Individual production of social well-being
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CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

8.1. Recapitulation of the problems and objectives inspiring this study

After seven chapters in which the reader had to zoom and unzoom repeatedly in order to overlook the broad scene of quality of life research and to focus at the detailed particulars of SPF theory as an element of that broader scene, it is now time to see what this whole exercise has yielded.

It seems helpful, before turning to the results, to recapitulate the starting point of this study. Like the chapters of this book, the problems and objectives that motivated this study require different degrees of ‘zooming in’ to be revealed. The sometimes microscopic problems and highly specific objectives in the further elaboration and refinement of SPF theory derive their relevance for an important part from the problems in the field of quality of life studies at large, which can only be observed when stepping back and taking in the broader scene.

Chapter 2 started out with a short overview of the field of quality of life studies. In surveying the scene, it was seen that there exists an yet unbridged gap between, on the one hand, the research efforts that concentrate on the (measurement of) objective conditions that are thought to affect quality of life and, on the other hand, subjective well-being research. Although at both sides of the gap much valuable research is (being) done and many important insights have been gained, it is crucial for all kinds of social interventions in which one could wish to apply such knowledge and insight, that the theoretical gap between people’s subjectively experienced quality of life and the objective conditions that affect it be bridged. The prime objective of this study was to contribute to bridging this gap; to help solve the problem of how the relation of subjective well-being to objective conditions can be modelled and understood theoretically.

Deriving directly from this objective, the logical first task was to examine the potential of existing theories in the field to do this job. Such an examination requires explicit criteria on which to judge the potential of theories for succeeding this challenge. Thus, it was necessary to pose and answer the question of what features a theory should have for adequately explaining how subjective well-being is affected by objective conditions. Identifying these requirements for an adequate theory of subjective well-being was a second objective that seemed relevant in the broad context of quality of life studies.
Examination of the main current theories in the field led me to the conclusion that, in their present form, none of the existing theories meets all these requirements. Three theories stood out as potentially adequate, although each of these would have to be adjusted or further elaborated to do the job. For several reasons, it was decided to select Lindenberg's Social Production Function theory from these three candidates, and to find out whether the necessary adjustments and elaborations could be achieved that would qualify SPF theory for the job of linking the objective and subjective approaches in quality of life studies.

This decision implied a shift of perspective: we had to depart from our broad view of the problems in quality of life research, in order to focus on the details of one particular theory that might eventually provide a remedy for the theoretical void in the general field of research. Our choice to pursue this potential lead to a solution for the theoretical problems of quality of life studies thus instigated the zooming in on SPF theory and its particulars in the remainder of this study.

In Chapter 3 SPF theory in its present state was put under close scrutiny and - guided by the objectives at the more general level of quality of life studies that were explicated in Chapter 2 - the main problems and needs for elaboration and refinement of the theory were identified. It appeared that there were three main problems that should be solved in order for SPF theory to qualify as a theory for linking the objective and subjective approaches in quality of life studies. The first problem concerned the conceptualisation of the three first-order goals (or components) of social well-being; the second concerned the identification of main relevant production factors (the 'objective conditions') for social well-being; and the third concerned the systematic incorporation of metagoals in the theoretical framework of SPF theory. These problems were taken up subsequently in the chapters 5 through 7, in which the 'microscopic' focus on the details of SPF theory was thus retained. This focus was only departed from again in the last part of Chapter 7, where the results concerning the elaboration of the metagoals were put (back) into the context of quality of life studies and the existing insights in that field.

In the present chapter, we will draw up the balance of the whole endeavour. The results of this exploratory study are evaluated both from the general perspective of quality of life studies and from the more specific point of view of SPF theory. For SPF theory is not only applicable to the field of quality of life studies, but it is also applied in other fields of research and for different purposes than for explaining how subjective well-being is affected by objective conditions.

Section 8.2. gives a summary of the exploratory study, its guiding research questions and the methods that were used. Section 8.3. then presents the results of the exploratory study, for each of the three research questions at a time. Each section also contains a critical evaluation of these results, in terms of their completeness, their practical usefulness and, possibly, the contribution they may make to theoretical progress.

The general balance of this study, in terms of its potential contribution to progress in quality of life studies, is drawn up in section 8.4. To what extent has the search for a theory that may bridge the gap between the objective and the subjective approaches been successful? And are there other results that are potentially useful for that field of study?

An overview of the questions that were left open in this study and the new questions and problems that it revealed, with some considerations and suggestions concerning the urgency of these problems and possible ways to attack them, conclude this chapter (section 8.5.).
8.2. Summary of the exploratory study and its method

In search of an adequate quality of life theory, that can explain how objective conditions affect subjective well-being, the objective of this study was to explore the potential of Lindenberg’s (1986, 1996) Social Production Function theory, and to search for a remedy for a few problems in SPF theory that were identified in advance. Three compound research questions were formulated at the start of the study. Research question 1 concerns the conceptualisation of the three components (‘first order instrumental goals’) which SPF theory claims constitute subjective social well-being. It was so formulated that answering it would improve SPF theory’s adequacy as a theory of subjective well-being, through deletion of ambiguities and vagueness in its concepts concerning subjective social well-being:

1. a). What are the various and distinctive aspects of ‘status’, ‘behavioural confirmation’, and ‘affection’, respectively?
   b). How and to what extent can the level of these goals be distinguished from the production factors that may be used to attain them?

