

Evaluating the Quality of Life Concept: A Critical Examination of its Application and Value in Understanding Mental Health Burdens

King's College London

13. June 2023

Abstract

This essay critically examines the Quality of Life (QoL) concept and its applications in mental health research and practice. With its multidimensional construct and inherent subjectivity, QoL provides a comprehensive measure of an individual's mental state, transcending traditional symptom-focused metrics. Tools like the Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire (Q-LES-Q) offer nuanced insights into patients' subjective well-being. QoL measures play a vital role in global health burden estimations. However, the variability and potential bias in self-reported QoL measures, along with issues of cross-cultural comparability, pose significant challenges. While QoL offers a beneficial lens through which to comprehend and tackle the weight of mental health issues, the essay finishes by highlighting the necessity for a thorough and subtly differentiated interpretation of QoL assessments. It argues for sustained investigation to fine-tune these methodologies and confirm their effectiveness.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	II
List of Tables	III
1 Introduction	1
2 Benefits of the Quality of Life Concept	3
2.1 More Holistic Understanding of Patient Well-being	3
2.2 Enhanced Patient-Centered Care	3
2.3 Insight into Population Health and Informing Health Policy	5
3 Limitations of the Quality of Life Concept	5
3.1 Subjectivity and Variability	5
3.2 Measurement Challenges	6
3.3 Lack of Standardisation	6
3.4 Complexity and Indirectness	7
4 Summary	7
Bibliography	9

List of Figures

1.1	A world map displaying the happiness levels of countries based on their QoL scores as reported in the 2018 World Happiness Report.	1
1.2	Screenshot of example questions of a QoL questionnaire.	2
2.1	Screenshot of example questions of the Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire (Q-LES-Q) questionnaire.	4

List of Tables

3.1 Comparison of the WHOQOL-BREF and Q-LES-Q quality of life questionnaires.	6
---	---

1 Introduction

Quality of Life (QoL) is a broad concept that considers many aspects of life, such as physical health, psychological condition, social interactions, personal beliefs, and surroundings. It has become quite a big deal in health research and clinical care, especially mental health. According to the World Health Organization, QoL is a pretty personal thing — it is based on how we perceive our lives through the lens of our own culture, morals, and personal goals. This makes it a holistic way to look at a person's overall well-being.

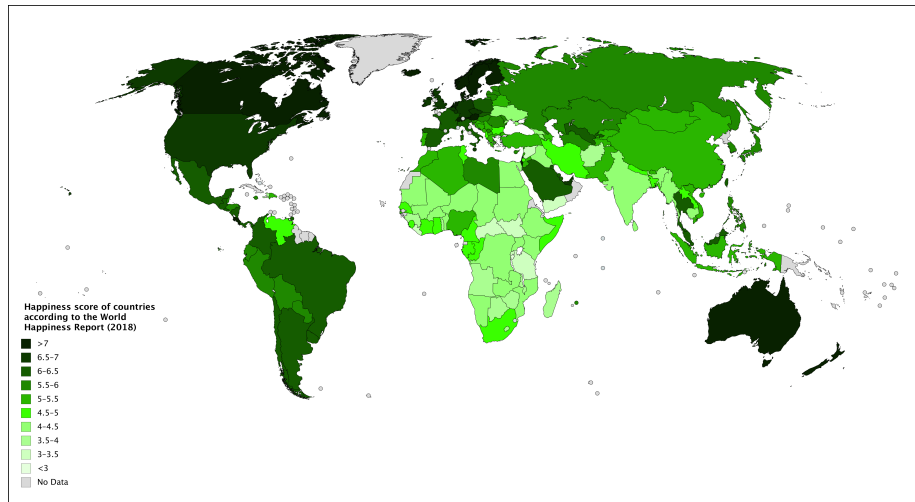


Figure 1.1: A world map displaying the happiness levels of countries based on their QoL scores as reported in the 2018 World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2018).

