Meanings of “Life” in “Quality of Life”

Mark Chekola
Minnesota State University Moorhead
USA
chekola@mnstate.edu

Abstract

In discussions of quality of life it seems that there has not been much focus on the concept of *life*. In quality of life studies it is important to seek conceptual clarity with regard to the basic concepts used. In empirical studies we need to be clear on what it is that is being measured. When *life* is referred to, is it an aspect of life currently, an aggregate of all aspects of life currently, the whole of life as it has been lived and continues to be lived? In addition to subjective aspects of life such as satisfaction, are there other features that must be attended to, such as achievement or challenge? Are there problems with the view of the self implied in some quality of life research?

Some ideas of philosophers such as Aristotle and John Stuart Mill will be discussed, as well as ideas of social scientists, in particular Ruut Veenhoven. Contemporary philosophers Lennart Nordenfelt, Ronald Dworkin, Robert Nozick and James Griffin have discussed some ways of considering life that may be helpful here. The implications of the author’s view of happiness as the realizing of a person’s important global desires, a “life plan” view, will be considered.

Introduction

Many Quality of Life researchers have noted problems with regard to the lack of a clear definition of “quality of life.” Ruut Veenhoven (2000) and Mark Rapley (2003) have both observed that as research is carried out particular conceptions of its meaning are put forward by those making use of the concept. Instead of working for a consensus on a definition, Veenhoven says, “Discursive communities develop their own quality-of-
life notions.” (Veenhoven 2000, p. 1) Rapley even asks the question “Should we ‘Hang Up Quality of Life as a Hopeless Term’,” in the title of the last chapter of his book

**Quality of Life Research: A Critical Introduction.** Without a doubt most participants in this conference would not be ready to accept a claim that “quality of life” is a hopeless term. Rather, they might likely agree with E. Haavi Morreim in her 1992 article entitled “The Impossibility and the Necessity of Quality of Life Research.” She focuses on such research in medicine, but the point could be applied to other areas of quality of life research: whether it be happiness studies, economics, public policy, planning, developing countries or medicine, as difficult as it might be to be clear about the concept and to collect data, the goal is important enough that it cannot be abandoned.

Nevertheless, we should not fall into thinking that anything goes with regard to “quality of life.” We should do what we can to become clearer about the concept of “quality of life,” and do our best to avoid conceptual sloppiness in discussions. Jouko Kajanoja, in his article “Theoretical Bases for the Measurement of Quality of Life,” tracks two waves of focus on social indicators. He claims that in the 1980’s there was a reduction in attention to them. He attributes it in part to a “bland empiricism” of developers of indicators: “There was concentration on development of empirical measures without very deep consideration of the theoretical and philosophical foundations.” (Kajanoja 2002, p. 64) While there has been renewed emphasis on indicators and measurement of quality of life, Kajanoja claims “In the second wave of the measurement of QOL, there appears to be even less consideration of theoretical and philosophical issues than in the 1960s and 1970s.” (Kajanoja 2002, p. 65)
Earlier use of “quality of life” in research focused on data such as GNP to make judgments and comparisons of quality of life in populations. Now, however, much of the research is focused on gathering data about individuals’ judgments of the quality of their own lives, and paying attention to the various aspects of life that seem to enter in to judgments people make about whether their lives are going well. Data from individuals may then be collected to use to seek an assessment of the quality of life of a population. It is this more individual-focused use of “quality of life” that I will be concerned with here. Hereinafter I will use “QOL” in general for “quality of life.”

