FROM QUALITY OF LIFE TO SOCIAL QUALITY: RELEVANCE FOR WORK AND CARE IN EUROPE

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The origins of Social Quality

The Social Quality approach arose from an initiative launched under the Dutch Presidency of the European Union in 1997, by a network of social scientists. The aim was to counteract the neo-liberal and economistic tendencies within European integration and to put forward an alternative vision of a social Europe. Whilst the idea of a social Europe has strong support within the European Union, and is exemplified in the profusion of concepts such as "social cohesion" "social inclusion" "social exclusion" "European Social Model" and so on, the problem was that these concepts are not linked in any theoretically coherent way, are often used inconsistently and are largely empty of content. The aim of the Social Quality initiative was therefore to develop a theoretically consistent model which could provide a basis for policies and which could be empirically grounded (Beck et al., 2001).

Social Quality is defined by the authors of this initiative as "the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential" (Beck et. al, 2001: 6–7).

The idea of Social Quality draws to a great extent upon the literature of the Quality of Life, which has a much longer history. Therefore, we shall now turn to explaining this concept and its relationship to Social Quality, before looking at the limitations of the Social Quality perspective as an alternative to Quality of Life.

Quality of Life

The Quality of Life is an established body of social theory which considers individual well-being, by defining a range of objective indicators on the one hand (such as income, housing conditions, employment etc.) and subjective indicators on the other hand, which are concerned with how satisfied individuals are with these various aspects of their lives. It draws upon the Nordic tradition of documenting living conditions, for the former, and the American tradition of looking at subjective satisfaction and happiness, for the latter. This concept has been extensively researched, both in Europe (Noll, 2000, Noll and Zapf, 1994) and in the US. Much of the quality of life material is published in the Journal of Social Indicators, and an European Centre for Social Indicators has been set up at Mannheim University.

The Quality of Life indicators are intended to add a new dimension to the more usual economic indicators of well-being, used in measuring social progress and comparative social situations. The Quality of Life is intended to go beyond GDP or income or consumption, to look at the human progress that can be found in European societies and bring in a subjective, as well as an objective, dimension.

The usual approach to the Quality of Life, embodied in several publications of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, is to identify a series of life domains (employment, housing, standard of living, family relations, social life, health etc.) and to identify a range of indicators under each of these domains (Rapley, 2003, Fahey et al., 2004). The key indicator however, is that of satisfaction and this can be defined as satisfaction with any one of the domains or satisfaction with life in general (usually, a single variable indicator). Alternative measures are *happiness* (also a single variable indicator) or, more rarely, alienation (Bohnke, 2005). Hence, this is largely an individually-oriented concept. It is concerned with the individual levels of living (living conditions) and individual subjective perceptions of conditions (*satisfaction* and *happiness*).

However, the Quality of Life approach has been adopted by the European Commission as a way of looking at European societies and measuring their progress. It has been used as a way of understanding the well-being of citizens across Europe, and thus it forms a part of the European policy framework.

It has proved attractive as a policy tool where it was felt that both subjective as well as objective indicators should be taken into account, and this principle is now becoming well established (Noll, 2004, Noll, 2002). It is seen as a way of monitoring social change and measuring well-being in the society (Fahey et al. 2003). This is partly why indicators have become more available on a comparative basis. For example, the Social Indicators project based at ZUMA, Mannheim, has put together a web site listing social indicators, and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has likewise constructed a publicly available interactive database of quality of life indicators across Europe (http://www.eurofound.eu.int/areas/qualityoflife/eurlife/index.php).

One criticism of this approach however, is that it is largely a-theoretical. It simply measures a range of subjective and objective factors, without really giving any theoretical framework. In the 1970s, Allardt tried to develop a more conceptual approach to the Nordic studies of living conditions by grouping them according to "having" (material needs), "loving" (social needs, relations with friends and family) and "being" (or need for personal growth, integration into wider society) (Allardt, 1993). Later on "living in good health" was added to Allardt's scheme (Bohnke, 2005). This approach has been used by the European Foundation in organizing the indicators that are collected and analysed, but it is still largely unrelated to social theory, in general, and tends towards a more psychological theory of needs, that is also individualistically founded.