Research question 2 concerns the identification of relevant objective conditions (‘availability of relevant production factors’) for the realisation of social well-being. It was so formulated that answering it would enhance SPF theory’s adequacy as a theory relating objective conditions and subjective well-being:

2. a). Which are the essential production factors for status, behavioural confirmation and affection, respectively, for Dutch adults?
   b). What are the complementarity or substitutability relations between these production factors?

Research question 3 concerns the completeness of SPF theory: the extent to which the theoretical framework of SPF theory covers the goals people ascribe to themselves and others, and the extent to which it covers the concepts of ‘quality of life’ and subjective well-being as these are found in the literature:

3  a). Which are the metagoals in people’s production of social and physical well-being?
   b). How are these metagoals related to each other, i.e. can they be modelled in an instrumental hierarchy?
   c). To what extent may we consider the cognitive component of well-being as it is known from the literature to be represented in the (hierarchy of) metagoals in SPF theory that is now specified?

All three research questions are - at least in first instance - exploratory and qualitative questions, requiring an exploratory, qualitative approach. The phenomenology of goals, the empirical diversity of means and the content of several concepts was to be investigated, and it should be realised that answering such ‘what’-questions properly demands a wholly different approach than answering the ‘how much’-questions that most of us are so much more used to deal with.

Because I wanted qualitative data which would allow to explore very broadly and openly the various goals people find relevant for themselves, formulated in their own words after their own experiences, as well as the varying contents of the concepts of SPF theory, and additionally also, for the same respondents, detailed data about their resources and activity patterns, I could not rely on existing datasets, because even those datasets that might have
been adequate for one of my objectives, did not include adequate empirical data for the other objectives.

In this study I have adopted a combination of methods for collecting qualitative data, and of methods for exploring and analysing these in a ‘grounded theory’-like way. The primary concern following from the research questions was to find and identify rather than measure or assess the distribution of aspects of social well-being, alternative means of production, and metagoals. Therefore, the respondents for the data collection were selected by theoretical sampling rather than through taking a random (representative) sample of the Dutch adult population. The theoretical sampling was intended to result in a limited number of respondents who would yet represent to a reasonable extent the multidimensional variety of the Dutch adult population. In total, 31 people were recruited as respondents for the qualitative study. All of these respondents were interviewed both by means of a written questionnaire which they filled in at home preliminary to the further data collection, and in a focus group interview. Fourteen respondents subsequently also participated in an intensive one-week time use study, including an individual final interview concerning their time use patterns and remaining issues bearing on their subjective well-being. The methods of data collection and the rationale for using these are extensively reported on in Chapter 4, as is the method of analysis I have applied.

The data that were thus obtained gave insight into the phenomenology of social well-being in its various forms as experienced by our respondents, as well as into the various further goals and values they believed of relevance for overall subjective well-being or ‘quality of life’, and the broad array of activities and resources that play a part in the respondents’ way of achieving well-being.

In the following stages of the study, the data were analysed for each of the research questions in turn.

8.3. Summary of the exploratory study’s main results

8.3.1. THE THREE COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL WELL-BEING THOROUGHLY CONCEPTUALISED

Chapter 5 presents the results of the analyses that served to answer the first research question, concerning the further conceptualisation of the three first-order instrumental goals for social well-being. The aim was both to identify the aspects of each first-order goal that distinguishes it from the other two, and to clear the concepts of elements that refer to the means by which social well-being in that particular form may be achieved.

By concentrating strictly on feelings and perceptions of social well-being and excluding actual activities and resources as the means from which these feelings of well-being may be derived, I arrived at an elaborated conceptualisation of status, behavioural confirmation and affection, consisting of sets of identified ‘aspects’ by which these components of social well-being may present themselves in people’s perceptions. The distinctive aspects of status, behavioural confirmation and affection, respectively, constitute their conceptualisation but also provide the

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1 Of course, the judgement of what is ‘reasonable’ is but subjective. I believe that we have succeeded to find a selection of respondents who represent to a satisfying extent the multidimensional variety of the Dutch adult population, but the representation is obviously far from perfect and people may disagree with my opinion that in this study the variety of Dutch adult population is represented to a ‘reasonable’ extent.
handles for the empirical investigation of levels of these components of subjective social well-being.

From the data it also appeared that in people’s perception of status, behavioural confirmation and affection, each may be perceived to be either given by others or by self. In previous writings on SPF theory, it has been claimed several times that ‘social approval’ is not constituted merely by the approval one receives from others, but that it also includes a component of self-approval. (e.g. Steverink 1996). Here I have taken this notion a step further, however, by arguing - based on the evidence found in the data - that within each of the three components of social well-being a part perceived to be given by others, and a self-rewarded part can be distinguished. The logical consequence, of course, is that for any valid measurement of status, behavioural confirmation or affection, both parts should also be represented in the measurement instrument. In order to achieve conceptual clarity, I proposed that the self-rewarded form of status be named ‘self ranking’, the self-rewarded form of behavioural confirmation ‘self approval’, and that of affection ‘self liking’. It appeared that each of the different aspects of status, behavioural confirmation and affection can manifest itself both as the perceived evaluation by others and in the self-rewarded form.

What are the different distinctive aspects by which the three components of social well-being are conceptualised?

For **status**, six aspects were distinguished. These six aspects of subjective status are:

1. a sense of being treated respectfully;
2. a sense of self realisation;
3. a sense of performing well relative to others;
4. a sense of being independent or autonomous;
5. a sense of being influential;
6. a sense of having a good reputation.