It is difficult to discuss QOL without also bringing in other concepts, such as happiness and well-being, which relate to QOL. They are often used as rough synonyms, with some qualifications. So I will sometimes make use of those terms, I hope not misleadingly. With regard to happiness, there have been differing views as to what the concept means, and some concern about whether a definition is possible. I have argued elsewhere that I believe there is a “conceptual core” of the concept of happiness (Chekola 2007, pp. 53-54). I will offer a speculation here that I will not argue for, but which, if true, gives us reason for hope in the discussion of QOL: while the history of the use of QOL is much shorter than the history of the use of happiness, I believe that there may be a conceptual core to the concept of QOL as well, though it may anchored in part by connections to the concepts of happiness and well-being. If this is so, it can give us some reason to reject some uses of “quality of life” as being inappropriate, such as in some marketing. In my discussion I will be using the methodology of philosophy, and so I will be seeking a clearer understanding of QOL as a concept as such, and not be directly concerned with how it can be used in the collection of data. This may make some people
with social science orientations impatient, because of the social sciences’ focus on operationalizing concepts for the purpose of collecting data. However, I think it may be important to not be too hasty to operationalize “QOL” until we’ve done some work on being clearer about the concept in general. Otherwise you have examples of what Veenhoven referred to as particular notions developed for use by particular discursive communities, or what Rapley calls QOL as a “member’s term.” (Rapley 2003, pp. 217-221) Of course, given lack of clarity and consensus on QOL, sometimes a definition will be stipulated for the sake of clarity within that context. But stipulative definitions are not full-fledged definitions.

An example of a work seeking to clarity QOL is the 2000 article “The Four Qualities of Life” by Ruut Veenhoven. He focuses on the term “quality” and develops a classification delineating four qualities of life: (1) the livability of the environment, (2) the life-ability of the individual, (3) the external utility of life and (4) the inner appreciation of life (Veenhoven 2000). He points out implications for research, and notes that the quest for data for overall QOL is hopeless. (31-33) I would like to see what we might be able to do in focusing on life in “QOL.”

Life Some Preliminary Distinctions

Lennart Nordenfelt notes that “Notwithstanding the increasingly rich literature on QOL, the basic notion of life has been almost completely neglected in this context.” (Nordenfelt 1994, p. 2). He offers some basic distinctions. We can distinguish between (a) a partial life and (b) complete life. Completeness can be measured in terms of time or
aspects. Aspects include (a) experience, (b) activities, (c) achievements, (d) events and (e) circumstances. (Nordenfelt 1994, p. 3).

Let us consider how some of these distinctions relate to some QOL research. Research in medicine and health care focuses on partial lives: lives while dealing with health problems, subsequent to a change in physical condition, etc. Some research focuses just on how certain interventions, such as a treatment, or medication, will affect the patient.

Longitudinal research, such as the Australian Quality of Life Panel Study used by Headey and Wearing, focuses on many aspects of person’s lives at a particular time or for a particular period (such as since the last time they were interviewed). (Headey and Wearing 1992, chapter 2) Notable about that study is that it included questions related to life events and a personality inventory.

Much recent QOL research has focused on what Nordenfelt calls the aspect of experience, using attempts to measure life satisfaction or moods in collecting data. In part I think that researchers have felt that other aspects of life, such as activities, achievements and events, affect QOL only insofar as they affect a person’s experiences, positive and negative. I will be raising some questions as to whether this may be too limited. In particular I wonder if there needs to be consideration of aspects of a person’s life such as activities and achievements in considering QOL, and that ways in which they may be part of QOL cannot be reduced to how they affect a person’s experiences, such as positive moods and life satisfaction.

How much is included in one’s life? What are its boundaries? In QOL research, for the most part, the selves whose lives are studied are seen as atomistic individuals.
Things outside of my self, such as the environment, other people with whom I have relationships, events, are of interest only insofar as they affect me, and my pleasures, satisfaction with life, etc. This seems to work out satisfactorily in individualistic Western societies, but may not allow room for more expansive views of the self held in some other cultures. Ruta, Camfield and Donaldson note, in pointing out some special factors that need to be considered in carrying out QOL research in developing countries, that some societies may have a concept of the self that incorporates others:

In a less individualistic understanding of wellbeing, the wellbeing of family and society may be understood not only as an instrumental way of achieving one’s own wellbeing but an intrinsic part of it. This requires a larger notion of the self than is common in the west but would be perfectly understandable, say, to a woman from Bangladesh. (Ruta, Camfield and Donaldson 2006, p. 8)

I believe most QOL researchers would want their data to include as accurately as possible the beliefs and judgments of those who are being studied. So if some people see their selves as including others, such as their family, that would have to be accepted, unless we have some objective criteria for disallowing such views. For them the well-being of a family member is part of the quality of their lives.

