

QUALITY OF LIFE: A DISCUSSION

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This is a discussion of the three papers presented on quality of life. The papers are viewed as works in progress and critiqued thusly. Indications are made in terms of where these papers individually, as well as collectively, lead us in understanding more about the quality of life. Several suggestions are offered.

My purpose is to stimulate further thought among the authors and audience about the three papers presented. Basically, I want to provide feedback on "where to go from here" rather than just critique these as "finished products." The guiding question is, what did this paper stimulate in me? What am I thinking about that I wasn't thinking about before I read the paper? I am also doing this as an "outsider" of sorts (a symbolic interactionist interested in quality of family life). I might have a different perspective or "axe to grind." Authors and audience should keep this in mind.

As a general statement, all of the papers are well done. They set forth a problem and go about seeking answers in relatively sophisticated fashions.

The paper by Longstreth and Billings is on an important topic -- effects on quality of life of those directly affected (apartment tenants) as well as indirectly (all of us), by conservation of natural resources. However, my understanding of the relevancy of their findings is limited by the way the current draft of the manuscript is crafted. Parts of the paper are hard to follow (for example, the same variable names are not used consistently throughout the paper). Also, the source of the data on apartment dwellers is unclear. Was this provided by the managers or through the larger study mentioned?

In the presentations of results section, the authors appear to switch back and forth between the probit analysis and more descriptive analysis. I found this confusing and suggest that it be done more clearly in the next draft. Also, a table or tables with this other information would help. I kept trying to find this in the present tables.

As I read, I kept thinking that this was an interesting topic, but I wish I knew more about it. A better "situating" of the problem would help. Why is this an issue? Is this a "hot" political issue in the West? Are people asking for or opposing the use of low flow fixtures? How much money is at stake here? Why is cleaning these fixtures an issue? My own experiences of people I know who own or manage apartments, plus having lived in apartments as well as having used low flow fixtures, lead me to observe the following. First, do people even know if they have low flow fixtures? Second, the mixture of the managers, owners, and their spouses as the level of analysis is confusing. Why are managers interviewed? Do they really decide what happens (61% to 83% indicate that owners approval is needed)? Owners would be more appropriate. This is an important point - it should either be justified in next draft or the owners interviewed.

The findings may be spurious. Perhaps there are other factors about the complex or owners that determine who is hired as managers, their education, age, etc. Also, is it a

slum landlord? How "run down" is the complex? Are some owners looking for a tax writeoff? These might be important determinants of both the type of fixtures used, and of the identity of the manager.

In the next draft, the conclusion section could be cleaned up and the complex findings presented in a clearer way. Also, the conclusions perhaps go beyond the data. Findings imply the necessity of employing incentives other than price in order to produce desired levels of conservation by apartment managers and tenants. But desired levels according to whom? The apartment managers, apartment tenants, owners, or city government? Other policy makers perhaps?

The findings mentioned limited amounts of complaints about fixtures. This implies that they are generally accepted. However, this isn't really discussed in the paper, except as mentioned in a table. But 9% of what? Of all tenants or the percentage of managers that have received complaints and if so, how many complaints? Or is it that managers say 9% of all tenants have complained. What percentage of tenants, over time, have had these fixtures? (Not just the number of apartments with them.)

The paper mentions older managers and possible payoffs, even though older managers cost more to hire. How do the authors know this? And, what exactly is the payoff in terms of dollars or quality of life?

My suggestions: (a) Better situate the problem to be addressed; (b) Address why the unit of analysis was chosen (and think about changing it); (c) Provide more information about the tenants, apartment, etc.; (d) Present conclusions in a more clear manner; and (e) Provide perspective of the tenant. What does this mean to the tenants in terms of their life quality?

"Quality of Life of Middle-Aged Women" by Walker, Lee, and Bubolz attempts to understand the effects of various resources and demands on the perceived quality of life of married women.

I had a little difficulty understanding the place of depression in this scheme. The paper mentions that depression has been seen as an outcome of stress and that it has an effect on the quality of life. There is a health index included as a variable, and the items listed sound like this may be an indicator of depression. But I can not be certain. I think depression may be a fruitful area for future research in the quality of life realm. Is depression an indicator of quality of life? Is it an outcome variable? Is it a determinant of quality of life? The most recent research cited on this issue was 1981.

Another issue that I started to think about concerned some of the stressors. What seems to me to be missing in some cases is the individual's perceptions of the stressors (e.g., time stressors). As Marks (in his 1977 American Sociological Review article) indicated, if people feel committed to a role, they tend not to feel that the demands of that role are stressors. But rather, they willingly give time and energy to the roles to which they are committed. He also suggests that people use accounts of no time and no energy to get themselves out of doing things they do not want to do. It seems to me that since these people were not asked about their commitment to these roles, we are unable

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to tell if these are really time stressors or not. My suggestion is to obtain better indicators of what is or is not stressful, and why.

