1.1. Quality of life, happiness, social well-being: how little we know about these concepts we are so familiar with

Interviewer:  
"Now what would you say is 'quality of life'? What is it to you?"

Kees Nagelkerke (male, age 37):  
"For me quality of life is what I have now: a normal life. After all those years of being an alcoholic, just living a normal life again. But I must admit I'd like to have a girl friend too. That is the one thing I miss."

Johan Berghuis (male, age 60):  
"Of course quality of life has to do with having a good income, a nice house, being healthy, but for me, what it all boils down to is that I am not dependent on anyone. That I do not have to ask for things, either for help or permission, but that I have my independence. Losing that would mean unhappiness for me. So health is important because if I were ill or handicapped, that would make me dependent."

Barbara van Kesteren (female, age 53):  
"Happiness or well-being is in so many things. I can thoroughly enjoy presiding over a political meeting, when there is a big conflict and the atmosphere is really tense, and then to orchestrate the discussion and decision taking... It gives me fuel to live on for months sometimes. But also very small, simple things. Like - and that for all my ferocity about women’s liberation - when I am ironing the laundry, and I make a good job of it, and the shirts and things look so crisp and neat... such things can also make me feel extremely happy. I don’t know why, but when you ask me about the quality of my life, it’s these things that matter."

Cobie Strating (female, age 45):  
"Quality of life is not having to worry about having a roof over your head, about having food. Security of basic needs. Being safe from warfare. Being healthy, fit enough to take
care of yourself. And also that you have family and friends whom you can turn to in case of need. I do not have to see them every day, oh no, but just to know that they are there if you need them.”

Carol Groothuis (female, age 28):
“Being healthy is the crucial thing for a happy life, for a good quality of life. For health is a prerequisite for all other things you may want to do. When you’re not healthy, you just do not feel well, and you can’t enjoy the things you do so much.”

Barend van der Weijde (male, age 76):
“I enjoy my life, I find the quality of my life very high. You know I am already 76 years old, and I can still get along as arbiter in the junior soccer competition. But most importantly: I still have a fantastic relationship with my wife. It is even better since I am retired. We have all day together, and we still make love every day, sometimes in the afternoon when we have a little siesta. Not technical ‘sex’ always, but far better: completely relaxed and lovingly laying together, hugging… Now that is the highest quality of life you may get.”

Anneke de Wit (female, age 60):
“I am happy when I know all is well with my children. If only all is well with them, and if I know they get along well, I am satisfied and grateful. And if something is amiss with any of my children, well, then I worry and I can’t feel good or happy. For me that is all that counts, I am not interested in money or houses or fancy holidays. And as for ‘quality of life’, for me that is when everything is well ordered and predictable, no unexpected things happening. I like to know exactly what will happen and how things will be. Then I find the quality of my life best.”

Frank Zuidema (male, age 41):
“For me it is just the reverse: I need variation and surprise to feel happy. The enjoyment of life for me is in the unexpected, the unplanned things that happen upon your way. And that I have the time and freedom to react to these. Variation, that’s really the essence for me of a ‘quality of life’ or well-being. That’s the one side of it. Besides there is one precondition for me to be happy at all, and that is my family: my wife and my two sons. But provided they are there and they are all right, it is the variation and freedom to do what I want that constitute the quality of my life.”

Barbara van Kesteren, again:
“Now that I think about it, it seems to me that the main thing really is to have goals. It does not matter so much what these goals are, as long as you have things to strive for, goals that you deem worth while, that give you direction and that you can move towards.”

Here are eight people, all responding from their own experience of life when asked what ‘quality of life’ or ‘happiness’ is. Eight highly idiosyncratic responses, some of which may be more in tune with our own ideas than others, but probably we can empathise with all to some extent. It is remarkable that, different though the responses may be, people appear to know well what you mean when asked about their ‘well-being’, ‘happiness’ or ‘quality of life’. Even though they may fill in the meaning of these concepts after their own fashion and experience,
there is an implicit understanding of what we are talking about. Apparently, well-being, happiness and quality of life are familiar concepts to most people. Some elements of what is ‘happiness’ or ‘quality of life’ reappear in more than one statement (such as health, the well-being of family and loved ones, material security), suggesting that there may be some common core in or some common basis of happiness, well-being and quality of life. Yet overall these eight responses suggest that happiness and quality of life are highly idiosyncratic matters.

As perhaps they should be? Probably, you find the differences in these eight people’s responses completely natural, and you would not have expected to find more similar responses if you would have asked some number of people yourself. For are not all people unique, every person facing a unique living situation, and having a unique psychological make-up and background? And do people not differ as well in the specific goals that they strive for, according to which they evaluate their life?

Many people will feel more comfortable with the notion that happiness is a highly idiosyncratic experience - a result of character, idiosyncratic circumstances and personal goals - than with some claim that in the end the personal differences in people’s appraisal of their life are mere ripples on a sea of common factors. After all, looking at the eight responses above, who would be able to distil these common factors and the common core of the concepts of well-being, happiness and quality of life?

