

# Chapter 1

## Relevance of the Use of Qualitative Methods in the Study of Quality of Life

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This chapter is dedicated to the origin and evolution of qualitative studies in the quality of life field. At first it describes the characteristics and specificity of qualitative methods, considering that their main purpose is to understand meaning for participants in the study of the events, situations and actions in which they are involved, the context in which participants act and the influence these methods have on their actions, as well as the process in which the actions take place, which can enable the identification and generation of a new theory (Maxwell 1996).

Although not many studies have been developed through the use of qualitative methodologies in quality of life field, this chapter shows a summary of the studies that had been published in the Official Journal of ISQOLS, *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, since 2006 and the qualitative studies produced during the last decade through the Research Program on Quality of Life, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, Argentina.

Finally, the chapter will point out that adopting a particular methodology implies a philosophic, theoretical and political decision and, in the case of qualitative methodology, it is an essential approach in understanding people's experiences of wellbeing and discovering new issues related to quality of life.

### 1.1 The Challenge of the Research

Strauss and Corbin (2002, p. 31) define investigation as a work flux that evolves through an entire investigation project, which implies a series of methodological decisions in each of its stages.

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The Word of science is more often considered as a creation of cognitive maps, molding and being molded by the actions and perceptions of the scientist, rather than an accumulation of knowledge (Bohm 1987 in May 2003, p. 21).

Research is a systematic rigorous activity carried out with the object of producing knowledge. It differs from other activities in the fact that it produces empirical evidence and uses clear and precise procedures to shed light on the way in which the results have been achieved, thus allowing for further argument. Its rigorousness is in keeping with the use of a specific language, an internal order (logical coherence) and a critical apparatus for reference, critical apparatus being understood as the entire set of bibliographical references that legitimize and support the research work (Vélez Restrepo 2003, p. 132).

In 2006, Greene identified four domains in social research:

- a. The philosophical aspects derived from the consideration of the nature of the social world and that of social knowledge, the role of context, the researcher-researched relationship, and the question of subjectivity/objectivity.
- b. The logics of research (methodology), which comprises the research questions, the construction of a design, and the proof, together with the methodological strategies, including the analysis, writing and interconnection of all these elements.
- c. The research practice, which comprises the research methods and techniques, as well as the methods of analysis.
- d. The socio-political aspects, which lead us to reflect upon the role of research in different societies, the interests behind research, and the possible relation it may have with governmental decisions.

Research is an intentional practice, with clear aims, which produces an acquisition of knowledge about the real world which differs from other activities such as common sense, art or religion.

## 1.2 The Quality of Life Field

The importance of the use of qualitative methodology in quality of life studies is related with the importance of considering people's perceptions, opinions, feelings, ideas and interpretations. This kind of approach is essential to the understanding of people's experiences of wellbeing and to the discovery of new issues related with the quality of life field.

The study of the quality of life refers to the material conditions (social welfare) and to the psycho-social conditions (personal welfare); the latter, based on experience and on personal assessment, including positive and negative measures and a global view of a person's life. This is known as vital satisfaction, defined by Diener et al. (2006, p. 2) as the general assessment each individual makes of his own life, taking into consideration all the areas that constitute the life of a person at a given point in time.

Quality of life is the perception each person has of his/her own place in life, within a cultural context and the system of values he/she conforms to, as related to expectations, interests, and achievements.

In assessing quality of life people consider all the things that matter to them and judge the overall quality of their lives as a whole, while at the same time, people choose particular aspects in the domains of their lives and judge each of these domains separately (Inoguchi and Fujii 2013, p. 4).

Quality of life has, of late, generally referred to as the degree that determines a person's life to be desirable or undesirable in individual cases. Domains of satisfaction with life are to be understood as the people's judgment, when assessing different areas of their lives. However, in order to grasp a person's level of satisfaction in each area, it is necessary for the person in question to specify its importance, how much it is enjoyed, and how much of it should be subjected to change.

Although individual needs deriving in personal satisfaction vary in the different societies, it must be pointed out that the comparative measurements undertaken, so far, have traditionally presented a tendency towards correlation between economic status and satisfaction. Nevertheless, we coincide with Easterlin (1974) who believes that economic prosperity does not necessarily affect quality of life.

But quality of life is also conditioned by social structure, which may be considered in terms of demographic characteristics, cultural traits, psycho-social characteristics of the community, as well as the characteristics of its institutions, both official and private, which develop their action in this context (Ferris 2006). The author points out that the demographic foundation of a society and its institutional structure, provide the social environment for living conditions. In this sense, quality of life is elicited by two types of forces, endogenous and exogenous. The former include mental, emotional and psychological responses of the people towards their living conditions. The latter, on the other hand, include the social structure and the cultural influence of the community (Ferris 2006).

Casas (1999) states that, nowadays, quality of life is a concept which refers to the citizens' joint action in assessing what affects them, thus carrying political significance, contributing to the study of the people's well-being from the perspective of physical and psychological well-being, relating material needs to socio-emotional ones, and integrating psychological and social measurements of perception to the assessment of individual personal experiences.

