Present Trends and Future Directions of Quality-Of-Life

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Abstract

Quality-of-life (QOL) is a multifaceted concept and it has attracted the attention of researchers from a wide range of academic disciplines as well as interest among policy makers, planners and others in the environmental design field. Being a rich concept, QOL studies can be construed in different perspectives like health approach, needs approach, happiness versus life satisfaction and the resource management approach. Although QOL research in Malaysia started in 1987, progress is slow. This paper provides an overview of the present trends of QOL research by highlighting the disciplinary and spatial bias and finally, suggests future directions of QOL research in Malaysia.

Keywords: Quality of life; interdisciplinary; happiness; life satisfaction

1. Introduction

The term Quality-of-life (QOL) is used and understood by most people as ‘goodness of life’ and being able to live successfully and happily within the environment (Brown and Brown, 2005). QOL concept should not be confused with the income based concept of standard of living. It refers to the physical, psychological, and sociological state of being of people. It is broader than happiness because it entails factors such as enjoyment and achievement. Quality of life is also broader than satisfaction because it entails variables such as aspiration and recollection. It is also broader than the wellbeing because the quality of life is neutral. It is broader than health because it entails being in the context of one or several

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factors (Inoguchi and Fujii, 2013, p.3). Standard indicators of the QOL include not only wealth and employment, but also the built environment, physical and mental health, education, recreation and leisure time, and social belonging (Gregory et al., 2009).

Quality of life (QOL) is a multifaceted concept which has been used by a variety of disciplines in the research works of both developed and developing countries. Sirgy (2001) argues that QOL is a rich concept and can be construed in different perspectives such as health approach, needs approach, QOL as happiness versus life satisfaction and the resource management approach. Over the years, the study of QOL has attracted the attention of researchers from a wide range of academic disciplines as well as interest among policy makers, planners and others in the environmental design fields. The concept is certainly interdisciplinary, and it is recognized as warranting interdisciplinary study (Marans, 2012, p. 10). Table 1 documents the disciplines which have embedded QOL for research and development policy purposes.

Table 1. Discipline Related to the QOL Studies.

| Disciplines                  | Major concern            | Measurement          | Nomenclature     |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Economics, Political Science | Income, poverty          | Objective            | QOL              |
| Sociology, Psychology        | Individual/ Community well-being | Subjective      | QOL/ QOWL        |
| Health studies               | Individual well-being    | Subjective           | HR-QOL           |
| Housing                      | Housing satisfaction     | Subjective well-being| QOL-Housing      |
| Marketing                    | Product satisfaction     | Subjective well-being| QOL-Marketing    |
| City level analysis          | Livability               | Objective            | QOL-livability   |
| Urban analysis               | Urban living condition   | Objective/ subjective| QOUL             |
| Tourism                      | Tangible, intangible benefits and costs | Objective/ subjective | QOL-Tourism      |

Source: Authors adaptation based on various studies.

Table 2. QOL Studies done at Various Spatial Levels.

| Spatial Level     | Approach          | Measurement          | Domains/ Components |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| International     | Indexing          | Objective/subjective | Multidimensional    |
| National          | Indexing          | Objective/subjective | Multidimensional    |
| Regional          | Indexing          | Objective/subjective | Multidimensional    |
| City / Urban      | Multiple communities | Objective/subjective | Multidimensional    |
| Community         | Multiple neighborhood | Objective/subjective | Multidimensional    |
| Neighborhood      | Multiple groups   | Objective/subjective | Multidimensional    |
| Building/ Group   | Households/families | Subjective         | Multidimensional    |

Source: Authors adaptation based on various studies.

QOL is a pervasive concept and can be applied at different spatial levels for research, and policy purposes. Table 2 presents the spatial levels at which QOL studies are embedded in the fields of the built environment for policy pursuits. Both disciplinary and spatial context provide a framework for examining the QOL research status of a country. Although QOL research in Malaysia started in 1987, progress has been very slow. QOL-related research in Malaysia is still in its infancy. Moreover, the QOL studies in
Malaysia have been biased to some disciplines and certain spatial level. It has been remarked that QOL research attracts attention and interest of many parties and understanding of QOL require endless efforts. However, efforts to improve understanding about QOL should not be limited to one discipline only, and it should be extended to other disciplines (Marans, 2012).

