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**Understanding the Diversity  
of Conceptions of Well-Being and Quality of Life**

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## **Abstract**

The concepts of well-being and quality of life concern evaluative judgements. There is insufficient understanding in current literature that these judgements are made variously due to not only use of differing values and differing research instruments but also differing standpoints, differing purposes, and differing theoretical views and ontological presuppositions. The paper elucidates these sources of differences and how they underlie the wide diversity of current conceptions.

JEL: A13, D60, I30, Z13

# Understanding the Diversity of Conceptions of Well-Being and Quality of Life

## 1 The Concept of Well-Being/Quality of Life – what it is and what it is not

The concept of quality of life refers to an evaluation (an evaluative judgement) about major aspects, or the entirety, of a life or a society. The concept of well-being is similarly an abstraction that is used to refer to the quality of any of many valued aspects of (a) life, or some set thereof, or their totality (Gasper 2007a).

The ‘well-being’ (WB) term is used more when we speak at the level of individuals, and ‘quality of life’ (QoL) somewhat more when we speak of communities, localities, and societies. Similarly, ‘well-being’ is used somewhat more to refer to actual experience, and ‘quality of life’ more to refer to context and environments. But in both cases the terms are used with a broad range of meanings, and the ranges almost completely overlap. This reflects that the two came from different disciplines—‘well-being’ more from psychology, and ‘quality of life’ more from sociology and social policy—which have only gradually and incompletely become open to each other.

These evaluations of a life situation, a life path (Chekola 2007), or a society can be made in many different ways. Let us distinguish six dimensions of variation in making the evaluations:

1. variation with reference to which aspects of being, of life; questions arise thus of *scope and focus*.

The choices of scope and focus link to a further five issues in evaluation:

2. which *values* underpin an interpretation of *well-being* and/or *quality of life*?
3. *research instruments*: which methods of observation and/or measurement and which methods of interpretation are employed?
4. with respect to which *purposes*, for this affects what sort of valuation is done: for purposes of understanding, or of praising/condemning, or of choosing/acting, ...
5. the evaluation can be undertaken by different persons, from different *standpoints*: for oneself, for others, for and in groups, ...
6. the evaluation can use different *theoretical frameworks*. This is connected to but not reducible to the preceding issues, and one key question concerns what conception is used of the nature of being a person.

The relativities with respect to focus, values and research instruments are more obvious, and we will consider them first. Those concerning purposes, standpoints and theoretical perspective are more subtle and we approach them later.

These dimensions of variation underlie the wide range of interpretations of well-being and quality of life, and mean that there is great danger of oversimplification. For example, there is far more than a binary contrast between ‘subjective well-being’ and ‘objective well-being’ (SWB-OWB). There

are many relevant interpretations of both, and the two categories overlap. Box 1 refers to three dimensions of variation: first, well-being measures can focus on subjective states or on a person's conditions and circumstances; second, they can be undertaken using private values or values endorsed through a public procedure; and third, they can be by self-reports or by external observers (e.g., as in Kahneman's work recording 'objective happiness'). When speaking of SWB or OWB I will prioritize the first of these criteria, focus. Within the SWB literature, self-report on self-selected subjective states (case 8 in Box 1) appears to be the usual main category but is not the only relevant one.

Even from only the first relativity, the choices about scope, we can see the concepts of WB and QoL as abstract nouns. Each concept is an umbrella for many more specific concepts (Gasper 2007a). This is comparable to how we need to think in terms of 'poverties, not poverty', in Manfred Max-Neef et al. (1991)'s phrase. 'Poverty is not [just] a lack of goods but exclusion from esteem and power' (Mary Douglas, 1982: 181).

Behind this lies a yet more fundamental point. Neither well-being nor quality of life is a determinate or definite single thing, or just two things – 'subjective well being' and 'objective well being' – or any number of things, lying out there, ready to be measured. Instead each is an *evaluation* of life / a life / life chances. Reflecting the second to sixth relativities, even if there were only one relevant aspect or all the aspects could be aggregated, there is no unique, eternal authoritative way for such evaluation – *either* in the mind of any single person *or* in the deliberations of a political community.

However, instead of saying 'valuation of life situation', which indicates an activity of evaluation or the product of such an activity, we typically hypostatize or reify a noun—'well-being' or 'quality of life'—suggesting a concrete definite thing.<sup>1</sup> The fallacy of misplaced concreteness is embedded in much of our language. People often tend to think of WB and QoL as definite entities. Even though Quality-of-Life thinking arose because of the inadequacies of GNP, the mental mould of a single aggregating index—whether for the individual or the collectivity—is politically and administratively convenient. Politicians who want to condemn, make promises, and take credit, may like to reduce a complex and contingent evaluation to a notion like GNP, something which they can influence and publicly point to. Many scientists concentrate on working with figures which although possibly unreliable and certainly very incomplete are thought—as in the history of GNP as a policy objective—to yet say something objective, precise and politically validated about important matters.

This paper follows instead Amartya Sen's principle that interpretations of inherently ambiguous ideas should illuminate, not attempt to eliminate, the ambiguity. We should not claim that there is only one true version. We should ask, for any WB or QoL evaluation: who is doing what to/for/with whom, when, where, and why?

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<sup>1</sup> Hypostatize = construe a conceptual entity as a real existence; reify = consider an abstract concept to be real. (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hypostatize>)

## Box 1 Different 'objective'/'subjective' well-being divisions

To use a single contrast between 'subjective and objective indicators of welfare' seriously oversimplifies. One issue concerns what is measured (subjective states or non-feelings). A separate issue concerns how and by whom it is measured. Subjective states can be studied by externals, as in case 3 below; but self-reports on subjective states (case 8) are also often valid and reliable measures of the states. We need then at least four categories, by allowing two options in each of these two dimensions. Veenhoven (2007) advises that we should use a 3x3 rather than 2x2 matrix, to indicate that we face a spectrum of possibilities along both dimensions rather than clearcut divides. The table below adds instead a third dimension, of public-determination versus private-determination, and uses a 2x2x2 structure to show eight cases. For example, in the 'social needs approach' (Gordon 2000) a relevant reference group determines societally required functionings or capabilities, whose achievement is then externally measured for the client group.