### **1.3 The Use of Qualitative Methodology in the Study of Quality of Life**

Even though the first attempts at applying qualitative methods in the field of Social Sciences were the ethnographic studies in the early twentieth century, we must point out that qualitative methods came into fashion once more in the 1980s, and that this tendency was extended all through the 1990s, with the increasing application of qualitative methodological texts in Europe and the USA together with its devel-

opment in Latin American countries, especially regarding the use of participatory methods.

Qualitative methods have been generally applied to little known subjects, which explains why most of those studies are merely exploratory and are, likewise, used in circumstances that demand a revision of existing theories.

They have been traditionally conceived as a methodological resource for a first level approach to reality, which preceded a second instance in which the quantitative method was displayed.

The main purposes of using qualitative methods are to understand the meaning for participants in the study of the events, situations and actions in which they are involved, the context in which participants act and the influence of it on their actions and the process in which the actions take place, and at the same time enable the identification and generation of new theory (Maxwell 1996).

Understanding the meaning<sup>1</sup> for participants in the study of the events, situations and actions they are involved with and the accounts that they give for their life and experiences, as people perspectives conforms part of the reality the researchers try to understand in the study (Maxwell 1996, p. 17).

At present, there are a number of different proposals of qualitative methods applied to the field of social and human sciences: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, Ethno-methodology, Content Analysis, Thematic Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Action Research, Participative Research, among others. Yet this chapter does not aim at presenting an abstract of every one of these proposals, since there is an extensive bibliography on each; the purpose is to reflect upon the peculiarities that qualitative methods have in common.

Qualitative studies are organized from generated ideas in relation with the importance of the analysis of the issue, with a core and keys of interpretation, not necessarily a hypothesis. The research purposes are focused on understanding something, gaining some insight into what is going on and why this is happening (Maxwell 1996, p. 16). The main feature of these studies is that they are holistic and inductive and that they require rigorous work over an extended span of time, their axes being discovery and comprehension.

Comprehension is a process that differs from information and scientific knowledge, and whose results are not definite. According to Arendt (1953–2005, pp. 32–33) comprehension precedes and prolongs knowledge and if a scholar wishes to transcend his own knowledge, he must be humble enough to become a careful listener of the populace in order to restore contact between knowledge and comprehension.

In this sense, Zemelman (2006, p. 33) points out the need to discuss a manner of comprehension of a historical moment in order to account for its diversity, which is quite different from the proof of a hypothesis. The researcher's capacity to articulate the diversities as they emerge, at a certain point in time, is what really matters.

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<sup>1</sup> For the author "meaning" is used in a broad sense including cognition, affect, intentions and anything else that might conform the participant's perspectives.

Unlike the traditional theoretical background of quantitative studies, qualitative studies comprise a conceptual context formed by concepts, topics, beliefs and theories which support the project. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 18) say that the contextual context explains either graphically or in a narrative form the main things to be studied, the key factors, concepts or variables and the presumed relationships among them.

The contextual context is not found, it is constructed by the researcher, hence, the importance of revising all the existing theories and previous researches (state of the art) in order to determine which of them may become a contribution to our project. In the construction of the conceptual context Maxwell (1996, p. 27) advises the consideration of the following: accumulated knowledge emerging from the researcher's experience, the theories and research already in existence in the thematic field, and the test research developed by the researcher.

Qualitative methods study inter-subjective meanings, situated and built by probing into the depths of social life in its natural development and exploring meaning for its actors. In this perspective, the world is built around meanings and symbols, the former being local, inherent to each individual and each group/culture and to their behavior within each historical moment. Furthermore, as is the case of every process of production of knowledge in social sciences, its results also affect the subjects. As Vélez Restrepo (2003, p. 143) says qualitative perspective is a social product whose production process is collective and transversally influenced by values, perceptions and meanings of the subjects in charge of their construction. An inter-subjective immersion into the desired knowledge of a particular reality is the condition which allows the comprehension of its internal logics and rationality.

The choice of qualitative methods implies a particular vision of the world which leads to a consideration of the essential meaning of the world (ontology), an idea of how it may be known (epistemology), and a way to guarantee the knowledge of the world (methodology) as well as a set of values to orient the task (axiology) (López et al. 2010, p. 132).

Studies of this kind offer two essential characteristics: *reflexibility* and *indexicality*.

The former originated in Garfinkel's ethno-methodology (1967). He states that ethno-methodology is the research of the methods people use to achieve and substantiate communication, decision making, rationality, and everyday life activity. It is, thus, an outlook on daily life and the rules that help the subjects (including the researcher himself) to understand and construct his own world. In this sense, *reflexibility* is the property which goes together with an activity when it presupposes something while making it observable, at the same time (Ruiz Olabuenaga and Ispizúa 1989, pp. 54–56). For Sotolongo Codina and Delgado Díaz (2006, p. 62) the *reflexibility* presumption considers that a system has been constituted in virtue of the reciprocal interference between the activity of the object system and the objectified activity of the subject.