Yet, perhaps unwittingly, the concepts of well-being, quality of life and happiness are dealt with in daily life as if they had a universal meaning and as if they depended by and large on the same factors for all people. Indeed, many forms of substantial social policy, on national, local and organisational levels, assume that there is a relatively large common core in people’s subjective experience of happiness and well-being, and that the factors favouring well-being and happiness coincide to a large extent for all people. For many purposes, in daily practice, people have to act as if well-being would mean largely the same and depend on largely the same things for different people. Moreover, for many purposes in daily practice, people have to act as if it were known what factors enhance or impede well-being and happiness. To some extent, it may be true that people ‘know’ what factors enhance well-being, but considering the matter critically, it appears that much is still unknown or implicit about these so familiar concepts of well-being, happiness and quality of life.

1.2. The pursuit of well-being at a larger scale: why we want a general conceptualisation

1.2.1. THE PURSUIT OF WELL-BEING IN MANY WAYS, TIMES AND PLACES

The pursuit of well-being, be it individually or collectively, has been a common theme in philosophy, religion, law and literature in all ages and places. It seems that people have sought ways to enhance their material and social conditions in all cultures, and there is ample reason to believe that the pursuit of individual well-being and societal well-being may in all these different times and places have coincided as frequently as clashed.

In most religions there are many rules and commandments that, although they order individuals to do (or leave) things possibly against their own immediate inclination for the

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1 Until more refined distinctions between these concepts are discussed in Chapter 2, ‘happiness’ and ‘(subjective) well-being’ are used interchangeably for people’s subjective enjoyment of life, and ‘quality of life’ is used to refer to the whole of subjective experience and objective conditions of life.
benefit of the social community, can easily be seen to benefit the individuals’ well-being in the long run precisely through the general order or stability or prosperity that the rules bring about. In the Jewish and Christian tradition there are ancient rules about giving alms to the poor, taking responsibility for widows and orphans of one’s kin, acquitting debts in the years of jubilee, et cetera. All such religious laws and duties can be understood as directions for the pursuit of both general and - consequently - individual well-being. Even many of the old-testamentical regulations concerning food production and preparation which may - to the non-Jewish of today - seem mere rites complicating life, appear when considered seriously, to have been directly relevant for the achievement and maintenance of hygiene and health, prosperity and sustainable agriculture. Likewise, in Buddhism and Taoism, as well as in the Islam, many rules and wise insights provide guidance about how to live in harmony with fellow men, with other creatures and with inanimate nature.

But the legacy of our ancestors concerning the ways to enhance well-being extends well beyond religious or religiously inspired rules. Also ancient philosophers, statesmen and other political and economical leaders have sought for the best ways to maintain and increase collective well-being, and left us much of their ideas, either in writing, in law and legislation or in historical experience. In the 17th century, the philosophical interest in ‘the good life’ and the societal conditions that make for it had a marked revival in the work of the ‘utopians’ (which, however, has yielded but very little lasting insights). And of course the pursuit of well-being and the nature of happiness have been a common theme for novelists and poets of all times. Also in a more material sense, many appliances, machines, building materials and everyday techniques that we know, are the result of inventors who sought for ways to improve the ease and quality of life. With this legacy of thought and experience, it is no wonder that notions of what well-being is and what conditions favour it belong to the common cultural baggage of people, which education may only add to and refine.

In the present day as always, the pursuit of well-being is still a common theme in much of people’s work and private doings, and it certainly is a common motive behind social (and economic) policy. In daily life, individuals continuously do things that affect their subjective well-being. Their choices about how they spend their time, where and with whom, as well as how they spend their money and other resources have both immediate and delayed effects on their own level of well-being. But people do not only make choices for themselves. Many policy makers face the task of deciding how to enhance or defend collective well-being, and voters may consider which notions and policies make sense. In different settings also, people make decisions that are meant to, and will, affect the well-being of others. Parents decide on the upbringing and education of their children. Children, when their parents are ageing, sometimes have to decide how to organise the care for their parents. Teachers – ideally - try to teach their pupils not only the contents of the prescribed books, but also social, emotional and other skills and attitudes that may improve their later lives. Nurses and medical specialists must daily take decisions about how and whether to treat their patients, decisions which are at least partly based on what they believe will result in the best ‘quality of life’ or subjective well-being of the patient. Architects base their designs for new buildings at least partly on their ideas of the effects of physical environment on people’s well-being.

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2 ‘Collective well-being’ refers to the general level of well-being in a society, irrespective of how exactly this is defined or assessed: either as an average of individuals’ levels of subjective well-being or as an overall measure of levels of subjective well-being and societal (economic or political) performance or in some other way.
It is thus quite common that people have to act on the basis of some notion of a common core in all people’s individual well-being, and on the basis of some notion of what - generally - makes for well-being. Although by and large all people will have general and considerably coinciding ideas of what happiness and well-being are, there is no clear, unambiguous definition or conceptualisation of well-being at hand that can straightforwardly be used. Despite the long history of the pursuit of well-being and the whole cultural legacy guiding our thoughts about it, the concept is indeed even so vague and elusive still that mere well-meaning discussions about how to enhance well-being end up in a maze of conceptual confusion, more often than not. And beyond an approximate consensus about a core set of general conditions deemed beneficial to well-being, there is by no means sufficient knowledge about the relation between living conditions and the well-being people experience to provide unequivocal guidance for policy makers and others that want to enhance the well-being of others. It is clear, and part of our common sense, that things like food, shelter, safety, health (care), clothing, education and freedom belong to the basic necessities for a good life, and are thus among the main ingredients for well-being and happiness. But beyond these common sense notions it is not clear how to proceed and enhance quality of life or well-being.

