

Abstract. *The constant research made by economists as well as other social scientists produces a vast literature on quality of life studies. On the other hand capturing all these researches, theories and results emerged from quality of life studies is not an easy task for someone less familiar with these studies. In this context, the present paper is using lakatosian methodology in order to identify taxonomic criteria that allow drawing some borders between quality of life research programs. Using this methodology we identify two different criteria at hardcore level: rationality and utility; one for heuristics level: research methodology; and one for protective belt level: public policies. These taxonomic criteria provide a reliable framework to distinguish among four research programs in quality of life studies: traditional economics, happiness studies, behavioral economics and capabilities approach.*

Keywords: quality of life, rationality, utility, research methodology, public policy.

A TAXONOMIC APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE STUDIES

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1. Introduction

In the last decades many economists and social scientists focused their attention on quality of life studies. Their research produced a vast literature which, for one who is not very familiar with this kind of analysis, might be difficult to grasp. There are, at least, three different approaches which can be identified in quality of life studies. First, there are happiness studies resumed by Frey and Stutzer (2002). This paper deals with important topics such as the link between happiness and utility, the effects of income, unemployment or inflation on happiness as well as institutional effect on happiness; the paper also tackles the implications for economic policy and theory but, at the same time, leaves open the issue of the link between happiness and quality of life. Second, different studies in behavioral economics focus on quality of life related topics such as hedonic treadmill (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006), Easterlin paradox (Easterlin, 2001) or paternalist policies (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003). Thirdly, capabilities approach initiated by works of Sen (1985), Nussbaum and Sen (1993) and continued by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress highlights various dimension of quality of life such as material well-being (Șerban-Oprescu, 2011), health (Constantinescu, 2011; Voinea, 2011), education (Badea, 2011), personal activities (Pelău, 2011), environmental conditions (Roșca, 2011; Ignat, 2011; Anica-Popa, 2011) or personal and economic insecurity (Aceleanu, 2011; Chenic, 2011).

From this perspective, the present study is an attempt to organize different assumptions, researches, theories and results produced by drawing some clear borders between various quality of life studies. Following this goal, the paper uses the research program methodology coined by Lakatos (1970, 1978) in order to identify epistemic assumptions that can be used as taxonomic criteria for quality of life research. In this context different possible taxonomic criteria were analyzed at each one of the three levels of a research program. First, at hardcore level, the analysis focused on two relevant epistemic questions: 1) To which extent can we assume that human action, decisions and choices are rational?; 2) How do individuals estimate their efficiency? The answers to these questions made it possible to identify two distinct frameworks (the rationality and utility context) that allow setting some clear boundaries between various approaches to quality of life research. The results are sketched in the first two sections of this paper. Second, at the heuristics level, the research method was identified as a taxonomic criterion which provides clear distinctions between research programs. At last, public policies context creates the framework for sorting into different classes the protective belts of research programs in quality of life studies.

2. Rationality context

Economists seem to have come to an agreement concerning rationality's place as a not only fundamental concept but one of the basic assumptions in economics. However, there are a lot of disagreements among economists when it comes to define

what it means to be rational. These disagreements lead many economists to shift their focus to define rational behavior rather than rationality *per se* (Steedman, 2000). In a more comprehensive framework, provided by Agassi and Jarvie (1980), at least four levels of rationality are identified: 1) goal directed behavior in the light of given beliefs; 2) choice of beliefs in the light of a given standard; 3) choice of beliefs in the light of best available standard; 4) choice of standard itself. Starting from this point one can easily distinguish among various research programs in quality of life studies. Thus, on the first level of rationality we can place behavioral economics and some heterodox research programs such as Austrian economics, while, on the second level of rationality stand mainstream economics and capabilities approach.