*Indexicality* is the movement which reveals contextual meaning and shows the dependence of concrete acts on the situational context in which they occur; therefore, they can only be explained if the context has been understood. According to Ruiz Olabuenaga and Ispizúa (1989, p. 56) it aims at the double meaning every

expression offers: a trans-situational meaning and a specific one, for individual situations.

Qualitative studies mostly work on description, defined by Strauss and Corbin (2002) as the use of words to express mental images of an occurrence, an aspect of the panorama, a scene, an experience, an emotion or sensation, where the narrative is made from the point of view of the person making the description. Every description includes a purpose, an audience, and a selective eye.

In qualitative studies, two kinds of description may be observed: fine descriptions and dense descriptions. The former are those which narrate an occurrence without attempting to show the intentions, motives, meanings or circumstances that surround it. Dense descriptions, on the other hand, reveal or lead to discover the subjacent knowledge, relationship structures which the persons under study may or may not understand, and act accordingly. They go beyond the act, probing into detail, context, emotion, and the affiliation network and micro-power (Ruiz Olabuénaga and Ispizúa 1989, p. 48).

Description may be the foundation for the interpretation and construction of a theory, though it is necessary to make clear that, while description incorporates concepts, it should be stressed that “describing does not equal theorizing”, although description is basic to theorization.

Nevertheless, interpretation and theorization are not the same. Interpretation is related to the significance given to occurrences by the subjects under study. It is only when researchers take, both descriptions and interpretations, as sources of explanation that they can be said to be attempting to generate theory.

All interpretations are constructed inter-subjectively, and within a given context to which they belong, and which their constructions cannot avoid; this does not imply the validity of all interpretations, only that it is necessary that they should be contrasted to the daily practice of real and concrete subjects (Sotolongo Codina and Delgado Diaz 2006, p. 57).

Theorizing is a long and deep process which implies formulating ideas in a logical, systematic and explicative scheme. In the depths of theorization lies the interaction between making inductions, deriving concepts, their properties and dimensions, on the basis of given data and deductions. Thus, theory is more than mere findings, since it offers further explanation of the phenomena, which allow the development of a field of knowledge (Strauss and Corbin 2002, pp. 15–28).

Maxwell (1996, p. 33) pointed out that in qualitative studies it is possible to use a theory based on concepts and one emerged from inductive reasoning through the data of the study (grounded theory); likewise, theory can be used as a coat closer where you can find and hang anything in it or as a Spotlight in which case theory illuminates what you can see in your research.

Considering the abovementioned characteristics and specific aspects related to qualitative studies we may point out that, since this type of studies consider the person as a protagonist of the research processes, acknowledging the importance that context and meaning have to the actors, we conclude that qualitative methodology is a kind of approach essential in understanding people’s experiences of wellbeing and discovering new issues related to quality of life.

#### 1.4 Qualitative Studies in Quality of Life at the *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, Official Journal of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS)

The *Applied Research in Quality of Life* (ARQOL) is the official journal of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS), Richard Estes is his Editor in Chief, and it is published by Springer.

The Journal presents conceptual, methodological and empirical papers dealing with quality-of-life studies in the applied areas of the natural and social sciences. It aims at publishing papers that have direct implications for, or impact on practical applications of research on the quality of life. The articles are crafted from interdisciplinary, inter-professional and international perspectives. ARQOL guides decision making in a variety of professions, industries, nonprofit, and government sectors, including healthcare, travel and tourism, marketing, corporate management, community planning, social work, public administration, and human resource management. It helps decision makers apply performance measures and apply assessment techniques based on such concepts as well-being, human satisfaction, human development, happiness, wellness and quality-of-life.

From its onset, in 2006, to August 2013, three specifically qualitative studies have been published in *Applied Research in Quality of Life*. Only these three articles are mentioned, since they are the ones which propose qualitative methodology as the only option used by researchers. It is worth mentioning that studies applying mixed methods have been published in this journal and they will be referred to, once more, in the eighth chapter of this book.

The first of those articles entitled *Revisiting the local impact of community indicators project: Sustainable Seattle as a prophet in its own land*, was written by Meg Holden. This article presented the results of a research on the policy impacts of community indicator projects in their localities and on manners of increasing the effectiveness of projects from the perspectives of different indicator organizations and policy actor groups. It was a case study in which data were gathered developing a historical analysis using archival and policy documents as well as newspapers, participant observations and deep interviews with people selected out of five groups: elected leaders, local government employees, nonprofit organizations, active citizens and businesses.