1.1. Aim and objectives

The main aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the present trends of QOL research by highlighting the disciplinary and spatial bias and finally, to suggest future directions based on the trend of the socio-economic development of the country.

Three objectives have been set for the paper. These are –
- To explore the present trend of the QOL studies in Malaysia.
- To investigate the biasness and deficiencies of QOL research in Malaysia.
- To refocus QOL research to the deficient or nationally considered important areas of the country.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical perspective

QOL is a broad concept which is concerned with overall well-being of people in the society, and it can be studied from different theoretical perspectives. Three important perspectives are-
- Happiness and Life Satisfaction Approach.
- Needs Satisfaction Approach.
- Life Satisfaction based on Need Satisfaction.

2.1.1. Happiness and life satisfaction approach

Happiness and life satisfaction are the central objectives of most people’s well-being in life. Thus, QOL can be construed from a happiness and life satisfaction approach. Although happiness and life satisfaction are not the same, they are mutually interrelated with the notion of QOL.

Happiness is defined as the affective or feeling state of the individual, and it is derived from the positive and negative emotional reactions experienced from life events (Sirgy and Lee, 2006). Happiness is usually measured by using the subjective expressions made by individuals through statements or claims describing their happiness. Kahneman (1999) argues that the subjective expression of happiness is insufficient and should be accompanied with the measurement of objective happiness. Happiness can also be viewed from the temporal perspective. Campbell et al. (1976) contend that happiness is regarded by psychologists as a short-term effect that fluctuates on a daily basis and it reflect how people feel towards their current state of affairs. On the other hand, the long-term happiness is disposition and is less subjected to the environmental factors.

Life satisfaction is defined as the outcome of evaluation of one’s current life situations or accomplishments against certain standards of comparisons such as one’s ideal life, expectations of personal utility, individual goals, values, needs, opulence and the lives of significant others. Usually, life satisfaction is measured based on an individual evaluation on the different aspects of life domain such as family life, financial life, consuming life and social life, given that these life domains are important to them. It is a long-term cognitive appraisal of the past, present and overall life events, and it is considered to be relatively more stable among older age groups of people than the younger ones (Campbell, et al., 1976). Furthermore, young people tend to indicate greater happiness but achieve less life satisfaction compared to older people.
2.1.2. Needs satisfaction approach

According to the needs satisfaction approach, an individual achieves a certain level of QOL based upon the extent to which his/her basic needs are met. Maslow’s (1954) work sets the foundation for development on the needs satisfaction theories. Arndt (1981) suggests these needs to be categorized into Physical needs, Social needs and Self-actualization needs. The theory proposed by Allards (1993) is to overcome the issue of the fixed arrangement of the needs in the sequence of hierarchy of order postulated by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and he proposed three types of needs. Table 3 summarizes the types of needs satisfaction according to the three different authors.

Table 3. Needs Satisfaction Theories.

| Needs Satisfaction Theories          | Maslow (1954)            | Arndts (1981)       | Allards (1993)      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Physiological needs                 | Physical needs           | Having needs        |
| Safety needs                        | Social needs             | Loving needs        |
| Belongings needs                    |                          |                     |
| Self-esteem needs                   | Self-actualization needs | Being needs         |
| Self-actualization needs            |                          |                     |

Source: Maslow, 1954; Arndts, 1981; Allards, 1993.

Since QOL is an intriguing construct, it can also be interpreted in terms of a need satisfaction approach. It has been argued that human needs form the underlying foundation of QOL. Therefore, QOL can be defined in terms of human needs and the fulfillment of those needs satisfactorily. Hence, QOL reflects a condition when certain aspects of human basic needs are being met. Some researchers of QOL incorporate a needs-based satisfaction model based on Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of human needs necessary for maintenance and existence (Table 3). Maslow further argued that once these basic needs are satisfied human beings will pursue higher needs such as self-actualization.