According to Steedman (2000), the long tradition of mainstream economics is to link rationality with choice which, in its turn is related to preferences. In this context, rationality might be defined as consistency of preferences which means that any given set, all individual preferences should follow three axioms: completeness, comparability and transitivity (this theory will be further analyzed in the utility context). Consequently, individuals' choices are clearly irrational when they do not follow the transitivity axiom (*ibidem*). There are, of course, various alternatives to this point of view from which we will only mention two. First, the more simplistic view of rationality defines choice as an act of selecting the most desirable element from a set without specifying the rules of selections. Second, a more formal approach renders rationality as a consistent maximization of a well-ordered function (such as utility or profit) (*ibidem*). Following almost the same line of thought, the capabilities approach, through Sen, tends to agree with the rationality-choices-preferences axioms, but, at the same time, weakens it by transforming the preference ordering from 'better than' in 'at least as good as' (*ibidem*). There are many critics to conventional rational choice theory. These critics are usually focusing on: 1) the nature of the choice set (choices are subjective and depend on expectations); 2) the limits of knowledge (the lack of relevant information – Simon's bounded rationality, the special features of information); 3) preference orderings (they are subjective and dependent on disposition of the individual); 4) failures of decision making process (*ibidem*). We shall further focus on the last two critiques which are brought to light by behavioral economics.

While it tends to agree with the assumption of preferences revealed through choices, behavioral economics argues that rationality does not consist in selecting preferences, as this process might be biased by framing or context. From this perspective, rationality can be defined as goal directed action (Taylor, 2010). According to Thaler and Sunstein (2003), there is a false assumption to believe that people are always or, at least, usually making choices that are in their best interest, or, in other words, humans often don't know what they want therefore are irrational (Taylor, 2010). While there are few empirical evidences which enhance the theory that people make better choices for themselves than others would, the irrationality assumption is supported by recent behavioral studies which reveal that many times individuals fail to make decisions consistent with Bayes rule, they use heuristics

instead of rational algorithms and are influenced by framing; they value much more present than future consumption and display self-control problems (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003). As if these behavioral fallacies were not enough, Kahneman (2006) adds more by arguing that “[r]esearch indicates that people are myopic in their decisions, may lack skill in predicting their future tastes, and can be led to erroneous choices by fallible memory and incorrect evaluation of past experiences” (p. 105). Moreover, choices which are identical from a rational point of view can be presented in distinct ways by framing the possible results of each choice and weighting them. A “reflection effect” occurs in these cases: people are risk-averse in respect to gains and risk-loving in respect to losses (Taylor, 2010). As a consequence, if one tries to place the problem on the second or even third level of rationality, he will discover that, according to behavioral studies, people are more likely to be irrational. This problem can only be solved by placing the rationality issue on its first level (according to Agassi’s ranking). At last, perhaps the most decisive standpoint is made by the Austrian school which assumes that choices are prior to preferences, hence preferences cannot be revealed by choices. Mises introduces the principle of singularism according to which any individual can make only one choice at a time and, thus the entire scale of preferences (which is only an abstract construction) can not be revealed (Taylor, 2010).

3. Utility context

Even though utility is a key-term in any economic theory, defining utility and measuring individual preferences are not at all an easy task. A reliable method of defining and assessing utility is paramount for quality of life since the best way to evaluate whether the individual is better off is by estimating preferences. This method implies at least two levels of difficulty: first to accurately assess preferences and, second, to find a way to aggregate these preferences (Fleurbaey, 2009). The difficulty in grasping and assessing such an elusive concept (i.e. utility) has split quality of life studies in three different directions: 1) preferences are revealed by choices (which is a reliable method for standard goods but it cannot be applied when the individual makes no choices); 2) preferences are either directly stated via questionnaires or indirect through choice experiments; 3) preferences are observed through satisfaction surveys which reveal the willingness-to-pay for various dimensions of quality of life (ibidem). According to these directions, one can identify at least four main research programs dedicated to quality of life studies: traditional economics, happiness approach, behavioral economics and capabilities approach.