The second article was edited in 2009 and was entitled *Suerte (luck): spirituality and well-being in El Alto, Bolivia*, by Melania Calestani. It is a doctorate thesis which, years later, became one of the volumes of the Springerbriefs collection. This paper deals with the importance of faith and the consequent resort to supernatural forces in order to acquire a sense of well-being in a poor neighborhood in the city of El Alto, Bolivia. It was an ethnographic research carried out during twelve months where the researcher developed the participants' observations, informal conversations and informal interviews. The author concluded that

Ethnography enables the analysis of the art of living, privileging a more unsystematic -yet rigorous- approach to accommodate different cultural contexts and the many perspectives that illustrate the scenarios of human life. Illustrating the value of such an approach and the complexities of social action can hopefully create space for further discussion on the importance of context and will highlight the malleability of concepts of well-being in everyday life, in opposition to universalist definitions based on material factors. (Calestani 2009, p. 73)

The third article, dating from 2010, is *Health related quality of life in Iranian breast cancer survivors: a qualitative study* de T. Harandy, F. Ghofranipour, A. Montazeri, M. Anoosheh, E. Mohammadi, F. Ahmadi, F. Shokravi and S. Niknami. This work analyses the role of cultural and social factors on quality of life, in relation to the state of health of women who have survived breasts cancer in Iran. The authors developed deep semi-structured interviews of 39 women diagnosed with breast cancer, at diverse stages, one year after diagnosis, and no longer on active invasive treatment. Two topics were discussed in the interviews: the effects of their illness in their QOL and cultural aspects affecting their QOL. Women agreed to be interviewed and authorized the interviews which were audio-taped and transcribed using members check. Results were analyzed using the words of the participants and organized in codes.

### **1.5 Qualitative Studies in Quality of Life at the Research Program on Quality of Life, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, Argentina**

Since the creation, in 2004, of the Research Program on Quality of Life of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, three research projects have taken place, developed with a qualitative focus and centered in the study of the relationship between quality of life and Access to university life.

The first project took place during 2005 and was entitled *A strategy in the improvement of the quality of life: the university as a space for the social integration of students*. Subsequently, and during the 2010–2011 period, the second project was developed under the name of *Images of the future and quality of life of young university students of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora*. Both projects allowed the identification of the existing relationships between higher studies and level of satisfaction in the lives of the subjects under study. The report revealed a direct and positive relationship between the situation of studying at university and the perception of quality of life. These conclusions encouraged us to pursue this line of research, thus, advancing in the study of the quality of life of post graduate students, taking into consideration that, since 2009, the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora has been offering its graduates and teaching staff the opportunity to take up post-graduate studies, free of charge. Our latest Project, developed in the course of 2012–2013, is



entitled *Quality of life and satisfaction with post-graduate studies: a study from the subjects' perspective*.

Presently, we shall very briefly introduce the most significant features and results of the first two projects, considering that they have already been published, and proceed to a deeper treatment of the third project one of whose central topics of study was, precisely, the definition of the concept of quality of life as expressed by the interviewed subjects.

First project: *A strategy in the improvement of the quality of life: the university as a space for the social integration of students*. Its aims were: to describe the role of university as a space for social integrating in the Departments of Greater Buenos Aires<sup>2</sup> in the early twenty-first century and identify the assessment the students made of their access to university, and the way it altered their quality of life. It was a descriptive study made through the qualitative method, the construction of meanings and the context in which the actors behave being part of the problem the research is about.

Semi-structured interviews were made to an intentional sample of students from Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, and two other national universities located in other Departments of Greater Buenos Aires, as well as three university professors from the abovementioned educational institutions who acted as key informers. This technique privileged the attainment of information pertaining the students' perception of their process of insertion in university life and the social role of university. The selected group of students was integrated by 10 subjects of both sexes, between 20 and 56 years old. The courses of study were the following: Advertising, Education, Social Work, Minors and Family, Law, Political Science and Mathematics.

The students greatly valued their access to university, whether to acquire knowledge, as an anticipatory mechanism of a possible future source of employment, or as a stage in the improvement of their quality of life; the latter being regarded in its broader sense rather than as a restrictive conception that relates the quality of life to material possessions.

In the students' discourse, the possibility of being inserted in the work-field was regarded as the final stage of development derived from previous ones such as: access to work spaces related to their courses of study, preceding their graduation, in order to become acquainted with the work-field; development of volunteer work; and the need to take up post-graduate studies. On account of the increasingly precarious working conditions, especially in the professions connected with social sciences, the expectations of working at the chosen profession began to take shape as a way of improving their personal quality of life and, in this sense, attending university has been a stage of improvement.

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<sup>2</sup> The Departments of Greater Buenos Aires is the geographical region that surrounds the capital district. Its size is 3833 km<sup>2</sup> and it is organized in 24 departments. The most recent national census (2010) showed that its population is about 9.916.715 inhabitants, which is the equivalent to the fourth part of the total country population which amounts to 40.117.096 inhabitants. It is a region that presents polarized life conditions, ranging from settlements of extreme poverty to high-income gated neighborhoods.

