



## Analysis

## Urban Quality of Life and Capabilities: An Experimental Study

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates residents' perception of quality of life in cities; to do this, the paper uses the capability approach proposed by Sen. In his work, Sen defines capabilities as the opportunities or possibilities individuals have while functionings are a subset of achievements among a wider set of achievable goals. The capability approach offers a theoretical framework with which to explain how individual perception of quality of life in cities develops. In the present work, the residents' perception of quality of life depends on personal characteristics, the presence of amenities (manmade and natural), and the actual use of those amenities. Residents of an Italian town were surveyed via face-to-face structured interviews. The main findings indicate that residents' perception of quality of life in cities is highly dependent on the choices people can actually make. These choices are strictly connected with the accessibility to services, individual allocation of time, and the social interactions people enjoy.

## 1. Introduction

Quality of life (QoL) is a crucial element in the competitiveness of cities, regions, and states because it represents a pull and retention factor for new people, firms, and resident populations. The latest evidence indicates that non-economic variables such as natural, public, and private amenities are key drivers of interregional migration (Partridge and Rickman, 2003, 2006; Partridge, 2010). Recent studies also show that the growth of cities depends on the migration of highly skilled individuals, who in turn require certain types of local amenities (Glaeser et al., 2001; Florida, 2002a, 2002b; Adamson et al., 2004; Shapiro, 2006). Hence, local QoL has become a key element of marketing policies “to put an area on the map” (Rogerson, 1999). Although how people live in cities is important, it is also, and perhaps predominantly, essential for the growth and survival of the cities themselves. In fact, the necessity to measure the QoL and make comparisons among local, national, and international cities or regions and states has become increasingly important because of its potential use as a political tool. Within Europe, the European Union (EU) monitors and compares the quality of local life by means of a survey titled “Quality of Life in Cities.” The survey is administered within the European Urban Audit, a specific program of the Directorate-General (DG) for regional and local policies.

Searching for possible measures of QoL is not an easy task because of the complexity of the concept. This is confirmed by the lack of a common definition in the literature in general and specifically in

economics literature (for a literature review on QoL, see Lambiri et al., 2007). Two interrelated issues, both linked to the multidimensionality of QoL measures, complicate any investigation of this topic: one problem is that QoL depends on a set of exogenous characteristics such as the quality and quantity of public services, built and natural environments, and cultural amenities, as well as more intangible factors such as human interactions and social and human capital. The second issue is that QoL depends also on the endogenous characteristics of the resident population, such as their status, gender, age, education, culture, and ethnicity. Thus far, two broad categories of indicators have been used to analyze QoL (Costanza et al., 2007), namely objective and subjective indicators. However, McCrea et al. (2006, p.79) point out that “care should be taken when making inferences about improvements in subjective urban quality of life based on improvements in objective urban quality of life.” Moreover, the literature can be classified according to the method used to investigate QoL. One stream of research uses questionnaires (Sirgy and Cornwell, 2002; Rogers et al., 2011; Mohan and Twigg, 2007) while another applies a more objective approach by measuring the quantity of amenities (Liu, 1976; Rogerson, 1999; Roback, 1982; Blomquist et al., 1988; Glaeser et al., 2001; Florida, 2002a, 2002b; Boschma and Fritsch, 2009; Brambilla et al., 2013). A further stream of research is the literature on happiness. In the field of economics, this literature has been driven by the seminal work of Easterlin (1974), which investigates the cross-sectional and dynamic relationships between income and self-reported happiness for a group of developed and developing countries. Overall, this literature considers

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self-reported happiness as a proxy for economic utility (Alesina et al., 2004) and find that above certain thresholds of income, the perception of happiness decreases (the so called “Easterlin paradox”). It means that happiness and income are not always positively correlated. Furthermore, recent studies focusing on the perception of happiness in cities find that, on average, individuals are less happy in cities respect to rural areas or small town. This finding is confirmed in the study of Knight and Gunatilaka (2010) for the case of China, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011) for the case of US, and Sørensen (2014) for the case of EU. It means that individuals decide to live where income, manmade and cultural amenities are objectively better, but their perception of life is lower than those leaving in place with relatively lower income and city amenities.

A different approach is the one developed by Sen (1987, 1993), which investigates QoL through capabilities and functionings instead of looking at it using the utility approach. Veenhoven (2010) explains that happiness is not the same as capability, even though the two are linked. Capability is required for living a happy life while happiness affects capability in several ways. Capability is conducive to happiness, and happiness enhances capability. However, how can the concept of capabilities and functionings be linked with QoL in cities?

None of the literature mentioned above takes into account the accessibility and frequency with which individuals can experience amenities. One possible exception is the work of Brambilla et al. (2013), which extends the standard hedonic models used to analyze QoL by measuring the role accessibility and the uneven distribution of amenities at a neighborhood level plays in Italian cities.

Similarly, in the present work QoL depends also on spatial interactions between individuals and the available amenities. Specifically, the aim of the present work is to analyze QoL perceptions in urban contexts using a wider definition of wellbeing, one not just based on quantity but also on accessibility. When QoL within an urban context is analyzed, it is essential to investigate personal circumstances but also the resources cities offer. Therefore, the presence and accessibility to amenities—as well as social interactions—matter.

