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### **ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF QUALITY OF LIFE**

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# ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF QUALITY OF LIFE

Iuliana PRECUPEȚU<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Up to now, quality of life (QOL) research has been guided by several conceptual frameworks that allow for the generation of rather general approaches to QOL with very fragmented explanatory contributions, while no specific conceptual models can be identified in the literature. This paper, which is based on a critical review of mainstream literature, aims to highlight the main difficulties in building a conceptual model of QOL and to propose a model that can overcome some of the current issues. The difficulties in constructing such a conceptual model stem mainly from the variety of definitions and the range assigned to the concept of QOL, the consequent operationalisation of the concept, the relativity and multidimensionality of the concept and the subsequent problems with unidimensional measures. This paper proposes a conceptual model that adopts an individual perspective on the theoretical construct and introduces several novel ideas for building a comprehensive explanatory framework for QOL. The following developments and improvements are suggested with the purpose of clarifying the intricate field of QOL research and closing in on a conceptual model: honing in on essential dimensions instead of constantly expanding the concept, increasing the effort put into theorising about QOL, adopting a life course perspective, generating longitudinal data and utilising research on agency. There is a high need for the development of a conceptual model of QOL and the concurrent integration of QOL approaches, at least at the European level, as this would contribute to fostering the advancement of the QOL research field and highlighting core European values regarding QOL standards.

Keywords: quality of life methodology, social indicators, critical review.

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## Introduction

As a specific perspective in the social sciences, quality of life (QOL) research proposes a comprehensive set of dimensions and indicators in an attempt to map all aspects of life. Currently, there is no consensus in the literature regarding a conceptual framework for QOL. The vast majority of existing analyses are on the trajectory of becoming *a theory of everything*, often lacking specificity and allowing for only cross-sectional analyses. In contrast, other studies have focused on particular issues, adopting a QOL approach that utilises a set of subjective indicators (satisfaction studies).

Currently, QOL is considered an “overarching frame that encompasses many other concepts that are applicable at the level of the individual, family, community and society, such as opportunities, disadvantage and exclusion, social cohesion and social capital” (Fahey *et al.*, 2003).

This paper examines the conceptual frameworks of QOL employed by mainstream science and is based on a critical review of the literature. It examines the main difficulties in the construction of conceptual models of QOL by focusing on definitions, operationalisation, issues with the relativity and multidimensionality of the concept and the consequent problems with unidimensional measures. Furthermore, it proposes a conceptual model that adopts an individual perspective on the theoretical construct and introduces several novel ideas for building a comprehensive explanatory model of QOL.

A critical literature review usually integrates, interprets and synthesises information from significant studies, leading to a critical interpretive synthesis (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). Furthermore, it concentrates on the conceptual contributions of previous works and provides the opportunity to appraise the resulting intrinsic value of the available literature, thus providing a *launch pad* for a new phase of conceptual development and subsequent *testing* (Grant, & Booth, 2009). In this respect, a critical review produces a larger picture than the findings of individual studies that typically examine single relationships. The resulting model is a subjective interpretation of the literature and relies heavily on the experience and expertise of the reviewer(s) (Burholt *et al.*, 2020). This review does not adopt a structured or systematic approach to considering the existing literature but includes a selection of studies that contributes to a model that could serve as a starting point for further evaluation.

Conceptual models capture theoretical ideas and empirical findings to represent phenomena of interest or specific research questions. They can guide research, policy and practice and lead to new approaches to existing issues and the framing of these issues in innovative ways. They are distinguished from conceptual frameworks, which are comprehensive and can include a wide range of issues to study (Brady *et al.*, 2020).

A conceptual model of QOL should follow a process that allows for a clear picture of the concept. It should include the content of the theoretical construct (dimensions and indicators), as well as elements such as input and output, the factors that determine the concept and the relationships between the various elements. Such a model would employ several steps, which are largely similar to those used in building composite indicators (OECD, 2008), leading to a proper conceptualisation of QOL: 1. Definition of the concept. 2. Development of the theoretical framework, which provides the basis for the selection of dimensions and indicators. 3. Mapping of the components: dimensions and indicators. 4. Generation/selection of the data, with indicators selected on the basis of their analytical soundness, measurability, country coverage, relevance to the phenomenon being measured and relationship to each other. 5. Ascertainment of various levels of measurement. 6. Understanding of the relationships between variables, using an exploratory (multivariate) analysis to investigate the overall structure of the indicators, assess the suitability of the dataset and explain the methodological choices. 7. Identification of the factors that impact QOL (and establishment of the direction of causality). 8. Identification of the outcomes of QOL.

