The construction of happiness
– a qualitative approach to happiness research.

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Abstract

Happiness research is advancing as an academic discipline as well as on the political agenda. An aspect, largely ignored in the field, is what impact an individual’s construction of the good life has on his or her subjective well-being. The purpose of this paper was to investigate how people in different situations in life and with different backgrounds construct the idea of a good life and the importance these constructions may have in explaining subjective well-being. Despite the differences between themselves, the respondents’ constructions of the good life were shown to have a lot in common. Some factors in the good life were shared by the respondents, such as relations to other people, access to food, water and housing, whereas in other aspects, such as money and time, the constructions of the good life differed quite a lot from one another. When evaluating their own lives the respondents used quite different criteria mostly corresponding to their idea of the good life. If this is a general pattern, possible to replicate in other studies, one may in the future be able to draw the conclusion that the construction of the good life has an effect on our subjective well-being.

Keywords: A good life, happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, social constructionism, qualitative method
Foreword

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1. INTRODUCTION

Is there such a thing as a universal good life? Or is the good life constructed by every individual in each situation?

People all over the world have a long, maybe eternal, history of searching for the good life and debating about the nature of it. In the last decades, a new research field, often referred to as happiness research, has grown and gained currency among psychologists, sociologists and economists. The happiness research has focused on finding out what makes people happy (Angner, 2005). Experts and policymakers have consequently started to take the happiness research more seriously and a number of newspapers and magazines, such as The Economist, New York Times, The Guardian, Times Magazine, Forbes Magazine, Dagens Nyheter¹, Svenska Dagbladet², and 00-tal³ have recently published leaders or articles about happiness. It is thus clear that happiness research is strongly advancing as a science as well as on the political agenda.

Happiness research has been dominated by the idea of subjective well-being (SWB)⁴ as systematically related to measurable variables such as income, age, number of close relations, marital status, occupation etc. (Biwas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Layard, 2005; Peiró, 2005; Veenhoven, 1991). The connection between these circumstances can be described with a simple figure:

![Figure 1 Standard model in happiness research](#)

However an aspect, largely ignored by the quantitative-dominated research in the field of happiness, is how the construction of the good life affects the SWB.

The social constructionist theory gives reason to believe that the constructions of the good life vary with shifting background factors such as for example age, gender, social class and ethnicity (Burr, 1995). If so, we might have reason to believe that these differences in turn may affect our evaluation of life in terms of SWB. A young fashion designer and a retired farmer may for instance value the same life situation very differently when it comes to satisfaction with life.

This approach does thus question the implicit assumption of the universal good life and calls for closer exploration of the constructions of the good life, which may with advantage be

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¹ The biggest morning paper in Sweden.
² The second biggest morning paper in Sweden.
³ A Swedish magazine about art and literature.
⁴ In the happiness research the concept happiness is often used synonymously with life satisfaction and subjective well-being all referring to an individual’s estimation of his or her own life. In this paper, the terms subjective well-being (or SWB) and life satisfaction will be used synonymously with the intention of capturing the meaning of all three concepts. However when referring to the research field the term happiness will be used since it is an established name on the discipline. See section 3.3 for an operationalization of the concepts.
done using qualitative research methods. A greater understanding of how life satisfaction is reached is vital for researchers, policymakers, social workers and others concerned finding ways to increase the SWB of people.

1.1 Objective

The objective with this paper is to investigate how people in different situations in life and with different backgrounds construct the idea of a good life and the importance these constructions have in explaining subjective well-being.

1.2 Research questions

• How is the good life constructed by people in different situations in life and with different backgrounds? What similarities and differences can be found?
• What impact may the construction of the concept ”a good life” have on the subjective well-being?

1.3 Delimitations

The study intends to in depth examine how six people talk about and construct the good life. It does not from these cases intend to generalize about how people generally construct the good life, nor come to conclusions about what makes people in general satisfied with their lives. It does neither aim to investigate the reasons behind the respondents’ constructions of the good life.

The selected respondents were between 22-63 years of age and were currently living in Stockholm, Sweden. In order to interview all respondents within the timeframes of the study and also due to economic limitations the geographical area was constrained to Stockholm. The limitations regarding the age, were based on the idea that the respondents should be of an age where they could clearly express themselves and reflect upon the relevant issues for the study.

1.4 General outline

In the first section of this paper a theoretical overview to the theories and research about a good life and subjective well-being is given as base for the coming elaborations into the field of research. Thereafter the social constructionism is presented as the theoretical framework together with the central concepts and the analytical model used in the study. In the fourth chapter the methodology is described in detail together with its relevance in connection to the objective. In the light of social constructionism and linkages to the earlier theories about the good life, presented in chapter two, the results are presented together with the analysis of the results. In the final chapter, the results and the method used are discussed, interpreted and evaluated and a new model for looking at and estimating SWB is presented.
2. BACKGROUND

In this chapter some of the prominent theories and research about the good life and subjective well-being (SWB) will be summarized (Angner, 2005; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Layard, 2005). The intention is, rather than giving a full account of the field, to give a theoretical foundation and context in relation to which, the results from the empirical results can be presented. The literature has accordingly been selected to create a balance between the theories relating to the good life and those more focused on the causal connection between objective circumstances and SWB.

This chapter deals with literature by a number of different authors, all using slightly different definitions of the central concepts such as well-being, welfare, SWB, life satisfaction and happiness. However no attempt to mainstream the definitions has been made. Instead the concepts used in the original source have been kept, and if it has differed evidently from the norm, it has been noted.

2.1 Theories about the good life

In this section, a number of theories about the good life, stretching back to the ancient Greece (about 400 B.C.) and the Age of Enlightenment (1715-1799) up to present-day are explored. The two main disciplines that lately have been concerned with theorizing about the good life, and well-being are, as will be seen, economics and sociology.

2.1.1 Ancient Greece - the cradle of the theories of a good life

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 - 322 B.C.) was one of the first to theorize about the good life (Nettle 2005). In doing so he used the notion *eudaimonia*, which for him was the ideal of good life (ibid.). In English, eudaimonia has often been translated to happiness, but as Sumner (1996) stresses, the notion is actually much closer to what we would usually label welfare. Eudaimonia represents a life in which the person, leading it prospers and fulfils his or her true potential (Nettle, 2005), which makes the way of living more important than pleasure and satisfaction (Sumner, 1996). This led Aristotle away from the subjective explanation to the good life and towards a more objective approach, where the level of satisfaction with life is best understood through fixed standards, rather than through the subject him- or herself and his or her personal feelings and desires (ibid.). The American philosopher Marta Nussbaum is the main, contemporary proponent of the Aristotelian view of the good life (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993).

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5 In many studies a division is made between objective and subjective accounts of the good life. In the objective accounts, theories emphasizing objective circumstances in life, such as the Gross National Product or the Human Development Index are usually included. To the subjective accounts, studies where the informants are asked to themselves rate their life satisfaction are usually embraced. This division is however very simplified and as will be seen in this chapter, there are a number of schools that stress both an objective and a subjective perspective. Since this study attempts to demonstrate the complexity of measuring the good life and question the one-sided focus on the quantitative methods it will also refrain from the objective-subjective division and instead lay emphasis on both.

6 Well-being and welfare are in this paper used synonymously.
2.1.2 The utilitarianism

The main thesis of the enlightenment philosopher Jeremy Bentham, often considered the father of both the utilitarianism and the hedonism, was that all actions in life should be directed towards one single goal, which was to create the greatest possible happiness, defined as a sense of pleasure and the absence of pain (Layard, 2005; Scruton, 1996). By saying that, he also meant that, in a good society, laws and public policy should be created so to increase the amount of happiness among the citizens in the society (ibid.). The base for measuring the happiness is according to the hedonism pleasure and pain, also taking into consideration the quantity of pleasure, its probability, proximity and duration in time (Scruton, 1996).

Bentham represented a type of utilitarianism criticized by John Stuart Mill (2001/1863). He argued that happiness differed in both quantity and quality, saying that the amount of satisfaction gained from for example a simple game could not be valued the same as that derived from poetry (ibid.). Hence Mill’s conclusion was that happiness existed in both lower and higher forms (ibid.).

2.1.3 The preference-theory

Economists have tried to measure well-being, since at least the early 20th century. The majority of the early economists adopted the so-called preference-theory to explain the well-being of individuals (Angner, 2005). In short, the preference theory states that an individual that prefers state X to state Y, will be better off and have more well-being in state X than in state Y. According to the theory, a higher income will thus enable an individual to fulfil more of his or her preferences (wants and needs), and thereby gain a higher amount of well-being (ibid.). This theory is in fact a further development of the utility-theory introduced by Bentham, claiming that people thus generally make their choices in life so to maximize their utility. But while Bentham interpreted utility as happiness, the new welfare-economists in the 1930s, moved away from that interpretation mainly due to the complexity in measuring it (Frey & Stutzer, 2001). Instead they came to use utility in the sense of the disposition to act in a certain way depending on their preferences. If a person, for instance, rather spends his or her money on drinking beer than buying clothes, drinking beer has a greater utility than buying clothes. While many economists still support the preference-theory, the question about what should be counted as preferences has lately been debated amongst economists (Angner, 2005).