The work of Arndt (1981) suggests a conceptual model of the processes determining QOL which proposed that work life is the physical place where actions through which the conversation of input resources to output and final fulfillment of goals occur. According to Allardt (1993), basic needs comprises of three components of life such as ‘having’, ‘loving’, and ‘being’. Having needs is related to material conditions necessary for survival, and the avoidance of misery while Loving needs are defined as needs related to other people and form social identities. Being needs are defined as the needs for integration into society and to live in harmony with nature.

2.1.3. Life satisfaction based on need hierarchy approach

Sirgy (1995) has developed a QOL model in which life satisfaction measure was drawn from Maslow’s (1954) need hierarchy theory. The model is based on the theoretical notion that the greater level of satisfaction of lower- and higher-order needs, the greater level of life satisfaction. Lower-order needs are related to biological sustenance and safety while higher-order needs are related to social belongings, esteem and self-actualization. Hence, QOL can be defined in terms of the hierarchical need satisfaction level of most of the members of a given society. The higher the need satisfactions of a majority of people in a given society, the greater the QOL of that society. Institutions are built to serve human needs in a society, and hence, they constitute a society’s QOL. Societal institutions that serve human needs include production, maintenance, managerial/political and adaptive institutions. Each of these types of societal institutions involves a hierarchical dimension. The model argues that progressive increases in QOL are accompanied by hierarchical changes in these societal institutions. The model was tested in 1,226 adults.
drawn from the United States, Canada, Australia, Turkey and China, along with other life satisfaction and demographics. The results provided evidence of the construct validity of the need hierarchy measure of life satisfaction.

Other theoretical perspectives applied to recently developed QOUL studies are – optimal centrality theory, territorial social indicators.

2.2. Empirical research perspective

Researchers in the field of QOL study have attempted to define the umbrella term “quality of life” in different ways since 1964. One way to dichotomize the notion of life quality is from the viewpoint of either the objective or subjective. One approach focuses on objective conditions in which people live while the other approach considers how they feel about those conditions and other life circumstances (Inoguchi and Fujii, 2013). Cummins (1996) suggests that there are two basic approaches to the definition and measurement of quality of life - one regards the construct as a single unitary entity while the other considers it to be composed of discrete domains. The former implies specifying QOL at an aggregate level by objective measures while the latter focuses at the disaggregated level or individual level.

Subjective approach focuses on measuring subjective well-being based on the individual evaluations and perceptions of life which are used to measure the QOL construct. These measures allow the researcher to use primary data to gain insights into what a person considers being important to the well-being or satisfaction in his life. Subjective QOL is about feeling good and being satisfied with things in general. It also refers to an individual’s ability to perform and enjoy social roles, work roles, community roles, and incorporate personal satisfaction, spiritual rewards and moral and social well-being. Subjective measures are used at the micro level analysis, for inter- and intragroup comparison. In summary, subjective QOL measures are concerned with measuring aspects related to the cognitive experience (judgment, beliefs, evaluation), affective aspects of experience (feeling) and behavior dimension.

Objective measures are those that can be observed and measured within the public domain using indicators such as physical properties and frequencies. Objective measurement of QOL includes economic status (income, possessions and career success), politics (such as crime rate and welfare expenditure), health and education, environment (such as pollution and climate) and social (such as mobility and living conditions). The objective measures of QOL allow researchers to use secondary data. However, the use of objective measures may pose problems with the validity issues. A group of indicators mentioned by Marans et al. (2011) is termed as behavioral indicators, which are for use in QOUL studies.

The choice on the use of either a subjective or an objective measurement for a QOL study depends on the research interest and design, and the availability of information. Subjective and objective measures complement each other, and they are needed in the QOL study. While both measurement methods offered insight into the QOL issue, there are a number of limitations to using either of these approaches separately, what seems best, then, is to attempt to approach QOL that combines objective and subjective approaches (Costanza et al., 2008, p.18). However, some empirical studies commented that direct links between objective and subjective indicators were found to be weak (McCrea, et al., 2011, p. 85).