Quality of life has been associated to vital satisfaction, to enjoyment, to “doing what I like” and, in doing so, with the possibility of personal fulfilment. Thus, quality of life has been recognized as an instance that confers entity to the experience people have of their own life styles and living conditions, conferring as much value to this experience, or even more, than to material conditions, historically considered “objective”.

The second project was developed in the course of 2010–2011 and was entitled *Images of the future and quality of life of young university students of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora*. Its aims were to describe the perception that young university students have of their quality of life, as related to the characteristics of their socio-political and economic context, and to identify their wishes and fears regarding their future insertion in the work field after their graduation. It was a descriptive study, with a qualitative perspective, which allowed a better understanding of the personal perceptions of the participants, giving way to the emergence of new categories, or to a new interpretation and significance of the same categories hitherto observed.

Ten university students were selected, males and females between 18 and 23 years old, newly incorporated to the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora. Each was selected for a different course of studies in that Faculty: Social Work, Psycho-pedagogy, Educational Sciences, Letters, Minors and Family, Social Communication, Journalism, Advertising, Public Relations, and Labor Relations.

A semi-structured interview was used as a technique, defined as *a gathering among subjects, and it is a technique that enables reading, comprehension and analysis of subjects, contexts, and social situations, also generating situations and acts of communication* (Tonon 2009, p. 5). The semi-structure was provided by thematic axes that responded to study oriented ideas, generated on the basis of a theoretical perspective, in coherence with the research design. Placing special attention on methodological rigorousness, the purpose of this kind of interview is, at the same time, to offer enough scope to avoid hindering the spontaneous emergence of new theoretical categories. The thematic axes were:

- Identification data: age, sex occupation, type and duration of job.
- Perception of present quality of life.
- Perception of the characteristics of the socio-political and economic context.
- Characteristics of the Departments of the Greater Buenos Aires.
- Expectations regarding a future insertion in the labor force: wishes and fears.
- Labor alternatives for the future.

For the data analysis we used Thematic Analysis, which is a method of qualitative analysis that allows for topics to be identified and codified within the dense descriptions obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the young students. The chosen phases for the thematic analysis were those of Braun and Clarke (2006).

The results demonstrate that all the subjects we interviewed lived with their families and were, in some cases, the first member of the family to enter university. Most of them were unemployed, but those who had a job considered it to be a con-

tribution to the family economy. On the other hand, others considered that getting a job was an expectation related to certain relevant values at a personal level, such as the right to feel independent.

Thus, the expectations of making a living on their chosen professions, as an improvement in their quality of life, relates the young students' access to university studies to the empowerment of quality of life, on objective and subjective terms. Quality of life is related to satisfaction with life, with enjoying what they like doing. Quality of life is therefore acknowledged as something that makes their lives meaningful. The scenario is completed by their conception of education as an opportunity to become real citizens. The students' discourse further discloses the notion that obtaining a university degree implies having access to a job and, thus, to social prestige.

These young people describe their difficulties in obtaining jobs, which sheds light on the way they relate this issue to their quality of life. In this sense, it is important to point out that Sirgy et al. (2008, p. 88) have studied the effects of satisfactory employment on the quality of life of a community, and have concluded that a total satisfaction with one's community is partially affected by job availability which, in turn, has an impact on the financial as well as the labor and family fields.

The results show that the young students of both sexes are, in all cases, satisfied with their quality of life, even when this feeling is related to different aspects of the same: namely, job availability, healthy family relations, religious practice, the opportunity to carry on with their studies, and the achievement of an economic status.

Finally, we may add that the central role our research assigns to work, as a means of improving quality of life, came across as part of the process of interaction in the construction of citizenship. University studies (and the university as an institution) continue to be perceived as a distinctive value related to social mobility, in its broad sense, that is, not reduced to economic status but also regarded as an improvement of the "person", in other words, of quality of life in general. The expectation of making a living on the chosen professions came up as an improvement of the quality of life, relating access to university to the empowerment of the quality of life, both in objective and subjective terms. The feeling of satisfaction with one's life and the enjoyment derived from doing what one likes, lead quality of life to be recognized as a state which makes one's life meaningful.

The third project was *Quality of life and satisfaction with post graduate studies: a study from the subjects' perspective*. Its aims were: to identify the situations which led the post graduate students in question to take up their studies; to interpret the descriptions of their quality of life made by the participants; to determine their alleged level of satisfaction with their present studies; and to identify whether the initiation of post graduate studies has, in fact produced a change in their quality of life, particularly in their work field.

The abovementioned was a descriptive study which proposed a qualitative perspective. The sample was integrated by students of post graduate courses from the Faculty of Social Sciences of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora (Specialization in Didactics and Curriculum, Masters in Curriculum, Specialization in Labor Relations, Masters in Labor Relations, Specialization in Social Communica-

tions, Masters in Social Communications). The mode adopted was that of the plain simple for qualitative studies which requires the researcher to make a list of the essential features each selected unit should possess; 18 subjects were interviewed to that effect. The selection was made taking into account the parameters of sex, age, and whether or not the subject was a student and/or ex-student of Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora.

