

INFLUENCE OF SUBJECTIVE FACTORS ON THE PERCEPTION OF QUALITY OF LIFE

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1. Introduction

If, in order to evaluate the quality of life of a collectivity or social group, we employ measures of the quality of life of its individual members, this psycho-individual frame may be very limited when we want to explain the sources of variation of perceived quality of life. In order to accomplish the last objective we must take into account the influence of the subjective factors. The models proposed until now are subordinated to a psycho-individual approach, assuming the existence of a purely individual, independent and autonomous self. Other methodological orientations contest this model, proposing models of (partial or total) determination of subjectivity. I was interested in the possibility of enlarging the frame of explanatory analysis of the variation of quality of life, including the psycho-sociological states (the influence of communication, psychological processes associated to the membership in social groups, etc.). In this paper I propose a theoretical analysis, seeking to identify the main methodological hallmarks and some starting points for elaborating such a model.

2. The limits of psychological individual approach to quality of life

Quasi-totality of the studies in this field of research understand quality of life as a mainly evaluative concept, with two main components:

- a) a state – the human life, as it is at a given time;
- b) a set of evaluation criteria (values) used for evaluation of the present state.

The construction of the concept of quality of life requires also another problem to be solved: the modeling of the process of evaluation¹.

Therefore, in order to operationalize the concept of quality of life, three types of indicators are used:

- Objective Indicators
- Indicators of quality of life in which one or both components are subjective (indicators of perceived quality of life).
- Indicators of happiness (purely subjective).

¹ Zamfir, C. et al., 1984, p.17

The relationship between the global quality of life and its components is complex. These are the main traits of this relationship:

- the global quality of life is not a simple addition of different domain qualities of life.

- we encounter also the opposite relationship: a global subjective state influences the evaluation of the quality of different domains of life. It is here an 'evaluation from the global point of view of the components'. That is why, in order to identify the structure of global quality of life, a set of "psychological states, which express more general reactions and attitudes towards life"² had to be introduced in the explanatory model. Some of these are: OPTIMISM/PESSIMISM, INTEGRATION/ALIENATION, FEAR/TRUST³.

Though such analyses are not providing an explanation for the dynamics and the interrelations of these individual psychological states. There was no tentative, at least in my knowledge, to identify regularities in the dynamic of these states, and in the connections, by the process of communication, between them.

My hypothesis is that the individual relevance of the indices that compose the more general concept of quality of life is the cause of the insufficiency of discussed models. I asked myself if we might compensate a part of these deficiencies using an explanatory model that takes into account also the cognitive-affective processes, related to the life of the individual in social groups.⁴

3. For a socio-psychological approach to quality of life

Studies of social psychology showed that, along with the individual affects and cognitive processes, human beings have emotional processes caused by the membership in social groups. These emotional processes had been studied in connection with following issues:

- the relationship between the individual identity and the collective identity.
- the relationship between the "private self" and the "collective self".
- the relationship between personal and collective self-esteem⁵.

On the other side, cultural studies and the social psychological analyses showed how "subjectivity"⁶ develops itself under the influence of interpersonal and mass communication.

² Zamfir, C., 1992, p. 221

³ Zamfir, C. et al., 1984, p.17

⁴ There are in Romanian literature suggestions for studying the influence of psycho-social factors on quality of life (Pânzaru 1992, 1993). "Quality of life, says Petru Pânzaru, is a social and collective opera, resulting from an interaction between the social "actors" in a concrete socio-economical, political and cultural context, in an specific psycho-social environment" (Pânzaru, 1992, p. 9) . The author suppose the existence of "instrumental mediators" between the human needs and their satisfaction. These mediators are the language and the psycho-social processes. A psycho-sociological approach, said the author, must take into account the influence of communication on the evaluation of domains of quality of life.

⁵ Rahn, Kroeger & Kite, 1994, p. 32

human needs and representations are socially determined, but also the human subjectivity is socially constructed. Ideology, says Althusser, operate implicitly. It manifests itself in those social representation or practices which individuals take as granted. There is no individual and coherent self, but a contradictory subjectivity, which can change in some situations, in response to a certain discourse⁹.

On the other hand, the structuralism argues that the notion of subject is a mystification, as long as it is supposed to be an independent agent of social relations. The structuralists are interested in the processes of symbolic construction of these structures, and in the meaning they contain. In structural and systemic analysis, the possibility of existence of a subject with the personal capacity to maintain or modify social relations is denied¹⁰.

For the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who integrated the theories of semiotic structuralism elaborated by F. de Saussure, the Unconscious is a system of meanings that act as a language (*langue*), produced not by a single individual, but by the culture. Thus, the Unconscious is composed by the other's perceptions and language. We have here a conception of a total social determination of subjectivity.

