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Methodologies for Defining 'Quality of Life'

presented by

Jessica Glicken
***e**cological **p**lanning and **t**oxicology, inc.*
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authors

Jessica Glicken
***e**cological **p**lanning and **t**oxicology, inc*
Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA
505-272-7417 (phone)
505-272-7418 (fax)
jxglicken@aol.com

Dennis Engi
Sandia National Laboratories
Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA
505-845-8284 (phone)
505-843-4223 (fax)
dengi@sandia.gov

introduction

'Quality of life' as a concept has been used in many ways in the public policy arena. We see it as essential component of any evaluation tool. It can be used in summative evaluations[1] to assess the impacts of policies or programs. Alternatively, it can be applied to formative evaluations to provide input to the formation of new policies. In short, it provides the context for the understanding needed to evaluate the results of choices that have been made in the public policy arena, or the potential of choices yet to be made. In either case, the public policy question revolves around the positive or negative impact the choice will have on quality of life, and the magnitude of that impact.

This discussion will develop a conceptual framework that proposes that an assessment of quality of life is based on a comparison of expectations with experience. The framework defines four basic components from which these expectations arise: natural conditions, social conditions, the 'body,' and the 'mind.' Each one of these components is generally described, and associated with a general policy or rhetorical category which gives it its policy vocabulary - environmental quality, economic well-being, human health, and self-fulfillment.

quality of life and policy decisions

We believe that it is one of the recognized functions of the government to positively impact quality of life of the target citizen group. Elsewhere (Glicken 1995; Engi 1989) we have begun the development of a qualitative architecture to understand policy responses which draws the relationship between what we have identified as three major categories of variables of this aspect of a political system: a policy portfolio, which is composed of a suite of policy tools; a set of social institutions and processes which serves as the vehicle through which these policy tools are operationalized or actualized; and 'quality of life' which is the conceptual (but not systemic) end point of these activities. As we conceive of this as a complex, interactive system (rather than a linear process) the nature of the impact on the quality of life of the target group will have significant feedback to the policy portfolio. This qualitative architecture is shown in figure 1, illustrating the relationships between the three major categories of variables.

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[1] Summative evaluations are retrospective in nature. They are usually performed at the conclusion of the activity or of some phase of it . This is in contrast to formative evaluations, which are reflexive, usually performed while an activity is in progress and designed to provide feedback to the evaluated activity and stimulate change (improvement) in it (Scriven 1980).

