How do you measure Quality of Life?

As cities change, researchers and policy makers try to understand the ways that economic, social, political and environmental factors as well as public policies influence the quality of life (QOL) of a place, and for groups and individuals. Many studies have been undertaken to identify and measure indicators, using quantitative and qualitative data sets, which contribute to QOL. An overview of this field is offered by Massam (2002). Absent in many discussions regarding the well-being of cities, however, is the status of the lived experiences of individuals within a specific place. While improving quality of life is argued to be desirable, the ways in which the concept can be measured is far more complex. For example, how does one quantify individual notions of well-being? The working paper *Lived Experiences* by Bryan Massam, Brian J. Hracs and Rodrigo Espinoza considers the difficulty of measuring quality of life from the perspective of the life of an individual. It examines the role of responsibility in determining who can alter QOL; for example, a public policy or individual initiatives. The authors suggest ways to collect, display and interpret empirical data about the lived experiences of a sample of individuals in four countries (Canada, Mexico, Poland and Sweden). This data set is used as a test case to elaborate a new methodology on measuring QOL. In their analysis, the authors also identify issues with a number of well-being measurements and then apply their own lived experience survey analysis. This is motivated by the work of Kahneman (2011), who claims that most traditional methods of collecting data with interviews are not entirely satisfactory. In particular, Kahneman suggests that instead of surveying respondents for stated levels of quality of life, a preferred approach uses questionnaires in which individuals identify activities in their recent past that reveal patterns of activities that are a surrogate for experiences and aspirations regarding satisfaction with lived experiences.

**Activities of Lived Experience**

In their study, the authors ask individuals who are undergraduate and graduate students in Canada, Mexico, Poland and Sweden to describe their activities over a recent period (2–3 weeks) and to calibrate the responses in terms of levels of satisfaction. Three basic questions were used by the authors to prompt each respondent to yield a long list of lived experiences and activities, such as:

- **Q1.** Which activities have you enjoyed in the last 2–3 weeks and which activities would you like to continue in the coming weeks?
- **Q2.** Which activities have you undertaken in the last 2–3 weeks which you did not enjoy, but felt some responsibility, obligation or duty to undertake?
- **Q3.** Which activities filled some of your time in the last 2–3 weeks which do not clearly fit into the first two categories?

Using the responses, the authors then derived four basic clusters of activities: mind (worrying, anxiety, reflection, hope and others); body (health, exercise, distress, diet and others); work (paid employment, unpaid employment, volunteering, household chores and others); people (family, friends, strangers, colleagues and others). Each dimension embraces a range of activities which reflect the possibilities and choices an individual may make depending on their age, gender,
commitments as well as socio-economic and cultural traditions. Below, Exhibit 1 displays a pattern of what an ideal lived life might look like for a respondent. Exhibit 1 displays the ideal lived life as participation on all four basic clusters of activity as high. The higher the level of participation, the further the * is from the centre.

Patterns of experienced life
Exhibit 1 also displays an actual level of their perceived level of participation on each axis. The question is posed: what pattern might be generated with an equal level of participation for each of the clusters of activities? Consider Exhibit 2 below. It is clear that a high level of participation might be the result of a positive and desirable level of lived experience; on the other hand a high level may indicate negative and undesirable lived experiences. High levels of work participation alone can lead to frustration, if there is not an ideal balance between work and other categories of an individual’s life. The same goes for mind, as a high participation within this category could be interpreted as response to a feeling of constant worry for the individual. By collecting and comparing data from students in four different countries which feature different political systems and socio-economic levels the authors highlight the diversity of lived experiences and the highly individualized perception of QOL.
Exhibit 3 illustrates possible responses from two subjects. While both subjects Michael and Susan have the same levels of actual life experiences (shown as solid lines) when we add their individual ideal experiences as they perceive them (dashed lines), we notice that Susan’s actual pattern is close to her ideal and hence we might suggest her QOL is higher than Michael’s as his ideal pattern is somewhat different from his actual pattern. If we question Susan she might tell us that the gaps between actual and her ideal patterns are not significant. However Michael might tell us that the gaps are significant and in some cases, for example, for body, people and mind he has to assume responsibility for trying to close these gaps, while for work he might suggest some changes to public policies that would help close this gap. In the empirical examples presented in the paper the authors examine the patterns for each subject, and elaborate on responses to questions concerning significance of the gaps and responsibility for closing gaps.

Ultimately, the white paper *Lived Experiences* describes an initial attempt to offer a way to collect, display and organise information about lived experiences for a small sample of individuals in relation to their quality of life. In so doing, the paper suggests that individuals may be able to change their lived experiences for the better, while possibly influencing the formulation and implementation of public policies that aim to improve the lived experiences of citizens more broadly.
References:
Kahneman, D. 2011, Thinking Fast and Slow, (Toronto: Doubleday)


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