Most of the time, conceptual models are focused on particular or narrow issues and provide explanations of phenomena of interest, as is the case with *social determinants of health* (WHO, 2010) or *exclusion from social relations* (Burholt *et al.*, 2020). In the case of QOL, no conceptual models for the general population have been put forward in the literature, and related research has been guided by conceptual frameworks that allow for the generation of rather general approaches to QOL with fragmented explanatory contributions.

One of the most developed QOL conceptual frameworks was proposed by Eurofound (Fahey *et al.*, 2003) and is based on a series of principles that are largely shared within the QOL literature. The focus of this framework is on a broad approach to QOL that tries to overcome the narrow concentration on living conditions that was often employed in the past. While seeking to encompass both resources and living conditions, this framework is also preoccupied with contextual characteristics, as QOL is seen as the result of a complex interplay between the resources that are available to people in various social settings, the various constraints people might face, the outcomes of these conditions and, finally, the subjective assessments people make. QOL is conceived of as the opportunities people have to achieve their own personal goals in their respective societies. The measurement of QOL includes subjective and objective indicators of resources and living conditions while focusing on the relationship between “reported satisfaction levels and resources/conditions rather than simply on satisfaction per se” (Fahey *et al.*, 2003). Finally, this particular conceptual framework aims to include aspects of society’s well-being, thus establishing a relationship with policy.

This specific conceptual framework represents the foundation of the QOL measurement in the European Quality of Life Survey, and its operational definition includes elements relevant to the European policy agenda. Being rather

policy driven, the model concentrates on living conditions, employment, work organisation and working conditions, with the goal of contributing to improving social protection and social services.

Other mainstream conceptual frameworks of QOL that are used in the measurement of QOL at individual and societal levels include Eurostat's (2017) QOL indicators, the European System of Social Indicators (Noll, 2014), the World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL) assessment tool (WHOQOL Group, 2012), the QOL framework used in Romanian sociology (Zamfir, 1984) and the frameworks guiding the various indices measuring QOL, such as the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (Cummins *et al.*, 2003) and the OECD (2020) Better Life Index.

### **Definitions of QOL**

The first difficulty in building a conceptual model of QOL involves defining the concept. The literature provides a multiplicity of definitions focusing on various components of life, and thus far, there is no consensus on the key elements that constitute the QOL construct. Some definitions concentrate on basic conditions or general opportunities for human life to flourish (Zamfir, 1984; Fahey *et al.*, 2003), while others try to comprehensively capture the complex nature of QOL and descriptively include the conditions of life and the actual content of the concept (Mărginean, 2005) (Table 1). The range of the concept widens even further when considering QOL's background factors and relative nature and bridging it with constructs such as sustainability or durability (Noll, 2014). Another type of definition taps into the mechanisms that people use to evaluate their QOL, such as comparisons, culture and value systems and personal goals (WHO, 2012), while other authors look at QOL outcomes (Zamfir, 2018). The variation among these definitions and the concepts associated with QOL at the level of definition (e.g. sustainability) holds the potential for as many conceptual models. The definitions and subsequent ways of operationalising the concept of QOL reflect the different traditions of QOL research and, to a certain extent, the distinct values in various parts of the world. For example, the Swedish approach focuses on the standard of living, which is defined as access to resources, such as money, wealth, knowledge, mental and physical energy and social relationships, that allow individuals to control their living conditions (Erikson, 1993). The American tradition of QOL research (starting with Andrews & Whitey, 1974) has been rather preoccupied with subjective well-being and the evaluations that people make regarding their life conditions, thus assigning perceptions/outcomes a central role. Sen's (2000) capability approach emphasises the resources - in the form of freedom and opportunities - that people need to achieve a good life, while outcomes are secondary. The German approach focuses on the "constellation of objective living conditions and subjective well-being across different life domains" (Zapf, 1984

as cited in Noll, 2002, 51), guiding much of the current understanding of QOL in Europe.

Regarding the definitions of QOL, the issues refer to the breadth of the concept, the emphasis placed on resources/conditions and outcomes, and the subsequent role attributed to the individual in the relationship between circumstances and outcomes. Today, with the development of cross-national surveys (e.g. European Social Survey, European Quality of Life Survey, Eurobarometer and European Values Survey) and various systems of social indicators (e.g., the Eurostat's QOL indicators and the European System of Social Indicators), there is a greater need for harmonisation in terms of finding a common understanding of QOL.