Some Influential Views from the History of Philosophy

In looking at the discussion of the good life in the history of philosophy, two influential views we find are the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle’s, and the 19th century utilitarian Bentham. While their focus is on how we judge life, we will want to note what they way implies about their conception of life. One issue I want to be attentive to is whether there are some “objective” features of life that may be ignored in the more subjective views of QOL.
Aristotle sees eudaimonia (sometimes translated as “happiness,” though there is debate about it) as “virtuous activity,” using our reason in the development of our characters, our actions and thinking, over a relatively long period. It is not a feeling or a state. It is, he claims, final—the ultimate aim of our desires, and self-sufficient—when we have it we lack nothing significant. He notes that eudaimonia is not pleasure, though pleasure typically accompanies such activity. So on his view eudaimonia is activity of a certain sort, and not a state, feeling, attitude or mood (Aristotle 1962: Book I, pp. 3-4)

Aristotle’s general approach is biological, and the excellence or virtue he focuses on has to do with function, and in particular function related to what is unique about the entity in question. When it comes to humans he sees reason and rational activity as what is unique to them, and what distinguishes them from other living beings that are capable of (a) nutrition and growth and (b) sensation and movement. So the conception of life involved in his account sees life as a carrying out of activity that by nature aims at excellence. In the case of humans, the use of reason will be especially important. Subjective states such as pleasure and satisfaction typically accompany such activity. But for Aristotle, in judging QOL, it is the excellent activity which is the eudaimonia, not the pleasure or satisfaction that may accompany it.

Bentham identified happiness with pleasure, and believed we could use a kind of hedonic calculus to determine which alternatives promise the greatest pleasure. He held a view of the self as atomistic, and so it is the pleasures of individuals that count. Collections of people, such as “the community,” are simply “a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are constituting as it were its members.” (Bentham 1962 p.
This sort of view seemed to have a great deal of influence on economics and other social sciences.

The conception of life on which Bentham’s view is based is a version of hedonism, both psychological (it is pleasure that motivates) and ethical (we use pleasure to evaluate). So for him what is particularly important for life are the subjective states involving pleasure and pain. A kind of calculative attention focusing on maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain helps us to live better lives. On this view happiness or QOL seems to be seen as a collection of pleasures. We should ask if it is not a too limited view of the nature and structure of people’s lives.

A “Life Plan” View

I have argued for a “life plan” view of happiness. I use “plan” in a very open sense: some life plans are very sketchy; some are detailed. According to this view happiness is the ongoing realizing of a person’s global desires, those which are relatively more permanent, comprehensive and important. Such desires typically include desires about the kind of person one wants to be, life goals (which may include a career), desires concerning relationships with others, etc. The realizing of a life plan is typically accompanied by pleasure and attitudes of being satisfied with life, but it would be incorrect to identify the nature of happiness with these.

My view is similar to Aristotle’s in that according to both views happiness is an not a state, but something ongoing—the realizing of a life plan, according to my view. Focusing on pleasure or satisfaction with life in assessing happiness or QOL seems to miss some of the structure and complexity of lives, and some features that may figure in
to assessing whether lives are going well. One’s life may be going well, in terms of the ongoing realizing of one’s global desires, and yet one might not feel pleasure or have an attitude of satisfaction with life at that time.\(^4\)

**Nordenfelt’s View and “Richness”**

Lennard Nordenfelt argues for a subjective concept of QOL, one which he calls a “want-equilibrium theory.” People are happy with their lives if they want the conditions of their lives to be as they are. There is an equilibrium relation between their wants and satisfied wants. (Nordenfelt 1993, p. 7). But he adds another dimension, “richness,” which has to do with the number and nature of wants. While happiness is still the equilibrium, a life can be richer with more wants or more ambitious wants. It would seem that on his view such a life has higher quality. (Nordenfelt 1993, pp. 64-65) If Nordenfelt is right about this, then in assessing QOL we should include attention to this dimension of richness. His view of the structure of life seems to be that while wants and their satisfaction are important, having more or more ambitious wants adds a quality-of-life-enhancing dimension to it.