2.1.4 The Gross National Product

Maybe the most important person in the opening of the field of welfare economics was Arthur Cecil Pigou that pleaded for that the national income should be used as an indicator of welfare (Angner, 2005). The Gross National Product (GNP) per capita is still the method, most widely used in measuring human welfare. It analyzes the relationship between people and companies, that are creating goods and services and measures the total value of the goods and services provided, by calculating the marginal utility for the consumer (ibid.).

GNP has however been criticized on several grounds in its ability to measure welfare. It does for example not take any account of the distribution of resources within a country. This implies that a country with a big gap between the social classes and a large amount of the
population living under the subsistence level can have the same GNP per capita as a country
with mainly middle class citizens (Doyal & Gough, 1991).

Although criticized from many different directions GNP per capita continues to be an
important and widely used measure when public policy is being made (Nussbaum & Sen,
1993).

2.1.5 The social indicator movement

In the 1950s, claims were raised against using GNP as a measure of well-being (Erikson,
1993). As a result of this, a new movement called the social indicator movement was formed
with Angus Campbell as the leader (Angner, 2005). He gave the economical measures
legitimacy in certain aspects, but questioned their validity in measuring the well-being of a
country (ibid.). In 1954 the United Nations (UN) brought forward a report by experts
regarding “the level of living”, suggesting that the welfare or level of living should be
measured with direct measures instead of with money. For instance should, according to the
experts, the space and quality, rather than the cost of the housing, measure the standard of
living (Johansson, 1979). The UN-experts went as far as proposing that incomes and
resources should not even be included in the measuring of the level of living (ibid.). The
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has in more recent reports returned to the
use of economic measures, but complemented them by investigating how the resources of a
country are used, for instance regarding the production of food and clean water, developing
weapons or building palaces (Angner, 2005).

The most used product of the social indicator movement is the Human Development Index
(HDI) that is published annually by the UNDP in the Human Development Report, and is also
used by the World Bank (Angner, 2005; Frey & Stutzer, 2001). The HDI is calculated by
measuring a number of social indicators; life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rates, school
enrolment ratios and standard of living (Angner, 2005). To this the GNP per capita is also
added in the calculation of the index (Frey and Stutzer, 2001).

2.1.6 Amartya Sen and the capabilities

In 1980 the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen presented his theories on capabilities, based on
the notions functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1985). The functionings refer to the things that
a person manages to do or be in leading a life (Sen, 1993). They can be both basic, such as
being in good health, but also more complex, for instance to be integrated in the society or to
have a good self esteem. The capabilities, on the other hand, are represented by the alternative
combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. In difference to the utilitarianism, the
capability approach does not value human acts on the bases of the utility they produce, but
rather by their inherent value (ibid.).

Even though sources to well-being might be external, it is the functions that are central to
the nature of well-being (Sen, 1993). Being well-nourished, happy and achieving self-respect
are examples of relevant functionings for well-being. In order to measure the well-being of a
person, these functionings must be assessed (ibid.).

The freedom to choose plays an important role in the capability set (Sen, 1993). Acting
freely and being able choose contribute to well-being, since it enables the individual to enjoy
various possible well-beings associated with the different functionings in the capability set (ibid.). An example used to illustrate this is the difference between fasting and starving that is defined by the free choice not to eat (ibid.). The possibility to choose between the functionings in a capability is thus highly relevant to the well-being. The reason why we worry more about a poor person starving than a rich person that is fasting, is because the latter has the capability to be well nourished but chooses not to, whereas the former lacks that capability (ibid.).

2.1.7 Basic Needs

The notion “need” is often used in the sense of “an inner drive” or force due to the lack of something (Doyal & Gough, 1991). Abraham Maslow is famous for having created the hierarchy of needs, in which the good life is characterized as the fulfilment of eight different types of needs namely physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, need to know and understand, aesthetic needs, self actualization and transcendence (Ventegodt, Merrick & Andersen, 2003). Once the first of these needs is fulfilled the next, higher need emerges (ibid.). Len Doyal and Ian Gough (1991), criticize Maslow’s theory on several grounds. They argue that the hierarchy by no means is universal, since skydivers for example care more about self-actualisation than safety. However the more important objection concerns how Maslow places needs on equal footing with motivations and drives. The urge to act in a certain way (for example to smoke a cigarette) should according to Doyal and Gough not be confused with a need, which gives the act normative justification. The urge to smoke should rather than a need be titled a want and thereby be distinguished from the very few needs that are universal in life (ibid.).

The basic needs that Doyal and Gough (1991) instead plead for are a notion more similar to Sen’s capability-concept, which should be measured in terms of physical health and autonomy of individuals. To produce an optimum level of basic-need satisfaction or objective welfare a certain level of so-called “intermediate needs” is demanded. The optimum level must however not be confused with the maximum level. Food in excess is for example, in most cultures not considered as something to strive towards. The intermediate needs, nutritional food and clean water, protective housing, non-hazardous work environment, non-hazardous physical environment, appropriate health care, security in childhood, significant primary relationships, physical security, economic security, appropriate education and safe birth control and child-bearing, are universal and apply to all cultures. The conclusions of Doyal and Gough (ibid.) are thus that the satisfaction of basic needs can be measured, compared and evaluated.

2.1.8 The Swedish Welfare Politics

In 1965 a comprehensive investigation to analyse the level of living in the Swedish population was appointed by a commission of the Swedish government, working on mapping out the condition of Swedish low-income earners (Johansson, 1979). In the investigation around 6000 persons were interviewed about the level of their living in nine different areas, corresponding to the indicators provided by the social indicator movement (ibid.). Thus a clear stand was taken against the use of solely economic measures in the measuring of well-being. Instead the
position taken in the Swedish welfare research was that to measure the level of living the conditions of living as well, as the resources, must be taken into account. Robert Erikson (1993) suggested that welfare should be defined primarily in terms of resources and conditions and that it is best measured by using, what he called “descriptive indicators” that are equivalent to what in this paper earlier on has been named social indicators.

2.1.9 Erik Allardt’s attempt towards an integrative model

Erik Allardt, started out from the Swedish Level of Living Survey, but compared it to the less known Scandinavian Welfare Study that, according to Allardt, offers a much more comprehensive system of indicators for describing the level of living and thus measuring the quality of life amongst the subjects (Allardt, 1993). The Scandinavian Welfare Study used what Allardt called a basic needs approach, which however differs a bit from Doyal and Gough’s basic needs approach. The basic needs approach, suggested by Allardt, is based upon three concepts, namely having, loving and being. “Having” refers to the same aspects that were dealt with in the Swedish Level of Living Study. With “loving” Allardt aimed to include more subjective factors such as attachments and relationships or in short the basic need to relate to other people. Finally, “being” stands for the need for integration in the society and connection to the nature (ibid.).

2.2 Explaining happiness

Alongside the theoretical debate about a good life, the causal relationships between the objective circumstances in life and SWB, have been given increased attention. Although not gaining currency until the 1960s, methods of measuring SWB can be traced back to the 1920s (Angner, 2005). These methods seem to have arisen in applied sciences, as a protest against the deficiencies in the contemporary measures used, and as a desire to improve the society (ibid.). A typical question asked in the studies was “Taking things all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you’re very happy, pretty happy or not too happy these days?” (Gurin et al., 1960, in Angner, 2005, p. 49).

2.2.1 Aspiration theory

In order to explain why the degree of life satisfaction could vary radically between individuals living in objectively identical circumstances Campbell, one of the researchers in the social indicators movement (see section 2.1.5), proposed the so-called aspiration theory suggesting that well-being is dependent on the hopes and expectations that a certain individual possesses in relation to what he or she has (Angner, 2005; Layard, 2005). A rise of income does usually, to start with, create a sense of satisfaction and well-being, but after a while, new expectations appear and the aspiration rises as a result (Frey & Stutzer, 2001).

2.2.2 Adaptation theory

Much has been written on adaptation or hedonic adaptation, as it is also called. The theory is closely connected to the aspiration theory by contributing to the explanation of why a high income is not necessarily correlated with happiness. Instead of focusing on the aspirations this theory focuses on the process of adaptation to new circumstances, which after a while reduces
happiness or misery (Frey & Stutzer, 2001). The capacity to adapt to new environments and stimuli is, according to Richard Layard (2005) part of the human nature. The theory can thus be used to help explain why lottery winners a while after the win does not seem to be much happier than the average person as found in a study by Shane Frederick and George Loewenstein (1999). In 1971, Brickman and Campbell (referred to in Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999) coined the notion “the hedonic treadmill”, which symbolizes the tendency for satisfactory circumstances to, after a while, lead to indifference.

Hedonic adaptation has also been applied to explain results from studies of persons, sentenced to a long prison penalties that after a while adapt to the life in the cell and cease finding life miserable (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999), and to explain the results of some studies reporting high levels of subjective well-being among people living in slum areas (Biwas-Diener & Diener, 2001). This process is sometimes called coping (Frey & Stutzer, 2001). There are however some things, that human beings don’t seem to be able to adapt to such as loud noise, the loss of a child or a spouse and sex (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999).

2.2.3 Social comparison theory

As the previous two theories, the social comparison theory has its focus on the relationship between income and happiness. However, instead of focusing on the individual’s comparisons to previous experiences it emphasizes the importance of the reference group that is made out of significant people with whom comparisons are made. According to the social comparison theory people’s thoughts and feelings are thus based on comparisons and relative judgements instead of absolute judgments (Layard, 2005).

