

THE ROLE AND STATUS OF GEOGRAPHY IN THE QUALITY OF LIFE RESEARCH

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***Abstract:** One of the basic attributes of the quality of life concept can be considered its interdisciplinary character. Thereby in the past decades quality of life studies have arisen in a wide range of scientific disciplines. From the geographical point of view, specification of the status of geographical research and its tasks within the framework of quality of life examination is of great importance. In this paper an attempt is made to outline some basic answers to two interrelated questions. The first one of them deals with the role the geography plays in the field of quality of life research. From a bit different point of view, the latter one focuses on the importance of this research for the geography itself. Besides these two problems, the aspect of geographical scale and the usefulness of information obtained via the geographical quality of life research are also discussed.*

***Abstrakt:** Jedným zo základných znakov problematiky kvality života je jej interdisciplinárny charakter. V posledných desaťročiach tak môžeme zaznamenať práce zamerané na jej výskum v rámci veľkého množstva vedeckých disciplín a odborov. Z pohľadu geografie je dôležité najmä špecifikovanie postavenia geografického výskumu, resp. konkretizácia jeho úloh v rámci štúdia kvality života. Cieľom predkladaného príspevku je načrtnúť základný rámec odpovedí na dve navzájom súvisiace otázky. Prvá z nich sa týka úlohy geografie pri výskume kvality života. Druhá, pri zaujatí mierne odlišného uhla pohľadu, sa zameriava na význam takéhoto výskumu pre samotnú geografiu. Okrem týchto dvoch otázok sa príspevok zaoberá tiež aspektom geografickej miery výskumu kvality života a naznačením niektorých možností využitia získaných poznatkov v praxi.*

I. QUALITY OF LIFE AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONCEPT

The quality of life is a complex, elusive phenomenon. Roughly it can be defined as a qualitative evaluation of human life, in subjective level expressed as a sense of happiness or satisfaction, which is a result of the influence and relative interaction of the external (environmental, economic and social) and internal (psychological) factors (Andráško 2008). In a more simple manner, quality of life can be seen as the degree to which the set of characteristics of one's life meets the individual needs.

The conception of quality life and its research become ever more popular. Along with the scientific community, findings regarding the quality of life levels of particular social groups or localities are also of great interest of lay, non-professional general public. From the scientific point of view, the complex and in many ways excessively "subjective" nature of the quality of life is the reason of its interdisciplinary character. With no surprise, in the past decades quality of life studies have arisen in a wide range of scientific disciplines. The works of Schuessler and Freshnock (1978), Helburn (1982), Jensen and Leven (1997), Mui (1998), Dempster and Donnelly (2000) or Dissart and Deller (2000)

represent only a subtle fraction of the wide-ranging group of studies set in the fields of sociology, psychology, economics, geography, planning, medicine and others. Skipping the methodological differences, we have to at least give notice to some terminological differences, basically regarding the use of meta-concepts (van Kamp et al. 2003) like (subjective) well-being, life satisfaction, livability, quality of place and other, to some extent chaotically used in the particular disciplines. Based on the extensive overview of the meta-concepts, Andráško (2007) came to the conclusion that due to their contents these all can be broadly comprised in the common quality of life concept.

II. QUALITY OF LIFE AND GEOGRAPHY

According to the above mentioned interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary (Andráško 2005, Ira and Andráško 2007) character of the quality of life, many authors (e.g. Diener and Suh 1997, Türksever and Atalik 2001) logically turn their attention to the interdisciplinary research, perceived as an promising, “ideal” way to examine the quality of life generality. Regardless of other scientific disciplines and branches which could take part in such approach from the geographical point of view, specification of the status, tasks and usefulness of the knowledge obtained via the geographical research within the framework of quality of life examination are of greatest importance. In this papers next part we will therefore briefly discuss two interrelated questions. The first one of them deals with the role the geography plays in the field of quality of life research and, from a bit different point of view, the latter one focuses on the importance of this research for the geography itself. The aim of this “consideration” is not to provide an exhaustive insight to the geography - quality of life relationship topic, but much more likely to contribute to and support the corresponding debate in the geographic community.

A. The role of geography in the quality of life research

The basic determination of the role the geography can play in the framework of quality of life research can be possibly rooted in Frazier’s (1982) claim that most of the problems related to human life have (certain) geographical dimension. Many other authors (Helburn 1982, Murdie et al. 1992, Dissart and Deller 2000, Massam 2002) even more directly refer to the existence of certain “geographical dimension of the quality of life”. This opinion is narrowly associated with the inartificial need to include the aspect of spatiality into the quality of life framework, which has arisen alongside the assumption that the quality of life (or better said its level measured by appropriate method) is changing not only “from man to man”, but in dependence of that also “from place to place” (Andráško 2007). Despite the life spaces of individuals can differ, there are many possibilities to define the areas where the everyday human activities meet and concentrate. The study of the quality of life of people living in some specific area (city, neighbourhood, etc.) stands for a typical example of research oriented this way.

In this context, the fundamental perspective of the role of geography within the quality of life research seems to be unambiguous. Based on geographer’s abilities to analyse the spatial aspects or variations of particular, relevant components and processes, and subsequently to come to the synthesis of acquired knowledge, the preferential strongpoint of geography resides in its capability to assess the spatial differentiation of selected territory from the quality of life viewpoint (Andráško 2007). In addition, Pacione (2003) also points out the traditional conceptual and methodological eclecticism of the geography.