*Table 1. Definitions of quality of life (QOL)*

| Focus of the definition                        | Definition  |
|--|---|
| Basic conditions for human life/ opportunities | "The sum of conditions that provide a person with the opportunity for harmonious development and the accomplishment of a full and satisfying life" (Zamfir, 1984, 28)   |
|  | "The opportunities that people have to achieve their own personal goals" (Fahey <i>et al.</i> , 2003, 65)   |
| Life domains                                   | "An ensemble of elements that refer to the physical, economic, social, cultural, political and health conditions in which people live; the content and nature of the activities they undertake; the characteristics of the relationships and social processes in which they participate; the goods and services to which they have access; their consumption patterns; their mode and style of life; the evaluation of circumstances and activity outcomes from the perspective of populations' expectations; and the subjective states of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, happiness and frustration" (Mărginean, 2005, 33) |
| Domains and values, including sustainability   | "Quality of life includes all major life domains and covers not only the various dimensions of the material well-being of individuals, but also immaterial and collective values like freedom, equity, preservation of natural fundamentals of life as well as responsibility for future generations" (Noll, 2014, 2027)  |
| Perceptions                                    | "Individuals' perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns, comprising six broad domains: physical health, psychological health, level of independence, social relations, environment and spirituality/ religion/personal beliefs" (WHO, 2012, 11)   |
| Outcomes                                       | "The global, synthetic quality of all conditions and spheres of life to the extent that it provides satisfaction to individuals" (Zamfir, 2018, 18)   |

## Mapping the components: Dimensions and indicators

The measurement of the concept should ideally rely on sound theory. However, the theory supporting the choice of indicators is very fragmented, with little explanatory power. In fact, QOL research began with an empirical approach (Andrews, 1974) involving qualitative research in which people were interviewed about their life concerns. This research was further carried out through large-scale quantitative surveys that contributed to a deeper understanding of the concept, its measurement and its explanatory factors (Andrews, & Whitey, 1976). Despite tremendous progress in the field, there is currently no theory guiding QOL research, and the field remains fundamentally empirical. A medium-range theory guides the various dimensions of QOL (e.g. health and housing), while a more developed theoretical framework is employed in happiness/subjective well-being studies.

Another difficulty resides in the relationship between the concept of QOL and constructs such as social cohesion and/or sustainability, which are complex and difficult to operationalise. This can be seen in the case of the European System of Social Indicators (Noll, 2014), which, despite being guided by life domains, maps QOL, social cohesion and sustainability at the same time integrating these concepts to little extent.

Another major issue is that outcomes, resources, capabilities and external circumstances are not distinguished in any way, “since it often depends on the point of view whether certain living conditions represent outcomes or resources” (Noll, 2002, 69). Consequently, all living circumstances are included to the extent that they are relevant to the welfare of the individual. (Table 2). This type of arbitrary selection makes it very difficult to understand the actual concepts being measured.

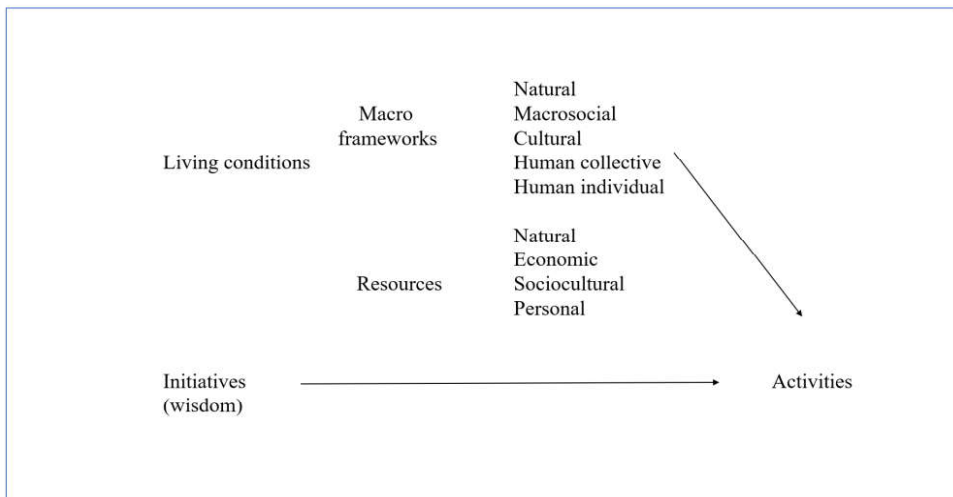


Figure 1. A conceptual model of the structure of life (Zamfir, 1984)