The first one to introduce the theory was the Harvard economist James Dusenberry, in 1949 (Kahneman7, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz & Stone, 2006). Since then a number of studies have been made, among others one by Clark and Oswald (referred to in Frey and Stutzer, 2001) on 10 000 British workers that concluded that the relative income was of much greater importance than the absolute income among the workers. In other words, the workers principally compared the wages with one another and can thereby be considered members to the same reference group (ibid.).

The reference group is dependent on country and the culture (Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama, 2004). For instance, in a recent study on relationships, happiness and wellbeing in Bangladesh by Camfield, Choudhury and Devine (2006), it was concluded that a significant source of happiness in the different communities was perceiving the socio-economic status as equal or better than other people in the community. The reference group was thus principally made out of people from their own community (ibid.).

Social comparison theory has also been used to explain the stability of the subjective well-being after an increased income growth in a country (Kahneman et al., 2006) or why the life satisfaction in the Scandinavian countries is higher than in the USA, where the economical differences are much greater (Landgren Möller, 2005).

7 Daniel Kahneman is professor in psychology and received the Nobel Prize in economics in 2002, as the first psychologist, for his work on the discipline “hedonic psychology” (Layard, 2005) where Bentham’s utility theory is revivied by elaborating it through the distinction between “instant utility” and “remembered utility” (Kahneman, 1999).
2.2.4 Sense of coherence

Aron Antonovsky (1987) founded the expression *a sense of coherence* (SOC), which is a way of estimating the ability of a person to, by using cognitive, emotional and instrumental strategies, cope with various situations that may occur and thereby increase health and well-being. Three major components judging a person’s SOC are meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility. The meaningfulness refers to the experience of how ones life makes sense, the manageability to the ability to meet and cope with demands and occurrences that turn up in life and the comprehensibility to, to what extent the world is perceived as understandable (ibid.).

2.2.5 Subjective well-being in economics

According to Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer (2001) happiness has in the last few years, finally been seriously measured in economics, after having been neglected for a long time.

Easterlin was the first economist to promote happiness as an indicator of welfare (Angner, 2005). He argued that social welfare corresponds to the notion of happiness (ibid.). From various studies he deduced that happiness correlates positively with income within a country at a given time, but not between countries in terms of GNP nor over time within a country (Easterlin, 1996). This led him to combine the conclusions of the early Duesenberry in the social comparison theory (ibid.) (section 2.2.3) and Campbell (1976) in the aspiration theory above (section 2.2.2), and claim that the level of happiness, rather than on the absolute level of income, is dependent on a person’s aspirations, that subsequently are dependent on comparison with other people close-by and ones past experiences (Easterlin, 2001).

2.3 Towards a change in public policy?

So, what impact has the happiness research had on public policy?

One of the main theses that the economist Layard (2005) has pleaded for is that public policy should be designed to maximize subjective well-being, instead of focusing on objective accounts of well-being. Kahneman (referred to in Angner, 2005) has also argued for the same type of change in public policy.

An extreme example of such a policy is the Kingdom of Bhutan, where the government has decided that the goal of public policy should be to increase the Gross National Happiness instead of the Gross National Product (Nettle, 2005). Layard (2005) has however also taken an offensive in the same direction, propounding a tougher taxing system where people that earn more, should be taxed more in order to avoid the “pollution” of other people who earn less, whose levels of happiness thereby decline according to the social comparison theory (ibid.).

Finally Frey and Stutzer (2001) called for a decentralized state in order to enable the citizens to take direct part of the political process, which according to them should increase their happiness, since their preferences thereby would be more likely to be taken into account (ibid.).
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A social constructionist approach is used in this study, to examine the construction of the good life and its impact on the subjective well-being (SWB). Together with the results of this exploration, an inductive approach is applied to explore how SWB can be looked upon and measured, of use for researchers in the field of happiness, but also for policy makers and professionals for example in the field of social work. The study can thus be said to have an abductive approach.8

The implications of using a social constructionist perspective as a base for developing new theories and how that relates to the happiness research will be discussed in the following.

3.1 Social constructionism9

The social constructionism is a very extensive theory, with many different diversions and spokesmen. Usually Thomas Luckman and Patrick Berger are considered to be the founders of the school with the publication of the book *The social construction of reality* (1966) in which they claim that all knowledge, including the simplest form that is produced in everyday reality, is derived from and maintained by social interactions. Both the knowledge and the reality can thus be claimed to be constructed.

Due to the diverseness of the theory it is difficult to outline a single definition of the concept (Burr, 1995). Constructionists can however be said to study how people construct their realities and the implications the constructions have for their lives, behaviours, and interactions with other people (Patton, 2002). At one extreme of the social constructionism there seem to exist the worldview that all meaningful reality is socially constructed, without exceptions (see for example Michael Crotty referred to in Patton, 2002). This view can thus be seen as a form of denial of the existing reality. However, many constructionists look upon reality from a realist ontology, meaning that they still consider things like people, meanings, structures etc. as somewhat independent from the construction of them (ibid.). This realist approach to social constructionism is called critical realism (Houston, 2001).

A few key assumptions can be found in the different approaches to the social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999). 1) Everything that we think we know about the world could be otherwise implying the necessity to take a critical stance to knowledge. 2) Meaning and knowledge is created in relationships and the daily interactions between people, focusing especially on the language. 3) By using the language and constructing new notions and interpretations of social phenomena, social life and action is constituted. 4) All ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative (ibid.).

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8 An abductive approach combines the deductive and inductive strategies (Larsson, 2005; Patton, 2002)
9 Social constructionism is, in many contexts, used interchangeably with social constructivism. Michael Crotty (referred to in Patton, 2002) makes a distinction between the two notions where the constructivism primarily represents an epistemological stance, focusing on how individuals shape and construct their reality in a, for each and every one of us, unique way. Constructionism does instead emphasize the effect that our culture has on us in the construction of the reality (ibid.). Since constructionism is the most frequently used term amongst the prominent spokesmen, (Burr, 1995; Berger & Luckman, 1967; Gergen, 1999; Hacking 1999) usually covering both aspects of the theory, it’s also the term that will be used in this paper.
In this paper the notion construction will be used to describe the process where a phenomenon is given meaning by an individual. It will thus be used in the sense that has usually been allocated to social construction. However, taking Hacking’s (1999) criticism of the expression social construction/ism into account, construction will be used instead of social construction.

3.2 Implications for the study

Looking at the good life as a construction implies that what is regarded as good in life more or less could differ between all persons in the world. It is thus, according to this theory, not possible to a priori, find one substantial definition that suits everyone. On the other hand there is a general belief that there are some aspects of life that are more important for our SWB than others. In order to further investigate how the good life is constructed it is thus appropriate to use qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews. It is also relevant to look at the implications the constructions have for the lives of the people studied and, like Winther-Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) proclaim, investigate the consequences these constructions and discourses about the good life have on society.

The inductive strategy does at the same time found a basis for developing new theories regarding the connection between the construction of the good life and the SWB and the implications this connection has for people concerned with measuring and estimating the good life. Together these two approaches reflect the objective and research questions of the study.

3.3 Construct Validity

The central concepts used in the study will in this section be operationalized. All definitions provided are the author’s own definitions.

3.3.1 A good life

The concept “a good life”, has been chosen as the central concept in the study, to enable the inclusion of many of the different concepts that have been used in the research on welfare and happiness, to describe more or less the same phenomenon. “A good life” is, from a theoretical perspective, a fairly neutral concept. In this paper a good life refers to the substantial content or attributes of a life that the individual assigns positive value to. It is thus not a matter of an evaluation of the good life but simply a description of its content.

3.3.3 Subjective well-being (SWB) / Life satisfaction

As mentioned earlier in this paper, these two notions will be used interchangeably. The subjective well-being or life satisfaction is employed as a measurement tool of the individual’s own estimation of his or her well-being. It refers to the evaluation of his or her subjective well-being.

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10 Hacking makes clear that the umbrella-term of "social construction" is far too broad to be discussed as a single concept and does instead proclaim the use of just "construction".
life, rather than to the content of the same or in short whether or not the individual is satisfied with his or her life independently of its character.

### 3.4 Analytical model

How may then the social constructionist perspective relate to the ideas on causality in the happiness research? One suggestion is the following model of analysis (Fahlander, 2007) that is an elaboration of figure 1 (see chapter one) that most contemporary happiness research is based on.

![Analytical model](image)

**Figure 2 Analytical model**

Just like figure 1, this model captures the direct relation between objective circumstances (that could be more or less anything in life that affects us such as money, relations, love, time, genes and so forth) and SWB that is independent of the individuals’ different constructions of the good life (arrow a). Money and education might for example have a direct impact on the SWB, by contributing to health and physical well-being (ibid.).

However an additional component has been added to this model. The figure above shows how some objective circumstances also affect the construction of the good life (arrow b). The construction of the good life is the subjective picture or vision that a person has about what is good in life, which in turn affect the individual’s evaluation of his or her life (arrow c). Returning to the example with money, the output of SWB (arrow c) gained from the money will depend on what significance money has been given in that person’s construction of the good life. If money is highly valued, the outcome in terms of SWB will be greater after a pay rise than if it is not valued as high. However if a high income, due to for example ideological reasons, is considered bad, the pay rise will, as a result of the construction of income, generate a lower SWB at the same time as the actual money through arrow a, probably will have positive effects on the SWB as mentioned above (ibid.).