When we consider how people in daily practice deal with situations where they have to make decisions that will affect the well-being of others, a range of strategies and solutions can be observed. These may be ordered along a continuum. One pole of this continuum represents a strategy that asserts that every person is the best judge of what he needs and wants, and that people are fully capable to decide on and take care of their own well-being, so all any other person or any policy should do is provide maximum freedom to act. This is a highly liberal stance, and – in somewhat moderated forms - it can be observed not only in liberal nations social and economic policies, but also on small scale, such as in child raising, education, et cetera. The opposite extreme holds that people either do not know what is good for them, or are incapable of acting adequately in their own interest, so they need others to decide what is best for them and to provide them with it. This strategy may raise associations with some centralised economic systems in communist and socialist societies, but it is a very common strategy in daily life, such as in education, health care, and child raising. In most real life situations we find an approach somewhere in between both extremes.

So people frequently have to act and make decisions on the basis of what they believe will enhance the well-being of others. Partly such decisions will be based on introspection, assuming that other people’s well-being and the determinants thereof will be largely similar to one’s own; partly such decisions will also be based on tradition and habit; and they may also be based partly on empirical evidence and research. However, empirical research into determinants of well-being is not ‘simply’ a matter of assessing the relation between objective living conditions and subjective well-being: it is much complicated by the lack of an intersubjective conceptualisation of well-being.

1.2.2. A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT TO ILLUSTRATE OUR LIMITED KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONTENT AND DETERMINANTS OF WELL-BEING

In order to clarify the tension that exists between our implicit understanding of the essence and determinants of well-being on the one hand and the lack of an explicit and unambiguous conceptualisation and of actual knowledge about well-being enhancing factors on the other hand, we will, as a thought experiment, consider how a policy maker might seek to enhance
the well-being of his subjects.

Suppose that you govern some country. You are a benevolent governor, and it is your main objective to further the happiness of your subjects. The National Treasury is well filled, and you are to decide how these public resources will be spent. How will you decide on your policy?

Perhaps you will think that, for the well-being of all, the foremost concern is to make sure that all subjects, or all households, have a minimum income. But thinking through on this strategy, several problems would inevitably hamper its straightforward implementation. Here let’s concentrate on two problems that derive directly from a lack of knowledge about the nature and determinants of well-being. Firstly, there is the question of what would be a reasonable ‘minimum income’. In order to answer this question, you might list a number of minimal necessities of life, for buying which the minimum income should be sufficient. In fact, what you are doing then resembles the second strategy you might wish to adopt (see below) and has by and large the same problems as that second strategy. Secondly, if you do not know what are the main preconditions for happiness or well-being, you cannot know either if these are purchasable goods. If not, e.g. if well-being would primarily depend on certain public goods, giving everybody a minimum income may hardly contribute to your subjects’ well-being, and be merely a waste of money that might have done much more good if used to produce public goods.

Perhaps then you’ll think that priority should be given to providing all subjects with goods and services that meet basic needs: food, shelter, clothing, education, health care provisions, safety. On first sight this might seem a more substantial solution than a minimum income policy. However, here again numerous complications arise as soon as we try to set a first step. The first problem here concerns the decision of what commodities are ‘basic necessities’, or what conditions are prerequisite to well-being. There may be broad consensus that goods such as food, shelter, clothing, et cetera, are necessary to some degree for having a good quality of life, that is, for well-being and happiness. But on closer look, it is not clear how to delineate the set of prerequisites. Does education belong to it? Many people may think so, yet a considerable proportion of the youth in obligatory education may believe that they would be much better of without it. Students playing truant or dropping out of school may signal that the relation between education and subjective well-being may not be unequivocal. And how about ‘shelter’- what kind of housing should be considered minimal? This obviously depends not only on climate, but also on cultural judgements about for example privacy needs. And as to food, this item on the list of basic necessities also requires specification. For in order to contribute to well-being, people should have neither too little nor too much food (calling for self-restraint, which if successful still costs effort, and if failing may result in obesity and loss of well-being because of that), and we might also want that the food they have be safe, healthy and tasteful. Still, the problem remains of how to decide which commodities make for well-being. Does public transport belong to these? Or democracy? Or full employment? And who decides about this?

The second problem blocking our way (assuming that we could overcome the first) lies in the paternalistic character of this kind of social policy. Who are you, as governor, to decide what people should have, how they should - minimally - be housed, how much schooling they should get, et cetera? What about freedom of choice? If one values autonomy and freedom of choice highly, one might prefer a policy in which people are given access to all basic necessities for well-being, instead of rationing these from above. But that would lead us back
some way to the first strategy, and invoke again part of the problems related to that.

The third problem is how to deal with complementarity and substitutability of goods. For - say, in the case of food - it is not the case that people need say 75 grams of rice daily; they may as well eat an equivalent amount of potatoes, bread or pasta instead, for what they really need is a minimum of carbohydrates. Thus, when designing the provision of adequate food, we should understand which products are functional substitutes. The same of course holds for the provision of other necessities: mobility may be ensured either by access to (good, free) public transport or by provision of a car; safety may be ensured either by having many policemen patrolling the streets or by realising good illumination, and installing video camera’s while having a smaller number of policemen actually on patrol. However, for many of the goods that might be ‘basic necessities’, substitutability relations are not all clear. Moreover, we should also take into account complementarity relations. For example, children may profit but partly from good schooling, if the curriculum requires that pupils do some hours of homework after school while the children are forced to spend their non-school hours in paid work, to enhance the family income. Or, the free provision of wheelchairs to physically disabled people will be of little avail to them as long as public terrain and public buildings are made accessible to wheelchairs. So, obviously, what really matters are the implicit ‘functions’ that the basic goods have for our subjects, and these implicit functions determine which goods and commodities may be used to substitute the other, and which complements are needed for particular commodities to have their intended effects.