<i>DIMENSION (2): WHOSE VALUES? (public or private values?) / Which standpoint DEterminES THE EXACT FOCUS?</i>				
<i>FOCUS AND VALUATION BY PUBLIC VALUES</i>		<i>FOCUS AND VALUATION BY PRIVATE VALUES</i>		
Dimension (1): FOCUS ON CONDITIONS OR SUBJECTIVE STATES	<i>Conditions</i>	<i>Subjective states</i>	<i>Conditions</i>	<i>Subjective states</i>
<i>'Objective', meaning external measurement / estimation</i>	Case 1: Focus on publicly approved and estimated non-feelings: an 'OWB' case; e.g. observe how far people (can) walk, etc., as in the 'social needs approach' (Gordon 2000).	Case 3: E.g., external monitoring of publicly approved set of brain functions and physiological indicators (such as [low] pain)	Case 5: External report on privately prioritised circumstances; one asks persons to identify the life-dimensions they find important, then one measures those (Bowling 1995)	Case 7: External report on the achievement of privately prioritised subjective states
Dimension (3): METHOD OF MEASUREMENT / ESTIMATION	Case 2: Self report on socially prioritised aspects (e.g.: 'I can walk 100 metres')	Case 4: Self report on socially prioritised types of feeling (e.g.: 'it hurts a lot')	Case 6: Self report on privately prioritised circumstances = subjective measures of poverty or QoL (e.g., 'I rank the facilities for my walking hobby as 2 out of 10').	Case 8: Self-report on subjective states. = 'Self-report subjective well-being' (e.g.: 'I am very happy with how far I can walk')

Since cases 2, 4, 5 and 7 are probably less common, the classification often becomes simplified, and the dangerous intuition can arise that a public-values perspective equates to external measurement and a private-values perspective to use of self-report. Further, value questions can be embarrassing, so choice of values can be hidden too, and the OWB/SWB contrast may become presented as if it concerns measurement method only. The three distinct dimensions of 'Who decides?', 'Look at what?' and 'Look how?' are then completely conflated.

The paper looks at the six dimensions of variation. Section 2 provides an overview of types of approach to conceptualising quality of life and well-being, with emphasis on which aspects of life they focus on. Sections 3, 4 and 5 investigate the issues of value priorities, research methodology, and purposes and standpoint. Section 6 examines major theoretical sources of diversity: differences between more individualistic and more social conceptions of persons, and between hedonic and eudaimonic conceptions of felt well-being. It contrasts conceptions of well-being assessment as, on the one hand, a form of mental temperature taking and, on the other hand, a complex and inherently ambiguous process of evaluative judgement, and argues for the second perspective. Section 7 gives a concluding review and observations.

## **2 Families of approaches - a diversity of types of focus**

Variation in the dimensions just mentioned generates many different conceptions of well-being and quality of life. David Phillips' book *Quality of Life* (2006) surveys a series of seven different research streams, each of which contains sub-streams.

[1] SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING (SWB). This now prominent stream has spread from psychology to economics and sociology. But SWB concepts and measures are not sufficient for all purposes. The remaining streams, except perhaps the preference fulfilment variant of [3a], are diverse interpretations of 'objective well-being'.

[2] HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE

[3a] 'UTILITY' – as interpreted in 20th century economics; this stream looks at purchasing power and/or imputed preference fulfilment

[3b] NEEDS AND CAPABILITIES – a stream that contains several variants concerning needs fulfilment or achievement of valued capabilities

[4] POVERTY STUDIES – this stream concentrates on the potential QoL of an individual: opportunities and their societal determinants

[5] COMMUNITY STUDIES – here the focus is on social context/fabric and the QoL of a community

[6] SOCIETAL QUALITY OF LIFE CONSTRUCTS – these approaches integrate a number of the above aspects.

The numbers in the list are those of Phillips' chapters, which proceed from more individualistic to more social conceptions. I give a fuller summary in the first two columns of Figure 1, which presents my interpretive overview of the book. Together the columns of the table present an analysis of the streams in terms of the dimensions of variation which we have identified.

SWB itself is multi-dimensional. Psychologists show us that well-being studies and ill-being studies are not identical. Subjective well-being has at least three major dimensions –positive affect; negative affect; life-satisfaction– and each of these has subdimensions. Ill-being and positive well-being can coexist at a given moment as different elements in one's life.

Much work tries to rank or choose between the conceptions: for example to compare and choose between the criteria of happiness and capability,