In Romanian sociology, Zamfir's (1984) proposed model makes the distinction between life conditions, macro frameworks and resources (Figure 1). Such a general approach is extremely useful in understanding the structure of personal life and the role of macro conditions in influencing individuals' QOL. Zamfir's proposed model and consequent approach are innovative in several ways. First, it employs a theory of human nature (Maslow, 1943) to understand the various needs that underlie *the value of life for the individual* and the subjective evaluation of various life aspects. Second, methodologically, it is one of the most developed attempts to describe various types of QOL indicators and their possible interpretations. Third, it includes a new variable in the concept of QOL, the 'capacity for social organisation', which highlights a major factor in the structuring of QOL in various contexts. In line with QOL philosophy, the emphasis of this model is on the social conditions that structure human life in various societies. With this approach, the policy-orientated nature of the concept of QOL again becomes evident, as circumstances (e.g. health, work, housing) need to be addressed for individuals to have good lives. The major strength of this conceptual framework is that it brings into the picture the role of individual action in structuring QOL outcomes. However, when operationalising the concept of QOL, life domains (e.g. work) (Table 2) are listed alongside measurement levels (individual, family, mezzo and macro), making it evident that, at the moment of actual measurement, it is very difficult to differentiate between conditions, resources and outcomes.

A detailed account of QOL was proposed by Mărginean (1991, 2011), and 24 dimensions of QOL (Table 2) were incorporated into the measurement of the concept. While trying to bring in macro-, mezzo- and individual-level indicators and balance the objective and subjective aspects of QOL, the list of indicators utilises the available data in Romania. It is a mix that is useful in mapping the comprehensiveness of QOL but is less significant when trying to differentiate between measurement levels and understand the relationships between indicators.

The main issues regarding the operationalisation of the QOL concept can be summarised as follows:

- Various levels of analysis are mixed in an attempt to map complexity.
- Trying to be ambitiously comprehensive leads to a close focus on indicators, while the big picture remains unaccounted for – a situation we can call *conceptual myopia*.
- Various studies employ different conceptualisations, thus making the comparability and generalisability of the results problematic.
- Many times, the distinction between determinants and dimensions is blurred.
- QOL is relative to social and cultural contexts and is transformed throughout the human lifespan, which is not taken into account in the current models.
- Relativity results from historical factors, institutional arrangements and the various values and views of QOL among cohorts, and this issue is insufficiently addressed in the current literature.



## **Understanding relationships between variables: Causality**

One of the main issues in understanding the relationships among dimensions and indicators is the direction of causality. The ongoing failure to promote a theoretical perspective on the nature of the various components of QOL, whether they are resources, conditions or outcomes, has contributed to the problem of causality. Moreover, causality can be direct or indirect.

“Explanations deduced from causal relationships show some problems since it is not [always] possible to (1) understand which are the relevant information necessary for explanations and (2) to establish a certain relationship between causes and effects; in other words, different logical (causal) orders can be ascribed to the phenomena and can lead to different explanations” (Magino, & Faccioni, 2017, 164).

Furthermore, patterns and interrelationships within and between the different domains of QOL are often dependent on the national context.

## **Understanding relationships between variables: Multidimensionality**

QOL is probably one of the most complex concepts in the social sciences. While many social constructs are multidimensional (social capital, social exclusion, social class, etc.), mapping the life of the individual in society and assessing its quality is a tremendous undertaking. Although it is generally considered a latent construct, there is no empirical evidence to support this view. Very limited evidence has been provided in the literature to show that a narrower concept, health-related QOL, is a latent construct (Choi *et al.*, 2005).

The concept of QOL appears to map the obvious, as it is used in everyday language and its basic meaning seems straightforward to most people. Mapping the obvious is not always an easy task, and there is a high degree of conceptual confusion when disentangling the many facets of QOL in mainstream science. The unprecedented development of science and further specialisation by domains (e.g. health and employment) has led to a high fragmentation of knowledge, while the information under the QOL conceptual umbrella remains fundamentally descriptive (with the notable exception of subjective well-being).

Despite a lack of empirical confirmation that QOL is a latent construct, there have been many attempts in the literature to create QOL indices, thus transforming a multidimensional concept into unidimensional constructs. These attempts include the Basic and Advanced QOL Indexes (Diener, 1995), the Netherlands Living Conditions Index (Boelhouwer, & Stoop, 1999), the WHOQOL (WHOQOL Group, 2012), the Happy Life Expectancy Scale (Ruut Veenhoven, 1996), the

Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (Cummins, 2003), and the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (Michalos *et al.*, 2011). However, QOL-related knowledge continues to be split across separate domains.

There are multiple issues regarding the use of indices and attempts at unidimensional measurements tend to most frequently use data from collapsed dimensions, as is the case with the OECD Better Life Index (OECD, 2020). These limitations mainly stem from the definition and measurement of the concept of QOL. According to Hagerty *et al.* (2011), the limits include four aspects: 1. the indices are very different in coverage and definitions of domains of QOL 2. they do not differentiate between *input* (public policy), *throughput* (people's choices) and *output* (e.g. subjective well-being), making them difficult to use in policy; 3. they do not capture the relationship between QOL and policy; 4. these indices all attempt to measure QOL without checking for convergent validity against other previously employed indices.