Fourthly, what if the public means fall short of the general provision with basic necessities? Should we solve this by cutting down a little on all different commodities, allowing all subjects with a little less food, a little smaller and cheaper houses, a little less education, or should we rather keep the level of provision of some goods intact and do all the economising on the somewhat ‘less basic’ or ‘less necessary’ commodities? But then we need to be able to rank the goods we had - with much difficulty - identified as ‘basic commodities’ for well-being in order of their contribution to well-being, a task even more problematic than the initial selection of goods.

A fifth problem with the strategy of providing all subjects with the basic necessities for well-being concerns the nature of well-being or happiness, in particular the question to what extent well-being and happiness are positional goods. Knowing about human traits like jealousy, envy, gloating and rivalry, we might suspect that perhaps well-being is wholly or partly dependent on one’s relative position. If so, providing all your subjects with equal amounts of basic goods would not necessarily increase the well-being of all, nor even the average well-being in your country.

And sixthly, providing people with basic necessities may at the same time deprive them of an important source of happiness and well-being if it is true, as some authors claim (e.g. Dow & Juster 1985, Csikszentmihalyi 1997, but also see the last statement in section 1.1.), that the process of achieving goals and the personal involvement in achieving of desired states have at least as great an effect on people’s well-being as the desired states themselves. If the process of working to achieve what one wants does indeed yield more well-being than ‘having’ what one wants, we should perhaps not simply provide people with what they want, but rather ensure that they have possibilities to attain what they want through directed efforts.

Concluding: this second strategy is also highly problematic; in fact our knowledge of the

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3 In Chapter 2, where Amartya Sen’s approach to ‘commodities and capabilities’ is discussed, this notion and similar ideas will be considered more extensively.
nature and determinants of well-being falls far short of what would be required for well-informed decisions about provision of basic necessities to enhance general well-being.

If you’d be discouraged by the obstacles, dilemma’s and doubts involved in the two possible strategies sketched above, you might hope to find a way out by ordering a nation-wide investigation, in which all your subjects are asked how happy and well they are. On the basis of this investigation, you might single out all subjects who have reported to be less than moderately happy, or perhaps single out the 10 or 20 percent who reported the lowest levels of well-being as target groups for your policy.

Yet here again we run up against the problem that we do not know enough about the nature and determinants of well-being. In the first place, if we do not know quite precisely what we mean with ‘well-being’, how we want to define the content of the concept, we may not be sure that by asking people about their ‘well-being’ we tap the same thing for all respondents. What if people differ in their interpretation of the term? More in general, it seems to be important to have a good notion of the nature of a concept or phenomenon, especially if it’s abstract, before setting out to measure it. For without that, there is no way of telling how valid the measurement results are, nor how well comparable they are between respondents. In the second place, we would need to know whether or to what extent subjective well-being is something absolute, or whether it is in fact relative by nature. If well-being would be wholly or largely relative, not only would we have to interpret the empirical data differently than if they referred to absolute levels of well-being, but we would also want to know what reference groups or reference points respondents used in rating their own well-being. For relative measures can only be interpreted in relation to the reference level.

In the third place, we would want to know to what extent subjective well-being is subject to adaptation. Surveys investigating subjective well-being are frequently met with scepticism of people’s ability to judge their own well-being. It is objected that such judgements must be faulty because people get adapted to their own life and living conditions, whether poor or advantageous, and perceive these as ‘neutral’. More generally, it is objected that by lack of objective reference points, people’s assessments of their own well-being cannot be compared. In the fourth place, we would want to know to what extent subjective well-being is stable or fleeting. Surveys investigating happiness and subjective well-being often meet the objection that such subjective feelings are fleeting affects, and that even if respondents give truthful and adequate assessments of their own well-being, their mood and thus their subjective well-being may be changed within half an hour, making all survey results merely random. It may of course be argued in defence that the mood-induced variation evens out in large scale surveys and need not prevent us from detecting more stable differences in level of well-being between categories of people, but still we would want to know more about the nature of well-being also with regard to its stability over time, or - rather - its fleeting and its stable components. Besides these problems concerning the nature of the concept you want to investigate in your survey, there remains the original problem that even if you identify people whose well-being is markedly low, you still have no clue about how to enhance it.

Now this thought experiment is not meant to suggest that in this book you will find solutions to the problem of how to enhance general well-being through social policy. It should have made clear, however, that

(a) we do have some general notions about the content and the determinants of well-being, happiness and quality of life;
(b) these notions are not very precise, however: there is considerable uncertainty about the relation between factors and subjective well-being, as well as about the exact nature and content of ‘well-being’ (mainly regarding the different aspects by which people may experience it, the extent to which it is absolute or relative, its stable and transient elements, and its state and process elements);
(c) the concepts of well-being, happiness and quality of life play a central role in everyday practical policy issues as well as in individual decisions; and
(d) perforce we take many decisions, with possibly large impact, on the basis of vague but seemingly familiar notions, while ideally we would want much better insight into the nature and causes of well-being.