**Challenge, Reality and Achievement**

I would like to consider an example which I believe will help to raise a question as to whether there is a feature of at least some lives that adds to the quality of those lives, but which cannot in any straightforward way be accounted for by “subjective” views of quality of life or happiness.
Jane Hodgson was an abortion rights advocate in the United States. She was the only doctor in the United States who was convicted of illegally performing an abortion in a hospital, a conviction which was overturned by the 1973 Roe v. Wade U. S. Supreme Court decision. Her obituary in the New York Times includes a quotation from her reported in a biography of her: “I think in many ways I’ve been lucky to have been part of this. If I hadn’t gotten involved, I would have gone through life probably being perfectly satisfied to go to the medical society parties and it would have been very, very dull. I would have been bored silly.” (New York Times 2006). Hodgson is clearly judging her life to have been better by having been involved in this challenge and activity.

How can we understand and account for this feature of her life that she sees as having made such a difference? Her brief description of the difference suggests it may be an example of what Nordenfelt refers to as “richness.” I do not think that what she is referring to can be reduced to just adding more pleasure to her life or increasing her life satisfaction. So that it is a “richer” life may give one sort of explanation. Let us consider some other ideas of some contemporary philosophers that may offer other explanations.

The philosopher Ronald Dworkin sees the idea of a good life, or well-being, as having to do with “how we should live to make good lives for ourselves.” (Dworkin 1999, p. 196) Dworkin claims we must recognize a complexity in the concept of well-being that includes a distinction between ”volitional well-being,” having or achieving what a person wants, and “critical well-being,” which is “having or achieving what he should want, that is, the achievements of experiences that it would make his life a worse one not to want (1999, p.230). When he goes on to further develop the idea of critical
interests he claims there are two different and competing general models of value which are used in “conceiving the source and nature of the value a life can have for the person whose life it is”: the model of impact (its value consists in its product—“its consequences for the rest of the world,” and the model of challenge (which Dworkin himself prefers)—“a good life lies in the inherent value of a skillful performance of living” (1999, p. 240—241). These address the concerns people have when they ask about their own lives or the lives of others whether they “add up to anything.” What is relevant to the Hodgson example is the model of challenge. She seems to see her involvement with regard to abortion rights as something that added something significant to her life, enhancing the quality of it. And this seems to be something that she sees as a part of her life, not something external to it (as the impact of a life might be claimed to be). So this could not be seen as the utility of her life and an external or “outer” quality as it would be according to Veenhoven’s categorization. While it had utility, as challenge, on Dworkin’s view, it is inherent to her life.

Robert Nozick introduced the famous example of the “experience machine.” It has to do with whether we would choose to be hooked up to a machine that stimulated our brains to induce guaranteed pleasurable experiences without any antecedent activity or state of affairs bringing them about. In his book The Examined Life, which Nordenfelt cites as a rare example of someone focusing on the concept of life, one of the things Nozick emphasizes is that people want and value a connection with reality. He says “…the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is why we desire it—and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn’t give us that.” (Nozick 1989, p. 107)
Nozick applies the concept of reality to life in a number of ways. One has to do with whether our experiences actually correspond to reality, which he believes is important to us. Another way he applies the concept of reality to how we think of life is to claim there are ways that people can be “more real.” In introducing this idea he says:

We are not merely empty buckets to be stuffed with happiness or pleasure; the self’s nature and character matter, too, even matter more. It is easy to fall into an “end-state” conception of the self, demarcating some particular condition for it to reach and maintain. As important as the self’s constituents and structure, however, are the ways it transforms itself. (Nozick 1989, p. 128)

He claims we can distinguish degrees of reality of the self, and to elucidate the idea uses as examples some literary characters, such as Hamlet, Lear and Antigone, and some people, such as Socrates, Moses and Gandhi, who are more real—“more vivid, concentrated, focused, delineated, integrated, inwardly beautiful.” (Nozick 1989, p. 131) He also notes that these people have had significant impact, which stemmed from their greater reality. (p. 133) He suggests that we can reflect on when we feel more real ourselves. He sees being “more real” as enhancing well-being, and so one’s quality of life.