For **behavioural confirmation**, also six aspects were distinguished. These are:

1. a sense of doing the right (or good) things;
2. a sense of being useful;
3. a sense of contributing to a common goal;
4. a sense of doing well the things that you do;
5. a sense of being a good person;
6. a sense of belonging to a functional group.

For **affection**, finally, nine aspects were distinguished. In contrast to the aspects of status and behavioural confirmation, the aspects of affection do not only refer to feelings concerning oneself, but also to what one feels towards others. That is, for optimal levels of subjective affection there must be reciprocity in each of the nine aspects, which, for that reason, are to be conceived as bi-directional. The nine aspects concerned are:

1. a sense of liking and being liked;
2. a sense of trusting and being trusted;
3. a sense of communicating and being communicated with at an ‘existential’ level;
4. a sense of reciprocal empathy;
5. a sense of reciprocal interdependency of subjective well-being;
6. a sense of reciprocity of the way one feels about the other;
7. a sense of being considered physically attractive and being attracted physically;
(8) a sense of reciprocal willingness to make give or do things without recompensation;
and (9) a sense of loving and being loved.

In this final chapter, drawing up the balance of this study, we must critically consider the value of this refined conceptualisation of status, behavioural confirmation and affection. It is obvious that in a general sense we have gained an improved understanding of what social well-being is, which aspects people experience, and how these aspects may manifest itself. As compared to the conceptualisation of this part of SPF theory thusfar, I believe that by reading the description of the aspects of status, behavioural confirmation and affection in Chapter 5, a better feeling for and insight in the subject matter may be gained by researchers applying the theory or working with results of its applications. To assess the practical value of the improved conceptualisations more precisely, three different ways in which they may have concrete effects are distinguished.

Firstly, the identification of the different aspects constituting the complex components of social well-being that SPF theory labels as status, behavioural confirmation and affection, provides a firm grip on these abstract concepts, and has made it possible that measurement instruments were developed by Nieboer et al. (forthcoming) that are believed to cover the complete concepts and that are generally applicable. Thus far, applications of SPF theory in empirical research had been forced to rely either on existing measurement instruments, originally developed to catch other concepts which were thought to approximate the first-order goal(s) in question, or on ad hoc operationalisations and measurements of the first-order goals, which were prone to cover the concept only partially, focussing on the aspects that are most directly related to the substantive empirical problem and failing to appreciate the further aspects of the concept. Both ways of measurement have a number of drawbacks. Firstly, if the empirical evidence of levels of the first-order instrumental goals are based on different measures and operationalisations, there is a problem comparing results from different studies using SPF theory, inhibiting the cumulation of (empirical) knowledge about and insight in people’s social production functions and their (subjectively experienced) levels of status, behavioural confirmation and affection (and comfort and stimulation). Secondly, the uncertain validity of measured levels of the first-order instrumental goals implies insecurity of explanations and interpretations. Lacking valid measurement instruments, the conscientious researcher must present all interpretations and explanations based on his empirical data with considerable reserve. Of course, there is hardly any study in which the empirical data are such as to allow interpretations and conclusions without some reserve, but the larger the validity problems in the measurement of the main concepts, the more doubtful is the value of a study. Thus the development of a general, valid, standardised measurement instrument for the key elements of the theory will be highly valuable. The improved conceptualisation of the three first-order goals for social well-being achieved in this study provides a sound basis for the development of such a measurement instrument. Thirdly, if existing measures are used, it often proves troublesome to explain to others what is the added value of introducing SPF theory above the more conventional concepts and conceptual frameworks to which the empirical measures that were used pertain. Whether or not there are valid arguments legitimating that SPF theory is imposed upon a study which for its empirical evidence relies

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2 I think that such a bias should be logically expected to occur when a researcher starts out from a concrete subject and problem to find ad hoc operationalisations of more abstract and general concepts.
on measures of other concepts, the question is justified whether it would not be better then to
either incorporate the valuable notions of SPF theory in the existing conceptual frameworks or
to develop adequate measurement instruments for the concepts of SPF theory proper.

Fourthly, when using ad hoc operationalisations that only measure the locally relevant aspects
of the first-order instrumental goals, all interpretation is also insecure because it is part of the
core notion of SPF theory that people substitute in their production of well-being (and of the
respective first-order goals) between contexts. This essential notion of SPF theory implies that
no inferences can be drawn from people’s level of the first-order instrumental goals in one
particular setting or context to either their overall level of subjective well-being or to the
productive rationality of their behaviour.

A fifth, practical, drawback both of using existing measures of other concepts as proxy and of
using ad hoc operationalisations, is of course that each subsequent study using SPF theory
faces the problem of finding adequate empirical evidence anew.

The improved conceptualisation of the three first-order goals for social well-being that was
achieved in this study has provided the basis for the development of standardised
measurement instruments carefully tailored to the concepts (Nieboer et al., forthcoming).

The improved conceptualisation of the status, behavioural confirmation and affection is also
worthwhile because it enables us to distinguish between the level of the three components of
social well-being at the one hand and the production factors leading to it at the other. One of
the problems that existed thusfar in SPF theory was the difficulty in distinguishing, at the
conceptual level, between the three components of social well-being proper and the
production factors that may contribute to the realisation thereof. This difficulty derived
essentially from the loose and partly ambiguous conceptualisation of status, behavioural
confirmation and affection, which obscured the difference between the constituent
components of experienced well-being and the activities and resources by which that is
brought about.