The semi-structured research interview was used from a perspective that sets aside the traditional reductionist outlook which has so far been attributed to the semi-structured research, i.e., as a simple tool to gather information (Tonon 2009, p. 71). Like in the previous researches, the interviews had a script based on the following axes:

- Identification data: age, sex, occupation, time and duration of job.
- Description of the decisive factors leading to post-graduate studies.
- Description of the subjects' family reactions regarding the subjects' decisions.
- Description of the subjects' quality of life.
- Degree of satisfaction with post-graduate studies: pedagogical, administrative, and education.
- Opinion about the university as an institution.
- Description of the possible relationship between post-graduate education and quality of life.
- Future perspectives regarding the possible changes in their lives, in general, and particularly as regards the job offer that a post-graduate degree is likely to generate.

In this research, the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in order to identify, analyze, and inform about topics and structures thus revealing, not only the experiences but also the meanings and realities of the subjects, as well as examining the ways in which events, realities, meanings, and experiences are dictated by society. Thus, thematic analysis becomes a strategy of qualitative data analysis through which results are systematized and inferred.

The interviewed subjects were between 27 and 53 years old, ten of them were females and eight of them males, most of them residing in the Departments of Greater Buenos Aires and have obtained their degrees at the Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, some have graduated recently, while others are re-commencing their studies after several years. In some cases, they have alleged not being the only university students in their families but, in most cases, they were taking up post-graduate studies for the first time.

The subjects' interview discourse reveals their acknowledgement of a good or very good quality of life and, only one of them did not show complete satisfaction with the life he had.

The definition of quality of life appears in the subjects' discourse as associated to family life, housing and environment, leisure time, health, job, education and politics; but it is mainly defined as good living, satisfaction with their activities, personal fulfillment, happiness, and harmony. One significant fact is that the definition of quality of life is not preeminently associated to money or economic welfare,

it is only related to the money earned at work, but only as a contribution to personal and family welfare.

Look, I believe quality of life is not a synonym of salary raise, in my specific case it would be the opposite; I think quality of life has to do with feeling useful and satisfied with the profession one has chosen, with one's family circle, as persons, which is not the same as just one's income. (female, 40 years old)

It's difficult to define quality of life but, let's say, if I had to use classical parameters and common sense, I'd say, well, I own a house, I have a job, my work enables me to be in a fairly good position, I go on holiday in Summer, in Winter I can also go on holiday, if I have the time; I can pay for my daughter's kindergarten, she's taking swimming lessons, gym lessons, I'm also taking swimming lessons. Let's say, I can indulge in certain things I like, nothing showy. I have my own car; I'm still paying for it in installments. (male, 34 years old)

Well, er..., I'm lucky to have an income that allows me to have a quality of life, doing what I like, not everything but, well, a few whims... (female, 30)

Family is a core determinant of life satisfaction and personal development. Mattew (1986) found that people with spouses and friends are more likely to be physically and mentally healthier than people living alone. The roles of the spouse and of the friend provide emotional support and well being (Requena 1995).

I've got my husband, so I consider my quality of life to be good. (Female, 27 years old)

I'm fulfilled... I've got my loved ones, which is what contributes quality of life, to a greater degree. (Female, 50 years old)

Being able to exploit and develop my abilities for the benefit of others and, obviously... my quality of life, I think I'm going to be alright if the people around me are alright, that's what comes to mind, that those who are with me should be well. My surroundings, my context; obviously, I prioritize my family, friends, my surroundings, my work, my studies. I'll feel well if those who are dear to me are well, this is my conception in this matter. (Male, 29 years old)

As to emotions, which also influence my life, I'm in a stable relationship. I have a good quality of life. (Female, 30 years old)

In their discourse there is a preeminence of the connection between having a job and pursuing post-graduate studies with an improvement of the quality of life in terms of personal achievement; and the pursuit of post-graduate studies as a form of improvement of their labor conditions.

Employment plays an important role on people's social lives and also confirms their conformity with social norms (Marks et al. 2004, p. 14). Various authors have observed a positive correlation between having a job and life satisfaction. Such is the case of the studies made by Jackson (1993, 1994, and 1998) y Rodgers (1977) involving women and quoted by Mammen, Bower and Lass (2009). Personal development captures curiosity, enthusiasm, absorption, flow, exploration, commitment, creative challenge and also potential meaningfulness (Marks et al. 2004, p. 4).