First of all, the traditional view on economics is strongly based on the ordinal utility assumption which is constructed on four axioms: 1) preferences are complete; 2) preferences are transitive; 3) preferences are context independent; 4) choices are dependent on preferences (Hausman and McPherson, 2009). A formalization of these four axioms reveals that utility is a continuous, monotone function. In other words, utility is an abstract construct that indicates preference ranking and “it is not

something that people seek” (ibidem, p. 5). Albeit the utilitarian view that assumes satisfaction can be compared across individuals and also can be assigned a monetary value, mainstream economics suggests that utility can only be revealed by choices and it is impossible to compare across individual preferences (Taylor, 2010).

Second, in happiness studies, in contrast to traditional economics, utility is more than an abstract construct since “many authors seem to keep searching for the ‘utility’ Graal and to believe that the recent developments bring them closer to it” (Fleurbaey, 2009, p. 33). This task is made easier by replacing the traditional term of utility with a new one, subjective well-being. According to Frey and Stutzer (2002), utility and happiness are not similar terms, but they are very closely related. Happiness has a wider sense than utility because it should “cover more aspects of human well-being”, but, since in many cases utility is difficult to grasp and measure, “subjective well-being can be considered a useful approximation [...]” which “allows us to empirically study problems that previously were analyzed only on an abstract level” (Frey and Stutzer, 2002, p. 405). In addition, in many happiness studies, “happiness, subjective well-being and life satisfaction are used interchangeably” (ibidem, p. 406). This utility-subjective well-being (happiness) equivalence is made possible by drawing a clear distinction between objective and subjective utility. Even though objective utility is dominant in traditional economics, subjective utility is more suited to explain human behavior and decision making process (ibidem). Subjective utility is a broader concept because it includes both objective utility (revealed utility) and procedural utility (not only the goal is important but also the meanings to achieve it). In addition, subjective utility is more directly linked with human behavior than experienced utility (ibidem). Moreover, subjective utility is able to grasp the two different psychological components of well-being: 1) affects which are closely related to emotions and give an instant evaluation of different events; 2) cognition which is linked to rationality and assesses satisfaction (ibidem). The replacement of utility with subjective well-being is not just a fashionable trend. In fact, the hope of happiness studies is that via subjective well-being economists will be finally able to assess utility in reliable quantitative terms.

Third, behavioral economics seem to lean towards a more hedonic version of utility borrowed from Edgeworth and Bentham, in which pleasure is an affect that has a certain level and duration. This simple approach is further filled with satisfaction judgments based on experienced and remembered events. These are more than just a reflection of affects (Fleurbaey, 2009). According to Hausman and McPherson (2009), behavioral economists usually try to follow Sidgwick’s assumption which states that welfare consists in any mental state which is desirable. Through insight into human mind, behavioral economics draws distinctions between different types of experiences that affect utility. Consequently, there is experienced utility which is a “continuous hedonic flow of pleasure and pain” (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006, p. 4). This kind of utility can be measured in controlled laboratory experiments in which researchers are able to focus only on the effect of a stimulus on individual experience (ibidem). On the other hand, there is ‘remembered utility’ which is “the way [individuals]

remember their experiences after they are over” (ibidem, p. 5). Even though this is more prone to biases, individuals use ‘remembered utility’ to assess life satisfaction and “... individuals’ choices are affected by their remembered utility” (ibidem, p. 6). Relying on Diener’s assumption in behavioral economics studies life satisfaction assessment emerges from a combination of an imperfect evaluation of affects and peoples’ perceptions on how they accomplish their aspirations and goals (ibidem). In addition, behavioral economists, inspired by Damasio’s work in neuroeconomics particularly his “somatic marker hypothesis”, suggest that human mind is incapable of wise decisions; all decisions are affected by emotions (Taylor, 2010). This is how behavioral economics explains the irrationality hypothesis.