With the new, more detailed and thorough conceptualisation of status, behavioural
confirmation and affection, this problem is, at least to a very large part, solved. Because we
now have a thorough image of what the three components of social well-being are, what the
subjective experience of them consists of, there is no more need to indicate what they are by
means of referring to how they come about. Also, now that the aspects of the three
components of social well-being are identified, they can be operationalised and in empirical
research, the subjective level of status, behavioural confirmation and affection can be assessed
independently of the measurement of production factors. This entails the feasibility of more
refined empirical testing of hypotheses derived in applications of SPF theory concerning the
instrumentality relations between particular resources and productive activities at the one hand
and levels of the three respective first-order instrumental goals at the other hand. In other
words, now that we are better able to make the conceptual distinction between the first-order
goals for social approval and the means that people may use to produce them, we have opened
up that part of SPF theory to empirical testing. By making a (part of a) theory testable,
theoretical progress is facilitated.

The third way in which the improved conceptualisation of the first-order goals for social well-
being may be of value is by facilitating the comparison of SPF theory as a theory of subjective
well-being, or as a behavioural theory of motivation to other theories. Clarifying the exact
meaning and content of the three first-order goals for social well-being, which belong to the
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main concepts in SPF theory, elucidates the (dis)similarities between the SPF conceptual framework and the concepts in other theories. It is now possible to assess to what extent the differently named concepts in SPF theory and other theories overlap or differ; whether SPF theory and some other theory cover the same phenomena and what parts of a subject or phenomenon covered by the one theory fall outside the other. For example, now that we have a clear view of what social well-being and its three components in SPF theory cover, it is much easier to assess the overlap and dissimilarities between SPF theory and other theories of (social) goals, such as Maslow’s pyramid of goals, or the goals proposed in socio-evolutionary approaches. In this way the theoretical discourse, between researchers from different approaches, or about theories and studies using different approaches, is facilitated.

Of course, some reservations should be made about all three different ways in which the improved conceptualisation may prove valuable. The most obvious reservation is that only for the three first-order goals for social well-being an conceptualisation has been achieved. The two first-order goals for physical well-being, that form the complementary branch in the framework of SPF theory were, for practical reasons, left out of this exploratory study, and still lag behind with regard to the clarity and thoroughness of conceptualisation. Thus, although the improved conceptualisation of status, behavioural confirmation and affection may prove valuable for empirical and theoretical studies in the three respects sketched above, the gains are limited because they do not hold for SPF theory as a whole.

In order to add more power and substance to the gains that this study has yielded, the two first-order goals for physical well-being, comfort and stimulation, should be elaborated in a similar fashion as the three components of social well-being.

A further reservation concerns the empirical measurement of the subjective level of status, behavioural confirmation and affection. As indicated above, I think the present study provides an adequate basis for developing valid measurement instruments for these three goals, and the preliminary results of Nieboer, who is working on the development of such measures, are promising (Nieboer et al., forthcoming). However, it would not do to run ahead of the actual yields of Nieboer’s instrument development, and therefore it should be noted that the gains that I have mentioned to be associated with obtaining good valid measures for the three components of well-being in SPF theory must as yet be considered potential gains.

8.3.2. THE MAIN PRODUCTION FACTORS FOR SOCIAL WELL-BEING IDENTIFIED AND SYSTEMATISED

In Chapter 6 reported the results of the analyses that served to answer the second research question, concerning the main production factors for status, behavioural confirmation and affection, and the complementarity and substitutability thereof. Although in principle the number of production factors for well-being is unlimited, as people may always find new ways of producing well-being and new substitutes for production factors that they lack, this only prohibits the identification of essential production factors at the most low level(s) of abstraction, for as soon as we abstract from production factors in their most concrete form, their relevant features can be detected and categories distinguished that do allow making an inventory of relevant production factors. From the theory, it could already be expected that differences should exist between the relevant features of production factors for status as compared with the features of production factors that are relevant for the realisation of behavioural confirmation and affection. It was also obvious beforehand that the characteristic features of the production factors for status would have to do with scarcity (as relative ranking only makes sense under the condition of scarcity), and that the characteristic features of the
production factors for behavioural confirmation would have to do with norm conformity; but as to what would be the essential features of production factors for affection, no clear ideas existed.

The yields of this part of the study are threefold:
(1) categorisation of contexts in which well-being is produced into six fields of production, allowing systematic inventorying of production factors;
(2) identification of the main relevant production factors for status, behavioural confirmation and affection, per field of production; and
(3) provision of a heuristics for hypothesising and the tentative formulation of hypotheses about the substitutability and complementarity relations between production factors.

Categorisation of contexts in which people produce their well-being
Guided by the data, I have distinguished six fields of production that correspond with a partitioning that seems rather universal in people’s own thinking about their life and activities. Divided over the ‘private domain’ and the ‘public domain’, there are the fields of personal relationships; of private productive activities; of private discretional or recreational activities; of public productive activities; of public relationships (citizenship and legal / bureaucratic rights and obligations); and of public non-institutionalised interaction.

I found that for each of these six fields, the production of status, behavioural confirmation and affection has certain field-specific characteristics or features. Therefore, investigating the main production factors for each component of social well-being per separate field of production allows less ambiguous identification of relevant features of production factors and clearer ordering of these main factors than if the effort were undertaken for all contexts of production at once.