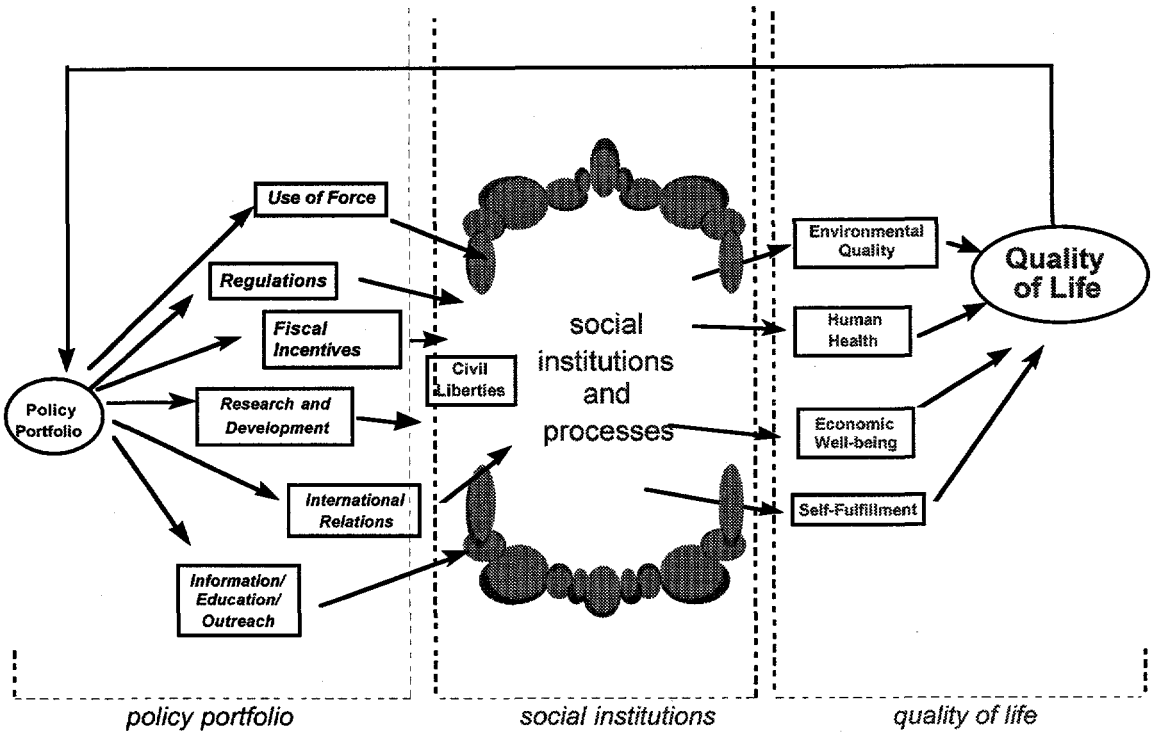

Figure 1: a qualitative architecture for understanding policy decisions

This discussion will address the right-hand side of the qualitative architecture, i.e. quality of life. It will develop a conceptual and analytic framework that will allow us to 'disaggregate' the quality of life concept into some constituent elements that are useful and operational in a public policy context. What we hope to do here is to make a reasonable argument for the four we have identified in figure 1: environmental quality, human health, economic well-being, and self-fulfillment. This framework also should help us understand how we think about the 'appropriateness' and the 'goodness' of policy tools.

Note that our framework will not propose ways to *measure* or value these elements. We believe that much of the disagreement in the debates on quality of life (cf Rosenberg 1995:1941; Rogerson et al 1981:1655) centers not about the elements themselves, but about metrics for valuing the elements. Our argument here will propose that those metrics are time- and space-specific: the elements are not. We further agree with Reich (1988), Rogerson (1995), and others who argue that much of the political utility of a concept like quality of life may lie in those dimensions which are ambiguous (the metrics), allow for multiple interpretations, and stimulate important public debates about the nature of society and the responsibility of the individuals within it. However, before we can debate metrics, we must come to some agreement about the areas that need to be measured. This is the value of the framework we will develop here and the four elements it identifies.

Keep in mind that the framework we will develop here is a very simple representation of a very complex system with multiple paths of and for interaction. As the purpose of this exercise is to develop a heuristic model that will be useful in a policy-making environment, we will indicate but not explore many of these relationships. Clearly, a complete

presentation of our qualitative architecture as a model for the policy process would supplement this discussion with such an exploration. It also would provide a similar analysis of the other two collections of state variables (the policy portfolio and the social institutions and processes) and the relationships among all three sets.

Construction of our quality of life framework begins with the recognition of the importance of both conditions of the world and the experience of those conditions by an individual. We then describe the outputs of analyses of those conditions and experience in a quality of life context. We have assigned the terms 'arenas' and 'resources' to the outputs of an analysis of conditions, and 'preferences' and 'abilities' to the contribution from the experience dimension. Finally, we look at the way these four sets of outputs (arenas, resources, preferences, and abilities) interact to generate expectations. The relationship of expectations to 'reality' is a measure or valuation of quality of life. We close with a discussion of why some parts of this framework appear to be more appropriate for policy intervention than others.

conditions and experience

Construction of our explanatory framework begins with an explication of the role of both subjective experience and objective, 'external' conditions (cf Rogerson et al 1981:1655). This distinction is pervasive in quality of life literature, almost all of which recognizes an

> "...operational or environmental [ingredient of quality of life] and a psychological condition...a situation or a condition that is perceived by an area's residents and translated by them into varying degrees of a sense of well-being." (Wish 1986:95)

We note from the start that our approach deliberately combines the two, giving us elements both of a postmodern focus on the individual (Harvey 1989) and his role in reality creation, *and* a positivist notion of a pre-existing and individual-independent truth. We believe this gives the most robust explanatory and analytic underpinning for this concept and the framework we will construct.

A discussion of 'external conditions' leads us to a positivist, empirical approach. It deals with observables, is descriptive in presentation, and often appears in the quality of life literature as work on standards of living or living conditions. It lays claims to objectivity, and tends to use observer report to describe the conditions under study. The discussion of subjective experience, on the other hand, takes a hermeneutic and humanistic approach, seeking to interpret individual experience. This approach has been called 'welfarist' as it focuses on perceptions of welfare or well-being (Ringen 1995:3). Welfarist approaches try to determine levels of 'happiness' or to assess 'satisfaction' rather than to describe conditions. They tend to be evaluative rather than descriptive in nature, and borrow many of their methodologies, tools and techniques from psychology, including the use of self-report. Figure 2 shows the distinctions and relationships between these two approaches, their associated methodologies, and different outputs.

