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Quality of Life (QOL), an Overview



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Synonyms

Happiness; Health; Welfare; Well-being and quality of life

Definition

The degree to which a life meets various standards of the good life.

Description

The term “quality of life” serves as a catchword for different notions of the good life. It is used in fact to denote a set of *qualities* of life, which can be ordered on the basis of the following two distinctions. One distinction is between *opportunities* for a good life and the *outcomes* of life. This distinction is quite common in the field of public-health research. Preconditions for good health,

such as adequate nutrition and professional care, are seldom mixed up with the concept of health. A second difference is between *external* and *inner* qualities of life. In the first case, the quality is in the environment in which one lives; in the latter, it is in the individual. This distinction is also quite common in public health. External pathogens are distinguished from inner afflictions. Combining of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix, presented in Table 1 below (Veenhoven 2000).

Four Qualities of Life

In the upper half of Table 1, we see, next to the outer opportunities in one’s environment, the inner capacities required to exploit these. The environmental conditions can be denoted by the term *livability*, the personal capacities by the word *life-ability*. This difference is not new. In sociology, the distinction between “social capital” and “psychological capital” is sometimes used in this context, and in the psychology of stress, the difference is labeled negatively in terms of “burden” and “bearing power.” The lower half of Table 1 is about quality of life with respect to its outcomes. These outcomes can be judged by their value for one’s environment and by their value for oneself. The external worth of a life is denoted by the term *utility of life*. The inner valuation of a life is called *appreciation of life*. These matters are of course related. Knowing that one’s life is useful will typically add to ones appreciation of life. Yet, useful lives are not always happy lives, and not every “good-for-nothing” is unhappy.

Quality of Life (QOL), an Overview, Table 1 Four qualities of life

	Outer qualities	Inner qualities
<i>Life chances</i>	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person
<i>Life results</i>	Utility of life	Enjoyment of life

Livability of the Environment

The left top quadrant in Table 1 denotes the meaning of good living conditions, which I call “livability.” One could also speak of the “habitability” of an environment, although this term is also used for the quality of housing in particular.

Ecologists see livability in the natural environment and describe it in terms of pollution, global warming, and degradation of nature. Currently, they associate livability typically with environmental preservation. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with sewer systems, traffic jams, and ghettos. Here, the good life is seen to be the fruit of human intervention. In public health, this all is referred to as a “sane” environment.

Society is central in the sociological view. Firstly, livability is associated with the quality of society as a whole. Classic concepts of the “good society” stress material welfare and social equality, sometimes equating the concept more or less with the welfare state. Current communitaristic notions emphasize close networks, strong norms, and active voluntary associations. The reverse of this livability concept is “social fragmentation.” Secondly, livability is seen in one’s position in society. For a long time, the emphasis was on the “underclass,” but currently, attention is shifting to the “outer class.” The corresponding antonyms are “deprivation” and “exclusion.”

Life-Ability of the Person

The right top quadrant of Table 1 denotes inner life chances. That is, how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. I call this “life-ability,” which contrasts elegantly with “livability.”

The most common depiction of this quality of life is an absence of functional defects. This is “health” in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as “negative health.” In this context, doctors

focus on unimpaired functioning of the body, while psychologists stress the absence of mental defects. This use of words presupposes a “normal” level of functioning. A good quality of life is seen to be the body and mind working as designed. This is the common meaning of the term used in curative care.

Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as “positive health” and associated with energy and resilience. Psychological concepts of positive mental health also involve autonomy, reality control, creativity, and inner synergy of traits and strivings. This broader definition is the favorite of the training professions and is central to the “positive psychology” movement.

Utility of Life

The left bottom quadrant of Table 1 represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. I refer to these external turnouts as the “utility” of life. When evaluating the external effects of a life, one can consider its functionality for the environment. In this context, doctors stress how essential a patient’s life is to their intimates. At a higher level, quality of life is seen as a contribution to society. Historians see quality in the additions an individual can make to human culture and rate, for example, the lives of great inventors higher than those of anonymous peasants. Moralists see quality in the preservation of the moral order and would deem the life of a saint to be better than that of a sinner. In this vein, the quality of a life is also linked to effects on the ecosystem. Ecologists see more quality in a life lived in a “sustainable” manner than in the life of a polluter.

Enjoyment of Life

Finally, the bottom right quadrant of Table 1 represents the inner outcomes of life. That is the

quality of life in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective appreciation of life. This is commonly referred to by terms such as “subjective well-being,” “life satisfaction,” and “happiness” in a limited sense of the word.

Humans are capable of evaluating their lives in different ways. We have, in common with all higher animals, an ability to appraise our situation affectively. We feel good or bad about particular things, and our mood level signals overall adaptation. As in animals, these affective appraisals are automatic, but unlike other animals, humans can reflect on this experience. We have an idea of how we have felt over the last year, while a cat does not. Humans can also judge life cognitively by comparing life as it is with notions of how it should be.

