SOCIAL QUALITY IN EUROPE

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Introduction

In this paper we discuss Social Quality as a sociologically grounded concept theoretical concept as opposed to the psychological concept of subjective life satisfaction While the latter is concerned with the feelings of individuals (how happy and/or satisfied they are) Social Quality is concerned with the nature of society and the establishment of social systems that promote the well-being of their citizens. It provides a complex methodological and analytical framework for enabling an informed critic of European Social Policy demonstrating the role for social policy in supporting societal development by providing the basis for social cohesion and social integration in civic society. It offers a complex methodological and analytical framework making it possible to assess society as a specific formation of relationships and processes (Herrmann and van der Maesen 2008). It provides not just a conceptual, consistent, transparent and useable policy tool for developing social policy but also a comprehensive and rational theoretical structure that describes and explains societal quality of life, Social Quality. As Prodi points out:

> .. it places social issues at the very core of the concept of quality. It promotes an approach that goes beyond production, economic growth, employment and social protection and gives self-fulfillment for individual citizens a major role to play in the formation of collective identities. (Prodi 2001)

We also argue that it enables the development of a theoretically informed analysis of life satisfaction providing recognising that subjective satisfaction is both an outcome of the social system and a factor in its functioning. Subjective satisfaction is a key indicator of the quality of the social system   and provides the basis for understanding what makes a livable society (Veenhoven 2008). People are embodied social beings, located in a given time and place, active in meeting their own needs in that context, and they need to be empowered to do so. While there are good arguments for social policy being informed by subjective as well as objective evidence – it is important to know what citizens want as well as to understand what they need (Veenhaven 2002) it is important to consider not just what is but what can be. What type of society can maximize citizens welfare, in other

words what is necessary to enable citizens to develop their capabilities. The developing Social Quality approach enables us to consider what is necessary to empower citizens and provide a social and economic context in which they have the maximum opportunity to develop their capabilities.

The origins of Social Quality

The Social Quality approach arose from an initiative launched under the Dutch Presidency of the European Union in 1997 by a network of social scientists. The aim was to counteract the neo-liberal and economistic tendencies within European integration and to put forward an alternative vision of a social Europe based on the EU goals of enhancing social cohesion and combating social exclusion.. The aim of the Social Quality initiative was to develop a theoretically consistent model which could provide a basis for policies and which could be empirically grounded (Beck *et al.* 2001). It emerged from a critique of, and to counterbalance, an economic as opposed to a social construction of quality of life (Phillips 2006)

Social Quality is defined by the authors of this initiative as "the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential" (Beck *et.al* 2001: 6-7). Its advocates were concerned to challenge what they saw as the narrowly economistic focus of European Social Policy with its emphasis on employment as the key to social inclusion, economic growth and competitiveness and argue for a social policy that sustained a liveable society for all (Herrmann and van der Maesen 2008). They argued for economic policies that provide for independence, labour market policies that opened the way for participation, social policies to for securing individual dignity and fostering social solidarity and empowerment by shaping the space for action.

Subjective Well-being

The subjective well-being approach is concerned with the individual as a whole person in his or her life circumstances - how they feel about their life circumstances, how they feel about things, taking everything into account. There is a long history of (mainly social

psychological) research on life satisfaction or subjective Quality of Life using life satisfaction and happiness as the main dependent variables (Diener and Suh,1997). In the most sophisticated Quality of Life approaches the indicators are well developed and the methodology used to select them rigorously defined. However, the indicators are not derived from theory and they presuppose existing social relations and structures – they are concerned with describing what is there already based upon the rather simple idea that objective and subjective factors reinforce one another. They are not concerned with opportunity structures available to individuals and what is achievable.

The Life Satisfaction approach asks people directly abut their satisfaction/happiness with their actual life circumstances, either generically or for specific domains. The research has been concerned with analysing people's reports of 'happiness' (which is generally seen as an indicator of emotion or mood) and 'general satisfaction with life' (which is generally taken as an indicator of people's cognitive evaluation of their circumstances). Subjective well-being has been shown to be an internally consistent and relatively stable construct – not just the reflection of immediate affect (but not so stable as to suggest that the scales measure purely an invariant trait of persons). There is evidence that it does indeed reflect surrounding circumstances with levels of happiness and satisfaction correlating with individuals social and economic circumstances within societies and with the well-being of societies going together with the well-being of their inhabitants (Bohnke 2005; Veenhoven 2008, 2009). .