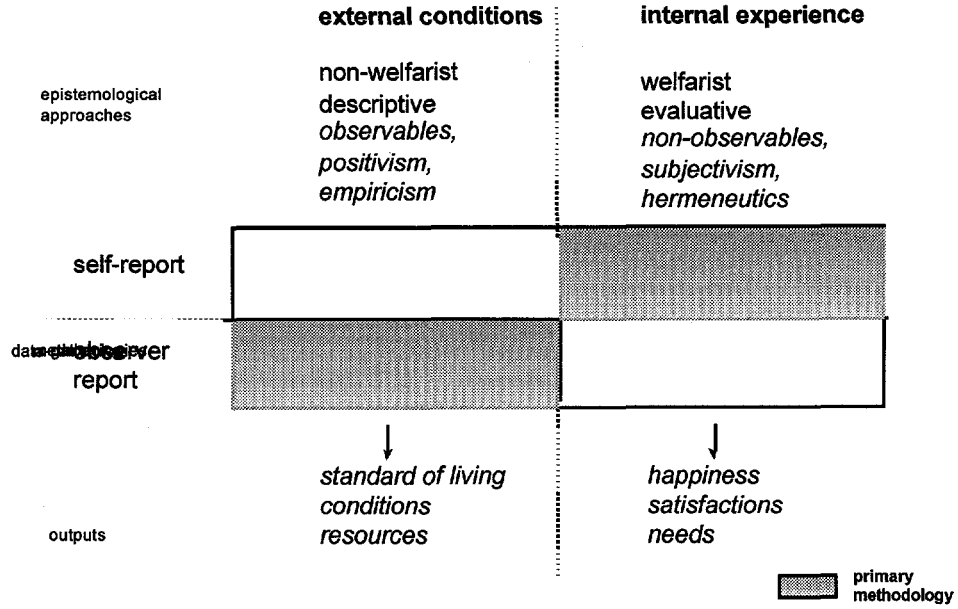

Figure 2: approaches and associated outputs

Our quality of life explanatory framework will incorporate elements from the epistemological approaches from both columns.

external conditions - the natural and social environments

The set of 'external conditions' relative to quality of life can be decomposed into two parts: the natural and the social environments. The natural environment, in our terminology, is more or less congruent with the natural world. (We recognize but leave aside for the moment, the argument that there is no portion of the 'natural world' that has not been impacted by anthropogenic factors - and we do not even begin to address the poststructuralist arguments that we can only understand the natural world as we experience it as social beings. We also recognize that the social environment is 'natural' as it is the expression of normal human behavior. Our exclusion of it from the 'natural environment' is an artifice of terminology to make an analytic point.) The natural environment is understood through the physical and biological sciences. It has entered policy discussions most visibly through ecology and the environmental sciences.

There are two characteristics of the natural environment that are particularly relevant to our discussion. These are 'presence' or availability of elements in the environment, and health or 'cleanliness' of the system. We treat each in turn.

We can determine that certain kinds of elements or assets are (not) available to the individual through his access to a defined natural environment. We call these assets 'wealth.' Wealth we define as assets that can be used to acquire something else of value.[2] The assets that compose wealth might include wood, which could be used for

[2] Again, we recognize that 'value' is socially defined, hence 'wealth' is a socially defined dimension of the natural environment.

cooking, heating, and construction, minerals and metals that could be used for manufacturing, various flora and fauna to be used for foodstuffs and clothing, and the like. We distinguish wealth from resources: resources are the subset of the assets included in wealth over which an individual has command (as distinct from those to which he may have access) (Erikson 1993:73). 'Access' means the individual can theoretically get to the asset. 'Command' means he has the real capability to exploit it. We discuss resources more fully later.

The health (or 'cleanliness') of the natural environment also is relevant to our framework, for such cleanliness affects the availability of natural assets at any given point in space or time. It also has direct impacts on human health. Measures of the 'cleanliness' or (to a lesser degree) the availability of natural wealth usually enter quality of life studies through (parts of) standard of living indices. These indices generally include air and water quality, and other similar categories

The health of the environment can be affected by anthropogenic or other factors. Anthropogenic impacts on the natural environment (which include the results of consumption activities as well as direct pollution) result from the activities of human groups or societies. This moves us to the second dimension of this description of external conditions for our quality of life framework: social conditions, or the social environment.

Discussion about the nature of social groups has a long history. Many different theoretical bodies of knowledge have evolved from these explorations, including sociology, political science, history, and economics. Each of these disciplines addresses (among many other things) the mechanisms of integration and cohesion found within groups that allows them to exist over time, including the relationship of the individual to the group; the relationship of the group to other groups; and the relationship of groups to the natural environment.

A description of social conditions could take many forms. It could be a description of institutions (such as nation-states, churches, families, or corporations) and the actors that make up those institutions. It could describe social activity in any one of many economically-based vocabularies, ranging from Marxism to neo-Keynesean economics. It could describe social class, or formal or informal interaction patterns. We find that most 'single indicator' studies of quality of life result in a reduction of activity to some element in this part of the model, usually income or some other indicator of economic activity.

So far, we have proposed that we approach quality of life as some convolution of external conditions and an individual's experience of those conditions. We then disaggregated 'external conditions' into a 'natural environment' and a 'social environment,' recognizing that these are mutually defining. Figure 3 shows our framework as we have developed it to this point.