**FIGURE 1**  
**An analytical summary of David Phillips' Quality Of Life (2006)**

<b>FAMILIES OF APPROACHES</b>	<b>FOCUS AND SCOPE (per variant)</b>	<b>DISCIPLINE(S) / THEORY BASE</b>	<b>VALUES</b>	<b>PURPOSES AND STANDPOINT</b>
[1] SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING (SWB); three aspects:- 1 – happiness (positive affect) 2 – pain (negative affect) 3 – life satisfaction	Individual well-being (WB) as felt by the individual. Work on 'instant happiness' stresses aspects 1 & 2 more than does work in a eudaimonic / reflective well-being tradition.	Psychology, and neo-utilitarian economics and sociology. (But psychology has diverse schools.) Aristotelian philosophy stresses aspect 3.	(Priority to) Individuals' judgements of A. pleasure/pain B. meaning	- For description and explanation; & - For evaluations by the individual or that seek to represent the individual
[2] HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE	[2a] Individual WB/QoL - Physical (and mental) functionings & capabilities; listed by professionals (or the subject individuals), then measured by professionals (or self-rated). [2b] Health-related QoL of communities	Health sciences	- Ideas about normal capabilities and functionings - Either belief in superior knowledge and judgement of professionals; or belief in rights and superior knowledge of patients	For allocation of rights and resources for medical care: - policy level - programme level - individual cases
[3a] 'UTILITY'	Here individual WB is imputed from individual's resources and/or choices, especially choices in real or simulated markets	Mainstream market-oriented economics	Values of market: 1. spenders' values, insofar as money-backed; 2. income distribution given; 3. people held responsible for own choices (which are assumed to reflect preferences)	For describing, explaining, and conducting allocation according to market principles
[3b] NEEDS AND CAPABILITIES – all variants consider WB & (actual or potential) QoL of individuals	A. Prudential values theory B. Human needs theories C. Doyal & Gough's theory of need D. Sen's capability approach E. Nussbaum's capabilities approach	Humanistic economics. Philosophy. Humanistic psychology. Critical social policy Humanistic economics. Humanistic philosophy.	Humanistic values:- In A: what makes lives go better. In B: requirements of a decent life. In C: avoidance of serious harm; social participation. In D: positive freedom to achieve reasoned values. In E: As B plus D.	Variants B, E: for explanation All the theories: for public policy (constitutional and legal frameworks; strategies, programmes, projects, specific allocations to persons)
[4] POVERTY STUDIES – on individual (potential) QoL, and its social determinants	A. Work on poverty lines B. Wider concepts of deprivation C. Attention to processes and outcomes of social inclusion and exclusion	Social economics Social policy Sociology	Similar to 3b, but: Variant A is often limited to material aspects and values; variants B & C are not.	Variant A: for description, and public policy. Variants B & C: also for explanation
[5] COMMUNITY STUDIES – on social context/fabric & community QoL	Study of the direct value and indirect impacts of various forms of social capital and social cohesion	Sociology Social policy Public health	Emphasis on people as group members	- Explanation. - Background work for public policy
[6] SOCIETAL QUALITY OF LIFE CONSTRUCTS	A. Bernard's democratic dialectic B. Berger-Schmitt & Noll: overarching QoL construct C. Social Quality approach (Beck et al, 2001)	Sociology Social policy Sociology	Liberty, equality, fraternity Implies all the values listed above Similar to values of [3b], plus of [5]	For public policy (through from constitutional and legal frameworks, to projects)

implicitly usually for the purpose in public policy analysis of ranking alternative possible or actual states. Certainly the criteria of happiness and capability do not always correlate. More happiness might not be accompanied by more capability. Phillips reviews research that suggests a strong locality culture may raise happiness but is sometimes bad for health; since of course the culture's content—its habits concerning diet, exercise and stress—makes a difference. Similarly, greater positive freedom and autonomy may not always produce more happiness; some uses of freedom prove to be self-damaging. Capability theorists have nevertheless proposed several reasons to prefer capability over subjective well-being in public policy evaluation (see especially Crocker 2008).

Rather than try for a general ranking of the various conceptions I will try to clarify how they relate to each other and, to some extent, what their respective roles may be. We start by comparing *focus and scope*: what aspects does an approach focus on?

We can group these traditions in studies of well-being according to their area of focus, and then arrange the main focus areas noted in the second column of Figure 1 into a story-like series. Conventional economics and other utilitarian conceptions present a sequential story, a ladder of living, from having resources and getting goods, through to consumption and on to happiness. The stages fall into three main sets: I. Inputs/ Resources; II. Life content: Functionings, etc.; III. Thoughts and Feelings (see Gasper 2007b; Robeyns & vd Veen 2007).

The story told by hedonic perspectives on subjective well-being differs somewhat from that told by eudaimonic perspectives. In the former, as in the utilitarian tradition, happiness is seen as an output from activity and consumption. In the latter story, happiness as *eudaimonia*—gratification or fulfilment—comes from acting in accordance with one's best potentials and qualities and is seen as inherent in meaningful and valued activities, rather than as a separable output. 'To talk about the "pleasure" of contemplation is only to say that contemplation is done for its own sake; it is not to refer to any emotion that accompanies contemplation' (Seligman 2003: 112).

Let us consider now the other five dimensions or relativities.

### **3 The values in assessments of well-being and quality of life**

Every WB/QoL conception is value-laden, since each is an attempt to highlight what is considered (by someone) as important. As Phillips says, there are strictly speaking no 'Objective Well-Being' measures, in the sense of value-independent measures; more accurate would be to refer instead to 'collectively subjective' measures (Phillips 2006: 233): measures which are granted some authority through collective processes and which measure the presence of collectively determined 'substantive goods' (Scanlon 1993). Highlighting SWB matches a utilitarian ethic, or a libertarian value-stance (Phillips 2006: 227-8) in which even if felt well-being comes as part of a lifestyle that indirectly damages people it is considered appropriate to let people make their own choices and their own mistakes. If, however, their choices damage other

people, not only themselves, then according to J.S. Mill's criterion public intervention becomes potentially justified.

Choices of focus depend partly on choices of values (Gasper 2007b). The two are often almost identical: for example, a value priority to capability leads to a focus on capability, and a value priority to possession leads to a focus on possessions.

All societies generate distinctive but diverse systems of values: value orientations vary between and within societies. This receives surprisingly little emphasis in some SWB literature which instead seeks universal patterns. Some value choices concern features of a society as a whole: e.g., collectivist versus individualist, or hierarchist versus egalitarian (or in Mary Douglas' typology, high versus low group orientation, and high versus low 'grid' control). Some value choices concern other persons; for example whether to emphasise their capabilities (potentials) or their functionings. Value choices of persons for themselves include those about leisure versus work, and about relationships compared to things. Western Europeans appear in general to put higher relative value on leisure and relationships than do USA residents, we are told.

