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*important issues, I interviewed four internationally distinguished scholars working in the broad area of QOL. Prof. Alex Michalos (AM) is in the Dept. of Political Science at the University of Northern British Columbia (Canada) and is founder and editor of the leading Journal in the field, Social Indicators Research. Prof. Wolfgang Glatzer (WG) is in the Dept. of Social Sciences at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University (Germany). Prof. Ed Diener (ED) is in the Dept. of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U.S.) and is currently the president of ISQOLS. Prof. Ruut Veenhoven (RV) is in the Dept. of Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Dept. of Social Sciences at the University of Utrecht (Netherlands).*

## WHAT'S NEW IN TESTING?

### Assessing Quality of Life: An Interview with Four Scholars

*There has been a dramatic interest in recent years in assessing quality of life (QOL) at local, regional, national, and international levels. Recognition of this interest has culminated most recently in the formation of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS). Inherent in the assessment of QOL is a number of measurement issues. To gain some perspective on some of these*

### Q. What is meant by “quality of life” and how is it measured?

AM: Quality of life means different things to different people. In broad strokes, it means “the good life”. The concept goes back to the Greeks. The idea of a good life in 5th century BC was good friends, loved ones, status in the community, and financial security. We now call these things “objective indicators” and we can operationalize them. Democritus suggested that a truly happy person would have all of these things but would also feel good about himself.

So what's really new is the technology. Plato and Aristotle wrote a lot about the good life, but not about operationalizing or measuring this good life.

WG: Quality of life has been created as a concept in contrast to economic growth and became more prominent when the experience of industrialization and economic growth led us to realize that economic growth is partly threatening and not an end in itself. Today, QOL is a broadly used term with many meanings. Our understanding of QOL is that it is multidimensional. We can distinguish between objective aspects and subjectively perceived aspects of QOL. Both may vary somewhat independently of each other and therefore both components are always necessary to evaluate QOL.

ED: To me, quality of life is ultimately a value judgement - whether people's lives have the qualities that are valued in that culture. QOL measures may be more focused on the internal reactions of individuals - on what I have called subjective well-being - or on more external measures that are aggregated descriptions of the society. The internal measures may be global (e.g., life satisfaction) or more specific (e.g., satisfaction with one's work). The external measures are based on descriptions of that society such as crime rate, infant mortality, and air pollution. The two types of indicators are complementary to each other; both offer unique insights into the quality of life of societies. I resist contrasting

these measures with the labels of "objective" and "subjective" because both types of measures involve subjective judgements and both can be objective in the sense that they can be measured by relatively valid methods.

RV: Quality of life - or individual well-being - is really an umbrella term for three classes of meanings: (a) good conditions for life, (b) good coping with life, and (c) successful living itself. In systems terminology, these correspond with input, throughput, and output, respectively. Each of these meanings can be measured in various ways. Some investigators choose to combine such separate measures in a QOL-index although, in my opinion, that is like adding apples and pears.

**Q. What are your current theoretical and/or research interests in QOL?**

ED: I am working on three lines of research related to subjective well-being. One set of studies delves into why and how income and subjective well-being are connected. Another line of research asks how people make life satisfaction judgements, i.e., on what do they base their answers? A third line of research examines why extraverts, on average, experience more pleasant emotions. I would also like to get back to the area of cross-cultural measurement of well being.

RV: My focus is on happiness in the sense of "an individual's overall appreciation of his/her life as a whole". My current questions focus on how happiness can be measured, what conditions external to the person favor a positive appreciation of life, how is happiness processed internally, and what are the consequences of enjoying (or not enjoying) life?

AM: For me, there's one theoretical problem that doesn't seem to go away and that is how to integrate information from economics, the environment, sociology, and psychology. We don't have a concept that is really broad enough to tie together all this information. This is actually a problem that attracted me early on in the 1970s and I still haven't solved it. For example, we have information on disappearing salmon. To explain why they are disappearing involves a lot of fairly straightforward biological research about fish. We also know this problem is connected to jobs and industry, so we need an economic theory. Where jobs and industry are involved there are people with families and with feelings. That involves some social, political, and psychological factors. You can consider quality of life in a small area like people who are dependent on the salmon industry, but you need to look at biology, economics, politics, and psychology to understand it.

WG: My main emphasis is given to continual social reporting about quality of life. I am especially

interested in studying the relationship between rapid social change and quality of life on a national level. In a recently published issue (Jan-Feb., 1998) of Social Indicators Research, I have put together a selection of countries that currently experience strong political and economic changes: e.g., South Africa, the Asian Tigers, and the Baltic and East European countries. There are serious challenges for bewareing and improving the quality of life in these countries.

**Q. What do you see as some key issues or questions in QOL research today?**

ED: In my area of subjective well-being, there are several critical questions. One question is the degree to which happiness and satisfaction arise from universal needs versus the extent to which they are based on cultural, relativistic, or contextual goals and values. Another important question is how personality and environment interact to produce subjective well-being. Finally, I believe that the question of adaptation is extremely important. How and when do people adapt to their life conditions, and when does adaptation fail to occur? Is there a hedonic treadmill in which life circumstances matter to subjective well-being only in the short-run, or are there some conditions that foster long-term well-being or ill-being?

RV: I think a main issue in QOL research is still distinguishing the variants of the good and finding appropriate measures for each of these. The next challenge is to chart their interrelations. Not everything we deem "good" goes neatly together. By understanding synergetic effects and interferences we can make better choices in social policy and other interventions that aim at bettering quality of life.