This concept is practically operationalised through assessment tools such as the WHOQOL questionnaire, as illustrated in Figure 1.2. QoL measures extend beyond the clinical symptoms to capture the full spectrum of an individual's life experiences, enhancing our understanding of mental health burdens. It can be applied to the population of entire countries as shown in the QoL map of the world in Figure 1.1.

		Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
16.	How satisfied are you with your sleep?	1	2	3	4	5
17.	How satisfied are you with your ability to perform your daily living activities?	1	2	3	4	5
18.	How satisfied are you with your capacity for work?	1	2	3	4	5
19.	How satisfied are you with yourself?	1	2	3	4	5
20.	How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?	1	2	3	4	5
21.	How satisfied are you with your sex life?	1	2	3	4	5
22.	How satisfied are you with the support you get from your friends?	1	2	3	4	5
23.	How satisfied are you with the conditions of your living place?	1	2	3	4	5
24.	How satisfied are you with your access to health services?	1	2	3	4	5
25.	How satisfied are you with your transport?	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 1.2: Screenshot of example questions of a QoL questionnaire (Harper et al., 1998).

QoL has broad applications across public health, psychiatry, and applied neuroscience. For example, in psychiatry, QoL metrics supplement traditional outcome measures such as symptom severity, contributing to shared decision-making processes in clinical practice and guiding policy-making at a population level. Applied neuroscience, meanwhile, uses QoL to connect the biological underpinnings of mental disorders with subjective patient experiences, as evidenced by studies indicating significant neurological implications on life satisfaction in disorders like depression (Zhang et al., 2016).

However, despite its broad applicability, the concept of QoL has its criticisms and limitations. The subsequent chapters will critically examine the benefits and drawbacks of the QoL concept in understanding mental health burdens.

2 Benefits of the Quality of Life Concept

The concept of QoL serves as a potent tool in mental health research and practice, offering benefits that address some of the limitations inherent in traditional clinical measures. This chapter explores these advantages, critically reviewing the empirical literature to provide a nuanced perspective.

2.1 More Holistic Understanding of Patient Well-being

One of the most significant benefits of the QoL concept is its broader, more comprehensive perspective on patient well-being. Traditionally, the assessment of mental health disorders relied heavily on symptomatic evaluations. However, the subjective experience of mental health is far more complex and extends beyond the presence or absence of symptoms. QoL assessments capture a range of factors that influence a person's well-being, including physical health, psychological status, social relationships, and environment.

Studies suggest that these factors can often deviate from clinical symptoms, revealing unique aspects of a patient's experience that may otherwise remain unnoticed. For example, a study on patients with schizophrenia found that while clinical symptom severity decreased over time, many patients reported no improvement in their QoL (Eack et al., 2007). These findings underscore the value of QoL measures in painting a more comprehensive picture of patient well-being.

2.2 Enhanced Patient-Centered Care

The QoL concept also supports a patient-centred approach in mental health care, aligning treatment goals with patients' unique needs and life contexts. Patient-centred care emphasises active patient participation in the treatment process and decision-making, an approach associated with improved treatment adherence and patient satisfaction (Dwamena et al., 2012).

QoL measures can guide the delivery of personalised interventions by highlighting areas that matter most to the patient. For instance, the Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire (Q-LES-Q), as shown in Figure 2.1, has been used to obtain sensitive measures of enjoyment and satisfaction in various areas of daily functioning. This tool captures the patient's experience beyond the severity of illness or depression, potentially informing more personalised therapeutic approaches (Endicott et al., 1993). This underscores the utility of QoL measures in tailoring interventions that resonate with patients' life contexts and goals.

**Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire – Short Form
(Q-LES-Q-SF)**

Taking everything into consideration, during the past week how satisfied have you been with your.....

	Very Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good
.....physical health?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....mood?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....work?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....household activities?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....social relationships?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....family relationships?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....leisure time activities?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....ability to function in daily life?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....sexual drive, interest and/or performance?*	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....economic status?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....living/housing situation?*	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
.....ability to get around physically without feeling dizzy or unsteady or falling?*	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of example questions of the Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire (Q-LES-Q) questionnaire (Endicott et al., 1993).