It is now widely recognised that it is influenced by factors beyond economic security even n in the poorest societies (see e.g. Clark 2002) and that we must take account of the extent to which physical, psychological and social needs are met.. Empirical studies of the correlates of subjective well-being show that both between and within countries the key determinants of subjective well-being are material living standards, confidence in government and trust (Veenhoven 2008). In poorer countries fulfilling basic needs is most important for meeting life satisfaction with having a livable income being the most important influence on well-being, although being healthy, having social support , having confidence in government and general trust, and feeling in control of ones life also influence general satisfaction and happiness (Abbott 2007; Abbott and Sapsford

2006: Abbott and Wallace 2007). As societies become more affluent general levels of subjective well-being and factors other than economic circumstances start to become more important. In the case of job satisfaction, for example, there is a move from having a job with a good income to looking for more intrinsic rewards such as having an interesting job or one with career prospects (Wallace *et al*., 2007). In the EU 27 there are marked differences between countries in subjective well-being with a North-South divide in the EU 15 and a marked East-West divide between the EU 15 and the former communist states that are now members. However, in all EU countries, the impact of economic factors is mediated by other factors, notably social support, health and trust (Bohnke 2005).

Societal Well-being and Individual Well-being

Well-being is fundamentally concerned with the welfare of individuals and societies. It is important to distinguish between societal well-being and individual well-being although the two are inextricably linked. The former provides the context in which individuals are able to flourish and grow – the capability structure. We need to consider the opportunities that society provides for individuals to build their capabilities, the resources that are available for individuals to utilize in securing their and their families' well-fare. Well-being is subjective – it is our understanding of our condition – but it is discursively constituted through social interactions and cultural meanings. The quality of society influences social engagement and the higher the quality of a society the more options people have to plan and make arrangements for the future (Gallie and Paugam 2002). There is a strong relationship between economic performance and the quality of governance in a society and individuals perception of the quality of their society.. Individuals' perception of the quality of their society is also influenced by their own social status and living conditions (Bohnke 2005). Agency and the ability to build capabilities is dependent on social and geographical location as well as individuals perceptions of the opportunities available to them which are in turn influenced by their position in the societal opportunity structures.

From Quality of Life to Social Quality

The Social Quality approach measures the quality of the *social context* of everyday life, and differs from the Quality of Life approach in that it is grounded in a theory of 'the social' – it is a sociologically grounded approach, as opposed to the Quality of Life approach, which takes the perspective of the isolated individual as the ultimate reality. The Social Quality approach does focus on the individual, but as an active subject living in developing social conditions. 'The Social' is seen as the outcome of the dialectical relationship between the formation of collective identities and the self-realisation of the human subject. The 'social space' is realised in and between four constitutive factors – socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion and social empowerment. The approach reflects the condition of human subjects as social (not only individual) subjects, it prioritises the analysis of the processes leading to the acting capacities of social beings, it analyses the self-realisation of these acting subjects and it is oriented to the formation of collective identities. In other words, it is concerned with the dialectical and recursive relationship between agency and structure and provides a vision for the future about how the Social Quality of a society can and should be improved. It provides the essential link between need, action and policies. The Social Quality approach combines economic and social development. It measures the extent to which the quality of daily life provides for an acceptable standard of living, taking account of the structural features of societies and their institutions as assessed by reference to their impact on citizens. Hence, it incorporates a mixture of structural and individual-level factors.
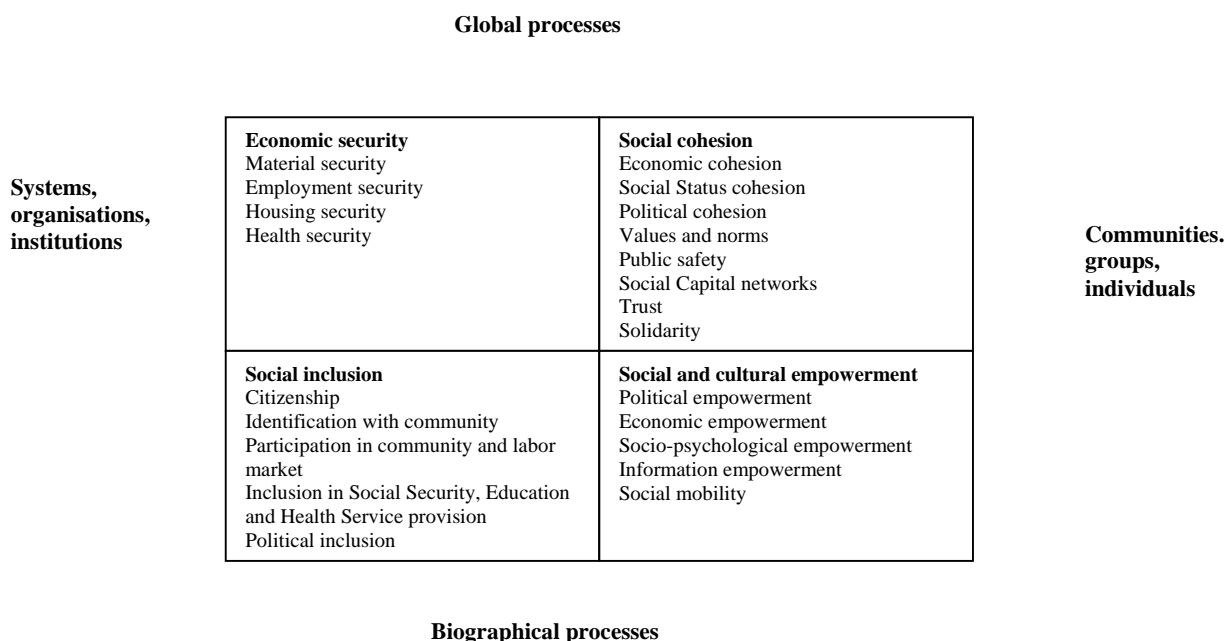
It is explicitly ideological in that it takes the existence of Western welfare states and liberal norms for granted.