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the stated objectives of the paper, the methodology adopted is a desktop research method. It is based on secondary information pertaining to the QOL related studies published in journals, conference proceedings, bulletins, government documents, research reports, monographs. The published information gathered from the internet search form the basic data of the study, and they are carefully analysed in order to arrive at meaningful findings, and to draw useful conclusions. Furthermore, the
studies were analysed from disciplinary perspective, coverage in contents, study scope, time and subject matter. However, the internet search for literature continued for three months, and hence, it was neither possible to gather all the relevant studies, nor do we claim to have covered all the QOL studies in Malaysia. This is one limitation of the present paper.

4. Findings

QOL research/studies in Malaysia can be broadly categorized into four groups. These are, viz., macro level studies, regional level studies, local/city level studies and micro level studies.

4.1. Macro level QOL studies in Malaysia

Macro level QOL studies in Malaysia are basically aggregate with either national or cross-national focus. These are designed by using objective and/or subjective approaches. In Malaysia, there are two studies which belong to this category.

4.1.1. Malaysian Quality of Life 2011 (EPU, 2012).

The Malaysian Quality of Life - 2011 is a government publication, reporting on the quality of life trend for the period of 2000 to 2010. The MQLI (Malaysian Quality of Life Index) is a tool used to gain insights in understanding the changes and improvements in the QOL of the people that include physical, social, economic and psychological aspects. It is a composite index made up of 11 components that include education, transport and communications, housing, culture and leisure, income and distribution, public safety, health, social participation, environment, family life, working conditions. A total of 45 indicators have been used. The MQLI provides an evaluation of economic policy effectiveness on a broader scope and thus, provides guidance to future planning for socioeconomic development policies and strategies. The MQLI calculated in 2011 was 111.9 over a base of 100 (2000). The sub-indices values were as follows: education - 120.4, transport and communication – 120.3, housing – 115.7, culture and leisure – 113.5, income and distribution – 113.3, public safety – 110.8, health – 110, social participation – 110.1, environment – 106.6, family life – 104.6, working condition – 104.6 (EPU, 2012, p.5).

4.1.2. Quality of Life in Asia (2013).

Inoguchi & Fujii (2013) examined the subjective and multileveled quality of life in 29 Asian countries including Malaysia, by using AsiaBarometer Survey data from 2003 to 2008. The study measures the diversities and contrasts among the 29 countries in Asia through value priorities, lifestyles, specific life domain satisfactions. The overall QOL is measured through residents’ self-assessed happiness, enjoyment and achievement. The Malaysian sample for the study was 1000, and the survey year was 2008. In addition to the overall QOL, the study also examined satisfaction levels with 16 specific life domains and grouped 29 Asian countries according to their satisfaction levels. The findings show that people in more dynamic, more competitive Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam) tend to prioritize post-materialist or QOL-enriching factors (such as friendships, marriage, neighbors, family life, leisure, and spiritual life) in their daily lifestyle (Inoguchi & Fujii, 2013).

In order to identify the determinants of QOL, the study used ordered logit regression analysis which shows that housing, household income, standard of living, and public safety are key features of mainstream Southeast Asian features. The estimated coefficients on “housing” are positive and statistically significant in all the regressions of “happiness,” “enjoyment,” and “achievement” using both married observations and the general sample of all the Malay observations. “Household income” is positively associated with “happiness” and “achievement” when using the married observations.
Satisfaction with public safety tends to be positively related to the overall QOL. It is essential to note that family life adds immensely to happiness. The estimated coefficient on “family life” is positive and statistically significant in the regressions of “happiness” when using the married observations and the general sample of all the Malay observations. The materialist life sphere is the most vital and positively related to the overall quality of life in the three spheres, followed by the post-materialist life sphere and the public life sphere in that order. In terms of demographics, females are happy based on the general sample of all the Malay respondents. Regionally, respondents in the northern border area with southern Thailand express less happiness, whereas respondents in the southern and central regions including Kuala Lumpur are the happiest. The respondents in eastern Malaysia, an area that borders Indonesia’s Kalimantan, fare slightly worse in terms of enjoyment levels. (Inoguchi and Fujii, 2013, p.128-33).