When categorising the main relevant production factors (see below) per first-order goal over the six fields of production, it became clear that these production factors are not only similar per first-order goal over different fields of production, but that they are - in different respects - also similar within each field of production over the three different first-order goals. Combining the two approaches for categorising people’s production factors (in a ‘goals-by-fields of production matrix’) provides a practicable way to inventory, summarise, and quick-scan a person’s production factors. It is expected that the empirical assessment of a person’s production factors will be far more easy and practicable when starting out the interview or questionnaire from the six distinct fields of production (each at a time), then when asking people in general (thus without specifying the functional context) what resources and productive activities they use to get status, behavioural confirmation or affection.

Identification of the main relevant production factors for status, behavioural confirmation and affection
All activities, resources and preconditions discernable in respondents’ statements about the realisation of one or more components of social well-being were listed. The idea that (the features of) production factors for status are distinct from those for behavioural confirmation or affection, combined with the partitioning of contexts in which well-being is realised in six fields, led me to represent the inventory of production factors in the form of a matrix of production factors per first-order instrumental goal, per field of production.

After categorising the numerous production factors emerging from the data into the matrix of components of social well-being by fields of production, leading to cells containing over 30
production factors, reduction of the impracticable multitude of production factors was necessary. This reduction was achieved through gradual abstraction from less relevant variations between concrete activities and resources towards the more goal-characteristic features they had in common. Thus a systematic and more or less practicable inventory of main relevant production factors for social well-being was achieved in the form of a matrix of production factors per first-order goal per field of production. In this matrix, systematic differences between the relevant (features of) production factors can be found both between the three components of social well-being and between the categories of contexts in which social well-being is produced.

The main characteristic features of the production factors for status may be summarised as: (a) scarce skills or scarce material resources; (b) exploiting one’s scarce skills and other scarce resources; (c) independency or acknowledged social position vis-à-vis others; (d) managing the visibility of one’s performance or assets by others, either by showing what’s scarce or hiding what’s common or low-ranked, or by seeking the right environments for favourable comparison.

The main characteristic features of the production factors for behavioural confirmation may be summarised as: (a) norm conforming choices of what to do; (b) adequate, i.e. norm conforming behaviour and performance in chosen activities; (c) managing the exposure of one’s behaviour to others’ judgements; (d) the presence of clear behavioural norms; and (e) relevant social and productive skills.

The main characteristic features of the production factors for affection may be summarised as: (a) self exposure; (b) spending time together; (c) stability and durability of social contacts; (d) presence or nearness of others; (e) relational skills.

The substitutability and complementarity of production factors

When using data on objective conditions for judging the (potential) ‘quality of life’ of particular categories of people, the inventory of production factors ordered both according to the three components of social well-being and to the six fields of production, enables us to disentangle different substitutability and complementarity relations and to get a better grasp on these.

In the first place, between the three components of social well-being, substitutability of production factors exists only to the extent that a loss or lack of social well-being in one component, say behavioural confirmation, may be compensated for by an increase in one or both of the other components. This limited substitutability was suggested already in Lindenberg & Frey (1993) and formulated more explicitly in e.g. Ormel et al. (1999, p. 72) and is assumed to exist only when a minimum level of each of the three components is secured.

In the second place, there are, within the production functions for status, behavioural confirmation and affection separately, substitutability and complementarity relations between production factors from different fields of production. It was argued that the main relevant production factors within a cell of the matrix are generally complementary, while the main production factors for a particular first-order goal in different fields of production may, to some extent, serve as substitutes in the overall production of that component of social well-being. Lacking adequate quantitative data and the time and opportunity of collecting these, the hypotheses concerning substitutability and complementarity of production factors from different fields of production could not be tested, however, and therefore must remain speculative.
Obviously, the practical value of these results of the exploration of the main relevant production factors for social well-being lies mainly in facilitating empirical investigations of the available production factors and, thus, the productive capacity of people. The feasibility of empirical assessment of respondents’ production factors, in combination with the possibility of measuring their level of status, behavioural confirmation and affection (cf. section 8.3.1.), allows empirical testing of SPF theory’s predictions concerning the relations between production factors and realised levels of first-order goals. A second gain of a systematic inventory of people's production factors for the three components of social well-being per field of production, lies in the guidance it provides to researchers conducting a study that focuses on a particular empirical setting. It seems that most empirical settings fit in more or less easily within one (or perhaps a few) field(s) of production.

The main relevant production factors for each of the cells in the goals-by-fields matrix may serve as a general checklist for researchers to chart the main relevant variables affecting their subjects’ well-being or social production functions in a particular setting. The categorisation of production factors in the conceptual matrix of first-order goals for social well-being and fields of production does also shed light on the substitutability and complementarity of (sets of) production factors. The general starting point it provides for deriving hypotheses concerning the substitutability and complementarity relations between concrete production factors for concrete (groups of) individuals, is in my view a good step forward in preparing or opening up SPF theory for empirical testing of one more of its essential elements. In that sense the development of a systematic way of exploring production factors can be considered a contribution to the testing and refining of SPF theory, i.e. to theoretical progress.