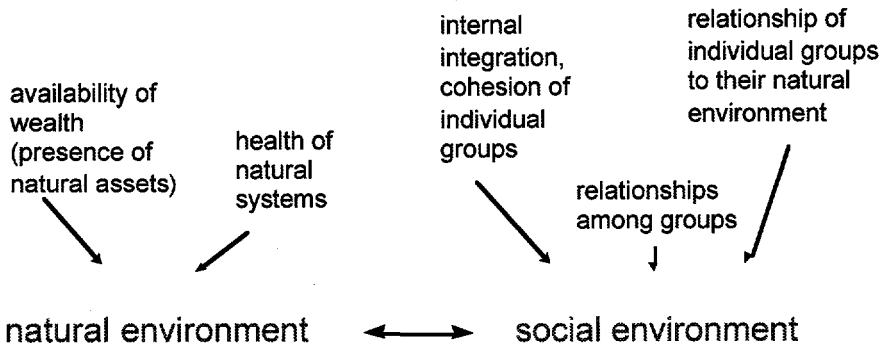

Figure 3: the external environment

internal experience - the 'mind' and the 'body'

The focus on external conditions in quality of life studies is generally contrasted to an approach which concentrates on the experience of those conditions by the individual. For our purposes, we divide individual experience into two general parts, each of which itself can be subdivided: the 'mind' and the 'body.'[3]

The 'body' portion of this duality itself has two parts. These parts incorporate elements from different epistemological approaches as shown in figure 2 above. The first part establishes the genetically-determined constraints on human activity, including strength, endurance, and that part of intelligence that is biologically determined. This suggests a postivitist, empirical approach: one can observe physical attributes such as body temperature or white blood cell count. One also could take a subjective or evaluative approach to the body (you are sick if you *feel* sick). Recent approaches to medicine which are including questions to the patient about how he feels as well as empirical tests of physiological indicators in preparation of diagnoses are a good example of this integrated approach which explicitly recognizes the relationship between the two (Brock 1993; Rosenberg 1995:13; World Health Organization Quality of Life Group 1995).

Turning to the 'mind,' we suggest two dimensions that are relevant to the study of quality of life: that of values, and that of epistemology. Very simply, epistemological frameworks are the structures within and rules by which we process information to yield knowledge. Values (or value systems) tell us the relative weight or importance to assign to different pieces and types of knowledge in a decision-making process.

Values, we suggest, are the product of the confluence of two different types of experience. The first addresses the outcomes and impacts of individual experience.

[3] We recognize that the 'mind-body distinction' is a very Western concept and not accepted by many non-Western philosophies. However, we excuse ourselves here by arguing that this model, as it will culminate in a qualitative architecture for understanding policy decisions, is an attempt to understand (at least initially) policy portfolios as they are developed and executed by (primarily but not exclusively democratic) governments that have evolved through a Western tradition. Therefore, we believe that this sort of typology is legitimate in this context. It would be an interesting exercise to construct the 'experience' side of this quality of life model in non-Western terms....

This is the 'psychological' nature of an individual, which is unique to him for it is formed by his specific life-experiences. The second dimension of values are those 'given' by the group. These are cultural values, and are experienced by the individual but only as he can and does participate as a group member

Epistemological frameworks are the ways in which we process information. These frameworks also have individual and group dimensions. Elsewhere, Glicken (1996) has presented a typology which argues for three general types of epistemological frameworks: cognitive, experiential, and political or social. *Cognitive* knowledge is based on technical expertise, is held by individuals, and debates are resolved by reference to an external, abstract system (science). Issues are ones of 'correctness,' not 'appropriateness' or 'goodness.' *Experiential* knowledge is knowledge based on common sense and personal experience and, again, is held by individuals. This is related to the psychologically-driven values we discussed above. Debates here are about 'appropriateness.' The third type of knowledge is *social* or *political* knowledge, which also could be called *value-based* knowledge. This is moral or normative knowledge, derived from social interests and based on cultural values. It engenders debates about the 'goodness' of activities. This type of knowledge is an attribute of groups, not individuals.

We now have developed the elements of the 'internal experience' dimension of our framework, using a Western-based 'mind-body' distinction. The mind is disaggregated into epistemological or cognitive, and value-based experiences. The body bridges approaches, for it is understood both by observation and by experience. Figure 4 shows this portion of our framework.

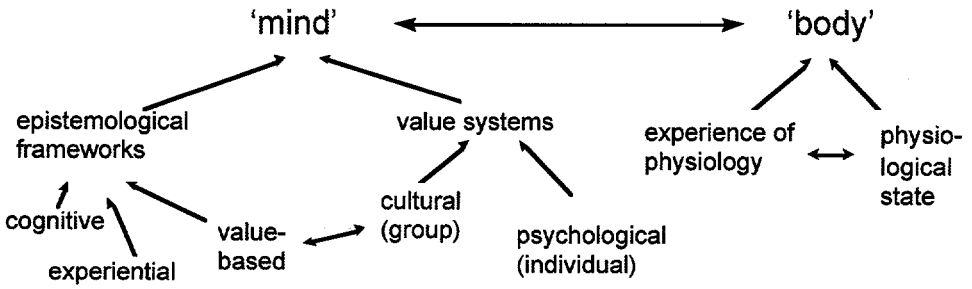

Figure 4: internal experience

putting the two together - external conditions and internal experience

Before we move to the next step, we must explicitly reiterate that external conditions and internal experience are intimately intertwined in our framework, although they have been graphically and analytically separated. Experience is given form by the environment (both natural and social) within which it is manifest. Natural and social features constrain movement within these spaces, and individuals internalize their experience through the frameworks given them by both the 'mind' (epistemological and value frames) and the body (physiological capabilities). The environment, in turn, is shaped by the experience

of the individuals and the activities of the groups which move within it. A graphic representation of our framework as we have developed it thus far is shown in Figure 5.