The last connection (arrow c) has to some extent been explored by happiness researchers, engaged in the aspiration theory (see 2.2.2). This theory is however fairly crude in its strictly quantitative approach that only considers the variances of aspirations in terms of level differences (for example increased income aspirations) instead of taking into account more qualitative nuances, such as the value an individual ascribes to an income per se in relation to other aspects in life.
4. METHODOLOGY

The majority of the happiness research uses quantitative methods such as for example measuring life satisfaction on a scale ranging from 1-10. As the objective with this study is to investigate constructions of the good life, and unravel and understand the ideas and experiences of the respondents, a qualitative method must at best be used. This goes in line with the phenomenological position\textsuperscript{11} that strives towards describing the subjective experience of the respondents (Patton, 2002). In order to, in a satisfactory way, succeed with documenting the subjective experiences of an individual, using qualitative interviews or observations is recommended (Willig, 2001).

The postmodern and social constructionist focus on the individual’s subjective constructions of the reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966) as well as the objective of this study that includes examining the constructions of the good life also suggests the use of qualitative methods.

The nature of the central topic in this study, the good life and the SWB, is also such that a qualitative method may very well be used. With a topic that aims to investigate and unravel complex and profound issues, it must be seen as an advantage to let the respondents speak freely and give them plenty of time to reflect and express themselves. For this reason, qualitative interviews that enable more nuances and a greater depth (Hayes, 2000) were selected as the more specific method of the study.

Below I give an account for the research process including potential problems of validity and reliability. The section is ended with an account of the ethical aspects taken into considerations.

4.1 Selection of literature

The selection of the literature studied to get a deeper understanding of earlier theories about a good life and research in the field of happiness was made based on a number of criterions. In consultation with the supervisor, also engaged in happiness research, a few key articles, dissertations and books were selected as a starting point. From the reference lists of those, the search for more literature continued. A number of relevant articles were found in the databases Sociological abstracts, PsycINFO, Social services abstracts and ERIC using the search words happiness, well-being, SWB, life satisfaction, quality of life, a good life and social construction/ism/ivism, in various combinations. Google and Google school were also used mainly for inspiration, but did also help in finding more articles (often through either of the databases). From the comprehensive material the emphasis was made on examples found to be most elementary, in order to outline the main features of the vast flora of theories of a good life.

\textsuperscript{11} The study is based on the postmodern, phenomenological and hermeneutic positions. The use of the social constructionist theory brings about a postmodern position since it bases its stances on the social constructionism (Patton, 2002). A lot of qualitative research is positioned somewhere between a hermeneutic and phenomenological position (Malterud, 1998). As is this study that uses the phenomenological position in its strive towards understanding the meaning the persons studied allocate to the good life and the hermeneutic position in interpreting and trying to make sense of their sayings (Patton, 2002).
4.2 Purposeful sampling

The method of sampling was maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002). Since the objective was to study people in different situations in life, and if possible draw conclusions about features, the maximum variation sampling was a natural choice. The maximum variation sampling was also seen as an advantage, since a heterogenic group of respondents would increase the probability that their constructions of the good life would differ. This would purport greater possibilities to study and compare the connections between each respondent’s construction of the good life and the SWB.

The respondents were selected to differ as much as possible from each other in the following four categories; sex, age, social class, and ethnical background. These categories were selected since a number of earlier studies have tried to show the connection between these and life satisfaction (Campbell, 1976; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Inglehart, 1990; Johansson, 1979; Pigou, 1960; Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama, 2004; Wilson, 1967 etc). Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson and Wängnerud (2004) give prominence to the strata sex, age, level of education, and inhabitants of cities or provincial towns in the use of maximal variation. Since the target population was limited to inhabitants from the city this stratum could not be used as a variable, but other than that, all other strata recommended by Esaiasson et al were used in the undertaken study (ibid.).

The respondents were identified through contacts via friends or other types of acquaintances of the author, by contacting them directly on the street or via email. In appendix 1, an overview of the respondents and the mode of contact is given.

Each category was divided into a number of subcategories. The sex into men and women, the age into 18-30, 31-50, and 51-80, social class was based on income where a netto income of < 10 000 was seen as lower class, 10 000-30 000 as middle and > 30 000 as upper, the ethnical background into Swedish and non-Swedish. The aim was to get an equal number from each category, or that at least someone from each category would be represented in the study. The first respondent selected could be more or less anybody, but as more were identified the criterions increased, in order to obtain the maximal variation. The ambition to have an equal number of respondents in each category was therefore not quite attained, but each category was in any case represented.

4.3 Data collection

When the respondents were contacted for the first time they were informed about the objective of the study and that their participation would be valuable to the author. They were further that their participation was confidential, but that people who know them might recognize them if they would take part of the study, once finished.

Once the respondents had been contacted and given their approval to participate in the study, a time for the interview was booked at a place of their preference. Therefore the interviews were made in a variety of places, at a café, in a booked room at the library, in one of the respondent’s home or in a private room at their work.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were recorded on both a dictaphone and a MP3-player, in case either of them would fail. They followed an interview guide (see
appendix 2) designed to meet the objective and the research questions of the study. The guide was divided into three parts circling around three main topics, namely background information, the definition of the good life and the SWB. The respondents were first asked to reflect freely around each topic. Comments, thoughts and statements were followed up with further questions and validations. After having done a test interview using only the three topics, a few subcategories were on forehand connected to each topic and if the respondents did not themselves mention these subcategories they were asked direct questions about them. This was done to make the interviews a little more structured and facilitate the analysis of the data. The first topic was chosen both in order to give the respondents an easy start in talking about things that they were familiar with, but also to collect some background information to be able to compare and look for tendencies in how the good life is constructed. The second topic was the main topic of the interview that was used as a base in order to answer both of the research questions. The last topic was used as a base for estimating the SWB as a base for research question two.

4.4 Transcription

All interviews were transcribed in their entirety by the author. The audiophiles with the interviews were imported in the software Transana 2.12 (Wisconsin Centre for Education Research, 2006) that was accordingly used for the transcribing. One of the advantages with the software is that the transcription through time codes is connected to the audiophile, enabling instant audition of any particular section of the transcription.

The transcriptions were made using the Jefferson transcription notation (Jeffersson, 1984) (appendix 3), trying to capture also non-verbal communication and tone of voice such as sighing, laughing etc. The transcriptions were made to capture the respondents’ narratives as literally as possible. Grammar mistakes were circumscribed to correct language, but interrupted sentences were kept unchanged.

4.5 Analysis

When the transcription was finished, the transcriptions were read in their entirety three times, following the five steps identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying and labelling normally used in content analysis (Patton, 2002). To start with, the analytic process called open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was applied, and important sections of the transcripts identified, highlighted and given a code that described its content. A list of all the code words were thereafter arranged and divided into three main groups following the topics of the interview guide. Some of the code words were bundled together in a larger category. In the second reading, the new code words were applied to the transcripts, leading to the process of axial coding where further reconstructions of the code system and the development of yet more subcategories, also taking into account codes relevant for the theory and literature used in the study (ibid.). When this was finished, the new and improved coding scheme (see appendix) was converted and applied to the transcripts in Transana. The software could thus, once the coding system was implemented in it, facilitate the process, by creating collection reports of certain code words that were of good use in the analysis. To answer the second research
question, the collection reports with all the important quotes sorted on each respondent in the category SWB, were compared to the collection reports of each respondent in the category a good life.

4.6 Reliability

The reliability has to be examined at all different stages of the study (Kvale, 1996). By asking the same questions several times during the interviews the respondents’ sayings were asessed to see if the outcome was the same. Leading or direct questions question were sometimes used, like Kvale (ibid.) recommends, as a way to test the stability in the statements of the respondents.

The objectivity of the researcher is an issue highly connected to the reliability (Patton, 2002). To avoid too much focus on the interviewer as a person, the author tried to have a fairly neutral appearance. It must however be recalled that the author, in this case, by no means is a professional researcher, with little experience and qualifications in the field, something that according to Patton (2002) also will affect the reliability of the study.

The author did all of the interviewing, transcribing, coding and analysing herself. This is of advantage for the consistency in the measurements and analytical tools. However the reliability could have been improved by having yet another person that transcribed and analysed the material parallely.

For the report, key quotes were translated from Swedish into English, which might have conveyed a lower reliability due to difficulties in translating certain phrases and double interpretation process, where the interviews firstly were interpreted from verbal to written language and secondly from Swedish to English (Kvale, 1996).

4.7 Internal validity

The internal validity, in difference to the external validity that deals more with issues such as statistical generalizability (see next section) is also of importance in all stages of the study (Esaiasson et al, 2004; Kvale, 1996). In this study the analysis and the discussion are structured in a way following the research questions. The social constructionist theory is reflected in the objective and the research questions and the method used was selected to best meet the objective and at the same time go in line with the social constructionist theory and the postmodern position.

Before the interview, the interview guide was carefully worked out and modified after a test interview had been made in order to in order to really capture the objective of the study. The subjective well-being was measured by asking the respondents to evaluate how satisfied they were with their lives. No scale was used to measure the life satisfaction, which probably would have facilitated the analysis and comparison between the respondents. However, even if a scale would have been used, the results still have to be interpreted, as a consequence of the theoretical framework used in this study. Leaving it up to respondents to choose how to describe their satisfaction with life, did also allowed more nuances.