Notwithstanding such variations, modern capitalist societies as a whole appear to have become addicted to monetized activity (Bartolini 2007). High monetized activity is equated to 'high performance'. The dominant value systems do not contain a notion of 'enough'. Here is an example from the Netherlands, in a major report from the national research institute for public health and the environment.

Little support for the high-performance society: A public opinion survey revealed that less than 10% of the Dutch population is comfortable with a society moving in the direction of progressive globalisation and individualisation. Many Dutch people, from all political parties, would rather belong to a society in which regional development and solidarity continue to play a role. However, denial of the high-performance society carries a price tag, considering that the average European income may only rise by a modest 40% from the present up to 2040, whereas most official projections aim at and expect up to 140% rise in income by 2040. (RIVM 2004 – Summary, p.5)

The 'high performance society' may thus be felt by most people in The Netherlands as a low performance society.<sup>2</sup> High performance is presumed in the report to mean high monetized turnover. Most of the Dutch population are reported not to want its presumed concomitants, but the report's language gives priority to economic growth as the meaning of high-performance. This is seen in its talk of 'denial' and 'only a modest 40%', as if 40% increase could hardly be enough, and the use of 'high performance' to mean high monetized-activity, high throughput and high monetary income. This misuse of 'performance' is recurrent not incidental. Similarly misused is the term 'the achieving society' (RIVM 2004: 13), as if income is the only form or the sine qua non for achievement.

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<sup>2</sup> A fable that circulates in the Internet, of a conversation between a New York City 'high performer' and a Caribbean fisherman, makes a similar point. The end goal for years of frantic striving by the 'high performer' will be to attain the lifestyle that the fisherman already possesses.

Values vary between and within the research traditions identified by Phillips, as seen in the fourth column of our Figure 1. Phillips shows the range in value commitments, from strongly libertarian and individualist perspectives, through to more collectivist perspectives that emphasise fraternity and/or to egalitarian views. (Not all collectively-oriented perspectives stress equality; some are hierarchical.) He finds some disagreements around all values, concerning relative weights or even validity, except in the case of a single value: the second component of SWB – negative affect, pain. All traditions agree that pain should be reduced (Phillips, p.231).

#### **4 Differences of research methodology**

Different choices of research instruments, methods of observation and measurement and interpretation, reflect differences on the other issues, including on theoretical perspective —is, for example, SWB a counterpart of length and weight?—and on values; but they are not purely determined by them and so need separate attention. The choices reflect also different views on the nature of social science. Even so, choices of method can easily be overstressed relative to the other choices. The discussions about meanings of ‘objective well-being’ versus ‘subjective well-being’, for example, concern choices of focus and standpoint and not only of methods of measurement, as we saw in Box 1.

In some cases methods-choices may stem from value-choices. Daniel Kahneman has identified various fallacies in revealed preference methodology, the claim that we can validly impute people’s ideas about well-being simply from watching what they do.<sup>3</sup> But listening to what people say, as relied on in much SWB research, is also error-prone. Judgements for oneself made in thought experiment studies give much more relative weight to physical health than we find from studies based on real life situations, for example. In real life people give more relative weight to social and psychological functioning than in the experiments; we see this for example in the case of the truly rather than conjecturally disabled (Phillips 2006: 44-7). We should thus be wary also of contingent valuation studies.

Both these methods choices are really value choices. Contingent valuation methods and revealed preference methodology are weak if seen as predictions or measures of actual satisfaction. But both reflect particular value choices: to leave people to carry their own responsibility and free to make their own mistakes. We encounter well-being here as a ‘practical concept’: we do something with it in a social situation; we use it for certain purposes (Seel 1997). In the case of contingent valuation exercises, people are asked to give well-being estimates in order to influence future collective choices. In the case of revealed preference analysis, scientists may feel short of time to consult people, or mistrust doing so, and instead opt to let them live with the consequences of valuations implied by their actions.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Hirata and Vendrik (2007) on how experienced utility sustainedly diverges from expectations.

The capability approach calls for a deeper type of talk: for reflection and debate, rather than for each person to only consult a supposed built-in utility-meter (in reality one's socialized and partly unconsidered notions). In principle the approach sees people as social individuals who are capable of reflection especially through interaction. This is an appropriate synthesis, though the approach will not fulfil that potential if it reduces public reasoning solely to vote-counting or opinion-polling (Gasper 2007c, 2009a).

Some methodological choices involve a hunt for simple universal patterns. Much SWB work hunts for clear-cut correlations within the data on SWB self-reports. This fits with an underlying theoretical framework in which people are standardised machines produced from a single factory, and thus often with an interest in one or other proposed story of the selection pressures and evolutionary outcomes in human prehistory (see e.g., Dutt 2001, Easterlin 2005, Frank 2005, Veenhoven 2005). In contrast, authors who stress that people are diversely culturally moulded (e.g., de Jesus Garcia et al., 2007)—within as well as between countries—expect to find at best situation-specific pathways, not simple universal generalisations (Pawson & Tilley 1997).<sup>4</sup>

The hunt for generalisations sometimes concentrates on the shoals of published material from rich countries, rather than on potentially more enlightening comparisons possible between widely different countries and times. Some work even deals almost exclusively with USA data yet offers conclusions stated in general terms. In contrast Easterlin (2005) is a good example of wide-ranging historical and geographical comparison, including with countries like post-war Japan which showed explosive income per capita growth but little or no SWB gain. Unsurprisingly though, pragmatic considerations of cost, speed and data availability often drive research.

