



City profile

What makes a 'happy city'? ☆

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ABSTRACT

Measuring and analysing the factors that affect the quality of life (QoL) in cities and regions has long been the subject of theoretical and empirical work in a wide range of fields. More recently there have been an increasing number of studies involving traditional so-called objective indicators of QoL as well as more subjective measures of well-being, drawing on the emerging new science of happiness. This article presents an overview of studies in this field and highlights the key issues and debates pertaining to measuring, analysing and theorising QoL and happiness in cities and regions. It also highlights the importance of geographical and socio-economic contextual factors pertaining to QoL, well-being and happiness with a particular emphasis on the impact of social and spatial inequalities and social justice.

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Introduction

Measuring the extent to which *where* we live affects how we feel and our overall QoL has long been the subject matter of theoretical and empirical work in the fields of human geography, urban and regional studies, regional science and regional Economics. Most of the efforts to date involve the use of objective approaches to researching QoL and well-being, whereby factors pertaining to the social and physical environment, that are relatively easy to quantify and which are assumed to determine human well-being (e.g. income, consumption, residential land, wages and rents, local amenities, natural environment, environmental pollution) are observed, measured and modelled. These factors are typically rated, and regions and cities are ranked on this basis (e.g. see Savageau's (2007) *Places Rated Almanac*, Mercer's (2012) *Quality of Living* rankings, or a more negative approach in *Crap Towns: The 50 Worst Places to Live in the UK* by Jordison and Kieran (2003)). Nevertheless, over the past decade there has been a massively increased interest in *subjective* measures of QoL and well-being, which are based on social survey data, whereby people are asked to rate their health, well-being, life satisfaction and overall happiness. In particular, in recent years there have been numerous attempts in the social sciences to define, measure and analyse subjective measures of happiness from different academic disciplinary perspectives, ranging from neuroscience and psychology to philosophy and economics. 'Happiness questions' are increasingly used in population

surveys and there is a rapidly growing body of interdisciplinary research on the determinants of subjective happiness and well-being. There has also been theoretical work discussing the possible links between subjective happiness and geographical or wider 'contextual' circumstances and characteristics (e.g. climate and socio-economic environment) as well as the relative importance of such characteristics in different countries and within regions and cities in a country (Ballas & Dorling, 2013).

An important distinction that can be made with regards to all these issues is that between studies of *happiness*, which typically analyse subjective measures measured via social survey questions such as 'are you happy with your life?' or 'how happy do you feel as you live now?', whereas *quality of life* (QoL) studies usually pertain to the analysis of more objective factors, such as the quantity and quality of natural amenities (e.g. climate and physical beauty) as well human-created amenities (e.g. recreation/entertainment opportunities, education and health services) and other 'objective' factors (e.g. unemployment rate and human capital). In the past decade there has been an increased interest in studying both objective and subjective measures of QoL and happiness and their socio-economic, demographic as well as possible geographical determinants. Given that most of the world's population now lives in cities, it is not surprising to see that a large and rapidly growing number of such studies focuses on urban areas, building on the long tradition of analysing 'objective' QoL measures and combining them with subjective approaches to measuring well-being. Of particular relevance and importance is a recent edited volume by Marans and Stimson (2011) "Investigating Quality of Urban Life", which included a detailed overview of pertinent studies over the last 50 years. It also included an impressive and cohesive set of empirical case studies of cities around the world, illustrating the

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key issues and approaches to the objective as well as subjective measurement of quality of urban life. Further, the volume highlights recent methodological developments and innovations (such as GIS and agent-based modelling) aimed at integrating objective and subjective approaches.

This article aims to further build on efforts such as the work of Marans and Stimson by highlighting the key issues pertaining to the factors affecting QoL, well-being and happiness in cities and also by reviewing some more recent work. The article is organised as follows: the next section presents an overview of ‘objective’ approaches to measuring QoL and well-being, drawing on some key comprehensive reviews that were carried out in the past, but also highlighting more recent work. The ‘Subjective happiness and well-being’ section introduces approaches to measuring and analysing ‘subjective’ measures of well-being and happiness and discusses the studies with a geographical and urban focus in this field to date. The ‘Contextual factors: social and spatial inequalities, social justice and the city’ section provides a discussion of city and city-region contextual factors pertaining to QoL, well-being and happiness. It also discusses methods and attempts to examine the interaction between individual level QoL and happiness and context. The concluding section discusses the role that cities can and should play in the new agendas of subjective happiness and well-being indicators and presents a research agenda to that end.