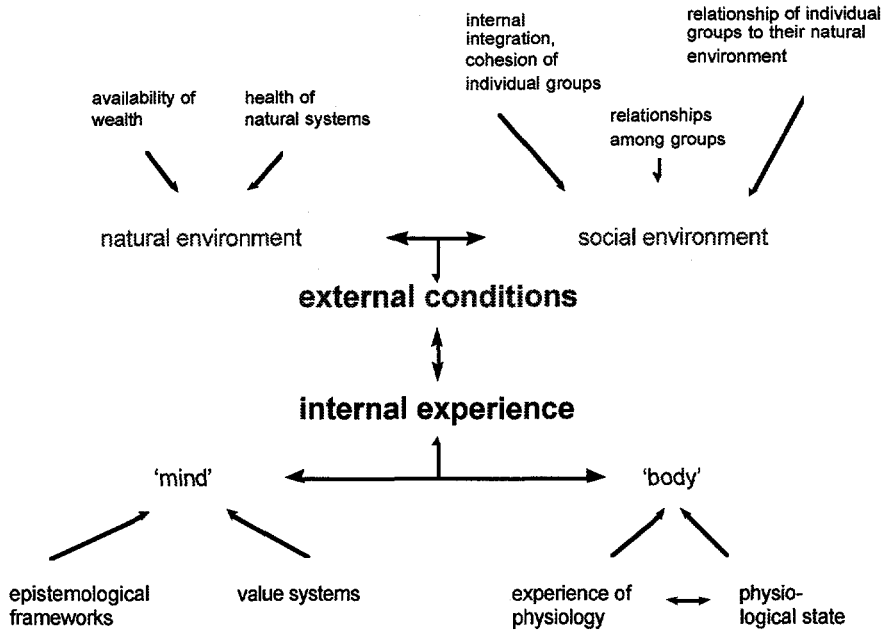

Figure 5: the relationship between external conditions and internal experience

arenas and resources

We have made several references above to two terms: arenas and resources. We borrow these terms from Ringen (1995), but extend their meaning and application somewhat. In the terms of our framework, both 'arenas' and 'resources' refer to the analytic output of a description of external conditions.

'Arenas' refers to the spaces within which individual actors move. This describes the possibilities offered to the individual for utilizing wealth, i.e. for defining that subset of wealth called resources. We define these spaces in both social and natural terms (Ringen defines them only in social terms [Ringen 1995:7]). For example, a university campus is a physical space; the university as an organization, as a collection of social roles, relationships, and values, is a social space. Arenas are usually combinations of natural and social spaces. An 'office' is a room with a socially defined function, for example; a 'river system,' defined in navigational terms, is a social construct, although it is enacted in terms defined by the 'natural environment. Families, ethnic groups, companies, social classes, and neighborhoods as collections of residents are social spaces. Note that both physical and social spaces can be difficult to define. Some social spaces (e.g. companies, families) are more clearly and explicitly defined and bounded than others (e.g. social classes, ethnic groups), with more recognized social roles and rules for interaction. Physical space also can be ambiguous. A 'room' is a clear physical space - but where does a 'forest' end?

'Resources' are the assets to which actors have access to help them produce or acquire things of value. Resources include money, social contacts or networks, raw materials such as wood, water, or metals, knowledge, and the like. Recall that, by our definition, resources are *only* those assets to which the actor has access, not the universe of assets available in either his natural or social space. For example, one could live over a large aquifer but have no access to water because of one's lack of access to water rights (a legal arena), to the money for the technology needed to drill a well (an economic arena), or the strength to dig (physiological state). The water in the acquifer only becomes a resource if the actor can move into the social arenas that allow him water rights or use of technology. Movement into these arenas is a function of his access to other resources such as education, money, or social contacts.

We suggest that the determinants of accessibility of assets to an individual actor are social and natural. Production and acquisition of things of value also takes place within and is constrained by natural and social space. Resources thus are bounded in time and space - they are situationally defined. Note that this leaves aside the question of desire - what assets the actor may *want* to access. We will treat this later under a discussion of preferences.

Figure 6 adds the concepts of resources and arenas to our framework.