## **5 Purposes behind, and standpoints in, judgements of well-being and quality of life**

We need and use different QoL and WB concepts for different purposes. Income per head is a relevant measure when our purpose is to understand the workings of the monetized economy, but is unsuited in several ways to be an evaluative WB or QoL measure. We must at least modify it. Such adjustment is subject to great limits given the fundamentally different natures of the starting point—a measure of activity levels—and the intended destination: a measure of well-being. We can instead directly examine well-being of a current local population by various measures, including their own assessments. Such assessments are not adequate for policy purposes though if we do not adjust

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<sup>4</sup> In social studies of health, Wilkinson's thesis holds that, universally, inequality leads to lower social cohesion, which has psycho-social consequences (higher stress, lower esteem, etc.) which produce negative health impacts. But testing has refuted the first two proposed linkages as having general validity (Phillips 2006, Ch.7). Sometimes inequality brings more social cohesion, or at any rate the two are associated; and inequality is not sufficient to cause stress, for which perceived injustice is also required.

them to reflect damage done to other people, including people elsewhere and/or who will live later (Robeyns & van der Veen 2007).

Similarly, Doyal and Gough (1991)'s *Theory of Human Need*, for example, does not emphasise happiness, because its purpose is to guide first-priority public resource allocations and commitments: first things first – including, in their view, physical and mental health and ability to function effectively in one's society and avoid major harm. Beyond that level the theory is deliberately underspecified and compatible with different ethical theories, such as a liberal insistence that people have the right to be unhappy in their own way or a full utilitarian insistence on a duty to help make people happy. Some people believe that pleasure promotion must not be part of the set of priorities for public promotion, because they think pleasure is too contingent, personally specific and idiosyncratic (cf. Gilbert 2005).

Purposes affect what sort of identification of 'well' and 'quality' will or should be done in well-being and QoL assessment. We can distinguish at least these purposes:-

1. In order *to understand and predict other people* we need to make judgements of their well-being, as they see it and as others see it.
2. *To provide meaning* to our existence: including to understand ourselves better.
3. *To judge (and advise on)* what is good for ourselves/others.
4. *To guide public activity/provision*, the decision making of collectivities. One is likely here to lean to a conception of WB/QoL that is about: (a) providing basic conditions for a good life, rather than ensuring its fulfilment; except in the case of children and other wards; (b) conditions for a *typical* decent/good life, not for fulfilment of every sort of personally idiosyncratic preference.

For purposes of understanding and predicting other people, *verstehen*—empathetic understanding of others' meanings, perceptions and values—is frequently necessary for plausible social science, just as it is for fruitful coexistence. To conceive of well-being only with reference to material things, for example, is a very incomplete picture of deprivation, and hence a bad basis for explanation. We need empathy and ability to understand and use criteria of value, to see how people conceive of their well-being and that of others. The same skills are required in relevant ranking (purpose 3 above) and appropriate guided social action (purpose 4 above).

The second and third categories of purpose deserve fuller comment. Just as we need to understand how others conceive of their quality of life, we make judgements of our own QoL/WB in order to guide our choices. Or do we? Much decisionmaking is by routine, habit, rule, or accident. Some people may have little idea of 'self', and/or great feeling of obligation to others, and/or little confidence about their ability to understand or predict. Daniel Gilbert declares that his book *Stumbling on Happiness* will help us to understand why we cannot predict what will make us happy, and why much that we plan for will inevitably be stale when we reach it. Even so, judgements of well-being or QoL have an even more basic role: they help us to make sense in our lives, including make sense of other people's lives and actions which interact with ours, and

thus help us to be able to go on. This is one rationale behind much art. As Allister MacGregor (personal communication) puts it, only by having a conception of wellbeing can we know how to regard others, can others know how to regard us and can we know how to regard ourselves.

What is the purpose of an SWB self-report, beyond letting one be released by finishing a questionnaire exercise and positioning oneself in relation to those who will read the results? The additional purpose is to take a stance in one's life that influences how one proceeds further. The suspicion arises that well favoured people will understate their blessings—for to dwell on one's good fortune can undermine one's readiness to meet future challenges—and that ill favoured people may overlook some of their misfortunes, again in order to be better able to go ahead. In both cases the truth might be dysfunctional. This is not to deny that some of the well-favoured's supposed blessings might be hollow and that some ill-favoured people gain fulfilment in ways, such as in rich family relations or in religion, that can be overlooked in certain forms of assessing quality of life. The 'poor' could be poor in income, but rich in other things that are more important for SWB.

Recognising an SWB self-report as a practical attitude, a stance constructed for particular purposes in a particular context, one will—even if fully satisfied with it as an SWB measure for that purpose in that context—be wary about its relevance for other purposes and in other contexts. Discussions of the SWB criterion with reference to cases of the happy poor should distinguish the question of reliability of the measure from the question of its suitability or unsuitability for other purposes than recording mental states: for inferring quality of life, or for judging claims for support.

Consider the case of happy invalids. Self-reported QoL appears to surprisingly often even increase after disablement or diagnosis of terminal illness (Phillips 2006: 50). The low and sometimes zero impact on SWB of (real, not thought-experiment) disability and debility (see e.g. Phillips, Ch.2) could however be attributed either to (1) evasive adaptive preferences – people learn not to punish themselves mentally on top of their physical punishment and learn how to downplay and ignore their disadvantage, or to (2) learning about what is most important in life—such as: relatedness, ability to set and pursue objectives, recognition, and so on—and concentrating on the real priorities, giving oneself greater ability to savor each day. The first type of preference adaptation gives what can be called *the uncounted problems* explanation, and would constitute an objection to SWB measures; but the latter phenomenon, *the realisation of what are illusory or lesser problems*, would not (Gasper 2007b). For in this case preferences and behaviour evolve through the acquisition or resurfacing, and the use not evasion, of important information.

That happy invalids have high SWB would not disprove that they have low OWB, as assessed in terms of collectively agreed values such as mobility, freedom from pain, or expected life-span. One purpose of making WB judgements in such a case is to answer the public policy question of whether, and by how much, is reduction of the chances of people becoming invalids a public priority. Clearly OWB not SWB is the relevant measure here. The invalids' high SWB will be a relevant measure for other purposes, insofar as it is due to learning which problems are less important and what things are

greater blessings. Those invalids who have high SWB because they have learned in this way should not become disqualified for public support. Since SWB is variable between persons according to their own psychic resources, robustness and efforts, it should not be a lead person-specific policy criterion of *deservingness or need*.<sup>5</sup> We must look there instead at OWB: an approved specification of the major environmental conditions and constitutional factors in the person's life, including whether the person is physically handicapped.