According to some authors (Saltelli, 2007; Nardo *et al.*, 2005), composite indicators may send ambiguous, non-robust policy messages if they are poorly constructed or misinterpreted or may make it possible to draw simplistic policy conclusions. There is also a high degree of subjectivity involved in many stages of the construction of composite indicators: the selection of sub-indicators, the choice of model, the weighting of indicators, the treatment of missing values and so on (Saisana, & Tarantola, 2002). Finally, these composite indicators increase the quantity of data needed because data are required for all the sub-indicators and for a statistically significant analysis. In the end, they “might obscure more than they reveal” (Fahey *et al.*, 2003, 14).

## **Understanding relationships between variables: The problematic issue of subjective indicators**

The issues here pertain to the partial understanding we currently have on the relationship between objective and subjective indicators, the relationships between QOL variables which vary by social contexts and time, and the incomplete (still) system of subjective indicators that can describe social contexts. In this respect, Eurostat's conceptual framework of QOL, an initiative based on the *Stiglitz Report* (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2009) that promotes the use of subjective indicators and goes beyond economic indicators, falls short of including subjective indicators across all dimensions of QOL, while the list of headline indicators incorporates a limited number of subjective aspects.

Table 2. Domains and indicators

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>European System of Social Indicators (Noll, 2002)</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Population, households and families</li> <li>2. Income, standard of living and consumption patterns</li> <li>3. Labour market and working conditions</li> <li>4. Education and vocational training</li> <li>5. Health</li> <li>6. Housing</li> <li>7. Social security</li> <li>8. Public safety and crime</li> <li>9. Social and political participation and integration</li> <li>10. Mobility and transportation</li> <li>11. Leisure, media and culture</li> <li>12. Environment</li> <li>13. Total life situation</li> </ol>  |
| <p>Indicators of QOL (Zamfir, 1984)</p>                  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The person (health, capacity to establish relationships, etc.)</li> <li>2. Family (health, relations and leisure)</li> <li>3. Habitat (home, neighbourhood, locality, etc.)</li> <li>4. Work (profession, organisation, colleagues, etc.)</li> <li>5. Leisure</li> <li>6. Opportunities for personal development (to expand knowledge and talents, access to education, etc.)</li> <li>7. Overall tone of life (cheerfulness, perception that life is interesting, etc.)</li> <li>8. Human environment (trust, respect, etc.)</li> <li>9. Economic resources</li> <li>10. Social environment (organisation of social life, fairness, equality, safety and institutions)</li> <li>11. Economic services (transport, amenities, goods, etc.)</li> <li>12. Social services (education, health care and administration)</li> <li>13. Participation (opportunity to change things, having a say, etc.)</li> </ol> |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>Indicators of QOL –excerpt<br/>(Mărginean, 2011)</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The person: health status, education level, marital status, employment status, feelings of belonging (integration), optimism/pessimism, satisfaction happiness/frustration, self-esteem</li> <li>2. Family: size and structure, nuptiality, cohesion, domestic violence, satisfaction with family life</li> <li>3. Population: distribution by sex and age, ethnicity and natality</li> <li>4. Natural environment: quality of natural environment, proportion of population affected by natural disasters</li> <li>5. Human settlements: distribution of population by residence, localities with access to electric power</li> <li>6. Housing: building materials, percentage of homes not connected to the sewage system, home comfort (evaluation)</li> <li>7. Employment: activity rate, unemployment rate</li> <li>8. Job quality: percentage of population working in poor working conditions, average number of days worked in a year by employed individuals (number of vacation days), quality of working conditions, job satisfaction</li> <li>9. Macroeconomic resources: GDP per capita, distribution of GDP by sector, share of consumption, equalised income, share of social and cultural expenditure.</li> <li>10. Income: personal monthly incomes, poverty rate, income satisfaction, income inequality, evaluation of income by household needs</li> <li>11. Consumption: household monthly expenditure, household consumption structure, consumption by type of products, daily calorie intake, quality of consumption, quality of services, share of food expenses in total household budget</li> </ol> |
|---|---|

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Eurofound (Fahey <i>et al.</i> , 2003) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Health and health care</li> <li>2. Employment and working conditions</li> <li>3. Economic resources</li> <li>4. Knowledge, education and training</li> <li>5. Families and households</li> <li>6. Community life and social participation</li> <li>7. Housing</li> <li>8. Local environment and amenities</li> <li>9. Transport</li> <li>10. Public safety and crime</li> <li>11. Recreation and leisure activities</li> <li>12. Culture and identity and political resources and human rights, including the European dimension</li> </ol> |
| Eurostat, 2017                         | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Material living conditions</li> <li>2. Productive or other main activities</li> <li>3. Health</li> <li>4. Education</li> <li>5. Leisure and social interactions</li> <li>6. Economic security and personal safety</li> <li>7. Governance and basic rights</li> <li>8. Natural and living environments</li> <li>9. Overall experience of life</li> </ol>   |