4.2. Regional level QOL studies in Malaysia

Regional level QOL studies in Malaysia, either using objective or subjective approach, are also aggregate studies with either inter-regional or cross-regional coverage. In Malaysia, although the Inoguchi and Fujii study have some regional focus, inter-regional or intra-regional QOL studies are lacking in Malaysia. The only study found is Mohit (2013) which was presented in AicQoL2013.

Objective measurements of social, economic, physical and environmental data at the regional/state level were analyzed to investigate regional variations in QOL. Based on the availability of secondary data, the study adopted a QOL framework which consists of 7 domains. These are – communication and recreation, economic condition, educational facilities, environmental condition, health facilities, public safety and social condition. A total of 35 indicators belonging to the 7 domains have been used in this study. The findings of the study suggest that in order to reduce differences in the interstate QOL and improve it as well, policy measures are necessary to enhance social condition, environmental condition and public safety. The indicators determining the social component are - divorce rate, drug addicts and juvenile delinquency. Hence, measures are necessary to reduce these rates. Again, environmental conditions can be improved through reducing pollution and enhancing citizen awareness. Similarly, public safety variables such as road accidents, crimes, fire breakouts should be brought under control in order to enhance State-level QOL. Therefore, the States of Malaysia should take active initiate towards improvements in the social, environmental and public safety conditions along with economic development for both reducing interstate differences of QOL, and improve them as well.

4.3. Local city level QOL studies in Malaysia

Local/ City level QOL studies in Malaysia have inter local/city or intra local/city focus. While inter local/city level study is expected to be comparative, intra local/city level studies concentrate at the neighborhood level variations of QOL, by using either objective or subjective approaches. In Malaysia, both types of QOL studies are lacking. Only two studies are found – the first one is Dasimah’s (2009) assessment of residents’ QOL in 13 Malaysian new towns, and Azhan, et al’s (2009) study of the quality of life in Seremban town of Malaysia.

The first study is based on a perceptual survey, and it was carried out to evaluate the level of quality of life experienced by a sample of 436 residents living in 13 new towns which were developed by the 6 State Economic Development Corporations in Malaysia. The study used 10 components with 22 indicators. The components were – community facilities, shopping facilities, infrastructure services, environment and open spaces, safety of self and properties, feeling about living in the area, sense of community, comfortable space in the house, house price/rental value, mobility and public transport. Among the 22 variables, the study found that religious centers were the most well provided facilities in these new towns.
with the highest score. All the new towns studied were also well served by infrastructure facilities including electricity, telephone service and also water supply and had achieved high satisfaction responses from the residents. Primary school facilities were ranked as number four which was lower than the religious centers, electricity service and telephone service. The young working age of the respondents who formed the majority of the residents of these new towns assumed to have children of primary school age, and they felt that the primary school requirements needed to be improved. Commercial service centers for lower goods were ranked as number six while commercial service centers for higher order goods were ranked second last in the list.

The second study examined the QOL status of Seremban, an intermediate city of Malaysia, based on three components – urban dwellers readiness, urban environment and urban accessibility, and 10 indicators. 550 respondents selected from a cross-section of various socioeconomic backgrounds were investigated through a structured questionnaire. The findings show that all three components significantly contribute to the Seremban’s QOL status. However, the score for urban dwellers readiness component (68.7%) is higher than urban environment component (64.2%), and urban accessibility component (60.0%). It is also found that the QOL of the city’s residents is homogeneous, and the city has a potential to be one of the better cities to live and be developed in future.

