other and are interconnected. According to W. Zapf's analysis, there are some *aspects* which have changed since the 70's (W., Zapf, 2002):

1. The concept of life quality and the other new concepts of well-being, in the context of competition systems, are no longer directed towards “the socialist way of living”;
2. The concept of life quality is a widespread concept today, which applies to other countries as well besides the wealthy western countries and which is not founded on a unique contradiction, such as, for instance, quantity versus quality or economy versus ecology;
3. The hopes and illusions related to a society in which an all-inclusive planning and control by complete systems of information were used have disappeared in the East as well as in the West;
4. Today, a self-regulated market does not represent the prominent pattern, the coordination of various and specialized control/management systems has been shaped in return: the market, the state, associations, as well as families and small groups;

In the broadest sense of life quality, it implies the approach of the concept according to the following investigation *areas*:

- the quality of the environment, which is characterized by a permanent and normal relationship between man and the natural environment;
- the quality of the social environment, which should guarantee stable conditions of material life, full employment of the workforce, guaranteeing leisure time, natural human relations, politic activity which is ethically and spiritually free;
- the quality of family environment, by means of the complex integration of family as demographic, economic and consumption unit;
- the quality of the work environment, the conditions which should allow the possibility of fulfilling professional or social ideals.

Quality of Life – Maximum Synthesis Expression of Happiness Objectiveness and Subjectivity

Life quality is not a mere label, but it stands for a multiple anxiety, a new search, the reassessment of human issues which has long been kept within the field of philosophical speculations of university environments but which is now part of the practical preoccupations of communities. It stimulated many creative searches. Philosophers started to meditate upon the conditions created by the contemporary civilization that grant a higher or lower human significance to life. Sociologists tried to set up complex instruments of measuring life quality, to search the social mechanisms that influence life in a positive or negative way. Politicians introduced the idea of life quality as the ultimate goal of their social development programs.

The heterogeneous and composite, diverse and contrasting character of the factors, the elements that people’s life quality depends on, the variety of aspirations and value rankings socially and culturally determined, the mobile scale of value not only of the ways of existence and perception but also of their manner of perception and assessment, of the levels of satisfaction-dissatisfaction etc. turn the “quality life” concept into a trans-specific one, on the philosophic and scientific plan.

The ample debates on “life quality” have the quality of focusing, more than any other concepts, the interest of the representatives of various ranges of the spirit: philosophers, economists, sociologists, ecologists, moralists, aestheticians, philologists etc., and of providing opportunities to bring out into relief not only the multi or pluri-disciplinarity, but their superior rank: trans-disciplinarity.

Although it is very well fit into trans-disciplinary approaches, the “life quality” concept is still plagued by mono-disciplinary preconceptions and judgments, by unilateral perceptions and interpretations, by hidden or open oppositions. Sociologists, psychologists and politologists all over the world declaim the absolute understanding of the determinant role of economy, and insist upon life quality non economic chains, which have been overlooked for a long time.

Life quality is a special type of concept: an evaluative concept. The descriptive concepts that science currently works with describe classes of objects, general existing features. Nevertheless, the life quality concept has an evaluative structure. It does not describe objects and moods properly, but it refers to their value for man. A simple and concise definition may be the following: life quality refers to the value of life for man; how good or bad is the life he lives, both in general and in its particular elements; the extent to which the standards of living offer man the possibility to satisfy his various needs; the level to which life is satisfactory and generates happiness or unhappiness.

R. Veehnhoven (R. Veenhoven, 1994) made a cross classification of life quality concepts according to two polar dimensions: chance-achievements of life (the potential/actual character of life quality) and internal/external qualities (that is of the individual, and the environment’s respectively). In a more recent conceptualization, four classes of theory have been identified: *the theory of needs*, according to which there are some general human needs whose fulfillment is in direct connection with the variation of the subjective quality of life; *the theory of relative standards*, where subjective well-being is the outcome of continuous comparisons between the current state and an ideal state (“what it should be”). Within the *theory of purposes*, a version of the previous theory, the comparison standards are internal: own objectives, purposes etc. *The theory of culture* implies the fact that the variations between social levels of subjective well-being might be mainly due to the variations of the elements within cultures, such as, for instance, the value differences of emotional states within satisfaction. Researchers wish to integrate all these approaches into a global theory, that of evaluation. This theory is based on the idea that individual well-being depends on the evaluation made to the relevant piece of information. Thus, the evaluations of satisfactions are influenced by the most accessible piece of information that, in its turn, is influenced by the needs, purposes and culture of the individual.