### **The conceptual model of QOL: The need for a life course perspective**

The suggested conceptual model (Figure 2) proposes a sharp differentiation between the various levels of measurement and a concentration on the individual and their relationship to the context in which they live. It employs a narrow definition of QOL that allows for a clear and operationalisable approach to what is being measured. As previously mentioned, at this stage the model is a launch pad for further discussion and for clarifying the relationships between variables.

Here, we define QOL as *the degree to which individuals are able to live a good life according to their values and goals. It involves being healthy; having material resources, a good education, a suitable job, housing, family ties, social connections, and leisure time; being active/participating in one's community/society; being satisfied and happy; and having good mental well-being. QOL is essentially individual and subjective.*

In terms of theory, there is still a need for the development of an account of what creates a good life at the individual level. As has already been detailed in the literature, a focus on needs in reference to a larger conception of human nature

is a sensible starting point for this endeavour (Zamfir, 1984; Bălăţescu, 2014; Maslow, 1943).

The model proposed here contributes to the existing literature through its emphasis on agency, its introduction of global factors (e.g. climate issues) that can change the context of personal life and by its use of the life course perspective, which can shed more light on processes across the individual's lifetime compared to the cross-sectional approach.

The life course perspective is well developed in the literature; however, it is a separate approach from QOL. It is currently used to understand QOL in older populations using two main models: accumulation of advantages/disadvantages over the lifespan and major contextual changes over the lifespan that impact QOL at the individual level. Other frameworks, such as pathways, latent factors and social mobility, are also possible. However, so far, the life course perspective has not been applied to younger and middle-aged populations when trying to explain QOL, despite the fact that these categories have different needs from older cohorts. A longitudinal approach will allow for a deeper understanding of the causal factors of QOL over the lifespan and will further the progress of current research.

The need for a longitudinal life course perspective is justified by the following major trends in society that have shaped individual lives: the rapidity of social change, changes in the composition of population, the changing age structure of society, the growth of longitudinal research (Elder *et al.*, 2002) and the increased sophistication of statistical methods of analysis.

In existing studies in lifespan psychology and life course sociology, the life course approach concentrates on the long-term study of human lives (Elder, 1998) and looks at life trajectories across multiple stages of life with the purpose of understanding the lifelong development of individuals (Cairns *et al.*, 1996). A life course approach to QOL would assume a slightly different angle, anchoring the individual in their social context and highlighting the role of agency in structuring a good life at the personal level. Moreover, methodologically, it would make causal models of QOL possible.

Thus far, this perspective has not been consistently used, partly due to the policy nature of the QOL concept. Since it is the role of policy to improve QOL in a given society, the focus is mainly on conditions that enable people to have a good life. Placing responsibility for QOL at the individual level might have unwanted consequences for the accountability of various social actors and policymakers in different societies. However, it is important to recognise the importance of agency in structuring the life course and, consequently, in shaping QOL beyond the individual attributes that are usually measured in QOL analysis (age, sex, marital status, religion, level of education, employment status, income, residence and ethnicity).