1.3. Some questions concerning the concept and determinants of individual well-being

In the foregoing, we have seen that in general people are very familiar with the concepts of happiness and well-being. Most people have no difficulty in applying these concepts to themselves and their own situation, and have clear notions about how happy they are and about their level of well-being. To a considerable extent, people appear to have no misgivings either about judging the well-being and happiness of others. Most people find it completely natural to feel sorry for someone who wants food or shelter, or to assume that the well-being of a single or childless person could have been higher if he had met a suitable partner or if she would but have had children. Yet, when asking people to define or describe the meaning or content of the concepts of ‘happiness’ or ‘well-being’, these familiar concepts appear vague and elusive, and only after considerable difficulty people come up with some answers; which are usually of a highly idiosyncratic nature. The same occurs when asking about the prerequisites and determinants of happiness and well-being: there is much confusion, disagreement and uncertainty about these. And this is not only the case when asking a chance selection of people: also in the scientific literature and among people who are professionally involved with these questions no clear and generally accepted conceptualisations of happiness and well-being are found, and the body of knowledge about determinants and prerequisites of well-being is at best incomplete.

Given the many situations in which one faces decisions that will affect the well-being of others, as well as situations where enhancement of someone else’s well-being is the salient goal, it is clear that clarification of the concept and better insight into the factors that affect subjective well-being is highly desirable and relevant.

Now that we have seen that individual well-being and the pursuit thereof can manifest itself in highly idiosyncratic forms; that there is much unclarity in the common thinking about the concept of well-being; and that policy ends and practical issues yet desire clarity and unanimity about the concept, its common core and its determinants, we may consider which are the main questions that must be answered to reach a clear conceptualisation and general insight in determinants of well-being.

In order to get a better grasp of what we are actually looking for, it may be helpful to consider why one would expect that there be a common core in people’s experience of well-being and common factors that determine well-being. Of course, people’s biological needs would be very similar, as humankind is simply a biological species. Few readers would expect the biological or physical component of well-being to differ much between people. At least, I
think most people will hold it likely that by and large (age related variations excepted) all people have similar biological needs, and will experience similar physical reactions to either fulfillment or thwarting of these needs. Now in the literature about subjective well-being, about quality of life or about human needs and motivation, we can see the same reasoning applied to people’s psychological or social-psychological needs and well-being (Maslow 1970; Rokeach 1979; Pervin 1989). There are many theories about human needs, which are all based implicitly or explicitly upon the assumption that people are all the same as to their needs, physiologically as well as social psychologically. Most theories grant that people’s concrete situations may lead to somewhat different ways in which these needs manifest themselves, but at some level of abstraction they still claim it is the same set of needs that holds for all people. Among the more prominent of these theories are the work of Maslow (1970), Rokeach (1979), and sociobiologists such as Bowlby (1984).

Very similar to theories about human needs, although put in different terms that emphasise rather the psychological processes that are activated by human needs, are motivation theories (e.g. Pervin 1989; Bandura 1989 etc; Ford 1992). These theories assume that at some level of abstraction, people’s motivations and strivings or goals are identical. As the goals and motives that are proposed in motivation theories confirm, these theories differ from theories of human needs rather in emphasis than in contents. What matters here is that theories of human needs and goals are frequently interpreted as if - and some theories indeed explicitly assume that - the fulfilment of these needs or achievement of these goals constitutes and determines subjective well-being. Thus, with regard to the clarification of the concept of subjective well-being, the first question to which we want an answer is what universal human goals or needs make for well-being. We want to know what ultimate goals the assumed instrumental chains of goals end in, because these are the goals (or needs, if that term is preferred) that are supposed to represent the components of subjective well-being. In other words, because it is supposed that a number of universal human goals or needs exist whose fulfilment would determine subjective well-being, the attempt to gain better insight into the nature of subjective well-being translates into the question of which are the universal and ultimate (in the sense of instrumental chains) human goals or needs. If we can distil from the literature on human needs and human goals a (theory that proposes a) convincing set of universal human goals or needs, this set of goals or needs may enable us to understand the nature and phenomenology of well-being and to make explicit its components and aspects.

To prevent any misunderstandings about the objective of this study, it must be stressed here that we do not want to clarify the concept of well-being in the sense of providing a precise and perfectly unambiguously formulated definition, as if we were describing the concept for a dictionary. The objective of this study, instead, is to investigate the phenomenon of well-being and the feelings, perceptions and (psychological?) processes underlying it. For when we ask people about their well-being, they usually know intuitively what response to give, even

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4 A problem in human needs theories and motivation theories is that they refrain from specifying any particular structure in the sets of needs or goals that they propose. Practically all theories present the human needs or goals they propose as equivalents, whereas after a little thought (and sometimes even at first sight) it seems obvious that the goals or needs are interrelated, either causally or instrumentally, and that there may also be a clear hierarchical ordering in their relevance for the individual human’s well-being. In as far as universal human needs or goals are indeed instrumentally related or hierarchically ordered, we would of course want a theory to be explicit about that, so that it may help us to better understand the relation between the fulfilment of these needs or achievement of these goals and the resulting level of subjective well-being.
though they would be confused when asked about the exact meaning of ‘well-being’. The term ‘well-being’ is an abstract term, for which I do not seek to find a linguistic description, but rather an explanation of what’s beneath: what processes or components constitute ‘well-being’ as people perceive and experience it, partly unconsciously as it may be? The objective is thus to arrive at propositions about the partly or wholly unconscious processes and aspects of ‘feeling well’ that affect the intuitive response of people when asked about their well-being.