This may explain Jane Hodgson’s appreciation of the challenge she took on and how it enhanced her life. If we think of some of the features of “greater reality” in a life according to Nozick’s description, her life certainly was more vivid, concentrated, focused and perhaps more integrated than it would have been without her involvement in the fight for abortion rights. But whether it does apply to her particular case, this is an aspect about life that also deserves some attention in considerations of QOL.

Like Nozick, James Griffin values the importance of reality and an objective basis for judgments about well-being. He criticizes what he calls the “enjoyment account” of
well-being by noting it leaves out too much, such as accomplishment and close, authentic personal relationships. (Griffin 1986, p. 19) In a recent article he writes of “accomplishment making a life better for the person living it.” (Griffin 2007, p. 141)

I would like to focus on accomplishment as Griffin discusses it because I think it shows (as does Nozick’s discussion of reality) a limitation of more subjective approaches to happiness and well-being.

Griffin sees accomplishment as one of the main prudential values of life. Others include components of human existence (such as agency, autonomy, capabilities, liberty), understanding, enjoyment, and deep personal relations. (Griffin 1986, p. 67) Accomplishment is to be distinguished from achievement (which seems to focus more on competition and the exercising of skill). Accomplishment is something seen as “giving life weight and point.” (Griffin 2007, p. 143) The desire for accomplishment is different from wanting a sense of accomplishment, and doesn’t necessarily include that the accomplishment affects my experience. (Griffin 1986, p. 19) So it would seem that accomplishment on his view would enhance my well-being even if I did not know of my accomplishment and did not feel pleasure or satisfaction concerning the accomplishment.6 Accomplishment, as Griffin discusses it, offers a valuable explanation of the Hodgson example. She does indicate that that she values it, so she has some correlative subjective experiences that enhance the quality of her life.

So it seems that there may be features of lives of the sort discussed, achievement, challenge, and being “more real” that add value to our lives that cannot be reduced to enjoyment or satisfaction.
If we consider Ruut Veenhoven’s “Four Qualities of Life,” I think we can see that he would have difficulty in placing Griffin’s view in his scheme. Veenhoven makes a distinction between inner and outer qualities and a distinction between life chances and life results. (Veenhoven 2000, p. 6). On his view what is key for happiness is the subjective appreciation of life, which is an inner QOL result. Veenhoven would, I think, probably suggest that accomplishment should be located in his category of the utility of life (an outer quality relating to life results). But this is not what Griffin has in mind. Accomplishment is on his view, not just a result of one’s life. It is inner, in that it is a component of one’s life. Or perhaps we could say it is constituent of one’s life as it is lived. It may have utility, but that is really something else. If one is aware of one’s accomplishment, one may take satisfaction in that, and that satisfaction is valuable, and fits in with the subjective appreciation of life. But on Griffin’s view accomplishment cannot be reduced to that.

Subjective Theories: Some Questions about Limitations

I have at several places indicated that there may be some elements or aspects of life that are neglected in subjective theories of happiness, quality of life, and well-being. In particular, it may be that because of the focus on basic explanation and the collection of empirical data such views may end up providing us with some causes or necessary conditions of happiness, but neglect more complicated aspects of human intention including global desires or goals, and the issues that came up in the discussion of the Jane Hodgson example.
I will use Ruut Veehoven’s theory as an example. I have already indicated that I think he would have difficulty accounting for accomplishment, as discussed by Griffin. I will use Veenhoven’s 2006 paper for a conference, “How Do We Assess How Happy We Are?” It offers a helpful summary of his theory and some speculation as to the value of his theory as reflecting biological and evolutionary aspects of well-being.