Lacan rethinks the distinction made by Freud¹¹, dividing the subject in three instances: the *symbolic*, the *imaginary*, and the *real*. The symbolic is the order of the language. This is the definition of culture in *Structural anthropology* by Claude Levi-Strauss. The Imaginary is constructed from versions of the Symbolic intrinsically to every individuality, defining the elements of individual biographies. The third element is the Real, a "psychical causality" analogous to the Freud's drive. The subject is conceived by Lacan only as "an instrument, a corridor, a support for the language and the play between the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic"¹².

Pushed to the extreme, this vision strongly denies the positive ontological status of the Self: Foucault and Derrida are viewing it as being rather a linguistic convention, an effect of the thinking on language¹³.

c) *partial* determination of subjectivity.

The symbolic interactionist approach is, in my opinion, a middle point between the first two approaches. They also consider the subjectivity as a product

⁹ Turner, G., 1992, p. 28

¹⁰ Rosenau, 1992, p. 46

¹¹ Actually, Freud is the first that "breaks" the unity of the subject, splitting human psychic in three levels: *id*, *ego* and *superego*. Freud is questioning the status of modern subject as coherent, integrated and unified. His "subject" is less a "conscient" one, than a psychoanalytic one, characterized by multiplicity and lack of unity (Rosenau, 1992, p.45). We may say that, "inventing" Unconscious – or, it might be better to say, attributing it a positive experience, in contrast with the meaning of non-conscious from the philosophical and literary tradition before him (Catherine B. Clement, 1975, p.49) - Freud leave the door widely open to the theories that challenge autonomy, rationality and the possibility of conceiving the subject in a rational frame (Game, 1991, p. 38).

¹² Catherine B.-Clement, 1975, pp 87-99

¹³ Rosenau, 1992, p.43

of social interactions. The mechanisms of ego construction, as it appears in the Mead and Cooley writings, are fundamentally social. The symbolic interactionists draw a splitting line inside the subject, between *private* and *collective* self. Thus, for G.H. Mead, the *collective self*, ("me"), is only an internalization of social roles, a reflection of an individual model which the social process grants, and that individuals are incorporating in their structure. That does not exclude the existence of a *private, psychological self*, (the "I"), which is a more personal element. "The psychological self, says Mead, is the reaction of the organism to other's attitudes; the social self is the ensemble of other's attitudes which we assume. The other's attitudes are composing the organized social self, in face of which we react as psychological self"¹⁴.

The symbolic interactionist approach rise important perspectives for the study of the processes related with the ties between "individual individuality" and "collective individuality", "private self" and "collective self"¹⁵.

5. Public mood and quality of life

Important applications of these models emerged in political psychology, interested in the *nature* and *sources* of satisfaction with political system and authorities. In this field of study was introduced the concept of "public mood", defined as "diffuse affective state, having distinct positive and negative components, that people experience because of their membership in a particular political community"¹⁶. In the cited study, the authors recognize that "public mood is not merely the projection of a private mood on to a public object, nor is public mood the aggregation or the average of the moods people experience in their everyday lives. Instead, our concept of public mood recognizes the fact that individuals often have emotional experiences because of their membership in a particular national community, just as they experience emotional reactions because of their other social group memberships"¹⁷

Now we can turn back to the initial observation: the explanatory models of variation of subjective quality or life insist on the individual psychological states, but take less into account the states caused by the group processes. Let's take two examples:

1) In the last cited work, the authors discuss a sensible change in public mood caused by a collective event like the winning of a Gold medal at Olympic Games by an athlete running on behalf of a country. As well the death of a public personality can possibly have an affective influence on the members of a national

¹⁴ Doise et al., 1992, pp.38-39

¹⁵ Rahn, Kroeger & Kite, 1994, p. 32

¹⁶ idem, p 32.

¹⁷ ibid., p 32-33.

community, and to create this mood which can “influence on the domain components of quality of life [evaluation]”¹⁸

A significant example can be found in the Philip Braud’s book “The Garden of Democratic Delights: For a Psycho-emotional Reading of Pluralist Systems”, where the author makes an analysis on the periodical boost of public optimism as a result of general elections. The analysis is designed to justify the main thesis of the book, that is: “The superiority of pluralist democracies ... consists in their ... superior aptitude to manage, without suffocating, the emotional dynamisms that traverse the society”¹⁹ This variation of public mood interested also American social psychologists, which saw “a periodicity in people’s collective optimism that correspond to national elections. People seem to get more optimistic during elections campaigns, and their feelings towards the political system improve as a result”.²⁰

We must make some remarks:

The second example seems to suggest that one of the ways to increase the quality of life is exactly this management of emotional dynamism. We may reiterate on this issue the Marxist discussion about the “authentic needs” and “false needs”, included also in a Romanian book (see Zamfir et al., 1984), talking about an “illusory increase in quality of life level” ? This bring us to the discussion about the project of quality of life researches, initiated in the sixties in United States, with the intention to create an instrument for evaluation of social developments towards the increase of level of living. From this point of view, an excessive preoccupation for the management of subjective component of quality of life to the detriment of efforts for the increasing of general quality of life, can alter the direction of the researches in the field from the initial project, including them in the frame of a science of “perfect happiness”. On the other hand, a social policy project visible unbalanced towards this direction cannot have only the totalitarian characteristic of the will to create a society in which human being, using the expression of a known Romanian political scientist, is “convicted to happiness”.²¹

6. Quality of life and communication

We saw that contemporary theories insist on multiple, changing and often contradictory features of subjectivity. The “tissue” of the Self depends largely on the relation with collectivity, and the process of communication mediates these relations. Studies in the quality of life research agree to the possibility that the subject is making judgments about standard of living in relation to needs. They

¹⁸ Zamfir, C., 1992, p. 221

¹⁹ Braud, P., 1996, p.12

²⁰ Rahn, Kroeger & Kite, 1994, p. 42

²¹ It is not less true that a rigid normativity in the field of human necessities is itself abusive.

also allow that the subjective criteria for the evaluation of the living conditions may be themselves contextual – e.g. social – determined. However, what was not sufficient emphasized, is the influence of communication on the level of individual life satisfaction. There are three levels of this influence.

Firstly, diffuse affective state, spread through mass or interpersonal communication, are influencing constantly the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the individual, without modifying, through the same process, the *criteria* by which are judged the diverse domains of quality of life. Thus, we may suppose that in a community characterized by discords, by a general pessimism, individual depression and despondency may represent a social norm. Studies about subcultures showed how can induce negative affective states, corresponding to a nihilist and contestatory attitude. Well-known subcultural currents like the one of *Young Angry Men*, in English literature and cinema of the sixties, brought forward the revolted type of personality, to who predominant are the dissatisfaction and despondency.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the contradictory character of this kind of affective states. Even if individual satisfaction is high in some moments, the social norm dictates to an individual to express an opposite affective state. A semiotic analysis of the rock subculture may show that this contradiction is linked with a *cultural construct*. Let's take, for example, the piece of the Rolling Stones in which, on the background of a full of optimism and vivid song, they obsessively repeat: "*I can't get no satisfaction*". We may suppose that this kind of social and cultural contexts favors the expression of a certain kind of mood, detrimental to the opposite mood. The spiral of silence *theory* is a model for the opinion of the majority (here, the emotional state of the majority) spreads by repressing the expression of opposed states or attitudes²². It is place here for an epistemological discussion: either the contradiction is apparent, being in most of the cases the result of the measurement errors (influence of the interviewer on the subject of the interview), either the contradiction is right inside the human personality. Researches subsumed to the positivistic methodological orientation are giving credit to the first idea, maintaining that the reality can be known eliminating those "measurement errors". Other authors are talking about the "positional subjectivity", developed by the individual in response to the exposure to one discourse²³. Still, both approaches are giving to the communication process a key-role in the explanation of these processes.

The third explanation, the most daring, is that happiness itself is a social construct: society gives the individual a way in which he or she can perceive and express happiness or unhappiness. The demarcation line between the sentiments inspired by the individual experience and those generated by the social experience is at least very fragile, as the social existence dictates the way in which are

²² cf. Drăgan, I., 1996, pp. 280-289

²³ Turner, G., 1992, p.28

constructed the identities around where those sentiments are developing. Speaking of despondency, let me refer to the opposite example, given by Jean Baudrillard, who analyses the way in which, in mass culture of the contemporary age, the sign, who is the main agent of communication, dilates itself in the field of communication and finally substitutes the reality – thus giving birth to the “automatic simulation of the real”, in a society characterized by total transparency²⁴. The simulacrum of happiness utilized in the mass culture productions invades the concept, emptying it from any signification. In a context where happiness – or its simulacrum - is in every occasion and in every moment expressed, and (to be happy) is a social norm, happiness becomes an abstract notion, a pure sign.

7. Quality of life from the perspective of “social self”

The essence of my essay was to signal that a psycho-individual analysis of sources of variation of quality of life may prove to be insufficient. On the contrary, enlarging the frame of study of quality of life to include the psychological states generated by the human existence in social groups may, theoretically, contribute to a better prediction power of the indicators of perceived quality of life.

However, if we try to offer a view of quality of life from the perspectives of “social self”, we must firstly answer to several questions:

1) Which are the components of the emotions of the “social self” having influence on the variations of perceived quality of life.

2) What are the dynamic elements of these affects (regularities, correlations, and so on...).

3) In which way correlate those emotions with the affects of the “individual self” and what influence have the individual variables (age, sex, socioeconomic status, type of personality, etc.) on them.

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²⁴ Baudrillard, J, 1996, p. 73

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