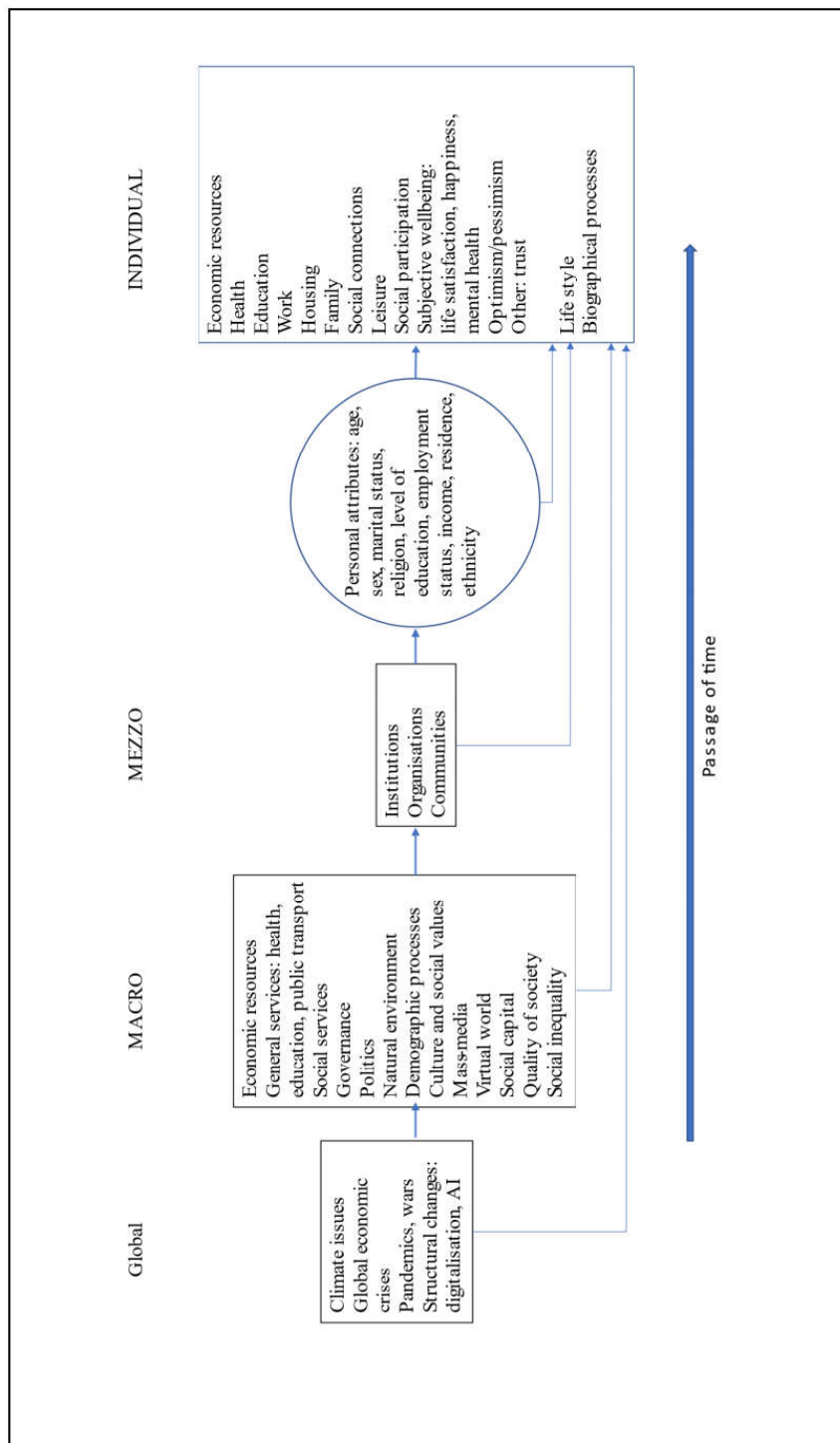


Figure 2. The conceptual model of QOL

While acknowledging the major impact of global forces and macro contexts (quality of society) on individual QOL, there is also room for a better understanding of agency in relation to macro frameworks. The contextual study of lives that is currently employed mainly in developmental and sociological social psychology includes multiple levels, from the macro structures and social institutions of society to the micro-experiences of individuals, and draws upon both quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed-method approach (Elder *et al.*, 2002).

The strength of the perspective under scrutiny here lies in its specific method of analysing how lives are socially organised. Social pathways, for example, will allow for a concentration on life domains. *Social pathways* are the trajectories of education, work, family, residences and even houses that are followed by individuals and groups and shaped by historical forces, global factors and social institutions. Choices regarding certain paths in life are constrained by opportunities in communities and societies but are also the result of individual agency.

The paradigmatic principles put forward by Elder *et al.* (2002) that support the life course perspective can be considered in QOL research. The *principle of life-span development* states that human development and ageing are lifelong processes (Crosnoe, & Elder, 2004). Although personal development is a process that unfolds over the entire duration of life, little information exists on how contexts impact individuals' lives throughout their lifespans. This opportunity for analysis is especially important in a country such as Romania, where changes in economic, political and welfare regimes have heavily affected people across generations. However, the differentiated impact of these changes across various cohorts needs to be scrutinised. The implications of adopting this principle extend to the policy area, as it is key not only to design appropriate policy measures but also to understand at what stage in the life cycle specific interventions are best targeted.

The *principle of agency* (Elder *et al.*, 2002) refers to the fact that individuals build their own life courses through the choices they make and the actions they take in specific historical and social circumstances. People react in various ways to their living conditions, with some individuals being able to make the most of even dire circumstances. This is the case when individuals choose to concentrate on education, use their natural qualities to further their living, practice skills (e.g. caring) and adopt positive values to get ahead. It is this process that remains unaccounted for, especially in Romania.