The main criticisms of the Quality of Life approach are both theoretical and methodological. For the theoretical criticisms, we can point out, first of all, the fact that the number of domains could be expanded indefinitely, along with the number of indicators. For example, why not include social participation, culture and arts, environmental quality etc.? This amounts to simply an additive list of indicators, without any real theoretical foundation. In addition, as we have indicated throughout, the Quality of Life approach is individualistic in orientation – it considers the individual as an isolated unit of analysis. This reflects its foundation in psychological literature. Furthermore, it assumes that the individual is rather a passive recorder of their life circumstances, rather than active in constructing their lives. It assumes that, if living conditions are improved, individuals will be grateful. Thirdly, "life satisfaction" was not always closely related to living conditions measured by other criteria, and happiness was even further away from living conditions. It seems that happiness more often measures individual states of emotion, rather than general well-being, in a more sociological sense.

Methodological criticisms centre on the nature of the key indicators and what they can tell us. On a methodological level, single indicators, such as life satisfaction, are rickety foundations for establishing general theories – it is better to use batteries of empirically validated questions (Near et al., 1987, Near and Rechner, 1993, Rose, 2005). Furthermore, the idea of "happiness" and "satisfaction" as measures of individual well-being are inherently problematical. Satisfaction can be a rationalization for existing (unsatisfactory) conditions, because there is no obvious alternative. This is one reason why many things that one would expect to detract from life satisfaction have no impact upon it. Work stress, poor work-life balance etc. are all weakly or not really related to life satisfaction. Women doing part-time work for few rewards may be satisfied, because they have low expectations.

Before going on to look at how the idea of Social Quality can improve on these problems, we shall consider the role of life satisfaction more generally and its variation across Europe.

Life satisfaction and happiness

There is a long history of (mainly social psychological) research on life satisfaction or subjective Quality of Life using *life satisfaction* and *happiness* as the main dependent variable (Diener and Suh, 1997). The more descriptive European approach centres, rather, on the development of indicators that can be used as measuring tools. In the most sophisticated Quality of Life approaches, for example, Berger-Schmitt and Noll (Berger-Schmitt and Noll, 2000) and Fahey et al (Fahey et al., 2004, Fahey et al., 2003, Fahey and Smyth, 2004), the indicators are well developed and the methodology used to select them, rigorously defined. However, they are not derived from theory and they presuppose existing social relations and structures – they are concerned with describing what is there already, based upon

the rather simple idea that objective and subjective factors would reinforce one another. They are not concerned with opportunity structures available to individuals and what is achievable.

This Life Satisfaction approach asks people directly about their satisfaction/ happiness with their actual life circumstances. The individual defines well-being, whether in terms of general satisfaction/ happiness with life (e.g. Argyle 2000) or within domains of life specified by researchers (e.g. Cummins 1996; van Praag et al. 2003). The research has been concerned with analysing people's reports of 'happiness' (which is generally seen as an indicator of emotion or mood) and 'general satisfaction with life' (which is generally taken as an indicator of people's cognitive evaluation of their circumstances). Subjective well-being has been shown to be an internally consistent and relatively stable construct – not just the reflection of immediate affect (but not so stable as to suggest that the scales measure purely an invariant trait of persons) – and there is evidence that it does indeed reflect surrounding circumstances, in the fact that it tends to be lower in deprived third-world countries than in the more affluent West.

