

QUALITY OF LIFE IN SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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. The past decade has witnessed the explosion of concern for issues of population, consumption, and environment degradation. There are assertions that our numbers are growing too fast, that we are rapidly depleting scarce resources, and that we are despoiling the landscape and disrupting ecologic and climatic systems. Malthusian notions of positive checks on population growth are again ascendant after decades of neglect. The world is increasingly seen as a bounded system. Limited and short run calculations of benefits and costs are increasingly seen as selfish and naive.

. Underlying this is a more basic concern for quality of life, and for well-being of present and future generations. Population growth is important because it affects the life chances and well-being of entire populations. Resource depletion has implications for life quality for future generations, and for those less able to compete for resources today. Pollution disrupts ecological and climatic systems, and threatens human well-being. Most who debate issues of population and environment are concerned with quality of life.

. There is little agreement about quality of life and its social indicators. There is agreement, however, that "quality of life" and "well-being" refer to the same thing. "Well-being is broadly conceived to mean the 'level' of life quality .." And the level of life quality means "the extent to which pleasure and satisfaction characterize human existence, and the extent to which people can avoid the various miseries which are potentially the lot of each of us" (Andrews 1974 280).

. Some authors emphasize subjective aspects of quality of life, and others stress material condi-

tions. The Environmental Protection Agency (1973) reports a "... need for quality of life measurements .. to include physical and material concepts as well as values and ideals" (1973).

QUALITY OF LIFE

. The category objective conditions refers to the social and physical environment experienced by people. From an historical perspective the social environment and the physical environment are human creations. In the life of any one person, however, they are objective conditions which structure and constrain opportunities, thoughts, and action.

. According to Marx, under capitalism, the key aspect of this reality is the political economy, under a ruling class which dominates "the whole moral and intellectual life of the people." This results in alienation among the social classes. (Bendix & Lipset 1966 6) Whether or not one accepts Marx' notion of a ruling class, it seems clear that in both capitalist and collectivist industrial societies, the political economy is indeed ascendant, and is crucially important in shaping individual life experience, in work, leisure, relations to the physical environment, and ultimately, in feelings of satisfaction and well-being. Other institutional sectors, such as family, education, religion, health, and welfare are important, but they exist as interdependent sectors for society which is increasingly dominated by the political and economic sectors.

. Objective physical conditions, so much emphasized in literature on the quality of life, include such physical and material conditions as environmental quality and availability of consumer goods and services. Objective socio-cultural conditions include relations of production, access to education and cultural activities, opportunity to participate, and patterns of inequality.

. Way of life is conceived at the individual level, and concerns a

person's day to day life, the nature of one's work, one's leisure, one's patterns of social interaction, health, consumption patterns, and style and level of living. In day to day activity, a person's needs are met or not met. One's way of life is influenced by the objective character of the physical and socio-cultural environment, including the political economy and cognitive elements such as beliefs, values, aspirations, and self-image.

. The quality of life is concerned with 1) the extent to which one's physiological and social needs are met, including security, belongingness, esteem, and achievement, and 2) how well one can develop one's potential (Maslow 1962).

. Discussions of subjective aspects of quality of life often involve use of the terms satisfaction and happiness (Campbell 1976). Dalkey & Rourke (1971) use these terms interchangeably, and define quality of life as "a person's sense of well-being, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life, and happiness or unhappiness." The two terms may be used to refer to two aspects of the same phenomena or with closely related referents. Using the terms "comfort" and "pleasure" rather than "satisfaction" and "happiness", Scitovsky (1976) sees two separate dimensions, and describes American society as "joyless", because it is long on comfort and short on pleasure. He suggests that both satisfaction of basic needs to provide comfort, and stimulation to provide pleasure, are essential for personal well-being. An optimum level is needed for both, and either excess or deficiency reduces well-being.

. Scitovsky's first finding is that in American society, satisfaction is strongly and positively correlated with age, but happiness is negatively correlated with age. Satisfaction of material needs, and physical comfort increase with age for Americans, while levels of stimulation decline. The

second finding is the consistent temporal trend from 1957 to 1972 for reported happiness levels to decrease in national surveys.

. The distinction between comfort and pleasure seems promising, and could be fruitfully examined in further research. It probably captures only part of the differences between satisfaction and happiness. Satisfaction taps cognitive or evaluative content more than happiness, while happiness is more affective than cognitive. And measures of satisfaction usually become more stable over time, while reports of happiness are more subject to change (Campbell 1976 491). Thus, satisfaction is more influenced by physical conditions, and happiness is more influenced by social and psychic factors. This suggests a relation between Maslow's (1952) hierarchy of needs and satisfaction and happiness. Meeting lower level needs gives satisfaction; meeting higher level needs gives happiness. What Maslow calls a "peak experience" is often one of immense happiness. Though happiness and satisfaction are related, they are not the same, and the difference is important.