8.3.3. THE MAIN METAGOALS IN PRODUCING WELL-BEING IDENTIFIED AND PUT INTO A TENTATIVE HIERARCHY

In Chapter 7 the results of the analyses that served to answer the third research question, concerning the identification and modelling of metagoals and the possibility to accommodate in this way the cognitive component of subjective well-being, were reported and discussed. The result of this part of the study can be summarised in three points:

(1) Identification of 20 metagoals, ranging from highly general and universal metagoals to rather specific and situational metagoals that appear to be instrumental to the more general metagoals;

(2) Elaboration of a theoretical framework in which the identified metagoals could be modelled, namely an instrumental hierarchy resembling that of social and physical well-being in the basic theoretical model of SPF theory; and

(3) Assessment of the extent to which the metagoals accommodate the cognitive component of subjective well-being as known from the literature.

Chronologically, the second point came first. On the basis of the assumption that people’s main universal motive is to improve their condition and a conceptual framework incorporating both SPF theory’s substantial goals and a set of operational goals as instrumental to the improvement of one’s position (Lindenberg 2001) and a preliminary set of seven metagoals (Lindenberg 1996) a theoretical framework was derived in which the metagoals encountered in the data could be placed. In this framework the as yet largely unidentified metagoals were, analogous to the basic theoretical model of the substantial goals in SPF theory, assumed to
constitute an instrumental hierarchy. The top, overarching both the hierarchy of substantive
goals and the hierarchy of metagoals, was formed by the general and universal motive of
‘improving one’s condition’. Directly below it, it was proposed that there should be two
general metagoals: ‘(immediate) efficiency’ and ‘development of productive capacity over
time’ (cf. figure 7.1).

For the identification and modelling of further, more specific metagoals (the first point above),
the data of this study were analysed once more. This led to the identification and modelling of
17 metagoals at varying levels of generality and abstraction. A few are thought to be
universally relevant, whereas others appear only situationally salient. The most universal
among the 17 metagoals that were identified are: agency or having control over one’s own
social production functions; self realisation; consistency or avoidance of moral conflict;
multifunctionality; limiting vulnerability or loss avoidance; and making investments. The
complete list of these is presented in section 7.4.

Although it is not claimed that the list of 17 metagoals is exhaustive, or that one might not
make slightly different distinctions between concepts and arrive at a somewhat different list, I
think the hierarchy of metagoals elaborated in Chapter 7 encompasses by and large the
relevant quality aspects of social production functions that may affect subjective well-being
and that may steer people’s behaviour.

All goals that had surfaced in the exploratory study, which did not qualify as manifestations of
(instrumental goals in the hierarchy of) physical- or social well-being, could without great
difficulty be interpreted as being (part of) one or more of these 17 proposed metagoals.

Further, as was asserted in section 7.5., our hierarchy of metagoals does fully encompass all
elements of what, in the literature on quality of life issues, is called ‘the cognitive component
of social well-being’. By distilling from a comprehensive review of subjective well-being
research the meanings that have been attached to the ‘cognitive component of subjective well-
being (SWB)’ in research and literature, and confronting these meanings with the 17
metagoals I identified, it was possible to evaluate the extent to which the latter cover the
former. The cognitive component of SWB appeared to refer to three kinds of mental
phenomena, namely social comparison, (setting and having) aspirations, and wanting to
perceive oneself moving towards goals. Each of these mental phenomena appears to be amply
covered by the proposed hierarchy of metagoals (cf. section 7.5). Since the incorporation of
the metagoals in the framework of SPF theory thus accommodates the cognitive component of
SWB (the affective component of SWB already being accommodated in the basic model of
SPF theory), this provides one of the required qualifications for SPF theory to suit for the
position of bridging the gap between objective and subjective approaches in quality of life
studies.

Now what is the worth of the identification of metagoals and the theoretical modelling of their
interrelations? I believe its potential value is twofold.

Firstly, what was achieved was the incorporation of other - often mentioned - goals that
people profess to strive for or to value, that could not be modelled as merely instrumental
goals for social or physical well-being. One needs not be a specialist in quality of life or
motivation theory to have been confronted repeatedly with the results of surveys and other
studies in which people are asked what goals they pursue or value. And when one confronts
the goals that usually come up in such studies, it is obvious that these overlap only partly with

the two universal and five first-order instrumental goals that SPF theory claims to be the overarching goals motivating people. Of course, several reasons may be thought of why people would either repress consciousness of their real goals or evade the revelation thereof to others, but I do not think that a sufficient or satisfying explanation of the obvious discrepancy between the goals people say they have and the goals in the basic model of SPF theory. People’s own assertions as to their goals should be taken more seriously than that. In the identification and elaboration of the metagoals, we have been able to incorporate at least the main goals that people profess to hold besides the goals concerning social and physical well-being, in the form of metagoals into the framework of SPF theory. This solves a problem of SPF theory in its confrontation to people’s real-life experiences, and may thus dissolve much resistance to its claims.

Secondly, the identification and elaboration of the metagoals may be seen as explicating the implications of the behavioural theory on which the theory of goals is built. The theory of substantial (or affective) goals that constitutes the explicit part of SPF theory is usually mistaken for the whole of SPF theory. This is a mistake, for the behavioural theory, which encompasses the cognitive processes and (cognitive or procedural) goals is inseparably connected to it and forms the foundation for the theory of substantial goals. What was achieved in Chapter 7 is thus the explication, the bringing to the fore, of the twin-half of SPF theory which had thus far remained rather at the background. This effort may be worthwhile not only because it (finally) does justice to the firm cognitive behavioural foundation of SPF theory but also because it enables adherents of SPF theory to enter the discussion with adherents of cognitive approaches or behavioural theory, with arguments and ammunition that clearly belong within SPF theory.