On the other hand, the capabilities approach is still undecided whether well-being resides in better functionings or more capabilities. Even though, in theory, one can talk about functionings and capabilities, in practice, it is much easier to grasp functionings than capabilities (Fleurbaey, 2009). For this reason the majority of empirical studies “deal almost exclusively with functionings because they are observable” (ibidem, p. 1036). Functionings are usually estimated via traditional utility since the unlimited needs assumption still applies in the case of functionings: people tend to be never satisfied they always want more and more (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). Nevertheless, the capabilities approach does not neglect the major breakthroughs made by alternative ways to traditional welfare approach. Thus, the importance of freedom and the need to respect individual preferences are paramount for the capabilities approach (Fleurbaey, 2009).

4. Research methods context

In many cases, research methods are to blame for drawing borders between different approaches in economics. Quality of life studies are no exception. A brief retrospective of literature reveals that research programs in quality of life studies display different methods when it comes to finding a reliable metric to assess life dimensions and to identify a global index for quality of life. From this perspective, we can easily keep the previous taxonomic approach which separates research programs in traditional economics, the happiness approach, behavioral economics and the capabilities approach. The research methods distinctions may be studied on two levels: assessing life dimensions and indexing these dimensions in a single metric.

On the first level, traditional economics came a long way to acknowledge that welfare is more than just increasing income and consumption. Incorporating non-monetary dimension of life without changing the unit of measurement used in estimating individuals’ well-being is a very daunting task. Different attempts have been made such as a corrected GDP or a ‘green GDP’, but, as Fleurbaey (2009) argues “a more promising approach for the incorporation of non-monetary aspects of quality of life involves equivalent incomes in which income can be submitted to additions and subtractions reflecting people’s willingness-to-pay for a move from their current situation to a reference situation” (p. 1047).

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Following conventional economics of mixing empiricism with formalism, happiness studies are trying to extract data on people's well being by using various methods of observation, these data are further used to design econometric functions that estimate individuals' well-being. the goal of the happiness approach seems to be acquiring advanced econometric methods (such as cross-section regressions) and further improvement of collected data (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). According to them, this econometric model consists in the latent variable which is true well-being and the independent variables which are different demographic, economic or social characteristics. The error term captures the biases. The consistency of this econometric model could be provided by more accurate data which can be collected from direct observation (such as large scale surveys) rather than observed behavior (ibidem).

On the other hand, one of the major shortcomings is that individual judgments are "prone to a multitude of systematic and nonsystematic biases" (ibidem, p. 429). These shortcomings could be overcome by setting as goal to find the determinants of happiness rather than measure level of happiness (ibidem). So far, happiness studies focused mainly on the following determinants of happiness: income, unemployment, inflation and some institutional factors such as political system. Even though researchers are able to apply econometric models and empirical analyses, these kinds of studies are only revealing a possible correlation between different factors and happiness and they are not consistent enough to explain the causality.

The fact that results tend to be less relevant as more data are collected and used only enhances the need for better research methods (ibidem). One topic particularly stressed out by happiness studies is the effects of income on well-being. The empirical studies on this topic revealed that higher income provides a higher subjective well-being, but at the same time, the same studies lead to a puzzling result known as the Easterlin paradox: even though in developed countries such as US, Japan or Western European countries income per capita has risen markedly over time, average happiness remained constant or slightly decreased (ibidem). In other words, neither cross-section data nor life cycle observation show a robust correlation between income and reported satisfaction as "people at any given point in the life cycle typically think that they will be better off in the future than at present, and that they are better off today than in the past" (ibidem, p. 434). According to Easterlin (2001), the empirical studies reveal three regularities: people tend to be happier with the increase of income, future happiness level is positioned above current level and reports on present happiness remain constant over time.