The Quality of Life approach originated in the Western and Northern countries of Europe and is seen as a concept biased towards these regions – for example, it is sometimes criticized for pre-supposing an universal welfare state. Noll (2000), is attempting to classify approaches to Quality of Life, to distinguish those that focus on individual Quality of Life from those that emphasise the distribution of welfare, or social relations or the quality of societies. The Quality of Life approach combines a concern with the objective cultural, political and economic contexts in which people live their lives and their subjective evaluation of their life situation (e.g. Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2002; Fehey et al. 2002). The idea has been extended to some extent by sociologists who relate this to variables such as social class, living conditions and so on, and more recently it has been discovered by economists trying to find an alternative to narrowly economic indicators. According to Richard Layard, for example, whilst income has more than doubled in the last 50 years, people seem to have become more unhappy (Layard, 2005). He argues therefore that to study the well-being of a society, we must take other factors into account, including individual well-being and social environment.

If we turn now to the measurement of Quality of Life in Europe using a recent survey (2003), we find some important variations across Europe. In the EU 27 countries (all member states from 2007), satisfaction varies more than happiness, with satisfaction being closely related to economic levels (GDP) and degree of modernization, whilst happiness is less closely related in this way. Table 1 shows a wide variation in the correlations between happiness and satisfaction in different European countries, as well as large variations in the standard deviation around the mean, especially in the poorer countries. The correlation coefficients between life satisfaction and happiness vary between 0.74 in Sweden and 0.57 in Bulgaria, at the other end of the satisfaction continuum. In Chart 1, we see that there is a

convergence between life satisfaction and happiness in the richer countries and a divergence in the poorer countries, although both generally increase with affluence.

Table 1

Subjective Quality of Life in Europe. N, means and standard deviations of overall satisfaction and happiness with, life and the correlation between both indicators

	Life Satisfaction (Q31)			Happiness (Q42)			Correlation	
Country	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Pearson's r
DK	997	8.4	1.52	985	8.3	1.40	985	0.70
FI	991	8.0	1.51	976	8.1	1.42	975	0.69
SE	999	7.8	1.69	994	7.9	1.66	993	0.74
AT	1001	7.8	1.78	990	7.9	1.75	992	0.66
LU	593	7.7	1.94	598	8.0	1.70	588	0.51
IE	981	7.7	1.76	920	8.1	1.68	917	0.67
NL	1035	7.5	1.26	970	7.7	1.25	968	0.70
BE	1000	7.5	1.61	982	7.7	1.49	981	0.69
ES	1001	7.5	1.73	972	7.8	1.67	972	0.61
UK	989	7.3	1.97	983	7.7	1.81	966	0.66
MT	591	7.3	1.98	571	7.9	1.66	560	0.52
DE	1050	7.2	1.94	1040	7.6	1.81	1046	0.65
IT	997	7.2	1.59	987	7.5	1.55	983	0.64
CY	588	7.2	2.09	590	7.8	1.96	582	0.73
SI	598	7.0	1.94	596	7.4	1.81	598	0.67
FR	1028	6.9	1.64	1028	7.3	1.51	1026	0.68
EL	997	6.8	2.21	991	7.6	1.93	986	0.62
CZ	981	6.5	2.13	985	7.2	1.87	973	0.66
RO	1019	6.2	2.28	1022	7.2	2.02	1015	0.61
PL	984	6.2	2.28	981	6.9	2.12	972	0.63
PT	992	6.0	2.07	974	6.8	2.02	974	0.54
HU	971	5.9	2.17	981	7.1	2.10	963	0.55
EE	586	5.9	2.02	579	6.8	2.03	579	0.65
SK	1065	5.7	2.37	1063	6.5	2.04	1061	0.67
TR	996	5.6	2.74	993	6.5	2.47	991	0.60
LV	988	5.5	2.12	951	6.4	2.06	941	0.56
LT	996	5.4	2.17	988	6.4	2.18	987	0.63
BG	982	4.4	2.32	978	5.9	2.36	959	0.57
EU15	*14640*	*7.3*	*1.80*	*14449*	*7.6*	*1.68*	*14359*	*0.65*
EU25	*23006*	*7.1*	*1.92*	*22747*	*7.5*	*1.77*	*22587*	*0.65*
NMS10	*8328*	*6.1*	*2.25*	*8312*	*6.9*	*2.08*	*8219*	*0.63*
CC3	*3017*	*5.6*	*2.64*	*3010*	*6.6*	*2.39*	*3000*	*0.61*

Questions:
Q31: *All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days? Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 10 means very satisfied.*
Q42: *Taking all things together on a scale of 1 to 10, how happy would you say you are? Here 1 means you are very unhappy and 10 means you are very happy.*
Source: the EQLS 2003, data weighted accordingly.