Operationally, this means the actual freedom individuals have to access and enjoyment of the amenities—manmade and natural—must be investigated. For example, a pleasant park does not represent a good indicator of QoL if it is difficult to reach or if a large portion of the resident population is excluded from its use because they do not have the time to go there or the park is not easy accessible from some neighborhoods within the city.

Therefore, the present paper uses a broader definition of QoL related to the capabilities approach of Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (1987, 1993). Sen's work is based on the concepts of capabilities and functionings. Capabilities are “...real opportunities you have regarding the life you lead” (Sen, 1987, 36). In other words, capabilities represent possibilities to do and to be, whereas functionings represent the real achievements or how people actually live (Gasper, 2007, 342). Applying this theoretical approach to QoL, the present study distinguishes between the possibilities individuals have for enjoying amenities, as measured by the amenities' presence (i.e., capabilities) and what they actually do, as measured by the frequency of the amenities' use (i.e., functionings).

Overall, the novel aspect of the present paper is providing an original way to approach QoL by linking together the literature on capabilities, QoL, life satisfaction, happiness, and time use. We postulate that QoL is strictly connected not only with the quantity and quality of amenities, but also with accessibility to them and individual allocation of time in daily activities. In the present work “Time dedicated to” is introduced as a proxy for what individuals really fulfill considering personal and external circumstances. Therefore, perceptions of QoL in cities are not a proxy for the objective level of urban quality of life, but a proxy for how, on average, individuals actually live in cities. To explore the relationship between QoL and these indicators, one ad hoc questionnaire was administered in person by means of structured

interviews to the resident population in Alghero, a small town that is located in the northwestern coast of Sardinia (Italy).

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 focuses on the related literature. Section 3 illustrates the theoretical setting. Section 4 provides details on how capabilities and functionings are operationalized in the survey and empirical model. Section 5 presents the structure of the questionnaire, the case study, and some descriptive statistics; Section 6 illustrates the estimation technique. Section 7 presents results of the work; Section 8 reports robustness checks on the obtained results, and Section 9 provides the final conclusions.

## 2. Related Literature

The QoL literature has contributions from many fields within the social sciences, such as psychology, economics, and sociology. In the economic field and at the city level, studies of QoL originate in the seminal works of Smith (1973) and Liu (1976), which produce composite measures of QoL in U.S. standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs). Another strand of the literature uses the hedonic method to infer the shadow prices of non-traded components of QoL, such as the presence of various types of amenities or disamenities. These prices are then used to produce a composite QoL index and rank cities accordingly (Rosen, 1979; Roback, 1982; Blomquist et al., 1988; Gyourko and Tracy, 1991; Kahn, 2001; Colombo et al., 2012). This literature considers QoL to be driven by economic opportunities and cost of living, as well as by natural amenities and disamenities. Within this framework, an interesting contribution is from Brambilla et al. (2013), which extends the hedonic approach to investigate how revealed preferences of QoL are affected by the uneven accessibility of amenities in Milan, Italy. This study evaluates QoL through objective indicators, not considering individual constraints such as the accessibility of amenities and time availability to enjoy them.

A further strand of the literature considers residents' perceptions of well-being as a proxy for QoL and happiness, thus using ad hoc surveys to measure it (Easterlin, 2003; Diener and Suh, 1999). In economics, this approach originates in the seminal work of Easterlin (1974), which analyzes the cross section and dynamic linkage between income and happiness for nineteen developed and developing countries from 1946 to the 1970s. The works that follow this approach consider QoL and happiness as a proxy for the economic concept of individual utility, or better, experienced utility, which is the utility derived from consumption (for some instances, see Alesina et al., 2004, which compares the U.S. and European cases; Litchfield et al., 2012, which analyzes life satisfaction in Albania). At the local level, life satisfaction and QoL are analyzed by Sirgy and Cornwell (2002), who study southwest Virginia, U.S., McCrea et al. (2006), who study Queensland, Australia, and Mohan and Twigg (2007), who study UK cities. Sirgy and Cornwell (2002) test three models to explain how satisfaction with neighborhood features affects residents' QoL. The findings support the hypothesis that community satisfaction affects individual perceptions of life satisfaction via different domains, that is, physical, social, economic, and neighborhood features. Building on the work of Sirgy and Cornwell, Costanza et al. (2007) present an integrative definition of QoL that combines objective and subjective elements; specifically, they “relate quality of life to the opportunities that are provided to meet human needs in the forms of built, human, social and natural capital (in addition to time)” (267). These opportunities fulfill the same role of capabilities presented by Amartya Sen, even though the authors do not explicitly mention this approach. Indeed, the opportunities available to fulfill human needs represent the possibilities to do and be in different life domains. However, the approach of Costanza et al. (2007) does not consider real achievements—how people actually live—while the capabilities literature explicitly defines them as functionings.

Conversely, there is a specific strand of literature that analyzes the role that capabilities play in influencing the QoL of individuals (Anand and Van Hees, 2006; Krishnakumar, 2007; Chiappero-Martinetti and

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