2.3 Insight into Population Health and Informing Health Policy

On a broader scale, QoL metrics provide a robust understanding of population health and guiding health policies. By incorporating QoL indicators, mental health research can reveal disparities, track changes over time, and assess the impact of interventions or policy changes at a population level. For example, the Global Burden of Disease Study (2018) provides a systematic analysis of the incidence, prevalence, and years lived with disability for numerous diseases and injuries worldwide, including mental disorders (GBD 2017 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators, 2018). This comprehensive report contributes valuable data to inform global mental health policies by accounting for these factors. This example underscores the potential of QoL metrics to influence policy-making, highlighting the broader societal value of the QoL concept.

3 Limitations of the Quality of Life Concept

As beneficial as the Quality of Life (QoL) concept is in understanding mental health burdens, it is not without limitations. This chapter discusses some drawbacks, critically engaging with recent research to provide an unbiased view of the concept's utility.

3.1 Subjectivity and Variability

The QoL concept inherently depends on the subjective experiences of individuals, which introduces a level of variability and inconsistency that can be challenging to navigate. What constitutes a high QoL for one person may not hold for another due to differences in personal values, cultural background, and life circumstances. This subjectivity can make comparing QoL scores across different individuals or groups challenging, potentially leading to misinterpretations or biases (Skevington & McCrate, 2012).

3.2 Measurement Challenges

Linked to its subjectivity is the challenge of accurately measuring QoL. Several instruments exist to assess QoL, each with varying sensitivity, reliability, and validity levels. For instance, the WHOQOL-BREF and the Q-LES-Q are widely used. However, they emphasise different aspects of QoL, as shown in Table 3.1, leading to potential inconsistencies between the measures (Endicott et al., 1993; Harper et al., 1998). Moreover, these measures rely on self-reporting, which can be influenced by temporary mood states, recall biases, or social desirability (Bowling, 2005).

	WHOQOL-BREF	Q-LES-Q
Primary Domain Focus	Physical health, Psychological health, Social relationships, environment	Physical health, Mood level, Work functioning, Household duties, Leisure activities, Social relationships, General activities
Number of Items	26 items	93 items
Scaling	5-point Likert scale	5-point Likert scale
Sensitivity to Change	High/Low (depends on research)	High/Low (depends on research)
Cross-Cultural Adaptability	High (developed by WHO, used globally)	Varies (can be adapted, but not as universal as WHOQOL-BREF)
Complexity (Time to Administer)	Moderate	High due to more items

Table 3.1: Comparison of the WHOQOL-BREF and Q-LES-Q quality of life questionnaires.

3.3 Lack of Standardisation

Another downside to the QoL concept is its need for more definition and measurement standardisation. While organisations like WHO have proposed definitions, many variants exist, leading to a need for more consensus in the literature. This fragmentation can pose difficulties in comparing studies, implementing interventions, or formulating policies based on QoL (Matarazzo, 1980).

3.4 Complexity and Indirectness

Finally, the QoL concept introduces complexity to mental health assessments and interventions. Given its broad and multifaceted nature, it can be challenging to pinpoint specific factors influencing QoL and to design interventions that address these elements. Moreover, making a direct link between specific treatments or interventions and changes in QoL can be more complex than symptom-focused measures. This complexity necessitates a careful, nuanced approach to using and interpreting QoL measures in mental health contexts.

In summary, while the QoL concept provides a rich, holistic view of mental health burdens, it also introduces several complexities and challenges. Its value should therefore be evaluated alongside these considerations, seeking to maximise its strengths while acknowledging and addressing its limitations.

4 Summary

The Quality of Life (QoL) concept holds significant potential in deepening our understanding of mental health burdens, offering a nuanced, person-centred perspective beyond traditional symptom-based measures. However, its application in psychiatry, mental health, and applied neuroscience is not without challenges.