A second, but directly related issue that demands attention is that of the determinants of social well-being. The idea that the ultimate universal human goals or needs that make for subjective well-being are themselves realised through other, instrumental goals, does not imply that the instrumental chains are single-path chains.

Suppose that one of the goals people strive for were ‘being admired’ or ‘distinguishing oneself from others’. There would be many alternative ways to win admiration from other people. Even among the eight respondents we met in section 1.1., there is considerable variety in how they try to win admiration (or distinguish oneself) from others:

Kees Nagelkerke for example, in as far as he cares about distinguishing himself from others, is mainly concerned with resisting the temptation to relapse into his old drinking habits, and derives pride and satisfaction from his success thus far, even more because he realises that there are but few severe alcoholics who succeed so well.

Johan Berghuis is admired for the high status job he has held, his wealth and broad education and knowledge, and the fascinating anecdotes he can tell about his exotic travels.

Barbara van Kesteren has more than one way to distinguish herself and feel admired. She takes pride in dressing daringly and fashionably, which certainly draws attention in the small and somewhat backward village where she lives, but she also distinguishes herself from the majority of middle-aged women by presiding over several local organisations and by leading a local political party.

Carol Groothuis sometimes grudges doing low-skilled work and people treating her equal to her poorly educated colleagues while she herself holds a university degree. She yearns for a higher level job, not so much because she does not enjoy her present work, but rather because she wants the recognition for what she actually is. Lacking this opportunity thus far, she tries to make up for it by excelling in sports; she is greatly improving her (considerable) athletic achievements.

Barend van der Weijde openly asks and receives admiration for all the things he still does despite his age. He is far more active socially and physically than the average 76 year old, and takes pride and satisfaction in it.

Anneke de Wit, who over the past 45 years has dedicated herself completely to the housework and raising her children, initially denies that she wants admiration or distinction, but later she tells that she feels her housekeeping is much better organised than that of all other people she knows: “There is nothing special that I am good at. I have no education and I have never had a paid job. But then I have the time to make sure my house is in perfect order, and I save us loads of money by being efficient and by repairing things. While all those people who want to combine working and raising children and what more, they usually make a mess of it and lose much of the money they make in that way.”

Frank Zuidema, finally, takes pride in going his own way, in not letting social norms dictate his choices in life. He shows pride in defying public opinion e.g. with regard to his choice for a career as a nurse and his choice to let his wife be the main earner and work only 30% himself. He boasts of defying the societal pressure to be busy and care for income and career,
and enjoys the contrast between his own freedom, the autonomy over his daily activities, and
the yoke of obligations under which the majority of people live.

Indeed, for a universal ultimate goal, there may be a number of parallel paths, along different
instrumental goals. People may use widely varying ways to realise social well-being. For some
part, the differences in how people achieve their - similar - goals may follow from differences
in their capacities and other resources. For some part, the differences may also be simply path-
dependencies: having once made a particular turn, chosen a particular way, this one choice
will steer later choices. For an other part, the ways people choose to attain their goals of
course also depend on prevailing norms and values in their social environment: Carol
Groothuis can only use her athletic achievements as a substitute to get admiration under the
condition that there are sufficient people around who appreciate sports.

But, as we saw in the case of Barbara van Kesteren, people may also use more than one means
to realise a particular goal. Most people participate in more than one social context, and
different contexts usually differ in norms and values as well as in available means to realise
certain goals. For example, many people participate in the context of a family, in the context
of friendships, but also in the context of their job or the context of a holiday or the context of
the religious community they belong to. In all these different contexts, people’s goals and
needs are the same. But the way in which a certain need may be met is likely to be very
different in these various contexts.

Thus, when we want to gain a better insight in and knowledge of the determinants of well-
being, we should probably differentiate between social contexts in which well-being may be
realised. To do so, however, requires a choice of which social contexts to distinguish. This is a
choice that must be made before a sensible attempt to chart the relevant objective factors that
affect well-being can be started.

Assuming that well-being results from needs being met and goals being realised, the questions
about the identification and content of human goals and about the objective conditions that
determine the possibilities for achieving these goals, would sufficiently summarise the
challenge of gaining a better notion and understanding of well-being and its determinants.

Yet, we should not too easily assume that the relation between well-being and the realisation
of goals lies only in the goals that are realised. It was already mentioned in section 1.2.2. (as
the sixth problem related to ‘basic needs’ policies) that the process of working towards one’s
goals may in itself be an important source of well-being. The activities and sense of purpose
and of improvement involved in progressing towards one’s goals and also approaching
intermediate, instrumental objectives, may result in well-being just as well. At least, we must
reckon with the probability that not only the end state but also the process towards it matter
for subjective well-being. In the literature, we find authors of high reputation claim that the
process of approaching one’s goals makes for subjective well-being (e.g. Dow & Juster 1985;
Csikszentmihalyi 1997). But also introspection and common experience support this notion.
Just remember Barbara’s second statement in section 1.1.:

“Now that I think about it, it seems to me that the main thing really is to have goals. It
does not matter so much what these goals be, as long as you have things to strive for,
goals that you deem worth while, that give you direction and that you can move towards.”