During the interviews a high validity was sought after by testing the meaning of the respondents’ statements, by following up with so-called validating or interpreting questions.
(Kvale, 1996) trying out the interpretations of the interviewer. In the end of each interview the interviewer made a summary to try out if she had understood and interpreted the respondents correctly. Some modifications of the interpretations were made during this stage. The interviewer tried to let the respondents speak as freely and detailed as possible, since it is also said to increase the validity (Patton, 2002).

In one of the interviews there were some language difficulties since the respondent was not fluent in Swedish, which possibly lowered the validity of that interview. The interviewer tried to overcome these problems by using a more simple language and make sure to validate all statements and sayings.

In the process of the analysis a lot of time was devoted to develop the analytical tools that in a satisfying way could be used in the analysis. By reading the transcripts three times before applying the coding scheme it could be modified and adapted to better cover and meet the objective of the study. When the analysis was worked out all results were strengthened by using rich quotes. The results that were not accounted for in the analysis do by no means contradict the main results or conclusions of the study.

**4.8 Generalizability**

In the analysis, analytical rather than statistical generalizations, will be made. From the six examined cases, it is not possible to draw general conclusions about the impact that the constructions of the good life have on the SWB. However using the social constructionist theory and the earlier research and theories about the good life and happiness as a base, it is possible to theoretically predict and strengthen the results of the study (Kvale, 1996). The maximal variation sampling does also enable some careful generalizations on the respondents about similarities in the construction of the good life (Patton, 2002).

**4.9 Ethical aspects**

Throughout the work with this thesis the ethical principals for humanistic and social scientific research by the Swedish research council have been used as a guideline, trying to implement the four main ethical principals of information, consent, confidentiality and using the research in all stages of the undertaken research process (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). How this was accomplished will be described in detail in this section.

**4.9.1 A contribution to social work and to society**

According to the international federation for social work (2006), social work should be:

“dedicated to service for the welfare and self-fulfilment of human beings; to the development and disciplined use of scientific knowledge regarding human behaviour and society; to the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations; to the enhancement and improvement of the quality of life of people; and to the achievement of social justice.”
A greater understanding of what is considered to be a good life, and what might affect the SWB, such as for example the construction of the good life is thus of highest ethical relevance both to social work and society as a whole.

4.9.2 Informed consent and confidentiality

Before the interviews started the respondents were once again given brief information about the objective of the study, that their participation was completely voluntary and that they by participating, by no means were obliged to answer all the questions and that they, at any time, could interrupt the interview. It was further stated that their participation was confidential, that their identity would not be revealed to anyone and names and that places would be anonymized in the report. However they were also told that it would be made public on the webpage of the university and that someone that know them well and read the report might recognize them, or in the cases where the contact with the respondents had been made through another person. They were also informed about how the transcriptions and audio-files would be taken care of after the study was finished and finally they were let know that their participation was very valuable and that they would get a copy of the study, sent home to them once it was completed.

4.9.3 The role of the researcher

The author of the report had very briefly met two of the respondents before the interviews, but all of the other four were complete strangers. However the fact that contact was established with several of the respondents through friends or other types of acquaintances is of course an ethical aspect worth taking into consideration. The fact that these respondents knew that the author had a connection to somebody they know might have made them a bit more restrictive in sharing information about themselves. However it can also have resulted in a stronger will to contribute with valuable information to the study.

The interviewer and his or her behaviour before or during the study will always have an effect on the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). There are also the aspects of power to consider, where in a few of the interviews the interviewer had a higher level of education and probably unintentionally used a more academic language. Efforts were made though, to try to adapt the langue used to each respondent, but changing it too much was not an aim, since it would probably decrease the reliability of the study.

4.9.4 Interpretation and verifying of data

In the process of the analysis the statements of the respondents were interpreted and analyzed. The analysis does always signify at least some amount of interpretation (Kvale, 1996). The analysis of the interviewee in a research project must however not convey interpretations that might fundamentally change the reality of the same. Therefore as much as possible of the data provided by the respondents were validated during the interview, in order to find out if the interviewer had interpreted the sayings correctly (ibid.). In the analysis of the transcriptions the unverified data was instead carefully interpreted and as far as possible verified by comparing it by other statements and sayings by the same person, using a more hermeneutic approach.
5. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

In this chapter the results from the interviews and the analysis of them are presented. The first section deals with the respondents’ different constructions of the good life and the following one their subjective well-being (SWB), how it is motivated and its relationship to the construction of the good life. The respondents have been named A-F in chronologically, following the order they were interviewed in. Background information about the respondents is provided in appendix 1.

5.1 Constructions of the good life

In general the respondents appeared to find it very meaningful to talk about the good life and seemed happy to share their thoughts and ideas. Some had, according to themselves, thought a lot about different explanations and theories about what constitutes a good life whereas others did not have that much experience of talking about the subject.

Many of the findings reappeared in the different respondents’ accounts, even though the modes of expression varied. Some did for example use a more academic language than others. A number of clear connections to the theories about the good life, accounted for in chapter two, could be discerned at once. One of the respondents did for example even name the theory that he thought best explained the good life. In some of the other cases it is likely that the connection was more unintentional, and not meant to relate to a certain theory such as the use of the term basic needs for example.

All of the respondents made comparisons between the different components that they claimed were parts of the good life, even though the components were abstract concepts that in theory are difficult to compare such as time, money and relations.

Below a number of themes, found to be significant as components in the constructions of the good life, are presented and discussed in relation to the different theories of the good life presented in chapter two. The aim with integrating these theories in the results is not to test them but to instead strengthen the results by putting them in a theoretical context and illustrate how the results of the study relate to earlier studies and theories about the good life.

5.1.1 Relations

All respondents brought forward and discussed having good relationships with family and/or friends as a highly important component in the good life. Many claimed that it was, on the whole, the most important factor. B described the significance that relations has in her life:

B: And this is something that I have experienced during this time also, that this with friends, family and relations, is the most important thing. There is nothing that is more important. All this with money, or being of use for the society, well I guess that might be good as well, but it’s not the most important, because that’s the relations.

B also said that she lately, since she had started her year off, had done quite a lot of reflecting about life in general and thus more or less come to realize that relations really are the single most important component in life. Like many of the other respondents, she said that these
relations could be both with family members and with friends. C and D both stressed that you have to have some people that you are loved by. It could be a grandmother, a partner or a friend, but the important thing was to have someone. D was the only one to also emphasize the importance of colleagues and professional contacts:

D: Those that you work with also convert into private relation. Like a person and not like a professional, you know. I think that people underestimate that they build personal relationship with people that they meet [through their work].

E and F were a bit less specific and claimed that relations in general are really important while A talked about the importance of relations mainly in terms of the well-being of the family and close friends as an important component in the good life. He did at the same time stress that a better contact with his family, probably would make his life better. These results are supported by a number of previous research results that also have concluded the importance of relations for the good life. Allardt (1993) stressed the need to relate to other people in his theory having-loving-being and Camfield, Choudhury and Devine (2006) concluded that relationships are highly important for the happiness and well-being of the people in the undertaken study in Bangladesh.

Both C and F discussed the quantity of the relations as less important than the quality, for the good life.

F: I have never felt the need to have many friends, It has been enough with just a few good friends.
J: So you say that it is maybe more important to have a few good friends [yes that’s my opinion] and go for quality rather than having many friends?
F: Much better. That’s the way I’ve always had it.

C: I have lately chosen quality before quantity. Earlier I had many acquaintances and now I don’t have that anymore. But it’s probably a matter of feeling more comfortable with myself.
J: That you have something that-
C: Yes that those that really stand close to you, that are there for you in all the different stages of your life, not only when you feel strong, but also when you are really weak. That is important.

In the basic needs theory, so-called significant primary relations are also emphasized as an important factor in the good life (Doyal & Gough, 1991). The significant primary relations are defined as a network that supplies the individual with educative and emotional security. According to Doyal and Gough (ibid.) there is little connection between the number of social contacts and the feeling of loneliness, which on the other hand is an indicator of a not so good life. What instead is linked is the quality of the relations, just like stated by C and F. It must however be stressed that even though A, B and D did not specifically emphasize the quality of the relationships, it does of course not imply that they found quantity more important than quality.
5.1.2 Love

When it comes to love as in love to a partner and not to a daughter, friend or pet, the respondents were once again quite in accord that being in a relationship and having a partner that you love and that loves you is important in the good life. However it was not seen as an indispensable component. C motivated her view as follows:

J: How important is it to have a partner?
C: Eh, I don’t know.
J: You don’t know?
C: No. Because it can be any kind of relation that is important. If I have a really nice relationship to my grandmother, it can be more important than the relation to a man or a woman, I think. (…)
As long as you get tenderness and love from somewhere.

It was thus by several of the respondents considered more important to have relations to people that love you and that you love than to specifically have a partner. The emphasis given to having a partner did however diverge a bit between the different respondents where some respondents still rated having a partner very high:

B: It is different to live in a love relationship. That is the of course the ultimate, if you can do that.

F: Of course it is important, but right now I don’t have a partner in my life

Love can thus be said to have been ascribed a shifting significance in the constructions of the good life.