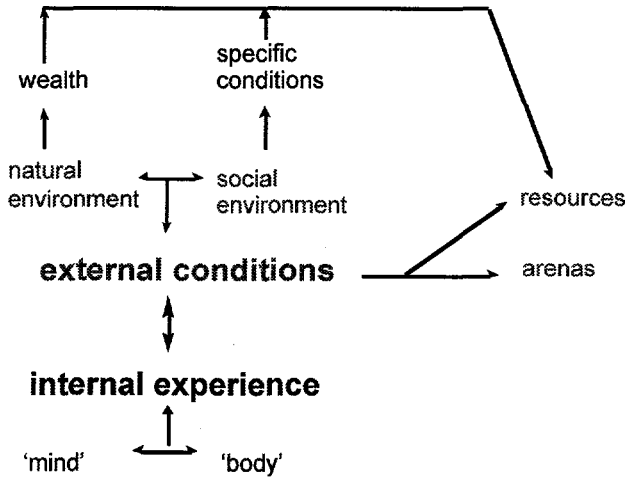

Figure 6: resources and arenas

preferences and abilities

The analytic outputs of the internal experience dimension of our model are *preferences* and *abilities*.

Preferences have also been called 'tastes' or aspirations, and, in some cases, expectations. (We will give a slightly different meaning to this last term later, so we have chosen to use 'preferences' here.) We define preferences as *expressions of value*

systems combined with *knowledge of alternatives* and of the (potential*) physiological experience or consequences* of choices. Preferences therefore "order states of the world" (Cohen 1995:11), but as Scanlon says, they "are not the source of reasons [for action] but reflect conclusions based on reasons of other kinds" (Scanlon 1995:192). Preferences are what causes one individual to buy a BMW and another, for the same money, to buy a Cadillac.

Often preferences are not explicitly understood nor can they be easily expressed. Self-report studies which attempt to extract statements of preference from individuals often find that the mode and level of expression of these kinds of experiences are culturally determined (cf McNabb 1990). This makes the construction of effective data-collection instruments extremely difficult. Furthermore, the nuances of language - its semantic and socio-linguistic dimensions - make questions subject to 'mis-interpretation' by respondents and answers difficult to decode by researchers. (These comments apply to many welfarist analyses.) Observer-report studies which watch which choices are made (rather than asking individuals how they feel about potential choices) are subject to all the criticisms of empiricism - primarily, that without insight into motivation, we cannot truly understand choice, but only behavior. Nonetheless, despite these methodological caveats, preference is an important component of our framework and should not be conceptually excluded because of difficulties of data collection.

Preferences usually are relative to the choices made and the actions taken by others. "Each person's consumption imposes negative externalities on others" (Frank 1989:82) by constraining and contextualizing action. Also, we must keep in mind that preferences are a function of values and cognitive frameworks. Both have a group and an individual dimension. Preferences thus are manipulated within both dimensions.

Abilities we define as the individual's actual capability to achieve various, valued end states (cf Sen 1995:30, 31). Abilities thus represent a potential to become. 'Ability' as an analytic concept includes not only physiological abilities (such as strength) but the cultural ability to conceive of possibilities and of ways to actualize them. Ability thus is a convolution of the individual's ability to identify and value an end state, and to manipulate external conditions to achieve it. This is a result of an individual's natural capabilities, his moral sense, and his epistemological or interpretive frameworks.

If we add these to our model, we get what is shown in Figure 7.

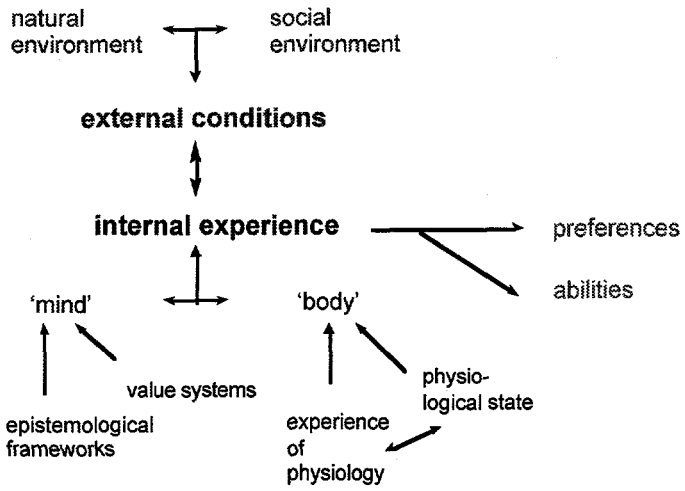

Figure 7: preferences and abilities

the full framework

Our framework now leads us to the following. If we begin with external conditions, we find that they yield us geographically and socio-politically defined resources (assets we can use) which we access in various arenas (social and physical spaces). What we choose to access and in which arenas is determined by our preferences (value-driven determinants of choice) and our physical and cognitive abilities.

> "Because a given level of consumption provides more satisfaction in some contexts than in others, people can increase their satisfaction by strategic manipulation of the contexts in which consumption occurs" (Frank 1989:84).

In our terminology, we would say that individuals may exercise values by choosing arenas in which to use resources. A given level of exploitation of a particular resource can provide different levels of satisfaction, depending upon the arena in which it is exercised[4].

The outcome of a convolution of conditions of the social and natural worlds and an individual's ability to manipulate his experience in those worlds according to his values is expectations. Quality of life is the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions of 'the real world,' or the output of activity.[5] The full framework is shown in figure 8.