The main vision today in social sciences includes happiness and satisfaction into the subjective and global states of life quality. These conceptualizations are not free of issues: some authors use the notion of “objective happiness”, while others deny the objective feature of satisfaction. On the other hand, if we consider happiness and satisfaction as global elements, it is somehow natural to believe that they may result from some sort of composition of sector elements. In reality, the causative relation between the two domains seems to be much more complicated.

Nevertheless, specialists have come to an agreement, namely that the satisfaction of life and happiness represent two sides: the cognitive and the affective ones of subjective well-being. Psycho-sociological research upon the range of emotion as analysis of the evaluation of life satisfaction has revealed the fact that the two dimensions are not fully independent at the conceptual and empirical levels.

The evaluation of happiness and satisfaction by means of social investigations implies setting up scales. The evaluation of the psychometrical features of these scales represents a separate domain in the life quality research. The outcomes of the performed measurements have important practical implications, especially when it comes to using the obtained indicators for the design and evaluation of social policies.

Happiness has been present in philosophical debates ever since the Greek classicism epoch. The dispute between two opposite notions was of great influence: hedone and eudaimonia. The former concept is linked to the idea of happiness as pleasure, not only of the senses, but also (starting with Epicur) of the mind. The acknowledgement of the fact that this pleasure is the

only asset and that the own, positive, momentary pleasure represents an asset too, irrespective of its causes, lays the foundation of the hedonist ethic theory.

In “The Nicomah Ethic”, Aristotle criticizes this perspective, supporting, on the other hand, “eudaimonia”, that is living in agreement with the true self (daimon), paving the way to an ethical philosophy where happiness represents the fulfillment of human potentiality. In the field of psychology, these two directions have been greatly revived lately with the newly created branches of hedonic psychology, which deals with the study of pleasant and unpleasant experiences, and generally with the difference between levels of existence and states of consciousness, as well as the study of positive psychology, the science of subjective positive experience, of the positive individual features, of positive institutions, meant to improve life quality and prevent pathologies that appear when life is void or meaningless.

Actually, the first scientific endeavours towards the research of happiness and satisfaction date back to the middle of the 20th century. That is the moment when various approaches, both psychological and sociological, show up on the background of the development of new research methodologies, as well as typical orientations towards man and his needs. Besides the notion of happiness, used somehow skeptically due to its humanistic connotations, there are also introduced similar concepts, such as life satisfaction, subjective well being, psychological well-being. These studies prove to have an explicit disciplinary character. The risk of the occurrence of a real conceptual jungle is very high.

Subjective well-being refers to the way in which people assess their own lives and includes variables, such as life satisfaction and marriage satisfaction, lack of depression and anxiety, as well as positive emotions. In other words, subjective well-being mostly overlaps the concept of subjective life quality, but the latter involves an effort of making the sociological approaches compatible with the psychological ones. In social psychology, the elements of psychological well-being represent the topic of some investigations meant to highlight its dimensions: self-acceptance, independence, positive relationships with the others, control over the environment, etc.

The concept of *life satisfaction* is not totally devoid of ambiguity either. On the one hand, it is a general indicator of subjective well-being. On the other hand, it is only one of its components (the cognitive one). R. Veenhoven defines subjective well-being as “the degree to which the individual evaluates favorably the global quality of his life”. This definition represents either a cognitive process or an emotional process (the hedonic component, related to the pleasure the individual gets out of his own experiences). Life satisfaction can be defined as the discrepancy between dreams and achievements, starting from the perception of fulfillment up to that of deprivation.

The author who preserves the full analytical power of the concept of happiness is the Dutch Ruut Veenhoven. In his papers, he brings together two classes of indicators: those of the cognitive level (life satisfaction) and those of the hedonic one (emotional indicators). In the analyses he made, it is the cognitive side that is privileged, happiness being actually equivalent to life satisfaction.