> ..underlying the four conditional factors is the process which, via the constant tension between self-realisation and the formation of collective identities, people become competent actors in the field of Social Quality. Essential in this process are the rule of law, human rights and social justice, social recognition/respect, social responsiveness and the individual's capacity to participate. (Van der Maesen *et al* 2005).

It challenges both economistic and narrowly individualistic models and recognises that self –actualisation is a social process – an outcome of the dialectical relationship between agency and structure. It combines aspects of the Quality of Life and quality of society approaches and is explicitly concerned with the quality of social relationships (Van der Maesen *et al* 2005). Social Quality defines the space within which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential. It requires the empowerment of individuals, the provision of economic security and other resources, the ability to participate in social life and a shared set of norms and values.

> Modern democratic societies .. [need] real opportunities for citizens to address their concerns, to develop their own visions and to enable themselves to contribute to an equitable and fair society (Beck *et al* 2001: 246)

Social Quality identifies four domains or areas: economic security ensuring personal security , based on a norm of social justice; social cohesion ensuring social recognition and providing the basis for solidarity; Social inclusion ensuring social responsiveness and equity. and; social empowerment enabling individuals to develop their capabilities and   feel they have control over their own lives and the capacity to act thus ensuring human dignity (Figure 1). These are expressed as four quadrants which are the product of the relationship between global processes and biographical processes on the one hand and that between systems and institutions and between communities (Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft) on the other. The up-down axis of the quadrant represents the relationship between the micro and the macro, the individual and the structural. The left-right axis of the Social Quality quadrant represents the relationship between system and community, between system integration and social integration in the words of David Lockwood (Lockwood, 1999).

Figure 1: **The Social Quality Model**

Global processes

Economic security Material security Employment security Housing security Health security	**Social cohesion** Economic cohesion Social Status cohesion Political cohesion Values and norms Public safety Social Capital networks Trust Solidarity
Social inclusion Citizenship Identification with community Participation in community and labor market Inclusion in Social Security, Education and Health Service provision Political inclusion	**Social and cultural empowerment** Political empowerment Economic empowerment Socio-psychological empowerment Information empowerment Social mobility

Systems, organisations, institutions (left margin)

Communities. groups, individuals (right margin)

Biographical processes

Social Quality is seen as a holistic construct which measures four complementary aspects and therefore some indicators can contribute to the measurement of more than one quadrant. Economic security means having available the necessary material resources for a decent life; social inclusion (citizenship), having access to the necessary institutional and infrastructural context; social cohesion, that the necessary collectively accepted values and norms are in place; and empowerment, that people feel that they have control over their own lives and the capacity to act and that they have the necessary knowledge, skills, experience and funding to do so. This model is based on the assumption that the welfare of citizens is influenced by all four quadrants - that they form the conditions for each other and influence the outcome, economic security is inadequate on its own.. The model takes account of micro- and macro-level structures and agencies – the tension between societal and biographical development, between institutional provision and individual lives. The Social Quality approach conceptualizes 'the social' as the space created by the interaction between the economic structure and the social structure and between structure and agency.