The Easterlin paradox provides the perfect opportunity for happiness studies to introduce aspiration level which is used as key-term in the following explanation: reported happiness is dependent on the aspiration level, aspirations levels are changing with income levels and "utility functions shift inversely with material aspirations" (Easterlin, 2001, p. 470). In this context, there are three assumptions regarding aspiration levels: "(1) early in the life cycle, preferences are fairly similar among income groups, (2) over the life cycle, preferences vary in proportion to income, and (3) in evaluating past or future happiness, people take their preferences to be the same

as those held currently” (ibidem, p. 476). This paradox also reveals the weaknesses of empirical methods since observations may be different from one period to another and people are unable to make absolute judgments because they always relate themselves to others or past events (Frey and Stutzer, 2002).

On the other hand, behavioral economics is using the theory of the hedonic treadmill to explain the Easterlin paradox. According to Kahneman and Krueger (2006, pp. 14-5), “the transitory effect of changes in life circumstances on reported satisfaction has been called *hedonic treadmill*, meaning that the effects of substantial life changes on subjective well-being are temporary”. Thus, an increase in income has little effects on life satisfaction or happiness (ibidem). In this context, the common research methods for estimating subjective well-being in happiness approach are: questionnaire surveys, experience sampling and day reconstruction, psychological and neurological measures, behavioral observations (Fleurbaey, 2009). At the same time, behavioral economists are aware of the caveats of empirical research since in spite all efforts; there is no guarantee that “respondents use the scales comparably” and “individuals may interpret and use the response categories differently” (ibidem, p. 1056).

While for the behavioral approach the Easterlin paradox reflects that people are not capable to make the best choices, for the capabilities approach this paradox doesn’t stand, people are trying to improve their dimensions of quality of life even though this behaviour is not reflected in an increase in their hedonic experiences (Fleurbaey, 2009). Being wide open to any reliable research method, the capabilities approach extends research to a wide variety of dimension of life while the other approaches are much narrow (ibidem). Thus, “... all studies which seek to incorporate multiple dimensions of quality of life into the evaluation of individual and social situations can be considered, broadly speaking, as pertaining to this approach” (ibidem, p. 1039). At the same time, the most important challenge for the capabilities approach is to shift its research methods to capabilities rather than functionings, but this kind of change comes with the difficulty to find a reliable assessment method (ibidem).

When it comes to indexing level, the approaches among research programs are quite contradictory. Traditional economics always wanted to identify a single comprehensive index for well-being, unfortunately many times its attempts fell into Arrow’s impossibility theorem. This theorem states that any social welfare function should follow three axioms: ordinalism, independence and weak Pareto. According to these axioms, the only possibility when there more than two alternatives is for someone to impose the good alternative (ibidem). This case is quite similar to Condorcet’s paradox. To solve this conundrum, instead of comparing preferences one can compare wealth or income (ibidem). This is the classical indexing method applied by traditional economics.

Going further to the happiness approach and behavioural economics, one can notice that there are contradictory ideas regarding indexing within this research programs, while some economists are focusing on defining a “Gross National Happiness”, others acknowledge that this research program is still far from replacing

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traditional measures of welfare with a single global happiness index (*ibidem*). Conversely, the capability approach unlike the other research programs rejects from the start the possibility of aggregation because there is no possibility to compare satisfaction across individuals (*ibidem*). It is also difficult to aggregate all the dimensions of capabilities and functioning since they are not all equivalent as weight. Any attempt to define a single index that weights all dimensions of life for all individuals is either impossible or, at least, paternalistic. In this context, the only plausible solution which respects every individual valuation of various dimension of life is dealing with functionings reflected via utility functions. From this reason, mainstream capabilities approach abandoned the quest for a single metric of quality of life (*ibidem*).