Levels of overall satisfaction with life and happiness in Europe
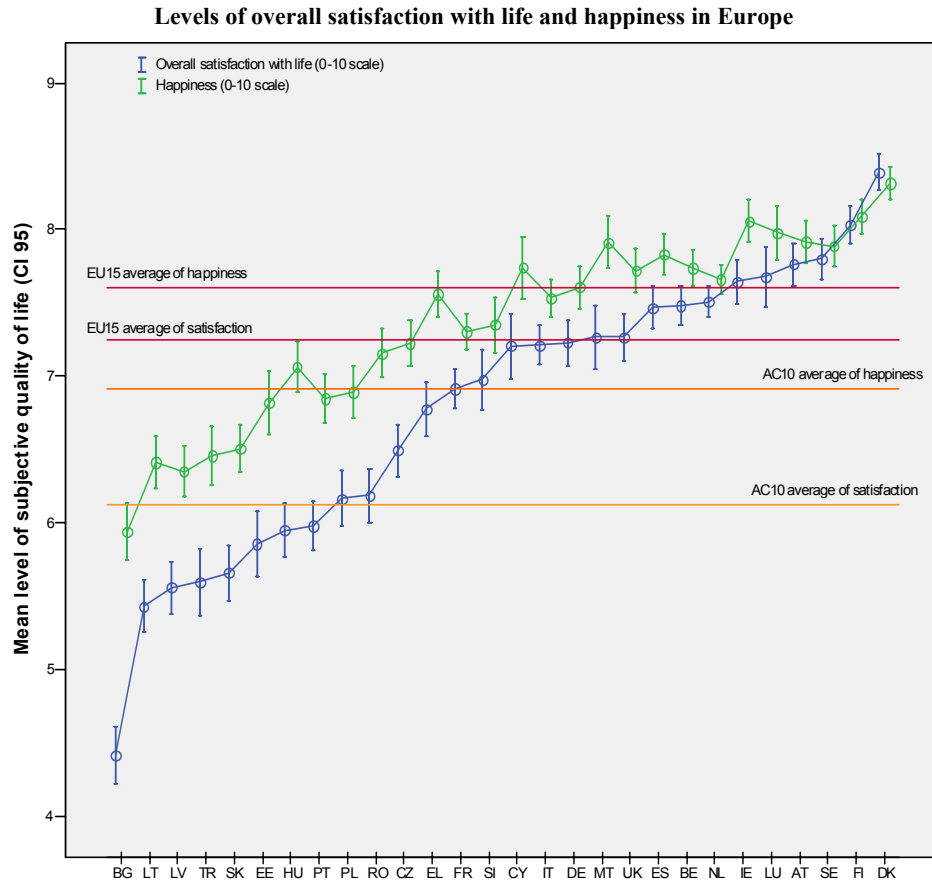
Ranked according to ascending levels of satisfaction with life. Means and 95% Confidence Intervals of two basic indicators of subjective Quality of Life.
Source: the EQLS 2003, data weighted accordingly.

It seems that, in poorer countries, fulfilling basic needs is most important for meeting life satisfaction, and in these countries just having a livable income is important for well-being. As societies become more affluent however, other factors start to become more important. In the case of job satisfaction, this moves from having a job with a good income to looking more for intrinsic rewards, such as having an interesting job or one with career prospects (Wallace et al., 2007). However, in all EU countries, being young, having a job, having a partner and being healthy lead to higher levels of life satisfaction (Delhey, 2004).