POPULATION, CONSUMPTION, & ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

. Probably nothing is so basic to life quality as adequate food, shelter, and health care. Yet these basic items are insufficient for much of the world population. By 1975 nearly half a billion people, including 15% to 25% of those in the Far East, Near East, and Africa, were estimated to be seriously malnourished (NAS 1975 2; FAO 1973). Basic physical well-being is the critical aspect of quality of life for many less developed countries. Unless major changes occur, it will be crucial for a still larger proportion of the world's future population (Borgstrom 1973; Ehrlich 1968; NAS 1975). The question is whether food production can rise fast enough to keep pace with population increase. But, since no one

seriously suggests purposely extending population growth to the limits of food production, the issue is broader. The question is not how many people will live, but how well they will live.

The problems of present and future food production point to a wider range of issues. These boil down to the total ability of the earth to sustain large numbers of people at high levels of consumption. Problems of environmental degradation, including resource depletion and pollution, are even more at issue (Randers & Meadows 1973). From an historical view, current rates of consumption are incredibly high. "We are now using up more irreplaceable raw materials in a decade than in all mankind's previous history, up to World War I, and for most of these products, the amounts used are doubling every 15 to 20 years" (Benoit 1974 14). "Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, each generation has consumed mineral resources equivalent to all previously consumed" (Cloud 1971 19). The United States, with about 6% of the world's population, annually consumes over 30% of all resources consumed, and is by far the most profligate consumer of the world's resources (Keyfitz 1976). According to Keyfitz, world resources are not adequate to bring more than a small percent of the population to the United States level of material consumption. This agrees with the "limits to growth" arguments of many authorities (Meadows 1972; Mesarovic & Pestel 1974; Goldsmith 1972; Daly 1973). Rapid consumption of nonrenewable resources is only one side of the environment degradation problem. The other side is the limited ability of the environment to absorb such wastes as carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, mercury, lead, detergents, asbestos fibers, pesticide residues, and radioactive wastes. The problem is compounded by modern industrial production of high volumes of non-biode-

gradable chemicals, some of which are lethal. More serious in the long run, are possible negative impacts on ecological and climatic systems (Brubaker 1972; Miller 1975). Perhaps the ultimate pollutant will be undissipated heat generated by the use of fossil fuel to produce energy. Though the long term impacts on world climate is speculative, serious impacts on micro climates may come quite soon (Randers & Meadows 1973 287).

IMPLICATIONS

The level of life quality is very low today for much of the world, and any real increase in future life quality is extremely unlikely. Some scientists see only disaster in continuing current trends. Important changes must occur. Rates of population growth must be greatly reduced. Food production must increase. And the worldwide distribution of goods and services must become more equitable. Environmental degradation through depletion of resources and pollution must be brought under control. While efforts to improve nutrition, housing, health care, and other basic amenities are essential in the less developed countries, it seems likely that levels of resource consumption could be greatly reduced in the United States, and in other developed countries without appreciably reducing development of potential or lowering levels of satisfaction (Mazur & Rosa 1974 609).

It is not clear that such control can occur, because many Americans seem addicted to maximal consumption. Yet, while "our standard of living has continued to rise, we have become .. less satisfied with the quality and character of our lives" (Train 1974 1050). "We buy items that are unnecessary or larger and fancier than we really need, and which have built-in obsolescence and very high operating costs - partly to prove that we can afford to do so, .. to hold or improve our social status

(Benoit 1974 18). Though is it said that "you can't buy happiness", many Americans seem to try, and usually are disappointed. But if consumerism fails to satisfy, why does it continue? Perhaps part of the answer is the \$20 billion annual expenditure for advertising by American producers (Scitovsky 1976 5). But the problem runs deeper. Some say the problem lies in the political economy of capitalism, which necessarily results in alienation. In this view, not only are profits and high levels of consumption essential to sustain capitalism, but the relations of production under capitalism necessarily place workers in situations of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Failing to find satisfaction and meaning in work, many Americans seek satisfaction in consumption. Many thus become alienated not only from work, but also from leisure (Anderson 1976; Pappenheim 1959).

. Loneliness seems an important problem in American society (Moustakas 1961; Reisman 1969; Slater 1970). Many Americans seem preoccupied with a "quest for community" (Nisbet 1953). Perhaps for many people, high rates of material consumption become ways to compensate for powerlessness and isolation. High rates of consumption are not indicators of a high level of life quality, but instead, may indicate problems in satisfying social needs.

. While higher levels of material well-being are essential in less developed countries, in the short run and long run, the developed countries' interests might be best served by decreasing inequality, emphasizing quality of social relations, attacking conditions conducive to alienation, and by reducing emphasis on consumption. This would aid the environment, would better serve social and psychic needs, and would lead to higher levels of satisfaction and happiness.

. Many areas of activity, expres-

sion, and response become most pleasurable only through specialized knowledge or experience. Education, both formal and informal, and variety of experiences are crucial to this aspect of well-being. Americans fail to find enjoyment in their leisure, and resort to material consumption as a substitute, because most have not acquired the tastes or skills for high culture (Scitovsky). The resurgence of interest in the United States in traditional activities like folk dancing and crafts may indicate a desire to revitalize traditional sources of stimulation. If levels of well-being are to be maximized, people of all ages must have access to educational and other experiences and activities which increase their ability to find optimal levels of stimulation. We should stress activities which minimize environmental costs.

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