5. Public policies context

Economic policies, which are a major part of the protective belt in any research program, are usually the result of some basic assumptions verified and applied via different research methods. In quality of life studies, the irrationality assumption and empiricist methods are the ones that lead to either a welfarist or a paternalist approach at policies level. The welfarist approach is commonly used in traditional economics but is sometimes applied in more modern research programs such as the capabilities approach or happiness studies. According to the welfarist view, people are sufficiently rational to acknowledge what is the best alternative for them, and they are primarily interested in raising their well-being by increasing consumption and income. However, the modern approaches in quality of life studies stress the idea that a better way to increase social welfare is to focus on social relations and other non-monetary dimensions of life (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). According to the happiness approach the sole increase of income could not be enough to improve well-being; quite often employment is more closely related to well-being than income. Consequently the welfare policy should be first directed toward providing employment (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). Going back to the income perspective, redistributing income should be a major concern for tax policies since people tend to assess their own level of happiness in comparison to others and poverty assessment is a matter of subjective well-being rather than of disposable income (Frey and Stutzer, 2002).

Alternatively, the paternalistic approach assumes that because people are sometimes unable to choose in their best interest, the best public policy is libertarian paternalism. Paternalist policies take a normative position by trying to find the real determinants of satisfaction and fighting against individuals biases that deflect the path to a greater satisfaction (Fleurbaey, 2009). This consists of influencing people's decisions in order to get better off without involving any coercion (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003). In other words, libertarian paternalism "preserves freedom of choice but authorizes both private and public institutions to steer people in the direction that will promote their welfare" (*ibidem*, p. 175). From this point of view, according to Rizzo and Whitman (2009, p. 910), a policy maker committed to paternalism has a daunting task

which consists in applying the following steps: 1) identify the true preference since the individual is unable to do this; 2) determine the decision making problem (what is keeping the individual away from the right decision); 3) measure biases; 4) deal with independent biases; 5) anticipate unraveling and unlearning effects; 6) keep in mind the heterogeneity problem. The most known and widely spread paternalistic policies are: 1) sin taxes (a tax that will induce a behaviour which avoids self-bias, insufficient will-power, hyperbolic discounting, time inconsistency); 2) default enrolments in savings plans that will avoid exponential discounting; 3) cooling off periods before and after various contracts; 4) risk narratives which will persuade consumers to avoid dangerous products (ibidem, p. 956).

6. Conclusions and discussion

This brief analysis of quality of life studies reveals the possibility to identify strong criteria that allow drawing borders among various approaches in this field of research. Using the epistemic theory of Lakatos, different taxonomic criteria were found on each level of research programs. At the hard core level, two criteria were defined: rationality and utility. These two criteria allow us to identify at least four major approaches in quality of life studies: traditional economics, happiness studies, behavioral economics and capabilities approach. The rationality context divides researches in to different assumptions: 1) rational people are capable to maximize a well-ordered function (such as utility or profit) and rationality can be defined as goal directed action (this hypothesis is usually assumed by traditional economics and from time to time by capabilities approach); 2) people are sometimes unable to choose in their best interest because, for various reasons, they fail to make rationally consistent decisions (this assumption is particularly stressed out by behavioural economics). The utility context distinguishes among ordinal utility (embraced by traditional economics), subjective well-being (happiness research) and hedonic utility (behavioral economics).

At the heuristic level, the research method is defined as taxonomic criterion for research programs. Using this criterion, the present analysis identifies the following approaches: 1) traditional economics emphasizes the material aspects of life and use monetary global indexes; 2) happiness studies are committed to find advanced econometric methods to measure life satisfaction and search for a global index of happiness; 3) behavioral economics estimates subjective well-being using questionnaire surveys, experience sampling and day reconstruction, psychological and neurological measures, behavioral observations; 4) the capabilities approach is trying to define the relevant dimensions of life and remains skeptical about the possibility to aggregate this dimensions in a single global index. At the protective belt level, using the public policies context, the study identifies the welfarist and paternalist approach. The first uses income and other non-monetary dimensions of life as proxies for well-being, while the second is trying to find the real determinants of satisfaction since people are sometimes unable to choose in their best interest.