Post-graduate studies have a lot to do with quality of life, they offer the chance to gain access to a place of learning, and that place of learning gives you personal satisfaction; because my presence here is a question of personal growth. (Female, 50)

I attend a post-graduate course for personal satisfaction, one gets ahead, comes into contact with people who want to make progress and with whom you can hold conversations at a totally different level from the ones on the streets, or habitually at work. (Female, 33)

Post-graduate courses offer this possibility ... and the quality of life ... not only by associating work to economic welfare, but also regarding work as a generator of other activities which broaden your personal spectrum, as when you open up to doing awesome things, surprising things. And you say, "Wow, this can actually be done!" Not always the same routine... (Female, 53)

Well, I have my work, my husband's got his, we both study, he attends a private university but I've always studied at public university; in this sense, I consider my quality of life to be good. (Female, 27 years old)

Many relationships ..., not only can I improve my quality of life regarding my work field by taking a post graduate course, but it also helps you acquire another train of thought, it opens your mind. Attending a post-graduate course changes your mentality; with the influence of TV, the radio, your family, it gives you another outlook on things ... I don't know what else to say. (Female, 30 years old)

The relationship of quality of life with the environment and habitation is one of the most popular options offered by the interviewed subjects. Some authors (Veenhoven 2009; Inoguchi and Fujii 2013) point out that the livability of the environment refers explicitly to the characteristics of the environment and is not limited by material conditions. The habitability of an environment is a term used for the quality of housing in particular (Veenhoven 2009, p. 8).

The places and environment where people live and the resources and activities available to them affect quality of life directly, but such objective conditions of life also affect quality indirectly through a set of values held by the same people (Inoguchi and Fujii 2013, p. 4)

What the interviewed subjects say:

Quality of life; I associate it more and more to the preservation of our space, looking after ourselves, posing whether we can really generate environments- fair, loving spaces...And, in looking after each other and, in the environment, in the field I cover, there is a definition of quality of life. (Female, 53 years old)

As to the place I live in, though there are no sewers where I live, it's something that is beyond me; but regarding my quality of life, I consider it good, in general lines. My environment has no specific needs ... this, at times, has got a bearing on it but, it's good, I should say it's good. (Male, 34 years old)

It's obvious that one would always wish to have more, for instance, in my case, I'm renting. Owning a house, obviously... but the general context is good. (Male, 29 years old)

Good; the house is rather small, very small, especially taking into account our kid. My immediate aim is to enlarge the house, but everything else is excellent; we're in good health, we have a job, our boy can even go to nursery school, has already got his education project; we have leisure time, we don't need anything else. (Female, 38 years old)

Three subjects have related quality of life to activities they carry out for leisure or for pleasure. In relation with the effects of leisure activities on people's quality of life, Cini et al. (2013) reported positive effects. The authors point out that leisure activities provide opportunities for self determined behaviors that exist when people freely choose to engage in activity out of a sense of interest, out of mere enjoyment of the activity itself, which is important in coping with stress and enhancing well-being (Cini et al. 2013, p. 46).

I relate my quality of life with leisure time. (Male, 28 years old)

Full, very good, my quality of life; I was able to go swimming again, because I had always had this activity, always. And, well, now I've gone back to this activity I had abandoned. (Female, 50 years old)

I love dancing, I really like dancing the tango and "salsa". (Female, 33 years old)

One of the interviewed subjects relates quality of life with good health. Good health is widely considered to be a key to living a happy life but causality can work the other way around. Well-being is also a key to good health as there is strong evidence that happy people are healthier and live longer (Marks et al. 2004, p. 16). In his book *Etica a Nicómaco*, Aristotle admitted the importance of good health in his definition of happiness. Health related QOL concentrates on an accurate depiction of the way health influences and is influenced by the experience of the body and the mind within a social and cultural context (Patrick 2006, p. 399).

If quality of life is also related, or so I think, to one's environment, to the environment, to the wholesome feeling of being involved with one's family, friends, and such, I could say that my quality of life is good, healthy. And if it were to be about, say, personal projects one has been able to achieve, I'd say that I'm in good health. (Male, 36 years old)

One of the subjects also related quality of life with his political activity, pointing out the flexibility this generates in him. In this sense, there is a coincidence with Martinez Manzano (2008, p. 10) who refers to Aristotle when he expresses that political life seeks honors, though its real nature consists in the exercise of virtue in the context of the citizens' coexistence.

I'm interested in politics ... one has a kind of social flexibility, different from other people's. Yes, I think I know... what I want. Well, my quality of life is very good. (Male, 27 years old)

But the interviewed subjects, essentially, define quality of life in terms of satisfaction, personal enrichment, transcendence, happiness and harmony.

According to Veenhoven (1996), life satisfaction or vital satisfaction, is the degree of positive assessment of global quality of life, i.e., how much a person enjoys the life he/she leads. The relevant dimension for the measurement of life satisfaction is the degree at which a measure is relevant to oneself. Life satisfaction captures satisfaction, pleasure, enjoyment and contentment (Marks et al. 2004, p. 4).