According to the *principle of time and place* derived from research in the social and behavioural sciences, individuals' life courses are embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetimes (Elder *et al.*, 2002, Bengston *et al.*, 2012). People are heavily impacted by the times in which they live. Life trajectories can develop more or less smoothly depending on the big events that mark the person's lifespan, such as wars, pandemics and structural changes. The effect of time cannot be erased through individual actions, as daring



as people may be. The individual's place also holds important weight, and the country's effect on QOL is quantifiable in many life domains.

The *principle of timing* (Elder *et al.*, 2002) takes into consideration that the significance of life transitions, events and behavioural patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life. Transitions should ideally occur when people are adequately prepared from a personal development point of view. Early or late transitions (e.g. teenage pregnancy or an early exit from the labour market) can have consequences in later life in terms of health or material resources.

Finally, the concept of *linked lives* (Elder, 1998; Dannefer, 2002) captures the idea that lives are lived interdependently, and the network of shared relationships bears the weight of social and historical circumstances. People's lives can be disrupted by changes in their social networks. Research on social connections emphasise the role of microclimates and play a key role in structuring trajectories across the lifespan. Families, extended families, school groups, work colleagues and even neighbours all impact the paths that people choose/take in their lives. Changes in the structure and makeup of these relationships can become turning points that alter a person's life course. These issues are insufficiently addressed in QOL studies, which instead concentrate on types of relations and various forms of support.

### **In conclusion, is a conceptual model of QOL possible?**

This paper has explored the difficulties associated with a conceptual model of QOL by means of a classical literature review. First, there are issues in terms of the definitions and range of the concept. There is a high variability of definitions employed in the literature, stemming from a variety of perspectives that emphasise different aspects of QOL, such as conditions of life, resources, opportunities, values and/or outcomes. Further expanding the meaning of QOL to include other concepts (e.g. sustainability) adds to the conceptual confusion. While this issue relates to other sociological concepts, it is particularly significant in the case of QOL, a concept that attempts to tap into the complexity of human life in the most comprehensive way possible. Second, the measurement of QOL is problematic for several reasons: the theory backing the choice of indicators is fragmented and has little explanatory power, with the notable exception of subjective well-being; the measurement levels (individual, mezzo, societal and global) are not always clearly differentiated in the operationalisation of the concept; conditions, resources and outcomes are very difficult to differentiate; various studies employ different conceptualisations, making the comparability and generalisability of results problematic; the distinction between determinants and dimensions is often blurred; and the current measurement models do not fully account for the fact that QOL is relative to social and cultural contexts and transforms throughout the life course. Third, it is difficult to understand the relationships between variables and

establish causality, as different causal orders can be attributed to the phenomena and can lead to different explanations. Fourth, multidimensionality is difficult to tackle, and even though there is a lack of empirical confirmation that QOL is a latent construct, there are numerous examples of QOL indices that transform a multidimensional concept into unidimensional constructs. Fifth, the use of subjective indicators is in itself problematic, as the relationship between subjective and objective indicators still needs to be clarified, while the coverage of domains with subjective indicators, especially in general frameworks such as Eurostat (2017) is incomplete.

Some of these issues will persist and will affect the construction of a conceptual model of QOL. However, some aspects can be developed and improved with the purpose of clarifying the intricate field of QOL research. For example, focusing on identifying essential dimensions instead of constantly expanding the concept of QOL could help locate fundamental aspects and advance the explanatory power of the model. Furthermore, increased effort should be put into the theorization of QOL. Additionally, adopting a life course perspective could contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between individual, institutional and macro factors in the context of social change. Generating panel data would help to shed light on causal mechanisms, and Eurofound (2020) has, to our knowledge, made the first attempt to gather longitudinal QOL data. Moreover, concentrating on how advantages and disadvantages accumulate over the life cycle could better explain inequality. In addition, more emphasis on the interlinked relationships between advantages/disadvantages is needed. Finally, research on agency can capture the active way in which people structure the course of their lives in their respective contexts of time and place.

This study has several limitations. First, the review is limited to models that are influential in mainstream science and produce significant systems of indicators and does not include narrower approaches at the national level that could contribute to the current undertaking. Second, the review is anchored in the present and does not focus on the development of the QOL paradigm over time. A chronological perspective might shed light on the advancement of the field towards some aspects that are underlined here as problematic. Finally, while the proposed framework contributes to mapping the conceptual structure of QOL by highlighting levels of analysis and indicators and the main causal directions, it is a launch pad for further discussion that needs additional work and clarification, ideally with data applications.

There is a high need for the development of a conceptual model of QOL and the concurrent integration of QOL approaches, at least at the European level, as the Eurostat QOL indicators are still under development. This would contribute to fostering the advancement of the QOL research field and to highlighting core European values regarding QOL standards.

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