This essay has critically discussed the benefits and drawbacks of the QoL concept, grounding the discussion in contemporary research to provide a balanced view. Among the key benefits of the QoL, concept includes its capacity to illuminate the lived experiences of individuals with mental health conditions, enhancing personalised care by providing a platform to capture patients' unique needs and life contexts (Dwamena et al., 2012; Endicott et al., 1993). Furthermore, QoL indicators can significantly contribute to understanding population health, helping inform health policies on a broader scale (GBD 2017 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators, 2018).

Nevertheless, the QoL concept has shortcomings. Its inherent subjectivity and variability can pose challenges in comparing QoL scores across individuals or groups (Skevington & McCrate, 2012). Measurement of QoL presents its own set of difficulties, especially given the reliance on self-report measures that could be influenced by factors such as mood states, recall biases, or social desirability (Bowling, 2005). The lack of standardisation in QoL definition and measurement can create difficulties in comparing studies or formulating policies (Matarazzo, 1980). Lastly, the complexity and indirectness of QoL measures necessitate a careful, nuanced approach to their use and interpretation in mental health contexts.

Moving forward, there is considerable scope for further research to enhance our understanding and utilisation of the QoL construct. Potential avenues include mitigating biases in self-reported QoL measures, such as developing standardisation strategies to account for individual differences in QoL perceptions and experiences. Furthermore, the cross-cultural applicability of QoL deserves further investigation. Research can contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of this complex construct by conducting comparative studies across different cultural groups, refining QoL measures to capture culturally-specific aspects of well-being better, or developing new QoL instruments tailored to specific cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the QoL concept offers a valuable tool to understand and address mental health burdens. Its strengths and limitations should be carefully considered, advocating for its judicious use alongside other measures to provide a comprehensive, balanced understanding of mental health. As we refine our understanding and measurement of QoL, we can better serve the diverse needs of individuals with mental health conditions and contribute towards a more holistic, person-centred approach to mental health research and practice.

Bibliography

- Bowling, A. (2005). Just one question: If one question works, why ask several? *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 59(5), 342–345.
URL <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1733095/> (Accessed at: 2023-06-12)
- Dwamena, F., Holmes-Rovner, M., Gaulden, C. M., Jorgenson, S., Sadigh, G., Sikorskii, A., Lewin, S., Smith, R. C., Coffey, J., & Olomu, A. (2012). Interventions for providers to promote a patient-centred approach in clinical consultations. *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 12(12), CD003267.
- Eack, S. M., Newhill, C. E., Anderson, C. M., & Rotondi, A. J. (2007). Quality of Life For Persons Living with Schizophrenia: More Than Just Symptoms. *Psychiatric rehabilitation journal*, 30(3), 219–222.
URL <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3716361/> (Accessed at: 2023-06-12)
- Endicott, J., Nee, J., Harrison, W., & Blumenthal, R. (1993). Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire: a new measure. *Psychopharmacology Bulletin*, 29(2), 321–326.
- GBD 2017 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators (2018). Global, regional, and national incidence, prevalence, and years lived with disability for 354 diseases and injuries for 195 countries and territories, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017. *Lancet (London, England)*, 392(10159), 1789–1858.
- Harper, A., Power, M., & WHOQOL Group, X. (1998). Development of the World Health Organization WHOQOL-Bref quality of life assessment. *Psychological Medicine*, (28), 551–558.
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. D. (2018). World Happiness Report 2018.
URL <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2018/> (Accessed at: 2023-06-12)
- Matarazzo, J. D. (1980). Behavioral health and behavioral medicine: frontiers for a new health psychology. *The American Psychologist*, 35(9), 807–817.
- Skevington, S. M., & McCrate, F. M. (2012). Expecting a good quality of life in health: assessing people with diverse diseases and conditions using the WHOQOL-BREF. *Health Expectations: An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy*, 15(1), 49–62.
- Zhang, H., Li, L., Wu, M., Chen, Z., Hu, X., Chen, Y., Zhu, H., Jia, Z., & Gong, Q. (2016). Brain gray matter alterations in first episodes of depression: A meta-analysis of whole-brain studies. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 60, 43–50.