So, for the purposes of public evaluation and public action, capability (the real ability to access something important, like employment) is often a relevant measure or target, since it judges whether people have access, without seeking to substitute for their choices. When we deal with immature agents (such as children) and/or with what are considered the real basics (like avoiding the major infectious diseases, and acquiring the fundamental skills and knowledge required to make competent choices), then functionings often become the more relevant measure/target.

A common misconception around the capability approach is that it is about individuals choosing between capabilities in light of their individual wishes or reasoned values. But individuals will typically use their wishes or reasoned values to decide directly between available functionings or commodities. The capability approach is relevant for public decision making about providing opportunities, especially access to public goods (here meaning goods deemed public priorities); it concerns group processes of deliberation and valuation rather than isolated choices by individuals (Gasper 2007c). Indeed it emphasises a further type of purpose, that of enriching public reflection and discussion (Crocker 2008).

A purpose leads to a judgement only when we take into account other information, notably about the specific situation concerned. Our fourth dimension of relativity arises at the interface of context and purpose: *standpoint*. There are numerous different public decision-making contexts and purposes that can influence the type of QoL concept that is found relevant (see column five in Figure 1). Dasgupta (2001) shows how different organizations have to pursue different objectives, since responsibilities need to be divided. The conception of well-being or quality of life that is relevant for a particular organization will depend on its context and its corresponding purposes. For example, a government ministry for international development aid that distributes aid between countries according to their existing quality of life might decide not to include quality of family life in its criteria for inter-country allocation, for that could discriminate against countries which have compensated for material deprivation by giving intense attention to the family; but an organization seeking to explain social dynamics could certainly include family life in its well-being/QoL conception.

Judgements of well-being or quality of life can be done by different persons or collectivities, from different standpoints. The valuation can be (i) by

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<sup>5</sup> Seligman offers a heuristic 'Happiness Formula':  $H$  (happiness) =  $S + C + V$ .  $S$  is the person's set-range: his/her typical happiness level or range; this is a dimension of personality.  $C$  = circumstances.  $V$  = factors under the person's voluntary control, such as learning and reflection (Seligman, 2003: 45).



a person for herself, (ii) by a person for others:- for those represented politically; for dependents; for distant others; (iii) by a group for itself; (iv) by a group for others. We could well focus on capabilities when the purpose is to inform public policy, i.e. for cases other than case (i); except that we may refer to functionings when dealing with dependents (including children and the incapable), for whom we aim to consider their best interests (see views discussed in Archard & Skivenes 2009), and also sometimes when we defend the basic interests of all; so to have inoculations is a compulsory functioning, not merely an available option.

Compared to work on well-being, work on quality of life more often tends to take a standpoint within a public decisionmaking context and thus looks also at necessary conditions within the social environment. Thus, the European Foundation for Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 'seeks to capture aspects of societal well-being going beyond the individuals' capacity to pursue their own ends' (Phillips 2006: 161).

## **6 Differences of social theory and psychological theory**

Different conceptions of well-being and quality of human life reflect different understandings of being and of the structures of human life, in other words different ontologies and perspectives about the nature of persons and societies; for example between emphasis on people as consumers or as do-ers (Gasper 2009b). The key dimension of contrast identified by Phillips in his survey of theories of quality of life is between conceptions of persons and hence conceptions of well-being which are individualistic and those which are in some sense more social. We must look also at the contrast within the set of individualistic conceptions between hedonic conceptions and those which are more reflective and discursive. Lastly we will see how the more reflective individualistic conceptions (such as Seligman's) merge into the more social conceptions, for much of the reflection is about social relationships and since the formation and formulation of the 'I' whose being is evaluated emerges and evolves through that reflective social interaction.

### *Social/collective conceptions and individualistic conceptions*

A conception of well-being or of life-quality rests on a conception of being and/or of human life. Phillips contrasts conceptions which are individualistic and those which require much attention to a group level. In contrast to many poverty notions, the social exclusion notion, for example, rests on a social conception of quality of life, and emphasises matters like discrimination and alienation. Similarly, in Ubuntu philosophy, I am because you are; I am fine because you are fine; I am because I have ancestors; I am an inheritor and have inheritors; I exist in relation to and through you.

Phillips identifies a series of relevant dimensions for theory comparison (2006: 230). Some theories presume that societal WB is identical to a sum of independently identifiable individual WBs; some reject this. We can ask whether a theory of well-being/quality of life emphasises:- social causes and requisites of individual wellbeing; aspects of individual wellbeing that are fundamentally social; individuals' prioritisation of the well-being of others and

of collective wellbeing; and individuals' or groups' valuations of those aspects of wellbeing which are relational.

Jordan (2008), for example, contrasts theories of 'welfare' as in welfare economics (set 3a in Phillips' listing), with theories of 'well-being' from social and cultural studies. Theories of 'welfare' consider the forms of individual choice within impersonal markets, and presume that these can be generalized to all human interaction. In Jordan's terms, they analyse economic value. Theories of 'well-being', in his terms, analyse 'social value', which is produced and exchanged through culture. However, although 'the social value associated with power, status, esteem, respect, membership and belonging stems from social relations, [it is] often communicated through the exchange and sharing of commodities' (Jordan, 2008:128). Consumption is to a large extent about creating and maintaining meanings, 'communicating claims to esteem and influence, and enabling the shared activities through which relationships are conducted' (p.116). But, Jordan argues: 'Because of its methodological individualism, economic analysis cannot encompass the processes by which interactions generate and distribute symbolic social value, and regulate such processes through culture and institutions.' (p.242). He seeks to explain the Easterlin paradox in terms of economic processes which undermine social value at the same time as they generate economic value.