5.1.3 Money

All of the respondents did at some stage in the interviews reflect upon the importance of money for the good life. Money has probably been the most studied factor in relation to the life satisfaction. In the interviews in this study, many of the respondents compared the importance of money for the good life to other components, mainly to relations, which in all cases were considered to be superior. B and D expressed themselves as follows:

B: Then you can have as much money, and as many houses, and how many summerhouses and boats that you want. But if you don’t have time to be with together, live and get to know each other, than that’s not a good life.

J: This with money that you mentioned, is that not so important?
D: It is not the determining factor. What is more important are what relations you have around you.

Judging from these quotes it is easy jump to the conclusions that money was not that important for the respondents in living a good life. This would however be a very simplified way of interpreting the results. What is clear is that relations were considered to be more
important than having money, but what significance money actually was given is more dubious and complex. To understand this better a deeper look into the interviews is required.

A: A good life, well isn’t it, that you don’t have to be really rich, but that you don’t have to worry about money maybe. That doesn’t mean that you have to have millions in the bank, that’s not what I’m after, but simply that you don’t have to look twice at one’s money. Isn’t that a good life?

It seems like A still considered money to be of importance for the good life in order to not have to worry about not having it. C was onto something similar:

C: As long as the need for money doesn’t disturb, the relations are more important.
J: What do you mean by disturb?
C: That you’re walking around with a feeling of stress that both ends won’t meet.

These respondents seemed to be more eager to define the lack of money as not being a good life, rather than defining actually having money as a good life. It seemed like the idea of not having money, might cause feelings of stress and worry, while having money more seemed to bring about a feeling of freedom. As expressed by F:

F: Money is not the whole world but it gives freedom. (…)
J: To be able to have a little bit of freedom and not having to count all the money?
F: Yes, without having to count every single penny. Yesterday I went to the cinema.
J: So, it is important to be able to do, and sometimes feel that you sometimes are getting some quality in your life?
F: Exactly! That’s what is important. It is no fun living just above the subsistence level.

F’s reflections on the significance of being free to choose what you want to do instead of always looking twice at the money, which is more or less the same that A and C said in the quotes above, have resemblances with Amartya Sen’s capability theory (Sen, 1993). Just like Sen, several of the respondents seemed to mean that the freedom given by for example money, implies a better quality of life since it enables the persons to choose more freely between different ways of living.

A similar idea, that it is not the money in itself but what you can get for the money that makes the good life, is expressed even more clearly in the interviews with C and E:

E: Money is nothing, but I need money to help my family.
J: Is it what you can get for the money [yes], that you for example can help your family, that is the important.
E: Yes.

C: Since we have put so much value in, since our whole society is build on money and most things that cause pleasure requires money, so yes, money is important. Or money is not important, but what you can get for the money is.
Some tendencies to variances regarding the importance of money in the constructions of the good life can thus be seen above and more will be uncovered in section 5.2, where the importance allocated money for the SWB is accounted for.

5.1.4 Basic Needs

The importance of money, or what you can get in exchange for money was thus by the respondents primarily motivated by some sort of foundational safety level, where they did not have to worry about having something to eat or paying the rent the next day. This safety level seemed to be more or less equivalent to what in the basic needs approach (Doyal & Gough, 1991) is called the economic security, which can be defined as freedom from poverty. The economic security is one of several components or “intermediate needs” that is needed to reach Physical health and autonomy, and thereby basic-needs satisfaction. Other components important to reach basic needs satisfaction are food, clean water, health, housing, a safe environment and education (ibid.). These are of course closely intertwined with the economical aspect, by means that all these components are easier to acquire if you have money. All of the respondents did to some extent talk in terms of basic needs. B emphasized the following components:

B: What it means to have a good life? Well, to start with I think that it means that people, that you have a good housing of course. That is the first thing, because there are people that… You need a good housing, you need food and potatoes.

Except for money, themes like food, housing, health and peace (a safe environment), were also seen as important basic needs required in order to have a good life. Out of these themes health was raised spontaneously by A and F, and considered by them both to be the most important factor for a good life.

J: Ok, if I say a good life, what does it mean to you, or what do you think it means to have a good life?
F: It is the health that is the most important.
J: The health?
F: Yes, that is of course the most important.

The other respondents did not really talk that much about health, even though it can sometimes be understood tacitly that they found it to be important for the good life.

When it comes to more structural issues like security and living in a non-hazardous environment, E was the only one that initially mentioned it as a component in the good life. He compared the life in Sweden to that in his home country, Kurdistan:

J: What makes life good here, in difference to what it was like for you before? What is it that makes life here good?
E: Here there are rules. I mean, for example Göran Persson and an ordinary person, they are the same. Rich and poor, nobody knows who is rich and who is poor, but down there if someone is famous the police can’t fine him or do anything about him. He is rich and all the policemen know him. But, the police can only take him, who is poor. That’s what it is.
J: So there’s more justice here?
E: Yes, justice. Exactly.

A also stressed living in peace as a highly important factor in order to be able to have a good life, while C formulated herself in terms very similar to those used in the basic needs approach:

C: Yes, I think that most people would agree on that, in order to have a good life, you need a base of security, both economically and socially.

None of the other respondents elaborated further on the impact of the structural conditions for the good life.

The importance of the different needs can thus be concluded to have been given varying attention by the different respondents in their constructions of the good life. Food, water and housing were however something that was stressed as indispensable by all of the respondents.

Even though the respondents used the term needs a lot, neither of them was very clear about what was required to satisfy a need. D tried to elaborate a little bit on the optimum level when it came to money and living standard:

D: I imagine that you should have sufficiently with money. Not too little and not too much. If you have too little you can easily end up manic and afraid not to survive. If you have too much you get a hell lot of problems in finding a way to administer the capital.
J: What is sufficiently?
D: Yes, it changes between… An own room for children above a certain age. A four-room apartment for four persons. That is sufficiently.

How the money should be spent, was something that the respondents reflected quite a bit upon, which can be said to be a matter of different life styles. As we have seen earlier in this chapter F talked about pleasure and enjoyment as important for the good life, by means of for example going to the cinema. Both A, B and F talked about being able to travel as a pleasure that would constitute a good life. B and D mentioned summerhouses as an enjoyable leisure, improving the quality of life. C had some further concrete examples of what pleasure is:

J: What do you mean by “most things that cause pleasure”?
C: Eh, chocolate, going swimming, buying clothes, pleasures. All pleasures cost money.

It does thus seem like most of the respondents agreed upon the utility of having money to spend on pleasures. The pleasures found to be important did however differ and the optimum level required for pleasure satisfaction was not defined, but did thereby most likely also differ.
5.1.5 Time

Just like relations, time was, by several of the respondents, compared to money in its relevance for the good life and found to be superior.

C: But before I was working. It didn’t matter that I had more money, because I didn’t have the time to spend it. I was just stressed in general, but now I’m always checking and valuing it. “Is it worth it?” People say that time is money, and they are right, actually. I might be worth to not be able to afford that extra coffee, but to have the time to be outside when the sun is shining.

What C seemed to be saying is that the value of the money is decreasing if you have little time. E exemplified by talking about a person that he didn’t consider had a good life.

E: So, he is rich and all nights he’s sitting up counting here and there. (…) But, he doesn’t have a good life. He comes here, he is stressed all the time. He is counting, he doesn’t have the time to see his mother. (…)
J: So, it is important to have time as well?
E: You have to have time. Exactly.

But what exactly is having time? What does it mean to have time? B defined having time as follows:

J: What do you mean by having time, or how are you thinking?
B: Well time so that you can use - or what an ugly word ((laughing)) well, so that you can take care of people that you have in your network so to say. Time to take care of that, that’s very important. Because the thing is, that if you don’t – you can have many friends, but if you never have time to see them, or never have time to do anything, or never have time to (.) then you lose it all of a sudden.
J: When you say that you don’t have time, are you thinking that you’re working too much, simply?
B: Yes, that’s what it is. That how I define it.

In all of the statements above “having time” seems to be referring to “not working”. “Not having enough time” does thereby seem to imply “working too much”. What exactly is considered “too much” is difficult to interpret from the statements. B was the only one that also emphasized a few other aspects that can lead to “not having enough time”.

B: My experience is that many young families these days live a very stressful life. That they are running from one thing to the other. You take a course here, and then you have to run, the kids are going to different activities and everyone is running around chasing some sort of happiness. That I don’t think you can get in that way. I guess that’s what I don’t consider a good life.
(…)
That is a good life to me. To have many friends and to have time to be with them.
It does thus seem that B extended the meaning of not having enough time to also comprise doing too many activities like courses etc. in the free time, at least when it’s done at the cost of instead spending time with family and friends. As a contrast D, did at one point in the interview reflect upon the improvements that could be made in his life:

D: I think I would like to have more time actually. When I look in my calendar, I am invited to all these exiting meetings that I actually can’t go to. That’s a shame.

D did in other parts of the interview also emphasize relations as the most important element in the good life, but at this point when he reflected upon improvements the first thing that came to his mind was to have more time to spend on work-related things. D did however not reflect upon “having more time” as a general component in the good life, and did therefore not provide a further explanation to his construction of the concept. Following the reasoning above, it seems likely however, that it would differ a bit from the other three’s.