The recent fuss over the ‘sudden wealth syndrome’5, referring to the psychosocial problems

5 The term was first used in the Los Angeles Times in the spring of 2000. See also Rosenberg’s article
experienced by people who have become instantly very rich, through successful speculation in the financial market or through winning a lottery, suggests something similar.

It seems that people need goals that they can work towards, not only because of what the actual realisation of the goal will bring them, but also and possibly even more because having goals provides structure to one’s life and invests every tiny step along the road towards the goals with value and satisfaction. But there appears to be even more to the notion that the process matters than only the progress towards one’s goals. Some twenty years ago a pop song was titled ‘it ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it’. When subjective well-being is concerned, this may be very true. Both in the literature and in common experience there is evidence that not only the content, the final realisation of and the progress towards one’s goals matter, but that the way in which goals are achieved matters too. For example, the subjective well-being one experiences if a goal is achieved wholly through one’s own efforts is likely to be higher than if there was a large component of luck. It might also be the case that people derive more well-being from a process in which the speed of approaching one’s goals gradually increases than a process that gradually slackens. Possibly, people derive more well-being from a course of action they have decided on autonomously than from a course of action prescribed by someone else. Perhaps the predictability of progress also matters for the subjective well-being that it yields. If progress is predictable, people may anticipate the realisation of their goals and savour their success in anticipation. But for all we know, unexpected success may, once realised, also give extra well-being just because of its unexpectedness. And probably there are more characteristics of the way in which people pursue the realisation of their goals that matter for the amount of well-being they derive from the process. It seems that we need to know much more about these ‘process-preferences’ before we can ever think that we understand what well-being is and how it comes about. Thus, the third main question we must consider is that of process versus results. The notion that subjective well-being not only depends on ‘state’ or level of goal realisation but also on ‘getting there’ is thus nothing new. It would be a step forward, however, to identify what features or elements of ‘getting there’ matter. What features of the process of goal realisation affect the level of subjective well-being? Which are the main relevant aspects of these procedural preferences? How does the way in which people organise their lives affect their eventual level of well-being?

Summarising, from the way I look at it, the problems and puzzles concerning the nature and determinants of subjective well-being cluster around three themes. Firstly, the theme of goals: what universal human goals are there and - correspondingly - what are the universal aspects or components of subjective well-being? Secondly, the theme of objective conditions that make for well-being: What are, in different social contexts, the main relevant objective conditions that affect goal achievement? What social contexts should be distinguished to arrive at a practicable categorisation of determinants of well-being? And thirdly, the theme of procedural preferences: to the extent that well-being is derived not only from one’s state of being but also from the process of striving for one’s goals, what features of the process affect the level of subjective well-being that is derived?

1.4. About the contents of this book

This book reports on the dissertation research I conducted in search of answers to the questions expounded above. I have started out on my search with a study of the literature about quality of life studies and an analysis of the state of the art in that field of research. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a detailed exposition of the main present theoretical problem in quality of life studies, namely the lack of a theory of human goals that relates objective conditions to subjective well-being. The chapter includes an analysis of what kind of theory is needed to solve that problem, and a critical assessment of the potential of the main existing approaches (in particular theories of human goals) to do that job.

In this study, I have taken up one of the more promising approaches for further examination and elaboration, namely Lindenberg’s (e.g. 1986, 1993, 1996) Social Production Function (SPF) theory. An extensive presentation and discussion of this theory is provided in Chapter 3. SPF theory is a theory of goal-directed behaviour, in which a hierarchy of human goals is explicitly proposed. At the most general level of this hierarchy of goals, the theory asserts that overall subjective well-being is constituted by two universal human goals, namely social and physical well-being. For both of these universal goals, the theory then proposes some - still general and rather abstract - essential elements or ‘first order instrumental goals’. The examination of the merits and weaknesses of Social Production Function theory revealed, first, some serious problems in the conceptualisation of the universal and first order instrumental goals; the theory’s main concepts. Without a solution for these problems, the theory is but partly fit for application to the theoretical problem in quality of life studies. Ambiguity and unclarity of concepts cause confusion when comparing and relating SPF theory to other, more established approaches and concepts in that field, and they impede the valid operationalisation and thus the empirical measurement of these central concepts. This first problem with SPF theory centers around the first of the three themes identified in section 1.3.: the theme of universal human goals and of universal aspects or components of subjective well-being.

The examination of SPF theory’s strengths and weaknesses also revealed a problem with regard to the identification of the objective conditions that affect subjective well-being. Although the main notion of theory concerns the realisation of well-being through concrete resources and activities, it is practically mute as to which resources - that is, which objective conditions - are most relevant for well-being. In Chapter 3 it is explained clearly that empirical investigation as to the main relevant conditions or resources for the realisation of well-being is wanted. This second problem with SPF theory concerns the second of the three themes identified in section 1.3.: the theme of objective conditions that affect well-being. The first two problems were found to exist mainly with regard to social well-being and only to a much lesser degree regarding physical well-being. Therefore, it was decided that the research questions derived from these problems would be restricted to social well-being alone.