[4] There are two policy implications here. The first is that individuals will seek to increase their stock of 'positional' goods over other types of goods, where positional goods are those which the particular society has defined as vehicles for relatively large amounts of social and cultural information. Automobiles in America are a good example, as they are fairly clear indicators of social status and value groups. The second is that policies can and should recognize the motivation to change arenas - and can focus on developing accessibility to various arenas for different groups.

[5] We believe this accounts for the 'champagne tastes' problem that often plagues quality of life models. Does an individual who places high value on expensive cars he is unable to

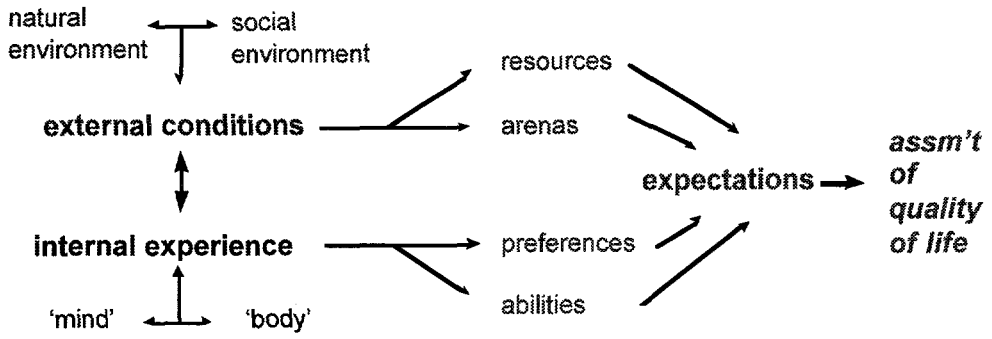

Figure 8: expectations and quality of life

Note that, as an analytic construct, this framework is time- and space-independent. The same elements always need to be considered to arrive at an assessment of quality of life. A specific application of the framework will ground it in a specific social group and particular physical environment, and will deal with identified individuals The values of that group and the capabilities of the individuals as they act in a defined natural world and construct preferences will give us actual metrics which we will then apply. Figure 9 shows where time and space enter into the framework.

afford have a worse quality of life than the individual who places no value on cars and so is content with a bicycle? We believe that the 'preferences' and 'abilities' dimension of our framework accounts for this problem. We further believe that the policymaker must give credence to the disappointments of the individual with champagne tastes, for he will attempt to perturb the system to help improve what he sees as a poor quality of life. The policy maker can play with such elements of this framework as group values as he frames his response to the discontented individual.