A key difference between the Quality of Life approach and the Social Quality approach is the role of individual actors as agents. This necessitates considering both objective and subjective indicators of well-being – relating objective welfare conditions to subjective perceptions of life satisfaction, happiness and well-being including the important distinction between functioning and capabilities (i.e. what an individual <u>is able</u> to do and what an individual <u>chooses</u> to do) (Sen 1993).

Social empowerment requires both that the objective conditions exist and that individuals have the ability to make use of the opportunities available to them. Empowerment is both a conditional factor for socioeconomic security, social cohesion and social integration and an outcome of their existence. There are three dimensions to empowerment – access, participation and control.

> 'Empowerment' means to enable people to control the personal, communal and social environment to foster their own development over the environment as well as accessing the environment to enrich their socio-personal life (Herrmann 2004: 28)

Social cohesion is the glue that binds a society together and creates trust. It provides the rule of law essential for social participation. Social integration and interaction are not possible without shared norms and values and trust in social and economic institutions as well as other groups and individuals.

> Social cohesion concerns the processes that create, defend or demolish social networks and the social infrastructures underpinning these networks. An adequate level of social cohesion is one which enables citizens 'to exist as real human subjects, as social beings'. (Beck *et al* 1997: 284)

Social inclusion in modern societies is the degree to which people are and feel integrated in institutions, organisations and social systems. It includes intimate relationships with kin and friends as well as membership of looser networks. It is thus a complex concept

and requires recognising the need for pluralistic social cohesiveness/multi-inclusiveness (Phillips 2005; Walker and Wigfield 2003) in order to facilitate the inclusion of individuals and communities. It means promoting equality of opportunity and respecting difference in order to enable all to reach their potential.

 In terms of socio-economic security, clearly people need resources over time to be able to cope with daily life, enjoy a dignified lifestyle and take advantage of the opportunities available to citizens. It is about more than having employment that pays a decent wage; it is about economic security across the life course and having access to health and welfare services including education.

The Social Quality model is then concerned to specify the conditions for an inclusive, socially cohesive society that empowers citizens who can enjoy a decent standard of living. It specifies both the conditions for well-being and the conditions for building and sustaining societies that are able to ensure the well-being of their members.

Social Quality and Quality of Life

 Social Quality represents an advance on Quality of Life because it is more theoretically grounded, because it looks at the social and not just the individual and because it includes new dimensions of agency by allowing for social and cultural empowerment. One question might be: which of these quadrants is more important. In fact Social Quality emphases all parts of the quadrant because it is concerned with the space that this covers. It also enables us to theoretical derive indicators to correlate with subjective life satisfaction both providing a sound basis for selecting indicators and testing the extent to which subjective satisfaction is influenced by the four constituent elements of the model, the indicators being measures of the underlying concepts of economic security, social cohesion, social integration and empowerment. Ultimately they are measures of a society with social and systems integration enabling individuals to take control over their lives in a social context (Wallace and Abbott 2009). Subjective satisfaction is the ultimate test of the social system and a liveable society. We must recognise that we are dealing with real people and their daily lives. The ways individuals experience the quality of their society

will vary over time and space. The quality of a society varies for individuals living in it depending on their social, economic and cultural location within in it. The social quality of societies also varies.

We have demonstrated that life satisfaction in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States is influenced by economic security, social cohesion, social integration and empowerment, (Abbott, Abbott and Saps ford, Abbott and Wallace) and London. More recently we have derived a model from Social Quality and used it to examine influences on life satisfaction in the EU 27. Using the 2003 and 2007 Living conditions and quality of Life Survey we have demonstrated that out model is stable over time and space. Subjective quality of life is influenced by economic security, social cohesion, social integration and empowerment. For the EU 27 we are able to explain over 40 percent of the variance in subjective satisfaction. While economic security contributes most to the variance, social cohesion, social integration and empowerment all make strong and significant contributions to the variance explained. People are dissatisfied if they are not able to enjoy a decent standard of living, do not have confidence in the government and lack general trust, lack social support and feel lonely and feel unable to take control over their own lives and though poor health and lack of education lack the capacity to do so (Abbott and Wallace.