A third problem in SPF theory appeared to be that one part of it (namely the ‘metagoals’, i.e. the goals and preferences people have as to how they structure their lives and realise their well-being) is as yet far less elaborated and specified than the rest. Yet, from the perspective and established knowledge of quality of life studies and well-being research, it must be expected that this somewhat under-elaborated part is no less relevant for explaining and predicting well-being and quality of life than the better elaborated and more frequently used parts of the theory. The metagoals and preferences that people have concerning how they go
about the production of well-being, of course refer to the issue of process well-being and procedural preferences; the third of the three themes identified in section 1.3. above. From this observation, the third task I took upon myself followed: to explore the as yet under-specified part of the ‘metagoals’ in SPF theory, to identify the main metagoals and possibly to provide some clues as to how they are related to each other and to the other elements of Social Production Function theory. The three problems thus identified in SPF theory are, in section 3.6, translated into the research problems for the empirical part of this study.

Given the research problems, an adequate design had to be chosen for the empirical study. The character of the research questions suggested an exploratory and qualitative approach: the objectives for the study were not to get information on actual levels and distribution of well-being, nor of the empirical prevalence of particular goals, resources or conditions, but rather to explore the actual content of certain concepts; to obtain an inventory of the diverse aspects that people actually perceive as components of well-being and quality of life; and to make an inventory of what might be the main relevant conditions for well-being. Chapter 4 describes the methods of data collection and analysis that I have used. Theoretical sampling resulted in a selection of respondents (or cases) for the empirical study. A triangulation of methods was used for data collection: (1) written questionnaires which the respondents filled in at home, about their evaluation of aspects of their life, their general happiness and well-being, their activity patterns, main sources of well-being, and their own notions of the main determinants of quality of life; (2) focus group interviews about the determinants and phenomenology of aspects of well-being and quality of life; (3) time use studies, charting the participants’ activity patterns and accompanying moods during one week; and (4) individual face-to-face interviews with the respondents who participated in the time use study.

The focus group data and the data from the individual interviews were analysed (with the help of a specialised application for computer-aided analysis of qualitative data: ATLAS/ti), following a strategy for analysis based on Wester’s (1984, 1995) version of Glaser & Strauss’ (1967) ‘grounded theory approach’. The data from the preliminary questionnaire and the time use studies were used for triangulation and to provide additional data where the information from the focus group and individual interviews was incomplete.

Chapters 5 through 7 report on the results of the exploratory study. In Chapter 5 the results concerning the first research question are presented. The phenomenology of the concepts that were as yet ambiguous or unclear in the basic model of Social Production Function theory is discussed there, resulting in improved, more specific conceptualisations of the three components (or first order goals) which, according to SPF theory, constitute social well-being. These conceptualisations do not have the form of rephrased definitions or of theory-based descriptions of the abstract concepts. Rather, the concepts are filled in with sets of distinctive aspects that were identified in a broad empirical inventory of the feelings and perceptions that constitute people’s subjective social well-being. In other words, the concepts are empirically grounded by identifying the various and distinctive aspects by which these components of social well-being manifest themselves in people’s perception. The theme of universal human goals and of universal aspects or components of well-being is thus central in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 6 the main relevant conditions and resources that affect social well-being that were
found in the empirical study are presented and discussed. The theme of Chapter 6 thus concerns the objective conditions that make for well-being. Although the inventory of ‘objective conditions’ facilitating the realisation of social well-being that emerges from this study has no pretense of being complete or final, it is thought to contain, at a slightly abstracted level, all the essential factors that determine opportunities for social well-being. An equally or perhaps even more substantial result of this part of the study is the development of a systematic way of charting the relevant conditions for social well-being at an individual level. By distinguishing six general social contexts it was possible to arrive at a systematic inventory that also reveals much of how the resources and conditions relate to each other: as substitutes or as complements (or not at all). The value and potential uses of this systematic approach to conditions for social well-being is considered in Chapter 6.

The third theme, concerning the part that the process of approaching one’s goals plays in subjective well-being, is taken up in Chapter 7. The results of my attempt at identifying and conceptualising the ‘metagoals’ in SPF theory are reported there. Based on the qualitative data and the analysis thereof, a set of hierarchically ordered metagoals is proposed. In addition to this, the relation of these metagoals to the concept of ‘cognitive well-being’ is discussed. According to the established notions in quality of life studies, cognitive well-being and affective well-being are the two components of overall subjective well-being. Since the elements in the basic model of SPF theory represent affective well-being, it would be advantageous if the cognitive component of well-being were fully represented in the metagoals, for in that case SPF theory would indeed encompass the whole range of aspects and elements of ‘overall well-being’ or ‘subjective quality of life’. Chapter 7 ends with answering whether indeed we may consider the cognitive component of well-being to be fully represented in the metagoals I propose in that chapter.

In the course of this book, we thus gradually get deeper and deeper into the particulars of Social Production Function theory, a process in which one may feel to lose touch with the general problems and questions from which we started out, concerning quality of life and how to enhance it. Therefore in Chapter 8, I retrace my steps and try to give a critical evaluation of the whole study and its results from the general perspective sketched in the present chapter. In the light of the practical and theoretical problems to which you were introduced in this first chapter, what may be the use of the notions gained in this study and of the elaboration of SPF theory that we achieved?