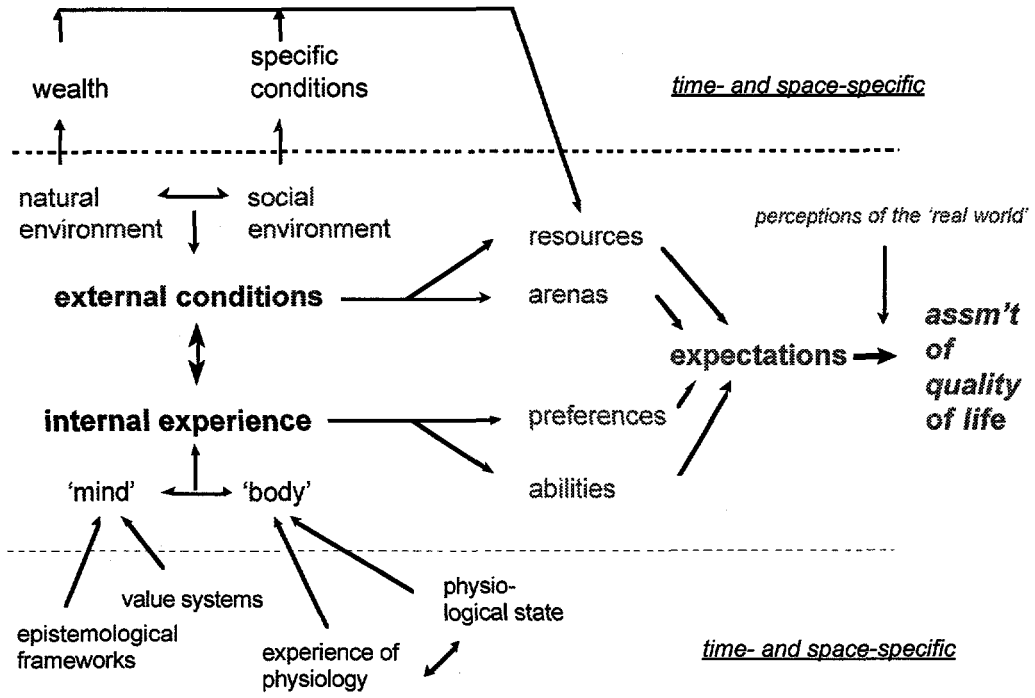

Figure 9: time- and space-specific dimensions of the framework

conclusions

Our conceptual framework proposes that an assessment of quality of life is based on a comparison of expectations with experience. The expectations arise from four, basic components: natural conditions, social conditions, the 'mind,' and the 'body.' We recall that our statement of purpose in developing this framework was to provide a heuristic tool for understanding the impact of a policy portfolio on quality of life. The quality of life framework disaggregated the concept of quality of life into elements that could be addressed by policy tools. If we look at these four basic quality of life elements, we find that the policy environment has a vocabulary and a frame of reference for three of them. 'Natural conditions' is expressed as 'environmental quality' and addressed by policy tools developed under this rubric. Social conditions generally are addressed through two vocabularies, that of economic well-being and social welfare. However, social welfare generally reduces to economic well-being (recall our earlier comment about the prevalence of economically-based single indicator studies), so we too will characterize the policy dimension of this element as 'economic well-being.' The 'body' clearly is addressed through human health-related policy tools. Figure 10 shows these associated quality of life elements and policy or rhetorical categories.

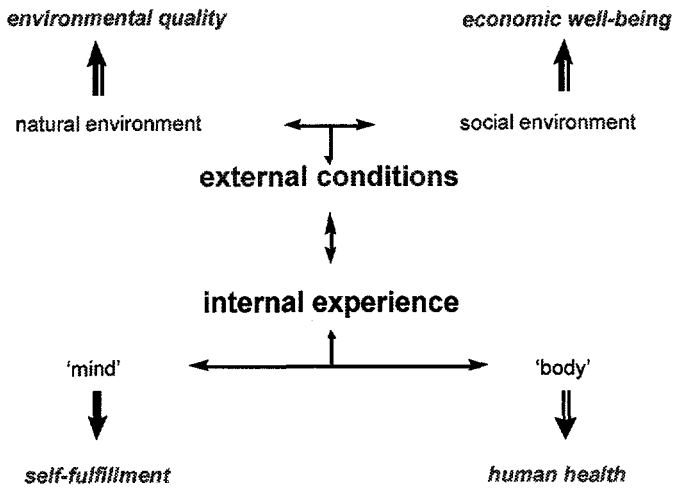

Figure 10: quality of life elements and associated policy categories

It is the fourth category - the 'mind' - with which our Western-based government in the US has the most difficulty. We lack the vocabulary that would allow the state to deal with it. We explicitly support a separation of church and state, philosophically and institutionally removing the moral or value dimension from control of the state. Our commitment to 'academic freedom' and current debates about the appropriateness of 'political correctness' highlight our unease with government or institutional control over epistemologies (recall also the on-going debate about teaching 'creationism' in the schools).

We propose as food for thought that this ambiguity may arise from the intensely individual nature of these dimensions of experience. We suggest that our political system has chosen to address this problem through the rhetoric of choice. Democracy and the civil liberties it provides offer an arena within which the individual may choose to exercise his abilities and develop preferences. Liberal democracy promotes exercise of that choice so long as it does not impinge upon the ability of others to exercise the same right. (Libertarianism promotes the right of the individual at any cost.)

These are some provocative statements - and certainly set the stage for many other debates, such as the boundaries of these domains of responsibility borne by the state and the individual (which is what a great deal of the abortion debate is about). Clearly, those debates are outside the scope of this paper.

what next?

Where do we go from here? An obvious next step is the completion of the argument for the qualitative architecture through a decomposition of the remaining two sets of variables: the policy portfolio and the social institutions and process. A second type of appropriate and necessary activity would be to develop the time- and space-specific metrics that are associated with the quality of life elements we identified so that the framework can be applied to a particular social group (say, the United States) at a particular time (the end of the twentieth century, for example).

We suggest that an abstract argument supporting the six types of tools in a policy portfolio is possible. It would be possible but much more difficult to develop such an argument for the third category of variables, the social institutions and processes. Therefore, we propose the following: develop a justification for the decomposition of the policy portfolio into some set of tool types (hopefully the six we have proposed); develop time- and space-specific metrics for the elements of quality of life; and then identify a specific and particular instance of a policy portfolio corresponding to the time- and space dimensions used for the quality of life metrics and trace the implementation of that policy portfolio through its particular set of relevant social institutions and processes. If the framework is robust, we should be able to see the positive and negative effects of that portfolio on the different quality of life elements and, ultimately, on an overall assessment of quality of life.

We hope that the framework we have developed here proves useful in a policy context. We have identified four elements of quality of life that may be impacted by policy tools. We have deliberately presented a rather simple model in the hopes that it will be used, but recognize that this framework must be incorporated into larger discussions of the qualitative architecture. We recognize and have indicated that there are many, many dimensions of discussion and debate around each of the elements of this framework. However, we do believe that our framework is logically consistent and internally cohesive - and hope that it provides some structure to and a vocabulary and interpretive framework for what are often formless debates about the impacts of policy tools and collections of meaningless statistics on 'quality of life.'

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