The constructions of time as a component in the good life and “not enough time” as a component in the not so good life seem to have been given more or less the same meaning by three of the respondents, and a somewhat different meaning by one of them. For respondents B and F the concept was not included in their narratives and must therefore be seen as less relevant in their constructions of the good life.

5.1.6 Coherence

All respondents expressed, with different examples, but with more or less the same signification, the importance of feeling needed, appreciated and belonging to some sort of context. Describing this phenomenon is facilitated by using Antonovsky’s (1987) salutogenic theory that sees well-being as dependent on a sense of coherence (SOC). D even defined a good life by using terms from Antonovsky:

J: What is a good life to you? How would you define a good life?
D: Have you heard of Aron Antonovsky?
J: Yes. Unravelling the mystery of health\(^\text{12}\).
D: Exactly. That’s quite a good definition to me. To have a life that’s meaningful, and that the world roughly is comprehensible and then constant difficulties and possibilities appear and they feel manageable. That feels like a good life.

D’s quote connects directly to the three keywords of the salutogenic theory namely meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility. The other respondents didn’t relate their reasoning to Antonovsky directly, but still expressed themselves in terms of meaningfulness and belonging.

J: To have some sort of occupation is that important then?
B: That you have something that’s rewarding.
J: To feel needed maybe?

\(^{12}\) Book by Antonovsky. See reference list.
B: To feel needed, yes I think that is important. But that you need to have a job and be employed, that’s nothing that I think is necessary.

J: Do you think that’s important then? To feel useful somehow?
F: To feel needed.
J: Yes, needed. To been in a context somewhere.
F: Yes I think so. I have made cinnamon buns twice. A big bag of cinnamon buns. They have been really popular. (…)
J: Do you think that’s important to all people? To have an occupation where you feel like you are part of something?
F: Yes, I think so. I think everyone would benefit from that. (...) People in X actually told me that “you feel better now that you are selling the magazine”.
J: And you say that yourself too, don’t you?
F: Yes of course. Now I have a task.

Both B and F clearly emphasized the need for meaningfulness in some sort of occupation that does not necessarily have to be a job. These sayings are strengthen by Antonovsky (1987) that hold taking part in the process that shapes the destiny as well as the everyday life to be important, which of course is not restricted to taking part and finding meaning in a job. He claimed that it is possible to have a strong SOC without feeling that the job is satisfactory if the outcome of the job, such as earning a salary or working for a good cause, is looked upon as meaningful (ibid.).

C did, by describing her dream, also express the significance of feeling appreciated and to be part of something, stressing the component meaningfulness in SOC. At the same time she also held the manageability for important in saying that she would like to do something that she really can feel that she is good at.

C: My dream is to use my dream and that, that I’m best at, in such a good way as possible, so that as many people as possible can benefit from it and where I really do something that I enjoy and feel that I’m good at. And that others think that too, and can take part, so that I can share with them what I’m good at.

The respondents seem to mainly have emphasized the meaningfulness, in the construction of the good life. A job might provide meaningfulness in itself, but the outcome of the job can also stand for the meaningfulness. It is of course not only the job that provides meaningfulness. Any other occupation could be just as meaningful. The crucial point is to be in a context that provides people with meaning and where they can feel that you have a role or a task. The respondents do thus seem to be of the opinion that a sense of coherence does contribute to the good life and form an important part of their constructions of the same, even though the ways of achieving it can vary a lot from person to person. These findings are also supported by Allardt’s (1993) theory about the three needs having, loving and being, where being emphasizes the importance of being integrated in the society and thus feeling like a meaningful part of it.
5.1.7 Views on similarities and differences

In order to relate the findings to the overall research strategy and the analytical model (figure 2), the respondents were also asked to reflect upon if they thought that the perceptions of a good life changed over time and if it differed a lot between different persons. The idea of the construction of the good life as something that changes over time can also be found in the aspiration theory where the aspirations rise after a period where the individual has grown accustomed to the circumstances in life (Layard, 2005).

All the respondents were of the opinion that the way the good life is constructed by different persons changes over time. B and D said that different things are of importance depending on where in life a person is.

J: Do you think that it differs a lot how people define what a good life is?
B: Definitely ((laughing)). I think it depends a lot on what situation in life that people are. Right now I am for example really enthusiastic about this year off and I have time to think about these things, and that makes it different to if you had asked me when I was working. Maybe not just half a year ago, but a year ago. Because it had been completely different then, I would maybe have defined it in a different way.

C and F were of the same opinion and said that people experience new things and develop and grow as persons in life, which means that different things become important at different times in life.

C: Love to me know is not what it was before, and happiness is not the same as before and pain and grief. Because I can only compare with what I have experienced.
J: And what has changed then?
C: Because now I have experienced more and in the future a good life will be so much more than it is right now.

One thing that, according to A, has a major impact of views and attitudes to the good life is starting an own family.

J: This with a good life, do you think that it is something that looks the same if-, something that changes. What do you think about that?
A: Well, of course it might change when the kids grow up. Maybe you can start caring more about yourself. You can do things without the kids. Maybe when the kids grow older it will be easier to go abroad and take some time off.

To E, the occurrence that had so far had the biggest impact on his view of what a good life is was when he moved from Kurdistan to Sweden.

The respondents all agreed that the perceptions of the good life differed between people at the same time as basic needs such as food, housing and relations are universal. In this respect the respondents answered a line with the analytical model (figure 2). The differences in the
constructions of the good life were said to principally depend on the life situation (A, B, C, D, E, F), but also on the society (A, D, E).

### 5.1.8 How was the good life constructed?

The main findings, in the analysis of the respondents’ constructions of the good life were thus that, despite the differences in for example sex, age, social class and ethnicity, the persons in the study shared quite a number of common views on what a good life is. Two components appeared in all respondents’ narratives, namely relations and basic material needs such as housing and access to food and water. If this is a representative finding, these aspects of life can be said to have a relation with the SWB that is independent of the variances in the individuals’ constructions of the good life. These findings can therefore be placed in arrow a, in the analytical model (figure 2).

Individual differences were at the same time detected, which implies that the good life not only can be looked upon in universal terms, but that it also has an aspect that is subjectively constructed, following arrow b in the model. The main differences were found in the qualitative nuances of the various components claimed to be a part of the good life, and in the significance allocated to primarily money and time. There were also a few elements that were only emphasized as important for the good life by a few of the respondents such as health, justice and personal development, which thus lead to somewhat differing constructions. If these differences are due to differences between the respondents’ constructions or of a more superficial nature is however hard to judge.

Just as argued by Doyal and Gough (1991), Allardt (1993) and Camfield, Choudhury and Devine (2006), all respondents regarded social relations as very important for the good life. The quantity of the relations did not seem to have a great impact on the good life, but the quality was said to be important, which is also a finding supported by Doyal and Gough (1991). Love was by most respondents seen more as a bonus than a necessity, but some emphasized it as more important. There did however seem to be a consensus that, to have good relations to at least a few persons, be it a grandmother, a friend or a partner, was the most important.

Money was seen as important in order to get by and at all survive, even though many of the respondents didn’t seem to be that comfortable talking about money as a vital component in the good life. Several did instead emphasize the importance of what you can get in exchange for money such as food, pleasure and the freedom to act more independently. Both the capability (Sen, 1993) and the basic needs approach (Doyal & Gough, 1991) stress the freedom or autonomy as a superior goal in the process towards life satisfaction, which accordingly give more credibility to this result. The significance allocated to money did however vary between the different respondents.

Other factors looked upon as basic needs by the respondents and thus of high utility in reaching the good life were health, housing, food and water etc. However, only two of the respondents did spontaneously mention health as an important component in the good life, which of course not is to say that the others didn’t find it relevant. Food, water and housing or a place to live did however seem to be things that all respondents looked upon as important, which also is supported by a number of research results and theories on the good life such as
the social indicator movement (Angner, 2005), basic needs approach (Doyal & Gough, 1991) and the capability approach (Sen, 1993).

It was striking how many of the respondents spoke in terms of needs. Doyal and Gough (1991) state that the ways to meet the needs vary from one culture to another, but still claim that the actual needs are universal. A social constructionist perspective on the ideas about basic needs does not necessarily imply a denial of any universal needs, but can instead problematize the possibility to come to a concrete assessment of the universal needs due to the various cultural constructions of concept and practises. The fact that the respondents principally seemed to talk in terms of basic needs and needs satisfaction does not mean that the constructions of the needs correspond to each other. It is very likely that F that is living just above the subsistence level’s construction of money as a basic need differs quite a lot from A’s for example. From a social constructionist perspective it does thus become important not just to accept the respondents sayings as parts of one or another theory, but to closely examine how the concepts they use are constructed.

Another crucial factor that most of the respondents mentioned was time, which mainly seemed to gain its significance from a relative perspective. It seemed as if the respondents meant different things when they talked about “having time” as a criterion in the good life, and the optimum level needed for satisfaction did accordingly also vary.

Coherence and meaningfulness were also stressed as a highly important factor by all respondents, which makes Antonovsky’s salutogenic theory (1987) highly useful to further strengthen these statements.

The construction of the good life was by all respondents thought to shift over time. Some were of the opinion that it also varied between different social groups. The fact people themselves believe that the constructions of the good life is something that is shifting between different persons, in particular over time, further strengthen the meaningfulness to continue exploring the matter.