Objective approaches to measuring QoL in cities

Conceptualising QoL in cities and regions

It can be argued that the first comprehensive geographical approach to measuring city and regional QoL and well-being using objective measures is the work of David Smith, who systematically examined the geography of social well-being in the US (Smith, 1973). This study was based on the statistical analysis of secondary data for different geographical levels. Since then there has been a steadily growing number of similar but increasingly sophisticated studies of urban and regional QoL. There have also been a number of reviews of such studies, some of which have been very comprehensive and informative. Amongst the notable most recent surveys is the work of Craglia, Leontidou, Nuvolati, and Schweikart (2004), Mulligan, Carruthers, and Cahill (2004), Stimson and Marans (2011), Mulligan and Carruthers (2011) and Lambiri, Biagi, and Royuela (2007). This section provides an overview of the key debates, points and themes highlighted by these reviews, but it also aims to enrich these debates with a discussion of additional and more recent work.

It has often been suggested (Mulligan & Carruthers, 2011; Mulligan et al., 2004) that amongst the first attempts to quantify and analyse QoL in cities is the work of Goodrich, Allin, and Hayes (1935), Goodrich (1936), who identified a data-based “plane of living” for US counties during the Great Depression, and Thorndike (1939), who rated the “goodness of life” in US cities. These studies were followed by Tiebout’s (1956) theory that people select where they live by considering public services in relation to the tax they have to pay, ‘voting with their feet’ when they are not satisfied with the level of services they receive in a particular location. Nevertheless, as noted above, it can be argued that the first attempt to build an *evidence-based* framework that can be used for the analysis of social well-being and QoL is the work of Smith (1973). In addition, there have been considerable efforts aimed at building a comprehensive conceptual, theoretical and empirical framework for the analysis of regional variation of QoL such as the work of Rosen (1974), Cropper (1981), Graves (1982) and Roback (1982), who examined the relationship between wages, rents and QoL indica-

tors, as well as the work of Hoehn, Berger, and Blomquist (1987) who demonstrated how amenity values can be estimated in an inter-regional context. These studies typically define individual well-being as a utility function of factors that can be measured (e.g. consumption, residential land, wages and rents, local amenities) and which are assumed to be associated with QoL. The theories underpinning these debates suggest that, assuming constant-returns-to-scale technology and free mobility, “an interregional equilibrium implies that firms cannot reduce their costs and individuals cannot improve their well-being by relocation” (Hoehn et al., 1987, p. 608).

Building objective well-being indicators for cities and regions

These theoretical developments have been complemented by numerous attempts to provide *specific objective indicators* of QoL by city and region, and to identify the factors affecting it, including natural and urban amenities. In particular, there has been considerable research on the impact of the latter and of related public policy initiatives upon a range of measures that are thought to affect QoL in cities and regions (e.g. Bartik and Smith, 1987; Beeson, 1991). A recent example is the work of Morais and Camanho (2011) who presented an evaluation of the performance of 206 European cities on the basis of QoL based on two approaches: the construction of a composite indicator and an assessment of the ability of local authorities to promote QoL in the city given the economic position of their country. Further, Morais, Miguèis, and Camanho (2011) present an assessment of the urban QoL in European cities from the perspective of highly qualified and educated workers. They highlight the increasing policy relevance of urban QoL, given that it plays a major role in the migration decisions of highly educated workers. The attraction of highly educated workers in turn significantly affects the competitiveness of cities, so it is argued that there is a strong need to improve methods to evaluate and monitor urban QoL. Morais et al. (2011) developed a composite QoL index for 246 European cities by using data from the European Urban Audit.

It can be argued that the quantity and standard of amenities could be seen as a suitable objective indicator of QoL in cities. As Mulligan and Carruthers (2011) point out, amenities can be seen as “site- or region-specific goods and services, of either the private or public variety, that make some locations particularly attractive for living and working. Their opposites, disamenities, make other places unattractive”. Amenities in this context include both natural (e.g. climate, physical beauty, proximity to mountains or coasts) as well as social or human-created (theatres, music halls, restaurants, public parks, health and education services, and shopping choice) phenomena. Mulligan et al. (2004), in a very comprehensive and synthetic overview of multidisciplinary research on QoL and cities, suggested that natural amenities such as climate and topography have an important impact on household migration decisions as well as on the cost of housing. In addition, social and human-created amenities such as fiscal prudence, cultural and lifestyle tolerance, education, crime levels and the responsible management of land use are increasingly important for the success of cities. Relevant examples of modelling natural amenities include the work of Cheshire and Magrini (2006), who used measures relating to climate, and Shapiro (2006) who used air quality measures. Similarly, with regards to social/human created amenities Glaeser, Kolko, and Saiz (2001) explored the impact of bars, restaurants and theatres and Glaeser and Sacerdote (1999) explored the impact of crime.

More recently, Mulligan and Carruthers (2011) examined the role of amenities in regional economic development and identified the following key debates: “jobs versus amenities”, “jobs versus people adjustment” and “household migration”. The “jobs versus

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