AM: Again, a key issue for me is the integration of QOL information from economic, environmental, social, and psychological issues. But there is also a large gap concerning the area of general and fine arts. If you think of the things that people get so much pleasure out of - music, literature, art, sculpture - there is so little research on people's satisfaction with these aspects of life and their effect on overall quality of life.

WG: I agree that a deficiency in the flowering QOL research is a coherent integration of the available knowledge. Many findings are presented without demonstrating their significance for the measurement and explanation of quality of life in general. Which findings can be accepted as reliable and valid? Another key conceptual issue concerns the significance that should be given to objective aspects and to subjective aspect in measuring quality of life.

Q. What kinds of measurement and assessment issues have arisen in the QOL research that you conduct?

AM: Although there are lots of standardized measures of quality of life - both global and specific measures - we need to further refine these measures. Also, for me, the more complicated issue has been getting a good measure of discrepancy and figuring out how exactly to use it. For example, if you take something like social comparison theory and say there's a gap between a person's salary and his/her perception of what someone else is getting, you can calculate the difference between how they rate themselves and the other person. However, I tend to find that letting the respondent describe or indicate that gap is a better predictor than when the researcher calculates the difference.

ED: For me, there is a circular relation between assessment and theoretical understanding: one must be able to measure subjective well-being to study it scientifically but one must understand it to validly measure it. For example, we now know that life satisfaction is a concept related to emotional well-being, but it should be measured independently of positive and negative affect. In addition, we know that there can be certain memory biases in global judgements of subjective well being and so experience sampling measures over time are preferable. We are also concerned with how defensiveness and denial might influence

self-reported measures of subjective well-being and this is why we advocate the inclusion of measures that are not self-report measures (e.g., peer reports, physiological measures). I can't emphasize enough how important measurement is, and I believe the field of subjective well-being has a long way to go in this area.

WG: Given my interest in studying QOL at a national level, I have found that all of the measurement problems that are substantial in empirical social research affect QOL research. More specifically, the necessity of panel studies has been demonstrated for solving questions of continuity and change. It is also obvious that more standardization is needed if comparability across nations, regions, and time should be attained. And there are lots of very specialized debates about the best indicators - especially the best comprehensive indicators.

RV: My research concentrates on happiness (in the sense of subjective appreciation of life). Measurement of that QOL variant is less problematic than most people think. Responses to survey questions about happiness seem reasonably valid and reliable. Nevertheless, we need to know how much distortion and error is still involved. If we know that, we can estimate true correlations more precisely. The cross-cultural comparability of happiness seems fairly good as well. Yet research on possible systematic distortions is still in its beginning.

Q. QOL research often takes place at a national or international level. What kinds of measurement or assessment issues arise in QOL research because of this?

WG: One big problem, which remains unsolved, is the question of what is the best set of indicators to measure the quality of life of nations. As I mentioned before, these should consist of objective conditions and subjectively perceived facets. In addition, different nations speak different languages and so it is difficult to say if a word like "happiness" really means the same thing in different languages.

ED: Measurement across societies requires more than just translation into other languages, even if the back-translation of the instrument indicates that the translation was good. We have to be sensitive to emic issues - the particular thoughts, values, and concerns in each society. Thus, comparing scores on instruments that are specifically created within each society (and using them in each of the other societies) is a needed next step and has yet to be done. Furthermore, I believe that more studies need to include measures that do not depend on global self-report - measures such as experience sampling over time, peer reports, and whether people can recall more positive than negative life events, or react more quickly to positive than to negative self-descriptors.

AM: I too think there are a number of problems that arise when conducting any research at this level. When you get indicators at the regional level and survey information at the individual level, you have to look at which body of information is explanatorily more powerful. It seems to me that about 4% of perceived life satisfaction and happiness is at the macro level and about 96% is at the individual level. You also have to worry about issues like translation and even the rules for collecting administrative data from country to country. Unemployment rates, for example, can be calculated very differently from one country to the next.

RV: I disagree with many of the concerns that might apply to the cross-cultural comparability of answers to survey questions about happiness. For example, my research has shown that there is no linguistic bias when asking about happiness and a satisfaction. There also does not appear to be much evidence for cross-cultural differences in social desirability bias or response styles.

**Q. Why do you think QOL research and assessment are attracting so much interest today?**

ED: People throughout the world are becoming increasingly interested in quality of life issues beyond making money. People are concerned with

crime, with pollution and environmental issues, with spending quality time with others, with health, and with actualizing their abilities. Significant numbers of people have their basic biological needs met and are concerned now with broader issues related to well-being. The new interest in doing rigorous research on QOL is a most exciting development and I believe that it will pay dividends in helping direct the policies that nations adopt in the 21st century.

RV: Basically, the less evident the deficit in life, the more interest there is in the good. When we are freed of hunger, we reach out for an even better life.

AM: I agree that after you reach a certain point economically, things really change in terms of people's interest in life satisfaction. As the demand for accountability by government has increased, funding has increased for evaluation and accountability and "key performance indicators" (i.e output measures). The measurement of QOL requires both input and output indicators. The recent interest in performance indicators today tends to neglect input indicators (e.g., costs, means employed) which is dangerous.

WG: The quality of life concept gives an answer to very old questions: Where do we want to go? What do we want to avoid? The successes and failures of industrialization have enforced the significance of questions about quality of life. These are questions for individuals, groups, regions, nations, and the world community. Without the instruments and analyses of the social sciences, not at least QOL research, everybody would be rather helpless to evaluate the state of, and the change in, quality of life of a population.