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Lakatos' methodology allowed to be distinguished at least four rival research programs in quality of life studies. By taking a normative approach, one could ask the following question: which one of these research programs is better? Fortunately, a large part of the answer lies in Lakatos' methodology. According to Lakatos (1970), one can distinguish among two types of research programs. On the one hand, there are progressive research programs that allow new facts and new theories to be discovered, and on the other hand, there are regressive research programs which only protect old theories that have lost their power to explain or to predict new facts. From this perspective, the initial normative position can be turned into a positive approach. Instead of asking which research program is better, we can ask whether these programs are progressive or not. In this context, a brief analysis of the empirical and theoretical developments produced by each of these four programs could bring more light into this issue.

First, is traditional economics a progressive research program from quality of life studies perspective? A brief retrospect on a few of the most important breakthroughs produced by traditional approach in quality of life studies will stand for an affirmative answer. At theoretical level, by introducing the concept of utility and applying it in economic theory through mathematics, traditional economics has led to the development of welfare economics. This was the first theoretical step in quality of life studies. Alternatively, at the empirical level, the traditional approach is still the most available and proper way to render and predict individual's pure economic behavior that affects his/her well-being and, consequently, quality of life level. Nevertheless, recent economic crisis revealed some of its weaknesses in terms of explanation and prediction and casted a shadow over the traditional approach in quality of life studies. But this does not necessarily mean that traditional economics has turned into a regressive research program. On the contrary, material well-being dimension of quality of life is still best explained by the traditional approach.

Second, happiness studies have driven the traditional economic goal of an individual, i.e. utility, to a new level, i.e. happiness. Thus, happiness studies have extended the empirical content of quality of life studies from mere material facts to perceptions on material facts. Life satisfaction is not only a question of wealth but a question of individual insights on various achievements obtained during a certain period. Moreover, at the theoretical level, happiness studies focused on more determinants of well-being than utility, providing new theories that not only explain but also measure the influences of various factors, such as income, unemployment, inflation or political environment, on individual's perception of life satisfaction. The developments mentioned above supply enough evidence to support the progressive feature of happiness studies as quality of life research programs.

Third, behavioral economics clearly puts a decisive mark on quality of life studies. The improvements made by behavioral approach to economics are mainly to be found at the level of decision theory. By assimilating a new rationality paradigm and adding more degrees of flexibility to utility concept, behavioral economics advances a new theory that can better explain and predict human behavior in particular

environments. Coincidentally or not, decisions made in these particular environments (accepting a job under temporal pressure, closing deals in a “hot state”, attending a particular university because it is trendy and so on) are very important for individual’s quality of life level over a long period of time. As if already provided statements were not enough to support the progressive feature of behavioral economics approach, at least one more could be added. One, according to Lakatos (1978) a research program is more progressive if attracts more followers. Second, a quick glance over quality of life research community will reveal that a significant body of economists adheres to behavioral approach.

Fourth, capabilities approach is, perhaps, the most present research program in quality of life study. Capabilities approach is not only an active but also a successful program at both theoretical and empirical level. The capabilities approach introduced one of the most comprehensive theories that can coherently explain, describe, and even predict quality of life issues. In a nutshell, the functionings and capabilities theory asserts that the individual seeks not only the traditional well-being, but a combination of valuable acts and states that define his/her life. This theory extends well beyond traditional limits the theoretical and empirical content of quality of life studies and opens interesting research paths. These research paths are already followed by a significant number of scholars with meaningful empirical results in measuring various dimensions of quality of life (as already stated in the introduction of this paper). Considering these evidences, one can argue that capabilities approach is definitely a progressive research program in quality of life studies.

To sum up, following Lakatos’ methodology the conclusion is evident: there are no better or worse research programs in quality of life studies. All programs are progressive in their own; moreover, there are no rival research programs but alternative programs in this field. One can note that each research program can be applied with more success than another in a particular area of research but none of these programs can claim to be overall “better” than the rest.

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