B. The role of quality of life research in the geography

As in a sense contrary to the above mentioned view stands the issue of the importance of the quality of life research for the geography, or in slightly other words, what role can (should) this research play in the field of this scientific discipline. As Johnston (1997) states, in the 1960s and 1970s the studies drawing the attention to the need of incorporation of the quality of life research into geography have arisen. Some of this work started to operate with the term “level of living” (e.g. Thompson et al. 1962, Lewis 1968). Special attention was given to the social conditions, situation or deprivation in urban areas (Bunge 1973, Herbert 1975, Smith 1979). In this way, much of the research was set in the context of the “social indicators movement” (Schneider 1976, Bowling and Brazier 1995), which in general can be considered the reaction to the finding that the financial or economic indicators and indexes are at least insufficient means for the pursuit of understanding and describing the human well-being in its broadest sense. Also in that time very popular and mostly on the spatial variations in population characteristics oriented research published under the general title of factorial ecologies became in a sense for certain reasons an object of critique. Some authors subsequently adapted factorial ecology procedures and by the means of the initial indicators set extension started to portray spatial variations in social welfare. One of them, P. L. Knox promoted the mapping of social and spatial variations in the quality of life as a fundamental objective for geography and suggested the related basic methodological framework (Johnston 1997). In the 1980s the growing interest in the aspects of environmental quality led to inclusion of the environmental indicators into the geographical quality of life studies. Among others, Cutter (1985) and Pacione (1986) presented a comprehensive (geographical) quality of life models. More recently, the connection of quality of life research with the Geographical Information Systems represents highly operational technique by the generation of well-being and quality of life maps (Massam 1999). From recent works for example Brereton et al. (2008) strongly support this notion.

One of the most distinct answers to our previous question about the role the quality of life research can play in geography was given by M. Pacione. From his point of view, the structure and distribution of quality of life forms a key area of research in (human) geography (Pacione 1986). In his latter work, Pacione (2003) extends this idea by the opinion that central to the quality of life research is study of the relationship between people and their environments and seeking to understand the nature of the person – environment relationship is the quintessential geographical question, that lies at the core of the sub-discipline of social (human) geography.

III. THE QUESTION OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SCALE

The geographical scale represents very important aspect of the quality of life research in geography. It primarily determines the degree to which our knowledge regarding the quality of life is (or will be) generalized. The study of the quality of life of every individual within his unique life space can be seen as an ideal, but at the same time difficult or even impossible kind of approach. As mentioned above, more likely the specification of studied area(s) and the form “relation” of people to it (e.g. residing people) is generally used. In this way it can be stated that the larger and bigger the studied area and population is, the higher is the degree our knowledge about quality of life is generalized. The geographical scale also certainly acts as a determining factor of many other aspects of the quality of life research. It reflects in the selection of indicators, methods of data acquisition, treating or plotting. From the used indicators viewpoint, usually the larger the referential area is, the bigger is the proportional representation of objective indicators (for wider discussion

about the quality of life indicators see e.g. Ira and Andráško 2007). In this way, the local level of research represents a suitable spatial framework for the use of subjective indicators or subjective as well as objective indicators. From this point of view, many authors (e.g. Charnes et al. 1973, Wish 1986, Pacione 2003) declare the opinion that the local level is most suitable for the (geographical) quality of life research.

From global to local in recent quality of life research, virtually every possible geographical scale is being employed. On the global level for example the internationally established Human Development Index can be mentioned. In Slottjes (1991) study the quality of life in 126 countries was compared. As examples of the quality of life research applied on the level of single country can serve the works of Glatzer and Zapf (1984) or Ira et al. (2005). The quality of life in metropolitan areas was studied in works of Liu (1976) or Sufian (1993). From the spatial viewpoint maybe the most frequent is the research of the quality of life in urban areas. As Andráško (2007) states, this research then can be divided to interurban (e.g. Boyer and Sauvageau 1981) and intraurban (e.g. Pacione 1986, Ira 2004, Andráško 2006) quality of life studies.

IV. THE USEFULNESS OF GEOGRAPHICAL QUALITY OF LIFE RESEARCH

From more practical point of view, the conception of the quality of life can be seen as the reaction of the modern society to the problems it has to deal with. Due to this statement we will conclude the paper with the specification of some possibilities of the practical utilization of the knowledge acquired via the geographical quality of life research.

The quality of life in the above mentioned sense represents a cluster of “real-world problems” inevitably connected with the applied geography, a concept and relation fittingly discussed by Pacione (1999). Several outputs of geographical quality of life research are of value to social scientists or policy makers. Combining the conclusions of Pacione (2003) and Andráško (2007) these include:

- a) production of the spatial projection of the information regarding the quality of life in particular areas;
- b) assessment of the spatial differentiation of selected territory(ies) from the quality of life viewpoint;
- c) production of territorial comparisons of the levels of quality of life and identification of the most “problematic” areas;
- d) production of visually transparent outputs (mainly maps), representing the information regarding the quality of life in quite simple and comprehensible, user friendly manner;
- e) creation of the specialized Geographical Information Systems as an highly operative tool for handling the quality of life related data;
- f) production of some baseline measures of quality of life against which we can compare subsequent measures and identify trends over time;
- g) knowledge of how satisfactions and dissatisfactions are distributed through society and across space;
- h) understanding the structure and dependence or interrelationship of various life concerns;
- i) understanding how people combine their feelings about individual life concerns into an overall evaluation of quality of life;
- j) achieving a better understanding of the causes and conditions which lead to individuals’ feelings of well being, and of the effects of such feelings on their behaviour;
- k) identifying problems meriting special attention and possible societal action;
- l) identification of normative standards against which actual conditions may be judged in order to inform effective policy formulation;
- m) monitoring the effects of policies on the ground;

n) promoting public participation in the policy making.

The aim of the quality of life conception can not be seen only in the way of identifying particular problems, but also to point out the possibilities of their solution and outline the direction the society has to follow in a sense to ensure the satisfactory degree of quality of life for all. Hopefully, the presented paper at least partially contributed to explanation and support of the status of geography and geographers in this endeavour.

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