Veenhoven sees the global assessment of life, or overall happiness, as satisfaction with one’s life as a whole. Such judgments are based on both hedonic level of affect and contentment (perceived realization of wants). (Veenhoven 2006, p. 20) However, he sees affect, and in particular affect based on need gratification, as primary, and claims that this fits nicely with an understanding of needs as coming into existence as part of the process of evolution. (Veenhoven 2006, pp. 22-23)

While this may be plausible with regard to a possible explanation of basic needs and pleasurable affect and the formation of basic wants, it seems that this leaves out some aspects of happiness and the quality of our lives, particularly higher level, more global desires. If we take the Hodgson example, Veenhoven claims that the kind of challenge involved in something like the fight for abortion rights can be explained by early evolutionary adaptation and the value of having skills to handle basic challenges (such as in hunting game for food). In modern life we no longer face the basic challenges in survival that earlier peoples such as hunter-gatherers faced, but we still have a need for competition and challenge and a drive to carry out our skills and abilities. This now is met by more modern alternatives, such as in business activity or quests for social change, such as Hodgson’s. (From personal conversation October 9, 2007)
While this may present a helpful basic picture of how basic human needs and motivations came to be formed, it leaves a great gap between that basic picture and our lives as we see them. If I offer as an explanation of why being involved in the fight for abortion rights was important to Hodgson and added to the quality of her life, that it gave her a kind of equivalent to good hunting skills that would have helped a hunter-gatherer thrive and that to exercise the evolutionary-based competitive skills she has she needed such an equivalent in modern life, and that the fight for abortion rights served to provide such an equivalent, this misses a great deal. It is reductive in claiming something like “her involvement was just….” One would guess that she saw this as something important for society and took it on as her own goal to do things to bring change about, a change for the good for society. The biological/evolutionary sort of explanation is not able to capture much of this, and in that regard gives just a partial account of happiness, well-being and quality of life.

Lives and Narratives

Nozick believes that narratives of our lives are important to us. He doesn’t discuss this in much detail. But he says “We would be willing…to give up some amount of happiness to get our lives’ narratives moving in the right direction, improving in general.” (Nozick 1989, p. 100) In part he is dealing with a debate concerning hedonism that claims the “shape of life” makes a difference: comparing two lives with equivalent totals of pleasure, a life whose shape is such that the pleasures increase is thought to be better than one in which pleasures decrease. I think Nozick has in mind also the
importance to people that their lives seem to have some direction, and to make sense. This may connect with his emphasis on degrees of reality of lives. He says people who are more real are “more vivid, concentrated, focused, delineated, integrated, inwardly beautiful.” (Nozick 1989, p. 131) These seem to be features that make for a better narrative.

Hilde Lindemann Nelson is a contemporary philosopher who has made use of narrative theory in discussing ways of dealing with oppression and illness. She says the following about a narrative view of personal identity:

Personal identities consist of a connective tissue of narratives—some constant, others shifting over time—which we weave around the features of our selves and our lives that matter most to us. The significant things I’ve done and experienced, my more important characteristics, the roles and relationships I care about most, the values that matter most to me—these form the relatively stable points around which I construct the narratives that constitute the sense I make of myself.” (Nelson 2001, p. 72)

I would like to note a possible connection between a part of what Nelson says here and an issue raised previously. Earlier (p. 6) it was noted that people in some societies may have of the self that incorporates others, so that the well being of certain others may be intrinsic part of one’s own well being. The way in which narratives of personal identity may include roles and relationships important to the person may be one way of making sense of an enlarged view of the self, which seems to contradict the individualism with which we are more familiar.

Dan Brock in “Quality of Life Measures in Health Care and Medical Ethics” uses the concept of a life plan to say something similar to what Nelson says about narratives with regard to the issue of the role of quantity or length of life and the harm of early death. He claims
People typically develop, at least by adolescence, more or less articulate and detailed plans for their lives; commonly, the further into the future those plans stretch, the less detailed, more general, and more open-ended they are. Our life plans undergo continuous revision, both minor and substantial, over the course of our lives, but at any point in time within a life people’s plans for their lives will be based in part on assumptions about what they can reasonably expect in the way of a normal life span. (Brock 193, p. 115)

When their lives are cut short “they often lose…the opportunity to complete long-term projects and to achieve and live out the full shape, coherence, and conclusion that they had planned for their lives.” (Brock 1993, p. 115) The life is cut short, with some goals and projects left unfulfilled. The narrative of the life is unfinished, stopped abruptly.