Of course, reservations should be made concerning these yields of the study as well. It is clear that the interpretation of the respondents’ statements concerning the goals they value and pursue is but my interpretation, and that, though it was carefully considered, it is open to disagreement.

Moreover, there has been no empirical testing of any of the proposed relations between the metagoals that were identified, nor of the relations between these metagoals and people’s overall subjective well-being. As long as the interpretations and interrelations of the metagoals emerging from this study are not tested empirically and have not gained empirical support, they are plausible but tentative. Their value for SPF theory thus remains as yet open.

8.4. General balance: how may this study contribute to quality of life studies?

The context of quality of life studies, a field of research with a large and direct relevancy for social policy, provides the substantial relevance of and motivation for the study that this book reports on. Therefore, whatever this study has yielded should be evaluated and judged foremost in that context. Taking such a broad context as the background against which to judge the results almost automatically implies that we should not expect to find our study to have brought radical changes or large steps forward. The objective of this study was much less ambitious than that. It was simply to add some conceptual insight that might eventually facilitate progress in the field of quality of life studies, by contributing to bridging the theoretical gap between subjective well-being on the one hand and the objective conditions that may affect it on the other.
When looking back from where we stand now, at the conclusion of this book, to what I knew or could find in the literature about quality of life studies at the outset, it may be concluded that in the course of this study some insights have been gained or sharpened. Firstly, the definition of the theoretical void in quality of life studies provided a sharpened insight in the main obstacle to progress in that field of research. Secondly, for the examination of the potential of existing theories to fill the void, requirements were formulated which an adequate theory of quality of life should meet. It is important to have in mind a more or less clear set of requirements which should be met, when setting out to find or develop a theory that is to play a key role in the achievement of further progress in a field like quality of life studies. Of course several general criteria should be observed as well. For example, the eventual theory should integrate the valuable elements of existing theories and insights on both subjective well-being and objective conditions for quality of life, and relate both in a systematic and understandable way; it should offer a clear general framework in which specific aspect-theories might be integrated; while it should encompasses sufficient substantial empirically supported insights to prevent it from being twisted in any direction. But such general criteria are not sufficiently specific to guide the search for an adequate theory of life. Therefore four more concrete requirements were specified, which proved helpful in guiding the search for an adequate theory. Irrespective of whether a theory meeting all four requirements would be found in the remainder of this study, the specification of these concrete requirements seems useful.

The evaluation of existing approaches according to the four criteria that were specified may also be worthwhile in itself, as it provides an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches that clarifies their selective or situational adequacy. For quality of life researchers who (continue to) work with one or more of the approaches that were put under scrutiny, a critical appraisal of the pro’s and con’s of these approaches may be useful.

Next, the potential of Lindenberg’s SPF theory to fulfill the role of bridging theory between the objective approaches and the subjective approaches in the field of quality of life studies was examined. It appeared that SPF theory meets, at least roughly, the requirements that were identified for a general quality of life theory. The main problems with SPF theory that were expounded in Chapter 3 have at least partly been solved in this study. So it might seem that as a result of the efforts in this project, we can now offer the field of quality of life studies an adequate theory with which the gap between the subjective and the objective approaches in the field may be bridged. However, this would be too optimistic. There still remain a number of serious problems that need to be solved before SPF theory may indeed be considered fit for this task. These remaining theoretical and practical difficulties are discussed below (section 8.5.1).

Even though the theory as a whole is not yet fully ready for application, some of the separate elements of the exploratory study reported in this book may already prove useful for certain aspects of quality of life research. For one thing, the thorough exploration of the phenomenology of social well-being (chapter 5) can be valuable as frame of reference for researchers interested in subjective social well-being, to get a better idea of the subject matter in all its forms and aspects.

A further and no less important result of this study that may be used directly in quality of life studies is the inventory of relevant production factors for social well-being (chapter 6). Compared to the usually ad-hoc selection of objective conditions that are used as indicators...
for the life quality that would be attainable for certain categories of people, the inventory of main production factors for status, behavioural confirmation and affection, although not yet tested empirically, offers a much better founded alternative. Even more so because there some ideas are also offered about the complementarity and substitutability of the production factors in this inventory. I have not been able to test the hypothesised complementarity and substitutability relations between production factors in this study. Even so, the suggested relations between the (abstract) groups of production factors have some face value and might provide a rule of thumb for policy makers concerned with the quality of life of their subjects that they lack thus far. For interpreting the scores of categories of citizens in social reports, that is, for judging - on the basis of data concerning people's resources, their participation in diverse social contexts and other objective conditions - the necessity of active intervention in order to improve the quality of life of certain categories of people, policy makers need general insights in how certain conditions may make up for a lack of other production factors, or, reversely, be indispensible for people to profit from other production factors they do have access to. It surely is desirable that the hypotheses concerning the functionality relations between production factors be empirically tested, but I think that even before that is achieved, they are sufficiently plausible to be regarded of value for policy makers and other people concerned with practical quality of life issues.

Overall, the results of this study provide useful general guidelines for policy makers who seek to find ways to enhance the well-being of their subjects. In section 1.2.2. a number of obstacles were identified that a governor who wants to further the well-being of his subjects would meet. One of these obstacles, for example, was the difficulty of finding out which people lag behind in terms of happiness and well-being. Ordering a nation-wide survey of ‘happiness’ or ‘well-being’ would help only when these concepts would be clear and could be measured validly. The results of the present study provide an elaborated conceptualisation of subjective social well-being and of its components as well as a detailed inventory of the aspects of these components that should be included in a valid measurement instrument for social well-being and its components.