A supporter of the paradigm of needs, which postulates the existence of some general human necessities whose level of fulfillment is in close connection to happiness, the author wishes to demonstrate that in the societies that guarantee a higher level of need satisfaction, people’s happiness is higher, that the economic and social progress brings an ever increasing degree of happiness within nations and that inter-society discrepancies represent the outcome of fulfilling, to a certain degree, of individual needs.

Such a perspective, which directly links satisfaction and happiness to the objective conditions, is utilitarian and objective, tending to grant happiness a positive ontological status. Veenhoven

introduces an objective indicator “Happy life expectancy”, measured as the outcome of life expectancy and the happy within a nation.

Other authors are in favour of the irreducible character of the subjective and objective measures of life quality. The two dimensions are generally poorly correlated to each other due to the phenomenon of cognitive homeostasis, which implies the regulation of the subjective well-being at the positive level. The two measures are convergent only at the lowest levels of life quality.

This endeavour seems to be in favour of the usefulness of the research of the objective side in a subjective process. The two dimensions of life quality are independent and must be conceptualized as such.

The preoccupations to highlight the structure of subjective well-being have shown the multi-dimensional character of this variable. One can notice the fact that between the positive emotional component (responsible with the states of joy, pride, etc.) and the negative one (depression, boredom, anxiety, loneliness) there are but weak correlations, as the two dimensions are almost independent.

As far as it seems, emotions cannot be represented on a continuum from extreme happiness to extreme unhappiness, some authors considering that a third dimension of emotions should be taken into consideration, that of “activation” as intensity of emotion. In their turn, the two dimensions are relatively independent to a third, life satisfaction. The latter may be perceived as the cognitive component of the global quality of life.

Life quality, as measurable variable, refers both to the subjective side and to the objective one of the research. From this perspective, the analysis of life quality brings out to light both psychological and environmental aspects. It involves a psychological assessment, performed by an individual or a group, of the satisfaction given by the living conditions and style.

The research of life quality implies taking into consideration people’s needs, their hopes and values. In a research paper published by Wish 15 it is shown that if the most used definitions regarding life quality are analyzed, one may notice similarities between them. In other words, all definitions include a situation or a condition designed by one or more residents of a region, which is translated on several levels of satisfaction.

Life quality is defined in respect to several social, economic and environmental factors. Failing of at least one of these factors can be enough to threaten or even affect the well-being of an individual or of the community. When promoting or intensifying life quality, certain aspects must be taken into consideration:

- on environmental terms, the protection of biologic diversity, the development of a management plan of the integrated resources and its adapting to global changes;
- on economic terms, long term planning and priority to individual needs (in a humanistic approach), the development of ecological technologies, the exploration of the social usefulness of production;
- on social terms, setting up equality among individuals and granting them the means for self-satisfaction (the capacity to influence their future, employment, education etc.).

Quality of life depends of the simultaneously and harmoniously fulfilling of all human needs: life conditions, economic and social security, health, education, free time etc. A society that is centered on the quality of life concept is a society centered on the human being, on his needs and aspirations. This kind of society has to offer alternatives and variants, and not to impose models. The coercion of society on the individual is a necessary and objective phenomenon. Its intensification is not necessary as well. The social medium based on the quality of life must be

characterized through the tolerance degree, in which the human individual is educated to understand his contribution to the social welfare.

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Conceptul de calitate a vieții – între economism și hedonism

Rezumat

Calitatea vieții este un tip special de concept: un concept evaluativ. Conceptele descriptive cu care știința operează în mod curent desemnează clase de obiecte, caracteristici generale existente. Conceptul de calitate a vieții are însă o structură evaluativă. El nu descrie obiecte și stări în ele însele, ci se referă la valoarea lor pentru om. În rândul populației, conceptul de "calitate a vieții" este asimilat conceptului vechi popular de "fericire". Fericirea se referă la o stare-afect, adică la sentimente de împlinire, satisfacție, deplinătate - calitatea vieții are însă în vedere condițiile care produc starea de fericire și contribuie la dezvoltarea ei.