A life plan view is more compatible than some other conceptions of happiness and well-being with views that see narratives as important to how people conceive of their lives. The life plan, the set of global desires of a person, is not the same as a narrative. The narrative can be seen as partly historical and partly consisting of key features and a “story” that one sees as making sense of one’s life. But it would seem that narratives would typically include the global desires of the person, those ends and aims of a person that are the relatively more important, permanent and comprehensive. This is a significant part of what drives the narrative.

Conclusion

We have looked at a number of ways that we can try to clarify different senses of “life” that are implied in QOL research. I have noted that there are aspects of life that arise in some judgments about quality of life or well-being that seem to be neglected in subjective theories of happiness and quality of life. In particular, there are ways in which what is important in quality of life extends beyond a subjective self that would seem to be
the focus of many current theories of quality of life and happiness. The way in which challenge or accomplishment can be important to a life and be part of the quality of a life seems to require seeing something “objective”—the actual accomplishment, for instance, and not just a pleasure or satisfaction in a belief of accomplishment or pleasure—as part of that life; in Veenhoven’s terms, an “inner” rather than an “outer” quality. Similarly, for those who with a more communitarian conception of the self, the well-being of others such as family members can be seen as an “inner” quality of their lives. And Nozick has suggested that reality is important to us, so that if my pleasure or life satisfaction is based on something not true which I do not know, that may actually diminish the quality of my life.

This seems to require thinking of one’s well-being, the quality of one’s life, as including objects of desire or concern as in some sense internal to it. Some “objective” features of the world are part of one’s quality of life, and not external to it in the sense of results or outcomes. If we have to consider the possibilities of wider boundaries of the self than the standard subjective individualist picture allows, then we may have some room for the enlarged view of the self referred to earlier, which sees the well-being of others, such as family members, as part of one’s own well-being. It does seem to be the case that even in our Western individualistic society that something terrible happening to a loved one or the loss of a loved one through death or a parting such as a breakup or a divorce is at least sometimes experienced as a direct harm to one’s own well-being rather than just something happening to someone else causing pain or, in the case of a parting, a painful failure in one’s wants and goals.
If it is true that “life” is complicated in these ways this may well be annoying and frustrating to empirical investigators of QOL and well-being. But if accuracy and truth is important in what we are investigating, so be it.

I believe further discussion between empirical researchers and philosophers about how to understand the different senses of “life” in “quality of life” with an aim to determine whether and how data can be collected would be a worthwhile endeavor. I propose that we seek to encourage such discussion in ISQOLS.

ENDNOTES

1 I thank Ruut Veenhoven for helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

2 A rare exception, Nordenfelt claims is, Robert Nozick in The Examined Life. I will be discussing some of Nozick’s ideas later.


4 In my account of the concept of happiness I claim that there is a disposition to feel positive feelings and attitudes associated with the realizing of the life plan, and that there is an absence of both serious felt dissatisfaction with one’s life and an attitude of being displeased with or disapproving of one’s life. Negative feelings an attitudes such as these are present in depression, and can rule out happiness. See Chekola 1994: pp. 84-91.

5 Nozick admits that this notion of reality is far from precise, but suggests that we not too easily dismiss it. He notes that many notions took a long time to clarify and sharpen. He also notes that the way in which the notion seems to be both descriptive and normative, and to “straddle the fact/value gap” is awkward. Nevertheless, it could perhaps help in making progress on “the otherwise intractable fact/value problem.” (Nozick 1989, pp. 138-139) One might note that these points might be suggested about the concepts of happiness, well-being, and quality of life as well.

6 We might also raise the question whether, if one mistakenly believes that one has had an accomplishment in one’s life and takes satisfaction in that belief, one’s well-being is less by virtue of the lack of real accomplishment, even though there are some positive subjective experiences. Both Griffin and Nozick give importance to reality with regard to actual well-being that subjective views of happiness see as irrelevant (except for the vulnerability of the judgments of life satisfaction based on the false beliefs, should the truth be found out).

7 Available at Ruut Veenhoven’s web page: www.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven, under Research, Works in Progress.

8

**REFERENCES**