Another obstacle was the doubt about the good of imposing government interventions: the policy maker in our thought experiment felt unsure about the importance of people’s sense of autonomy for their subjective well-being, and thus about the desirability of policymakers interfering with people’s investment behaviour and freedom of choice. The chapter about the metagoals revealed that the sense of agency and control over one’s life seems indeed to be a universal metagoal and thus highly important for overall subjective well-being. Although this result does not offer a clearcut solution to the policy maker’s dilemma, it does provide policy makers with a ground for giving careful thought to the balance between intervening and respecting people’s autonomy.

Yet another of the multiple obstacles that were discussed in section 1.2.2. was the lack of guidance in deciding what goods are ‘basic’ and should be accessible to all subjects. Although this study has not resulted in an actual inventory of basic goods, the inventory of main production factors presented in Chapter 6 comes close to this – be it only at some level of abstraction – and also provides general insight into the complementarity and substitutability relations between goods and condition, which is essential.

Summarising, although this study has not resulted in a recipe for policies to further people’s subjective well-being, it does provide useful equipment (concepts, a theoretical framework and many insights) for policy makers to deal with the obstacles they meet.
8.5. Looking ahead

The extensive discussion of the yields of this study, in the foregoing sections of this chapter, should not induce one to overlook the problems that are yet to be solved and the impediments to actual progress that still remain. Looking at the level of Social Production Function theory and the efforts to make it fit for application in quality of life studies, at least four points can easily be discerned where there are still unsolved problems:

- Analogous to the conceptualisation of the social well-being components in this study, their counterpart in the SPF hierarchy of substantive goals, namely the physical well-being part of the hierarchy, with comfort and stimulation as first-order instrumental goals, should also be more thoroughly conceptualised. If possible, one would want to have ‘comfort’ and ‘stimulation’ conceptualised in similar vein as the three components of social well-being, that is, by identifying the distinctive aspects by which people experience them;

- Although this study has yielded a more thorough and less ambiguous conceptualisation of status, behavioural confirmation and affection, the development of measurement instruments for these three components of social well-being is yet to be achieved. This is a challenging job and although preliminary results are highly promising there are many technical and practical problems yet to be solved;

- Similarly, the development of a measurement tool for the empirical measurement of production factors is yet to be completed. Besides the usual technical and practical difficulties that have to be overcome there, an extra problem is constituted by the enormous number of factors that need to be investigated in order to have even a roughly dependable inventory of people’s possibilities for realising well-being. As yet I have not been able to think of an acceptable way out of the dilemma between the practical limitations to what can be asked in any questionnaire and the necessity to assess roughly the whole range of production factors in order to be able to infer anything at all concerning people’s potential level of well-being;

- Notwithstanding that this study has advanced the specification and conceptualisation of the metagoals, it is clear that this part of SPF theory still lags somewhat behind the rest in the conceptualisation of its relation to overall subjective well-being. As to the position of the metagoals as to the basic theoretical framework of higher and lower order substantial goals linked by social production functions, it is clear that the metagoals come in as the quality of the production functions. Yet, when looking at SPF theory from the perspective of mainstream SWB research, this may be found unsatisfactory. From the perspective of SWB research, the basic hierarchy of (social and physical well-being goals in) SPF theory represents the affective component of SWB, and the metagoals represent the cognitive component of SWB. Both components, the affective and the cognitive, are considered equally important as constituent parts of overall SWB. Therefore, one might demand that the way the cognitive component relates to overall SWB is modelled analogous to the way the relation between overall SWB and the affective component of well-being is modelled. The elaborated version of SPF theory that results from this study, has not achieved that yet: although we know how to conceptualise the relation of the metagoals to the social production functions by which people realise social and physical well-being, the direct relation of the metagoals to overall subjective well-being is not clear yet. Besides this main point, it must also be acknowledged that the proposed hierarchy of metagoals is but tentative. It is not well
possible to both identify concepts (i.e. metagoals) and to ascertain their interrelations on the basis of the same data. A further investigation and testing of the proposed interrelations of the metagoals is thus desirable. And, of course, in future we would also want the metagoals to be operationalised and their hypothesised relation to SWB and to each other to be tested empirically.

Besides following up these leads, however, I believe it is also highly important that research along the existing lines in quality of life studies be continued. Both research from the subjective approach and research focussing on the objective living conditions that appear relevant for ‘quality of life’ remains indispensible. I think it is true that a bridge between them is essential in order to make real progress in the field of study, but even so each apart is still likely to yield valuable results. In the course of the present study, it has become more and more clear that practically everybody entertains a set of notions and beliefs about ‘quality of life’ and ‘subjective well-being’ or ‘happiness’ as well as about the actual distribution of objective resources. This ‘conventional wisdom’ is sometimes wisdom indeed, but just as often it contains many inconsistencies and false assumptions. Yet it is these semi-conscious beliefs that people usually act on, in private situations and in public office - such as social policymaking - alike.

Therefore it remains very important to provide policy makers and others with valid and well-informed information about the actual distribution of subjective well-being, and of resources and conditions that appear conducive to high quality of life, as well as with increasingly clear and hopefully increasingly converging conceptualisations of what ‘quality of life’ is.