It would be particularly unfortunate to ignore the collectivist aspects of WB/QoL since we already have numerous individualist indicators and policy remains dominated by measures like GNP, which merely adds up a total of individual gross incomes. '[A]part from a very few exceptions inter-personal relations, or sociality-as-relationality, is absent among the key ingredients of happiness' treated by economists (Bruni and Porta 2007: xx). Pugno (2007) is one exception, who builds from the evidence that close interpersonal relationships are central to well-being and can be jeopardised by certain patterns of socio-economic change.

Consider then the following sorts of position:

- a) A form of ontological individualism: Individual WBs/QoLs are considered not constitutively interactive—one person's well-being does not affect that of another; so if you suffer, I may be affected via the impact of this on your actions and contributions but not through sympathy with your suffering. Societal QoL is the sum of individual QoLs determined in isolation, because people are fundamentally discrete entities.
- b) Ethical individualism: Individual QoLs may (or may not) be constitutively interactive, via sympathy, but societal QoL is obtained by adding up individual QoLs, either (b1) as specified by individuals or (b2) as the sum of collectively determined individual QoLs (i.e., determined by authorised representatives or experts).
- c) Societal QoL cannot be identified through adding up individual QoLs because an individual's sense of self is not so separate from his/her feeling of identity and commitment as a member of a group or groups (cf. Zarri 2007). Societal QoL is then conceived as (c1) a synthesis of individual assessments of collective QoL, or as (c2) collectively

determined (by authorised representatives or collective vote) collective QoL.

Conceptions (c1) and (c2), which focus on a category of collective quality of life, reflect a notion that people are fundamentally group members. Conception (b1) is perhaps the main one in rich countries. Let us probe further its tradition of work on individualist indicators of individual well-being, in particular its SWB stream.

*Choices within subjectivist conceptions – hedonic versus eudaimonic conceptions*

Much work on SWB takes it as something definite, to be measured and statistically interpreted almost like length or weight. Yet it is, or can be and should be, a product of reflection and interpretation, and hence is inevitably ambiguous – as not only a vector concept but one with greyness in each of its dimensions. The ‘instant utility’ in one part of our nervous system is not the only or main criterion; we have reflective and interpretive powers which we can use to say that we approve even when we are suffering, or disapprove even when we are experiencing pleasure. Just as people have preferences about their own preferences, so they have some more and some less reflective ways of ranking their state of mind. Chekola provides a thoughtful warning against simplified, ‘limited and barren’, non-cognitive concepts of happiness (2007:221.)

In a eudaimonic rather than hedonic conception of SWB—as argued by Deci and Ryan (2001) in psychology, and Bruni and Porta (2007) in economics—one rates mature and informed reflective fulfilment above immediate or unconsidered pleasure. This matches the Aristotelian tradition, where ‘happiness means well-doing ... [and] this “doing” also means directing action by thought’ (Vivenza 2007: 8). Similarly for Buddhist thought ‘The most common error is to confuse pleasure for happiness’ (Ricard 2005: 40); ‘we so often confuse genuine happiness with merely seeking enjoyable emotions’ (ibid., p.28).

We are centrally interested in the quality of persons’ subjectivity and reflection. In the happy invalid case, we objected in some respects to the variants where an individual achieves happiness by evading reality; in contrast to the variants where the invalid achieves happiness by embracing reality, identifying sources of deeper meaning and fulfilment in life and focussing on those.

If obliged to rank one’s mental state and/or life situation on a scale of 1 to 4 or 1 to 10 or whatever, in response to a researcher, each one of us can give an answer, and the answer may be fairly steady if repeated—reliable in the scientific sense—reflecting a certain equilibrium that expresses one’s personality and way of thinking. But when describing one’s mental state and life situation to oneself—say in a diary—or to others, in one’s daily conversations and correspondence, one might never use such a scale. Nor does anyone use it when trying to describe a known person’s mental state and life situation; novelists do not, but nor do journalists or friends or colleagues or superiors, let alone family members. How can we interpret this discrepancy? Something fundamental might be missing in some of the research on SWB.

If assessment of well-being for others is complex, for the reasons we have touched on – the choices of scope, of value, of purpose and standpoint, of theoretical framework, of evidence and in reasoning – then why would we expect dramatic simplicity when people make well-being assessments for themselves? We should not.

Well-being and quality of life are vector concepts. Many components in the vector can be fuzzy and contingent, as product of a complex judgement process, and the significance of a component may depend on several of the other components. Whether an experience or even a sensation is felt as pain or pleasure may depend on its social and interpretive context: the pain of the religious ecstatic is experienced as pleasure or joy. Zamagni notes how happiness is profoundly dependent on a social context, in which people interrelate as actors with meaning-laden identities, not as the meaning-drained agents of traditional economic theory who cared only for their utility-meters. That was close to an economics of autistic beings rather than real social human beings, and is inadequate for understanding happiness (Zamagni 2005: 329).

People are, on the other hand, not merely ant-like members of a collectivity. The self arises through thinking about and in relation to others. People's reflections, and their ideas of the self (/selves) whose well-being they seek to promote, are formed and conducted in terms of socially created systems of symbols and meanings. If we see people as reflective social beings not as utility-meters, then well-being research requires wider horizons than much hedonic SWB research, conclude Bruni and Porta and many of the contributors in their two recent volumes (2005, 2007).

We should refine the argument. First, judgemental evaluative character applies more especially to thinking about the past and the future than to reacting in the present. It is especially important for the life-satisfaction component in SWB.<sup>6</sup> Positive affect and negative affect are closer to being 'mental temperature' type entities. Even these components however, while in substantial part determined by the intersection of life events and circumstances and by personality (including a person's 'set range' of feeling), are also significantly variable according to how people learn to think about their life events and circumstances, how they interpret them. The principle of 'count your blessings', for example, applies also in interpreting current experience, not only when reviewing the past. Similarly, pleasures can be increased by knowing how to savor them. Interestingly, the single most effective way of doing that appears to be to share the experience with others (Seligman 2003: 108).