Quality of Life – like the economic indicators that it is intended to replace – is designed as a universalistic theory. However, it assumes the existence of welfare states and a generally high level of well being, such as is found in Western Europe, so that other needs, beyond mere survival, become important (Maslow, 1954). We

may ask whether once basic needs are fulfilled, life satisfaction is culturally relative. It may vary according to country, gender and ethnic group (Calloni, 2001). What may lead to satisfaction in one country would not necessarily do so in another. Life satisfaction is also affected by cultural norms and adaptation to situations. Hence, women in Hungary and other Eastern European countries have a very unequal division of labour in the home, but do not necessarily report that they are unsatisfied with this, whilst women (and men) in Sweden have a much more equal division of labour, and yet are more dissatisfied with it (Strandh and Nordenmark, 2003). Similarly, people in Tokyo, in a recent study, were not happy in general, despite high levels of affluence and good social services (Abbott, 2007). This implies that, in some countries, people might be discontented, whatever their living conditions. Unhappiness could be culturally specific. This would help to explain also the relatively weak correlations between happiness, satisfaction and living conditions in Europe.

From Quality of Life to Social Quality

The problems identified with the Quality of Life approach led to its reconceptualisation as Social Quality. Quality of Life approaches have demonstrated that, beyond a certain level of economic development, subjective satisfaction does not increase and is highly stable in Western societies (Eckersley, 2000, Eckersley, 1998, Cummins, 1995, Cummins, 1998). However, people are less positive about the Quality of their society. Beyond the economic threshold reached in Western societies, people become concerned about income distribution, the burden of unpaid housework, the loss of natural resources and the costs of unemployment (Eckersley, 2000, Halstead, 1998, Hamilton, 1998). People's own subjective Quality of Life is most influenced by the more personal and intimate aspects of life, which seems to act as a buffer against multiple negative shifts in personal circumstances. Yet, there appears to be an erosion of confidence in society and its future, resulting in a loss of trust and the privatisation of life (Bauman, 1995, Eckersley, 2000). In particular, there is concern about the negative impact of economic changes on family life (Pusey, 1998), resulting in the breakdown of traditional values, the breaking of existing family networks and too much consumerism. It is evident that citizens in Western societies, at least, are concerned as much about social and environmental issues as they are about economic growth. Indeed, lack of satisfaction in Western Europe is highest on average in those countries with the lowest levels of economic inequality and strong welfare states paid for from high levels of taxation (Fahey et al. 2003). Therefore, the Social Quality approach seeks to explain some of these wider factors more thoroughly than simply relying on satisfaction or happiness as indicators.

The Social Quality approach emphasizes the social, as well as the individual dimensions. It measures the quality of the *social context* of everyday life, differs from the Quality of Life approach in that it is grounded in a theory of 'the social' – it

is a sociologically grounded approach, as opposed to the Quality of Life approach, which takes the perspective of the isolated individual as the ultimate reality. The Social Quality approach does focus on the individual, but as an active subject, living in developing social conditions. 'The Social' is seen as the outcome of the dialectical relationship between the formation of collective identities and the self-realisation of the human subject. The 'social space' is realised in and between four constitutive factors – socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion and social empowerment. The approach reflects the condition of human subjects as social (not only individual) subjects, it prioritises the analysis of the processes leading to the acting capacities of social beings, it analyses the self-realisation of these acting subjects and it is oriented to the formation of collective identities. In other words, it is concerned with the dialectical and recursive relationship between agency and structure, and provides a vision for the future about how the Social Quality of a society can and should be improved. It provides the essential link between need, action and policies. The Social Quality approach combines economic and social development. It measures the extent to which the quality of daily life provides for an acceptable standard of living, taking account of the structural features of societies and their institutions, as assessed by reference to their impact on citizens. Hence, it incorporates a mixture of structural and individual-level factors.

It is explicitly ideological in that it takes the existence of Western welfare states and liberal norms for granted.