This paper also uses some one-item measures, for example, marital happiness. Quality of family life has a more sophisticated measure. Marital happiness, I would argue, is multifaceted.

The paper indicates that due to the high correlation between marital happiness and quality of life, in the final equation (with quality of life as dependent variable) marital happiness was dropped. However, later in the paper, marital happiness is still discussed quite frequently. It also mentions that quality of family life is highly related to quality of life and also that marital happiness does not directly impact on quality of life, but rather is mediated through quality of family life. I am confused as to exactly what place marital happiness has in the determination of quality of life.

Health symptoms are mentioned several times, usually as determinants as such things as marital happiness or quality of family life. Could it be that it really is the other way around? The paper mentions that depression is a possible outcome of stress. This is also true for poor health. Therefore, it may in fact be that the quality of the marriage is related to health outcome- that those people with less satisfying and therefore more stressful marriages are less healthy. I started thinking that the equations might be structured differently, with health as an outcome rather than a determinant of marital happiness and quality of family life. (Some mention of this is made in the conclusions.)

Another question I have is, why in the health symptoms equation (on page 8) is level of income not a determinant of health symptoms? I think there is ample evidence concerning the effect of income and other SES indicators on one's health. I would guess that level of income plays an important part in determining health symptoms, as do the other listed variables. My suggestion is to include income as a determinant of health symptoms.

This paper adds to the literature of the importance of utilizing both objective and subjective measures of determining quality of life. Income adequacy appears to be an important variable in understanding quality of life. Health is also an important variable, consistent with other findings. The authors note that health symptoms are significantly related to overall quality of life as well as to evaluations of marriage and family life. This indicates that health is an especially sensitive indicator of quality of life, influencing many different life demands.

The authors note that, in their model, health symptoms are seen as independent variables in relation to marriage and other family variables. ("There probably is an interactive effect, that poor health can affect family relationships, creating stress which feeds back and impacts further on health symptoms. Future research should examine these relationships from a non-recursive model.") I agree that the relationship between health and family and the quality of life is not fully understood. I think that this might be best investigated at this point, with health symptoms as either outcomes of marital and/or family happiness, or even as outcomes of quality of life. I suggest that careful thought be given to the placement of health symptoms in the path model.

The paper reinforces previous research of what variables seem to be related to quality of life. However, I caution that the statement on page 12 that "the strong relationship of

family life to quality of life attest to the continuing significance of intimate interpersonal relationships to well being" is perhaps overstated. Only middle-aged married women with children are included in the sample; thus it is hard to know if single, or single parents, or perhaps the remarried, are the same.

In conclusion, the authors mention that findings identify three major domains representing demands and resources which affect quality of life. They note that family relationships present both stressors and demands and also are important social resources. This seems an important point that future research ought to look at more closely -- that is, what is the role of the family in all of this? It seems that the family can either be a big source of strain or a "haven from a heartless world." Should we turn our attention from trying to find what set of variables "predict" some amount of variance in a standard quality of life measure, and direct our efforts to improving family relationships? I suggest that the authors integrate more clearly the role of "family" or "intimate" relationships into their models, as well as the related literature. I would also caution the authors to think about the statement that "the findings of this research have identified three major domains, representing demands and resources, which affect quality of life." (p. 12) The domains were chosen by the researchers for study, not discovered through their research, and they seem to explain a relatively small amount of variance.

My suggestions follow. (A) Better explain the motivation for the study. Why is this important to know? (B) Integrate the findings with the literature in a more complete fashion. What is the unique contribution of this piece of research? (C) Think about what more qualitative research might address in terms of what people really see as constraints in their environment? What resources do they really call upon? What are they asked to do in their lives that is affecting their overall assessment of health and marriage and life in general? Perhaps this will lead to better understanding of what our survey research is, or is not, finding. For example, what is it about family relations or perceptions of income that influences the satisfaction people have in life? (D) I also wonder if the magnitude of some of life's demands are adequately represented in the way we do our research. For example, if my mother were to fall and break her hip today, that would have a strong impact on the quality of my life, much more so than some of the other variables that are included in a study like this. I would suggest that more attention be paid to the measurement of stressors and resources. Perhaps a stronger link should be forged between stress research and quality of life research. (E) Think about the place of health symptoms in the model, and also the relationship between socio-economic status and health.