Happiness can be defined as the degree to which a person evaluates the overall quality of his or her present life as a whole positively. In other words, how much the person likes the life he or she leads? This evaluation appears to draw on affective information in the first place, if people appraise how happy they *are*, they estimate how well they *feel* most of the time.

Analogous Concepts in Biology

In biology, external living conditions are referred to as the “biotope” or “habitat.” A biotope can be more or less suitable for a species, depending on, for example, the availability of food, shelter, and competition. This is analogous to what I call “livability.” An organism’s capacity to survive in the environment is called “fitness” by biologists. This latter term acknowledges the fact that the organism’s capabilities must meet (fit) environmental demand. This is equivalent to what I call “life-ability.” With respect to outcomes of life, biologists also distinguish between external and internal effects. External effects are various ecological functions, such as being prey for other creatures, and the continuation of the species. This is analogous to what I call the “utility” of life. The outcome of life for the organism itself is depicted as “survival,” which is seen to result from the fit between abilities and environment. This notion corresponds to what I call “enjoyment

of life.” This is more than mere correspondence, because subjective enjoyment is also a signal of good adaptation.

Measurement of Quality of Life

Quality of life in nations is usually measured using indexes that involve indicators taken from each of the quadrants in Table 1, for instance, the Human Development Index includes income per head (top left), education (top right), and life expectancy (bottom right). Yet this makes no sense, and the table helps us to see why not.

Comprehensive Measurement Not Possible

Quality of life cannot be measured by totaling the quadrants in Table 1. There is no point in combining the qualities in the upper and the lower half of the table, since this involves the adding of chances and outcomes. Combining the qualities on the left and the right makes little sense either and in particular not in the case of life chances, where it is not the *sum* that matters but rather the *fit* between external conditions and inner capacities.

Still another problem is that three of the four qualities listed in Table 1 cannot be measured very well. We can only make guesses about the features that constitute the livability of an environment, and it is also quite difficult to establish what abilities are most required to live well in particular environments. Although it is clear that some necessities must be met, it is not so clear what is required on top of these, in what quantities, and in what mix. Measuring the utility of a life is not really feasible either, since external effects are quite diverse and often difficult to assess. Due to this lack of sound scientific criteria, any measurements of the usefulness of a life depend very much on assumption and ideology, and hence there is little agreement on how to measure these qualities of life.

Measuring happiness is less problematic however. Since happiness is an overall judgment of life, we cease to have the problem of trying to add and compare apples and oranges: as happiness is a state of mind for an individual, we can assess it rather easily by asking that person how happy he or she feels.

Most Inclusive Measure Is How Long and Happy People Live

In biology, “survival” is assumed to result from the “fit” between the abilities of the organism and the demands of the environment in which the organism lives. This fit cannot be observed as such but is typically inferred from survival rates. If an organism perishes before its programmed lifetime, there is apparently something wrong with this chance constellation.

In this line, we can also infer the life chances in a human society from the outcomes in happiness. If people live happily, their environment is apparently sufficiently livable and their abilities appropriate. This may not appeal to supporters of the theory that happiness is a culturally constructed illusion, but it fits well with the view that happiness is a biological signal of how well we thrive.

In simple animals, good adaptation reflects only in survival; in higher animals, good adaptation also reflects in hedonic experience. Negative affect is indicative of poor adaptation and tends to inhibit the organism, while positive affect is indicative of good adaptation and works as a “go” signal. So, an animal that does not feel good is probably not doing well.

This inner experience is not an issue in biology, because we cannot assess how animals feel. Still there is ground to see hedonic experience as an additional manifestation of good adaptation, and in this vein, one could argue that an animal that feels well most of its lifetime seems to be better adapted than an animal that lives equally long but feels less well.

Humans are capable of reflecting on their experiences and can condense positive and negative affects into an overall appraisal of happiness.

They are also capable of communicating that appraisal to investigators. Hence, in the case of humans, we can use the additional sign of good adaptation and assess how long *and* happy they live. The degree to which people live long and happy is denoted in the right bottom quadrant in Table 1, and this is the most inclusive measure of outcomes of life for the individual. It is also indicative for the qualities denoted by the two top quadrants. If people live long and happy, their environment is apparently livable and their life abilities must be adequate. So, this measure in fact covers three of the four quadrants and is therefore the most comprehensive measure of quality of life available (Veenhoven 2006).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Happiness](#)
- ▶ [Happiness Adjusted Life Years](#)
- ▶ [Health Related Quality of Life](#)
- ▶ [Need Theory](#)
- ▶ [Well-Being](#)

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