…underlying the four conditional factors is the process by which, via the constant tension between self-realisation and the formation of collective identities, people become competent actors in the field of Social Quality. Essential in this process are the rule of law, human rights and social justice, social recognition/respect, social responsiveness and the individual's capacity to participate. (Van der Maesen et al. 2005).

The Social Quality approach, based on the established critique of narrowly economistic explanations in terms of objective economic criteria and/or the medical understanding of well-being, insists that we have to consider the articulation between the quality of society and the subjective quality of individuals' lives within it. It means going beyond a description of objective living conditions and taking account of the subjective understanding by the citizens of their life situation and the extent to which they feel able to make the necessary choices in order to act to secure their well-being – to choose a style of life they value. People are embodied social beings, located in a given time and place, active in meeting their own needs in that context, and they need to be empowered to do so.

The Social Quality approach, which challenges both economistic and narrowly individualistic models, and recognises that self-actualisation is a social process – an outcome of the dialectical relationship between agency and structure – provides such a framework. It combines aspects of the Quality of Life and quality of society approaches, and is explicitly concerned with the quality of social

relationships (Van der Maesen et al. 2005). Social Quality defines the space within which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities, under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential. It requires the empowerment of individuals, the provision of economic security and other resources, the ability to participate in social life and a shared set of norms and values.

Modern democratic societies need real opportunities for citizens, to address their concerns, to develop their own visions and to enable themselves to contribute to an equitable and fair society (Beck et al. 2001: 246)

Indeed, the Social Quality approach represents a way of improving democracy and compensating for the "democratic deficit" in the European Union (Therborn 2001).

Social Quality identifies four domains or areas – economic security (necessary material resources), social cohesion (necessary accepted norms and values in place), social inclusion (access to necessary institutional and infrastructural context) and cultural empowerment (the extent to which citizens feel they have control over their own lives and the capacity to act) – see Figure 1. These are expressed as four quadrants which are the product of the relationship between global processes and biographical processes, on the one hand, and that between systems and institutions, and between communities (*Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*), on the other.

Figure 1

The Social Quality Model

Global processes

Systems, organisations, institutions	**Economic security** Material security Employment security Housing security Health security	**Social cohesion** Economic cohesion Social Status cohesion Political cohesion Values and norms Public safety Social Capital networks Trust Solidarity	Communities, groups, individuals
	Social inclusion Citizenship Identification with community Participation in community and labor market Inclusion in social security Education and Health Service provision Political inclusion	**Social and cultural empowerment** Political empowerment Economic empowerment Socio-psychological empowerment Information empowerment Social mobility	

Biographical processes

Social Quality is seen as a holistic construct, which measures four complementary aspects, and therefore, some indicators can contribute to the measurement of more than one quadrant. Economic security means having available the necessary material resources; social inclusion (citizenship), having access to the necessary institutional and infrastructural context; social cohesion, that the necessary collectively accepted values and norms are in place; and empowerment, that people feel that they have control over their own lives and the capacity to act, and that they have the necessary knowledge, skills, experience and funding to do so. The indicators of Social Quality, which measure both objective conditions and subjective understanding, are still being developed. Thus, for example, in measuring economic security, both income and subjective satisfaction with income would be measured, and for health, both health status and satisfaction with health. This model is based on the assumption that the welfare of citizens is influenced by all four quadrants – that they form the conditions for each other and influence the outcome. The model takes account of micro- and macro-level structures and agencies – the tension between societal and biographical development, between institutional provision and individual lives. The Social Quality approach conceptualizes 'the social' as the space created by the interaction between structure and agency.

A key difference between the Quality of Life approach and the Social Quality approach is the role of individual actors as agents. This necessitates considering both objective and subjective indicators of well-being – relating objective welfare conditions to subjective perceptions of life satisfaction, happiness and well-being (Schulz, 2000, Fahey and Smyth, 2004) we take a 'capabilities' approach, deriving This then, refers to the "capabilities" approach, originally from the work of Sen, including the important distinction between functioning and capabilities (i.e., what an individual is able to do and what an individual chooses to do).