I like that the paper by Douthitt, MacDonald, and Mullis clearly states its purpose and what its significance would be to the knowledge base. That is, its aim is developing several "rigorously defined measures of economic well-being to accurately analyze the relationship between the economic domain and psychological well-being" (pg. 3). Research in the past has found that there is a relationship, but not an exclusive one, between level of income and psychological well-being. Perhaps more of the variance can be explained if better definitions or measures of economic well-being are used. The authors particularly point out the problems with using a current income measure, as opposed to other measures of income. Stage of family life cycle or stage of the individual in the life course might also be more explicitly considered in the discussion of why current income may not be an accurate measure.

The psychological well-being scale looks interesting. However, I would suggest more of a discussion of why the various items were selected. It might have been interesting to include items on satisfaction regarding friends, since that could be an important consideration throughout the life cycle, perhaps very important for singles. Single people may have trouble answering about family life: perhaps satisfaction with dating or significant others is important. I suggest that this be explored.

A contribution this paper can make (or others from it) would be to more clearly specify economic well-being and also more clearly specify psychological well-being. Also, given the intended purpose of the paper, I began to wonder if it may have been better served to use a standardized measure of personal well-being, so that results could be better integrated with the literature.

I find the idea of trying to operationalize the three different income hypotheses intriguing. One question I do have has to do with the Dunsenberry Relative Income Hypothesis and how it is operationalized. The authors are trying to capture the relative nature of economic well-being (how the family is "keeping up with the Jones"), by taking the mean expenditures for the sample and netting this from the expenditures of each family. My question is, how accurate is this when examining rural and urban differences or the cost of living in various parts of a region or state? While this may be acceptable for this sample (since it was all within the same state), how could this be done with a broader based sample? For example, expenditures for a farm family living in rural Wisconsin would surely be different than the expenditures of a family living on Long Island.

I also wonder about the interpretation of this calculation. If the family is spending more than the average, and therefore doing more than "keeping up with the Jones," does this in fact mean they are getting more in debt or that they have more income? Later, on page 12 of their paper, the authors indicate that spending more than the average seems to be related to less current satisfaction. They also note that spending less is related to more satisfaction. I wonder what, if anything, this might say about the accuracy or usefulness of this indicator? I suggest this be investigated further, especially so when one realizes that the families that spend more are, in fact, "The Jones."

Are people really aware of their expected family income? As measured in this paper, it appears that this is projected by the researchers rather than being a factor "as known to the respondent." That is, this is a scientific concept, rather than an ethnoconcept. Perhaps respondents should be asked about how they perceive their ability to maintain a relatively level pattern of consumption throughout their lifetime. This variable seems to be related to psychological well-being, but I am not sure that people really know that.

The authors note that, "Generally all three models of economic well-being perform favorably in explaining psychological well-being." I would caution that it be remembered that the best model had an adjusted r^2 of .15. Perhaps these more powerful measures of economic well-being used in conjunction with other theoretically important variables hold promise for future insights into determinants of the quality of life.

My overall suggestions include the following. (A) Given what I was stimulated to think about by reading these three fine papers, I believe that perhaps we do not allow people to tell us, in their own language, what is creating or causing them to feel the way they do about the quality of their lives. (B) Perhaps research should move in the direction of less quantification and more qualitative methodology. This would allow researchers to get a richer sense of why people are the way they are, and why they feel the way they do. For example, what kind of role performances are these people undertaking? What is their sense of self? How is this articulated with the demands of the environment they are living in, whether rural Kansas, urban Michigan or urban Louisiana? Subjective variables and personal perceptions seem important to quality of life. Perhaps we need to ask more from ethnographic approaches to learn about the indicators and determinants of quality of life. Some of these ideas are addressed in these papers. (C) I am beginning to think that more emphasis should be placed on the dependent variable side of the equation. That is, more emphasis on how quality of life is measured. Is quality of life the same as psychological well-being, level of depression, or the sense of not feeling stress? Is quality of life something that varies hour to hour and day to day? Under what conditions do people even think about the quality of their lives? Does quality of life lead to other outcomes? Why is this an important topic to research?

(D) Perhaps on the determinant side of the equation, there are objective conditions that influence the quality of life. People may be unaware of some of these -- race or gender, for example, may have allowed opportunities or have limited opportunities for the person. How the person was socialized by the parent(s), values that were thus acquired, outlooks on life, and a sense of what is or is not important, may in a large way influence the current sense of well-being and satisfaction of who they are and where they are. Other factors which may influence quality of life may be out of the person's control, such as genetic or biological dispositions, health status, or catastrophes. The stress research indicates that perceptions play a major role in determining feelings of distress. These perceptions are commonly found to be more important than objective indicators of the nature of the stressor or resources available. I am beginning to think that maybe the important determinants of quality of life are mentalistic variables, including the intrapersonal discourses people have with themselves about their senses of self, their role identities, and the fit between their perceived selves and the selves they want to be.