I believe that quality of life is related to satisfaction and a post-graduate course; personally, I believe this brings deep satisfaction. Beyond the fact that it allows for subsidiary jobs, even if that were not the case, I believe it has to do with a question of inner satisfaction, self improvement, other bonds, other outlooks, to other ways of listening; intangible satisfactions which are related to quality of life. Experiencing the satisfaction of doing the things I'm interested in and being interested in what I do, this is quality of life to me; being satisfied with the things I do gives me moral well-being and ease of mind. (Female, 38)

There's a relation with the term personal development but, in my conception of quality of life development, when I define it, I take it as a question of personal development as a professional and, well, obviously, the post-graduate course will afford me all that, and has already done so, to a greater or lesser extent, through the curricular subjects, the different experiences and class mates, and a lot of other things that are reflected professionally through many of the things I've learnt. And, well, this is also reflected in my quality of life. (Male, 29)

From the personal satisfaction of knowing, learning... (Female, 40 years old)

Smith (1980, pp. 21–27 in Sirgy 2006, p. 356) sketched six views of the good life: maximum gratification of desire, dominant end view, purpose in life, living up to one's major expectations, human flourishing and satisfaction of need. The author

said that the first four views posit the good life as an end or product, while the two final ones posit it as a process.

A good life must be good for something more than itself. This presumes some higher values (Veenhoven 2009, p. 8). Gerson (1976, p. 795 in Veenhoven 2009, p.) referred to the latter as transcendental conceptions of quality of life.

I relate quality of life, more and more, with a good life, I mean, the things we are generating in order to have a better coexistence with ourselves and with others. (Female, 53 years old)  
 Quality of life is the chance we have to, intelligently, select the things that are going to enrich us, improve us, and make us grow up. I understand that quality of life is not only about material things, it also relates to emotions, thoughts, and transcendent things, because I believe in transcendence, and I believe that is also quality of life. (Female, 47 years old)

Things can be intrinsically valuable or instrumentally valuable. The things that are intrinsically valuable are those regarded as good, for what they are, or good as ends, themselves. The things that are instrumentally valuable are the ones regarded as good for obtaining other things, or good as a means of obtaining things that are regarded as intrinsically valuable (Michalos 2006, p. 353).

Reflecting on that old model of harmony, today one might say that people are happy when their heads and hearts are together, such people can be said to be happy (Michalos 2006, p. 355). Aristotle said that the proper, intrinsically valuable aim of human beings is happiness “to be happy is to live well and to do well”. Happiness should be placed among the things that are themselves pleasurable, not for any other reason, for happiness does not need anything other than itself; and the activities selected for what they are, are those which do not seek anything beyond the activity itself (Aristotle 1176b, p. 281). The happy life is the life of virtue and effort (Aristotle 1177b, p. 283). Happiness is the major possession sought by the nature of human beings. For Aristotle, happiness is the ultimate end, since it is always sought for itself, while making the subject independent and self-sufficient; for whoever reaches it is content with it and needs nothing more.

Perhaps we should review our concepts of quality of life to check whether we are referring to the same thing. To me, quality of life is related to a state of harmony; it's rather utopian to think of a state of harmony, but being somehow firm in one's position, balanced, happy, is not a utopian state. I regard quality of life, not so related to financial gain ... with welfare, but with the satisfaction of basic needs, of course. (Female, 50 years old)  
 Quality of life.....it's very subjective, isn't it? (Female, 30 years old)

To conclude, we may say that the definition of quality of life extracted from the discourse of the interviewed subjects is essentially considered in terms of satisfaction, personal enrichment, transcendence, happiness, and harmony. A significant finding is the fact that quality of life is not essentially associated to money or economic welfare, for money has only been associated to work, and in terms of personal and family welfare. It is identified as a positive relationship between having a job and taking up post-graduate studies, in terms of personal development and the chance/opportunity of improving working conditions. The environment and habitation, the most often mentioned, appear integrated with personal and community life development. Lastly, the access to leisure activities that generate pleasure, good health, and political activity complete the definition.



## 1.6 Conclusions

If we agree to the fact that quality of life offers us the possibility of a new theoretical outlook—which aims at working on potentialities rather than deficiencies, and on a community anchorage which includes the analysis of the socio-political context where a person is considered as subject and protagonist—we may then state that quality of life poses a social and political reality necessarily based on an integrated respect for human rights (Tonon 2003).

This chapter has led us to consider that deciding on a particular methodology implies a philosophic, theoretical and political decision. In this sense qualitative research constructs and interprets meanings within specific social and cultural contexts, thus, becoming a sense generator (Torres Carrillo 2006, p. 100).

The use of the qualitative methods in the study of the quality of life of persons, groups, communities and nations, is suitable and important, though researches made through qualitative methods have not yet been highly developed.

Likewise, it would be interesting to understand what Schultz and Meleis expressed two decades ago:

If we admit that there are different forms of knowledge, different unknown things to be discovered, different inclinations of the knowledgeable to discover, and different aspects which can be found out about the same phenomenon, we will then, perhaps, develop more appropriate criteria to learn from what we already know, and then to know what we wish to know (Schultz and Meleis 1988. p. 221 in May 2003, p. 15)

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