We need to go beyond a description of objective living conditions to take account of the subjective understanding by citizens of their life situation and the extent to which they feel able to make the necessary choices, in order to act to secure their well-being – to choose a style of life they value. In other words, we need to understand the lived experience of citizens. Welfare is about functioning – about the actual socioeconomic circumstances of individuals, about entitlement, opportunities and rights, and the ability of citizens too make positive choices to achieve collectively valued goals in their society (Sen, 1993).

Sen has pointed to the importance of going beyond a narrow focus on resources to consider the substantive freedoms people have reason to value (Sen 1999). Development, for Sen, consists in providing for the expansion of human capabilities. Nussbaum (2000) has developed a non-specific theory which provides a list of 'functioning' capabilities that can be modified and adapted to provide a guide to policy and thinking.

Social empowerment requires both that the objective conditions exist and that individuals have the ability to make use of the opportunities available to them.

Empowerment is both a conditional factor for socioeconomic security, social cohesion and social integration and an outcome of their existence. There are three dimensions to empowerment – access, participation and control.

'Empowerment' means to enable people to control the personal, communal and social environment to foster their own development over the environment, as well as accessing the environment to enrich their sociopersonal life (Herman 2004: 28).

Social cohesion is the glue that binds a society together and creates trust. It provides the rule of law, essential for social participation. Social integration and interaction are not possible without shared norms and values, and trust in social and economic institutions, as well as other groups and individuals.

Social cohesion concerns the processes that create, defend or demolish social networks and the social infrastructures underpinning these networks. An adequate level of social cohesion is one which enables citizens 'to exist as real human subjects, as social beings' (Beck et al. 1995: 284).

Social inclusion in modern societies is the degree to which people are and feel integrated in institutions, organisations and social systems. It is a complex concept and requires recognising the need for pluralistic social cohesiveness/ multi-inclusiveness (Phillips, 2003; Walker and Wigfield, 2003), in order to facilitate the inclusion of individuals and communities.

It means promoting equality of opportunity and respecting difference, in order to enable all to reach their potential. In terms of socioeconomic security, clearly people need resources over time to be able to cope with daily life, enjoy a dignified lifestyle and take advantage of the opportunities available to citizens. An inclusive, socially cohesive society, that empowers citizens to enable them to gain control over the necessary socioeconomic resources to ensure security.

The up-down axis of the quadrant represents the relationship between the micro and the macro, the individual and the structural. The left-right axis of the Social Quality quadrant represents the relationship between system and community, between system integration and social integration, in the words of David Lockwood (Lockwood, 1999).

Therefore social quality represents an advance on Quality of Life, because it is more theoretically grounded, because it looks at the social and not just the individual, and because it includes new dimensions of agency by allowing for social and cultural empowerment. One question might be: which of these quadrants is more important. In fact, Social Quality emphases all parts of the quadrant, because it is concerned with the space that this covers.

Measuring Social Quality requires the construction of both objective and subjective indicators (van der Maesen et al., 2002). It requires considering input, process, outcome and impact. It is concerned with identifying practice. Indicators, in terms of education, for example, involve measuring the educational provision (input), the numbers/ proportions of children attending school at various levels, the outcomes of education (achievement), and the impact of education on individuals

and society more broadly. The Final Report of the Social Quality Network identifies domains, sub-domains and indicators for measuring each of the conditional factors (nine of them). The authors stress a number of conditions that indicators should meet – they should:

- measure conditions that exist empirically;
- measure the degree to which social actors may use these conditions, to enable them to participate actively as social actors in the construction and reconstruction of the quality of the social;
- be robust and statistically valid;
- be able to be measured cross-culturally;
- inform public policy;
- be timely and susceptible to revision;
- actually measure the phenomenon.