Social Quality, Quality of life and Social Policy
Well-being approaches clearly have significant policy relevance. They clearly demonstrate that both social and individual well-being is influenced by more than economic factors. Policies designed both to support the social and economic development of a society as well as to enable the flourishing of individuals must take account of factors other than, on the one hand growth in GDP and on the other income maintenance. Whilst it is evident that those in the poorest economic circumstances are most influenced by their material situation in evaluating their well-being it is evident that social integration, social cohesion and the degree of freedom they have to act to secure their well-being all influence they subjective evaluation of their well-being. In other words the

quality of a society as well as individuals position within that society influences well-being.

Combining, as we have the Social Quality approach with measuring what is important in determining individual life satisfaction , we can consider what social policy needs to encompass if it is both to meet individual needs and underpin the development of competitive, dynamic societies. With respect to the policy context, we need to gain a more holistic and accurate profile of what is important to people – the subjective understandings of citizens themselves. In other words, to understand the lived experience of citizens we need to relate agency to structure, ultimately the articulation between needs and capabilities (Nussbaum 2000; Doyle and Gough 1991; Gough 2002).

The nature of well-being has to be considered in the context of the institutions, processes and policies that affect it. All real welfare regimes show a mix of market, state and family/community provision, but they differ in the proportions of the mix and, more importantly, in the rhetoric or discourse in which views about welfare provision are expressed. Further, beyond the discourses that we can use to describe how welfare can be provided to maximize its impact, there are also discourses that enable us to describe or conceptualise our Social Quality and to evaluate it. Our understanding of our needs/wants is constrained by our knowledge/understanding of what is possible. What we want or need in order to 'have a good life' is limited by what we think we know or understand to be possible. Wants may exceed objectively structural needs , but conversely they may fall short of what is objectively possible.

Social quality provides the basis for a meta- theory for developing public policy and for its implementation - for the practice of public policy. Societal policy determines social quality. Societal policy is made up of economic policy, labour market policy and social policy. Economic policy is concerned with allowing independence, labour market policy with opening ways for participation and social policy with securing dignity and fostering solidarity. The policy context shapes social quality by providing socio-economic security or social inclusion, for example or by providing the basis for social and cultural

empowerment. However, it is also shaped by social quality in the way that different human and social needs are fed back into the policy process. A public policy informed by Social Quality provides the basis for general integration, policies to ensure societal cohesion and social integration. Policies designed to socially empower all members of the society.

Welfare states take different forms. In Europe this is usually expressed in the form of welfare regimes, which may or may not lead to different kinds of social quality (Esping Andersen 1990). The relationship between social quality and welfare systems still needs to be established. This leads us to the question of how far social quality reflects gender regimes. The social quality model appears to be gender neutral, but gender regimes of breadwinner model, modified breadwinner model, dual earner models etc. (Lewis, Daly and Rake) could have important influences upon social quality, not least for women. Although the gender dimension could be incorporated, it has not yet been explicitly thought out. However,   the model enables a more holistic consideration of social quality. And raises the question of what is social quality for women? Is it the same as that for men? Economic security is about more than paid employment and to the extent that individual economic security is based on a wage earner model women are marginalised both in terms of social integration and empowerment. Married women, especially those with children , are likely to have intermittent labour market participation. This not only makes them dependent for economic security on their male partner but also often precludes them from entitlement to social benefits that are based on contributions from wages and provide for example for economic security in old age. In other words we can ask what provides for economic security for differently positioned groups in society, how can we ensure an inclusive and cohesive society and ensure that all are socially and culturally empowered.

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that Social Quality is a better concept that Quality of Life for developing social theory. Both perspectives go beyond economic measures of well being, but Social Quality embodies a social as well as an individual dimension for

understanding subjective and objective well-being. Furthermore, Social Quality brings in the aspect of agency the role of human capability in understanding Quality of Life. Social Quality also helps us to bring together subjective and objective criteria for measuring the quality of society. In our research we have found this model to be a robust one, which works both in European societies in general but also in individual, very different societies.

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