Secondly, Seligman's contrast between the pleasures (inevitably temporary positive affect) and the gratifications—a contrast stressed also by JS Mill, Alfred Marshall, and Tibor Scitovsky amongst others—or that between hedonic and eudaimonic emphases in the study of subjective well-being, could be a more fundamental divide in well-being studies than is the contrast

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<sup>6</sup> The concepts of life-satisfaction and eudaimonic SWB may substantially overlap (as assumed in Figure 1) but the latter seems too plural for them to be identical. The concepts of eudaimonic SWB and objective well-being overlap when the eudaimonic SWB values of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2001) are collectively or authoritatively identified as 'substantive goods'.

between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ well-being conceptions. Eudaimonic emphases include reflection, absorption, and (as source of the absorption) meaningfulness. This meaningfulness involves not just providing a stimulating challenge to skills but the undertaking of something of value within a community and/or for a cause larger than oneself. Eudaimonic SWB thus concerns or includes reflective engagement in things of wider value. Any interpretation of ‘objective well-being’ is in several respects similar: it is the product of a collective reflection on what is of general value within a community. A constant preoccupation with pleasures, with obtaining positive affect and avoiding negative affect—typically fanned by marketing that urges people to continually spend—diverts people from deeper gratifications that do not involve short run pleasure and convenience but instead the building and exercise of personal strengths. Since the pleasures are ephemeral, preoccupation with them promotes instead in the longer run a greater proneness to dissatisfaction and depression, concludes Seligman (2003).

Thirdly, we might find that choices of ontological and theoretical perspective are in practice often affected by matters of value choice, purpose, standpoint, and even convenience in data collection. That possibility requires fuller examination than I have space for here.

## 7 Conclusion

I summarise the main points argued above as follows.

1. The concepts of well-being and quality of life refer to evaluative judgements about selected aspects or the entirety of a life-situation or life-path, for an individual, group or society. They do not refer to one or other unitary and objective entity. They should be understood as abstract nouns, umbrella terms, which cover many different possible concepts. Even if there are certain objective entities (e.g., positive affect) that are often closely associated, these are not identical to a judgement about well-being / QoL and are sometimes rejected as insufficient or misleading indicators.
2. These evaluative judgements are made in many different ways, according to choices in at least six dimensions: focus of attention, values used, research instruments used, guiding purposes of the exercise, standpoint adopted, and theoretical framework employed. We saw an illustration of this in how there are many different notions of ‘subjective wellbeing’ and of ‘objective wellbeing’.
3. Different choices in these dimensions underlie the diversity of traditions in thinking about well-being and quality-of-life, including the traditions surveyed by Phillips (2006): the subjective well-being tradition from psychology; quality-of-life work in health sciences; the economics-based tradition of ‘utility’ estimation; theories of human need and/or capability; poverty studies; studies of community quality-of-life and social fabric; and overarching quality-of-life constructs.
4. These traditions focus at different levels along a ‘ladder of living’, from contexts, to having resources and getting goods, through consuming, to enjoying. Eudaimonic conceptions mistrust an emphasis on enjoyment as a

mental output that follows a certain activity, rather than on satisfaction as a judgement of the meaningfulness and fittingness found in suitable activity. In terms of values, all conceptions use one or other set of value-criteria, which underlie the choice of focus.

5. Choices in research methodology partly reflect choices in the other dimensions, notably choices of value and differing policy preoccupations, but they demand separate attention for they also reflect differing ideas about the nature and possibilities of social science and the influence of data availability.

6. Different purposes contribute to the formation of different concepts and judgements of well-being and life quality: purposes of description, explanation and prediction of other people; of understanding, finding meaning in, and living our own lives; of evaluating and choosing for oneself; and evaluating and choosing (also) for others. In all cases, concepts of well-being and life quality should be seen as practical attitudes: constructed to serve particular purposes in particular contexts. Different purposes and contexts will lead to differently constructed attitudes. Self-reports of subjective well-being, for example, can be valid and reliable for certain purposes, but do not prove to be sufficient, valid and reliable for all other important purposes.

7. Different conceptions of well-being and quality of human life reflect different ontologies: understandings of being and of the elements of human life. Two key contrasts are, firstly, between conceptions of persons and hence conceptions of well-being which are individualistic and those which are more social; and, secondly, between conceptions which see well-being as a life-outcome which can be measured in the same sort of way as weight, and conceptions which are more reflective and discursive. The more reflective individualistic conceptions and the more social conceptions of well-being flow into each other, for the formulation of the 'I' whose being is evaluated emerges through social interactions.

What should we do with these diverse conceptualisations of quality of life or well-being? We can try to add them all together, to give an eclectic heap (as, for example, Berger-Schnitt and Noll, 2000), and this may have some democratic merit. Quite often however different conceptions point in different directions, providing us with paradoxes that have driven the field of happiness studies (Bruni and Porta eds. 2007; Gasper 2005, 2007b).<sup>7</sup> We can seek a theoretical rationale for selecting just one school, as some pure utilitarians essay, or for building a particular synthesis, as Phillips attempts. Or, as I have suggested in this paper, we can try to understand them as having different roles and different occasions of relevance. We need to reflect on and then focus in scope according to our judgements on: purposes, roles and standpoint, as well as on values, theoretical perspective, and the adequacy and feasibility of the required procedures and instruments. We should always reflect consciously on each of these aspects. Clarifying the different conceptions and dimensions helps us too in better understanding the paradoxes.

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<sup>7</sup> Economics-and-happiness work focuses on divergences between measures of subjective well-being and income. Equally interesting and important are the common divergences between objective and subjective well-being measures, and between measures of income and objective well-being (Gasper 2005, 2007b).

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