Social Quality and Social Policy

One factor that might affect the variations in Social Quality is social policies. The nature of well-being has to be considered in the context of the institutions, processes and policies that affect it. All real welfare regimes show a mix of market, state and family/ community provision, but they differ in the proportions of the mix and, more importantly, in the rhetoric or discourse in which views about welfare provision are expressed. Further, beyond the discourses that we can use to describe how welfare can be provided to maximize its impact, there are also discourses that enable us to describe or conceptualise our Social Quality, and to evaluate it. Our understanding of our needs/ wants is constrained by our knowledge/ understanding of what is possible. What we want or need in order to 'have a good life' is limited by what we think or know or understand is possible. Wants may exceed objectively structural needs accounts, but conversely they could also fall short of what is objectively possible. It is concerned with a normative idea of society and social policy.

With respect to the policy context, we need to gain a more holistic and accurate profile of what is important to people – the subjective understandings of citizens themselves. In other words, to understand the lived experience of citizens we need to relate agency to structure. This refers to the debates about human functioning and capability – ultimately, the articulation between needs and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Doyle and Gough, 1991; Gough, 2002).

The policy context shapes social quality by providing socioeconomic security or social inclusion, for example, or by providing the basis for social and cultural empowerment. However, it is also shaped by social quality, in the way that different human and social needs are fed back into the policy process.

Welfare states take different forms. In Europe, this is usually expressed in the form of welfare regimes, which may or may not lead to different kinds of social

quality (Esping Andersen, 1990). The relationship between social quality and welfare systems still needs to be established. This leads us to the question of how far social quality reflects gender regimes. The social quality model appears to be gender neutral, but gender regimes of breadwinner model, modified breadwinner model, dual earner models etc. (Lewis, Daly and Rake) could have important influences upon social quality, not least for women. Although the gender dimension could be incorporated, it has not yet been explicitly thought out.

A further problem is the extent to which social quality can be assessed only on the basis of the nation-state or the extent to which it is Europe-wide. Again, this would need to be thought through. Quality of Life is traditionally considered in terms of national differences, as our chart at the beginning illustrated.

Criticisms of the Social Quality perspective

The Social Quality perspective certainly represents a way forward. However, many of the problems of the earlier Quality of Life perspective remain unresolved. For example, the list of indicators is descriptive and additive, nor is it always clear which indicators belong in which quadrant. For example, gender equality could belong in more than one quadrant. Secondly, the indicators do not always relate very closely to the concepts. For example, the percentage of women in public life does not necessarily mean that they are empowered, and national pride, which is listed as an element of cohesion, can also have divisive effects. Thirdly, it is not clear if all domains and indicators have equal status, or whether some are more powerful than others. The concept has yet to be rigorously empirically tested. Finally, it is not clear how it relates to different policy regimes and welfare systems. Proponents of the model tend to argue for its normative potential, rather than considering what it really measures.

Hence, the Social Quality approach is concerned with a normative idea, whilst the Quality of Life is concerned with measuring what really exists. This is precisely what makes it a difficult concept for social research. It begs the question: quality for what? How could we assess a society as having higher or lower levels of social quality when there are a great bundle of variables available, the sheer quantity of which might affect the results?

Despite making claims to go beyond a descriptive list of indicators, this is, in fact, what the Social Quality approach, in the end, does too.

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that Social Quality is a better concept that Quality of Life for developing social theory. Both perspectives go beyond economic measures of well being, but Social Quality embodies a social, as well as an individual dimension for understanding subjective and objective well-being. Furthermore, Social Quality brings in the aspect of agency, the role of human

capability in understanding Quality of Life. Social Quality also helps us to bring together subjective and objective criteria for measuring the quality of society.

Although it makes claims to go beyond Quality of Life, in the end, the theoretical basis for the Social Quality model is weak, the empirical indicators under-developed, and the comparative dimensions difficult to operationalise. The Quality of Life model is at least a well tested one, although we have identified a number of limitations in this paper.

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