4.4. Micro level QOL studies in Malaysia

Micro level QOL studies in Malaysia are discrete studies with disciplinary orientations. These studies are designed to conduct in-depth analysis of the problem or issues pertaining to the topic of research where the authors intend to provide policy suggestions. Table 4 provides a description of QOL studies during 1987-2012.

| Authors                  | Study Focus                                                                 | QOL Category |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Husna & Nurijan (1987)   | Residential satisfaction of public low-cost flat dwellers in Kuala Lumpur.    | QOL-Housing  |
| Mastura et al. (n.d.)    | Residents’ housing satisfaction of PDC projects in Penang.                  | QOL-Housing  |
| Norizan (1993)           | Residential satisfaction of low-cost housing dwellers in Johor Bahru         | QOL-Housing  |
| Halimah & Lau (1998)     | Compared perceived concept of home aspired by Malay & Chinese housewives in low-cost housing in Selangor. | QOL-Housing  |
| Salleh (2008)            | Studied residential neighborhood satisfaction of private low-cost housing in P. Pinang & Terengganu. | QOL-Housing  |
| Oh (2000)                | Studied housing satisfaction of middle income households in Bandar Baru Bangi, Malaysia. | QOL-Housing  |
| Mohit, et al. (2010)     | Studied residential satisfaction of newly designed public low-cost housing in Kuala Lumpur. | QOL-Housing  |
| Mohit & Nurul Nazyddah (2011) | Studied housing satisfaction of Selangor Zakat Board-funded low income housing in Selangor state. | QOL-Housing  |
| Hafazah Ab Karim (2012)  | Studied four domains of QOL in Low-cost housing in Shah Alam.               | QOL-Housing  |
| Sarima M. Noor & Mohd Adli Abdullah (2012) | Studied Quality of Working Life (QOWL) in a multinational firm in Malaysia. | QOWL         |
The AicQoL2013 Conference, the first of its kind in Malaysia includes 89 papers. From a title search containing the word ‘QOL’, it is found that only 20 (23%) papers deal with the various dimensions of QOL in Malaysia. A detailed study of the title contents indicates that there are HR-QOL-4, QOL-SD-2, QOL-Construction-1, QOL-Housing-4, QOUL-6, and QOWL-3 studies.

The foregoing analysis shows that QOL studies in Malaysia are focused mainly on housing (44.7%), followed by quality of urban life (QOUL) (20.7%) and HR-QOL (17.3%) while QOL embedded sustainable development, environment and working life research occupy lower percentage of studies.

5. Discussion

This paper provides the present trends of QOL research in Malaysia under four typologies – macro, regional, local/city and micro level studies. From the findings, it appears that micro level studies pertaining to disciplinary concerns and utilizing subjective approach dominates the scenario of QOL research in Malaysia. It is found that micro level QOL research is dominated by housing, urban life and health concerns compared to the QOL concerns to environment, sustainable development and working life. Therefore, there is a need to embed QOL in other branches of the built environment discipline, along with the promotion of macro, regional and local/ city level QOL studies.

6. Conclusion

QOL is a growing field of research. Many disciplines have already embedded QOL within their research domain. While the current trend of QOL studies in Malaysia appears to be biased towards some disciplines, efforts should be extended to other disciplines. QOL research attracts attention and interest of many parties and understanding of QOL requires endless efforts. Marans and Stimson (2011) have identified several challenges of QOL studies to which future studies may be directed. These are –

• QOL studies should be focused towards examining cross-cultural or cross-regional differences or similarities in different parts of the world.
• QOL studies should be promoted through additional outlets of research. Besides, international scholarly publications, efforts should be made to present study results in local media or on the Web.
• Efforts should be made to ensure that local government officials are made aware of QOL study findings, so as to inform the multitude of planning and policy decisions that need to be made in their respective jurisdictions.

In addition to the above, the following prospects of future research of QOL in Malaysia appear essential:

• In the Built Environment discipline such as Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Quantity Surveying, Construction Management, Applied Arts, QOL-related researches are virtually absent. QOL research should be embedded in these branches of the Built Environment.
• Since Malaysia is going to be highly urbanized in the recent future, more and more QOUL research is needed to streamline the future urban and regional development of the country.

Land, K.C. et al (2012) have reiterated that decision makers of all kinds will find many applications of QOL research to policy choice, and evaluation. QOL research can be expanded in the field of social
impact assessment while it can enhance evaluation of public intervention efforts at the regional level. Finally, this paper expects to inspire the participants of AicQoL2014 conference to undertake more QOL studies, linking the social indicators with the environmental design and planning professions.

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