To conclude it can thus be said that, despite the common views on the good life, individual differences exist, making it necessary to consider both the constructions of the good life and the components that can be seen as universal in order to evaluate the life satisfaction of an individual. Certain factors can objectively be said to be important in a good life, but these factors are not sufficient in order to give the full picture about the good life, whereby subjective models of explanation and measurements, such as qualitative interviews, will also have to be used.

5.2 The relation between the good life and subjective well-being

Whilst the above section focused on arrow a and b, in the analytical model (figure 2) this section will focus on the relation between the construction of the good life and the SWB (arrow c).

This connection is harder to ascertain, but in the following an attempt to unravel certain indications pointing towards the existence of such a connection, will be made, based on how the respondents reasoned to determine if they were satisfied or not with their lives. This section is therefore structured around each respondent, in order to demonstrate and compare on what basis they evaluate their lives and thereby approximate their SWB as high or low.
Since a home and sufficiently with food and potable water, was something that all of the respondents classified as vital for the good life and also have access to, it was, as described in section 5.1.8, supposed to pass directly through arrow a, and has therefore not been taken into account in this section.

The respondents’ main statements, regarding their evaluation of their lives, will first be summarized and presented one by one and thereafter compared and discussed in the final section.

5.2.1 Respondent A's evaluation of his life

A constructed the good life as dependent on five main factors namely health, good relations with family and friends, the well-being of the family, peace and money.

Taken all things together he claimed to be satisfied with his own life. The main motive for his satisfaction with life was thus his family and their well-being.

J: Did getting a family signify that you got a good life then?
A: Yes, you can say that.
J: What more is good in your life then?
A: Well, I guess this with • my girlfriend’s family.
J: Like the extended family?
A: Yes, her mother and father and sisters.

He also regarded himself as being of good health and living in a country where there is peace. The only improvements that he could think of were to take up the relationships to his own family (mother, brothers and sisters) and to be a bit better off economically although he did not claim to be too dissatisfied with his current financial situation.

Out of the five factors in A’s construction of the good life, he claimed to be completely satisfied with three of them and reasonably satisfied with the other two, even though they could be better. This implies that his construction of the good life could have an impact on his SWB following arrow c in the analytical model (figure 2).

5.2.2 Respondent B’s evaluation of her life

B’s construction of the good life was based on two principal factors and two that seem slightly less important. Relations to friends and family, was the most important factor, followed by having the time to spend with those that are close to you. Furthermore she emphasized “to feel needed” or to have some sort of occupation that is considered meaningful. Finally having a partner to love and that loves you was also something that she stated as very important.

She said the following about her own life:

J: Can you tell me a little bit about your own life, right now? Do you feel that you have a good life, right now, and in that case why or why not?
B: Yes, I think I have a good life right now because I can decide completely over my own time.
Out of the factors mentioned above she was thus at present very satisfied with the amount of time that she had now on her year off and the freedom it gave her. This had also given her the opportunity to spend time with the people that she cared about and thus maintain the relations that she found important. In general she was very satisfied with the relations she had to family and friends except for a son that she said not to have any contact with. This was thus held as something that could be improved in her life, together with finding a partner to love. Even though she was not working at the time of the interview, she had found many other occupations that she enjoyed doing and that provided her life with meaning.

Her general satisfaction with life in relation to her being very satisfied with two of the four main features of her construction of a good life and having one that could be improved but was still very satisfactory and one was not fulfilled at present, suggests that there could be a connection between her construction of the good life and the SWB.

5.2.3 Respondent C's evaluation of her life

C focused principally on personal development and getting to know the self in her construction of the good life. Like the others she also emphasized relations, being able to act freely and finally pleasures (to have the ability to allow yourself to do things like going to the cinema, going swimming, eating good chocolate etc.).

She claimed to be very satisfied with life due to several components. To start with she was very satisfied with the relations that she had at present, as well as the ability to act freely in the aspect of having reached the state in her own personal development where she didn’t care so much about what others thought of her. She also asserted to having developed her personality a lot in the last years, even though she did by no means look at herself as fulfilled. Finally she affirmed to be enjoying quite a few pleasurable things in life and seemed content with those.

C: I feel like I have the best relations, that I have ever had. This, in relation to what I had before, I think I am on the top, in how close, true and affectionate relations I have. This is in relation to what I used to have, so it is difficult for me to see how this could be better, because I don’t know if they can. Love is great right now, and money, I don’t think so much about it. It feels like that’s also better than it ever was.

C’s declaration to be really satisfied with her life, can be seen in the light of the construction of four main criteria for the good life that, according to herself, almost all are met in a very satisfactory way, where getting to know herself a bit better was the only one that she claimed had quite a few things missing before being completely satisfactory. Taken all this together suggests that there also, in the case of C, could exist a connection between her construction of the good life and her SWB.

5.2.4 Respondent D's evaluation of his life

D only had two main things that he considered of importance in the construction of the good life, and one subordinated. The first issue that he stated as important in the good life is encompassing quite a few different aspects but the main term used was a sense of coherence
Looking at the reasons for this, he does to start with have his job that also is his hobby and only occupation at the side of his family, where he, according to himself, achieves meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility. He also claimed to be very satisfied with his relations, both to family, friends and professionally. When it comes to money he confessed to have a very good salary, but did still say that it would be fun with a little bit more.

J: And you don’t want more money?
D: Well, of course it would be fun to have a few hundred thousands more in the account, but it is at that level. And I have a good salary. Damn, I shouldn’t have more money ((laughing)). It is so unnecessary to go on thinking like that.

Taking all things together, D’s claim to be really satisfied with his life and him being very satisfied with the two most prominent factors in his construction of the good life and still pretty satisfied with the subordinate one does also imply that this could be a result of the causal connection following arrow c in the analytical model (figure 2).

5.2.5 Respondent D’s evaluation of his life

E’s construction of the good life withheld three main and two minor components. The three principal ones were relations, helping the family and living in a just society. The subordinate ones were money and having an occupation that is interesting and stimulating.

He said the following about his life today:

E: Today I have a good life here in Sweden. I don’t want anything else. Like I have it now, I am satisfied. I had never, never understood that I would come to Sweden and live here.

This statement might seem a bit confusing put in relation to the satisfaction that E claimed to have with each one of the components. He lives in a society that, according to him is very just (he is of course comparing with the corruption in Iraq/Kurdistan). When it comes to relations he has his family in Kurdistan that he said that he talked to a few times a month, but here in Sweden he claimed not to really have anyone that he trusts. He said that he would like to have friends that he could trust, and that don’t “do stupid things”, by which he was referring to the past when he was involved in some criminal activities. He is helping his family by sending them money every month, but said that he would like to be able to send them more money and was thus not completely satisfied with the help that he currently was giving them. Regarding money he declared to be more or less satisfied. He said that his salary is good enough, and he was very happy to have a full time job, but since he would like to be able to send more money to his family and thereafter start saving money to maybe be able to start studying, he was not completely satisfied. He claimed to be satisfied with his job, but did at the same time say that he in the future would like to maybe be able to start his own business.
Looking at all these things together, and comparing them to E’s construction of the good life, could generate a supposition that E would not be too satisfied with his life. As can be seen from the quote above he did however claim that he did not want anything else from life. His statements do thus in a way contradict each other since he claimed to be dissatisfied with several components in his life but still in overall satisfied with no further aspirations. It must however be remembered, as discussed in section 4.6, that this interview has lower reliability than the others due to language difficulties, which might have been a reason for the contradictory statements.

5.2.6 Respondent F’s evaluation of her life

When F talked about the good life, she did it in terms of relations, health, the well-being of her family, money to be able to allow oneself some entertainment or pleasures and feeling needed. Health was stated as the most important factor.

When she was asked about her own life, she said the following:

J: What do you think about your own life? Do you think that you have a good life too, or what do you think about your own life?
F: Right now, maybe not so good, since I have this with the economy all the time. And I guess the health is not perfect either. But other than that I am fine. Ok at least.

As F said in the quote above, both the health and the economy left quite a bit more to wish for, before they could be said to be satisfactory. The relations were said to be satisfactory, but she did not have a lot of friends, although she stated that she preferred quality to quantity. She did however say that having a close male friend would maybe make her a little bit more satisfied with her relations. Only occasionally could she afford to for example going to the cinema, something that she claimed that she really would like to be able to do more freely. Her son and family seemed to be quite well-being, which was satisfactory and she also said that she now, when she was selling the magazine, felt a stronger sense of coherence since that she had a place to go to, where she felt needed and cared about.

Since F’s health, that she considered the most important part in having a good life, not was that good, and other things that were said to be of importance in her construction of the good life, such as money and pleasures, weren’t either that satisfactory the reality did not quite meet her construction of the good life. The fact that she claimed that she did not have such a good life at the time, is a further indication towards the existence of a causal connection, as suggested with arrow c in the analytical model (figure 2).

5.2.7 How did the respondents evaluate their lives?

In order to disentangle the different effects from each other one would need quite a different research strategy and a more extensive empirical material. In the following, some speculative reasoning involving counter-factual scenarios, will however be allowed.

One may for example consider what might happen if respondent D would be living after respondent B’s construction of the good life where relations and time to be with family and friends and to reflect, are the two most important factors. It is likely that D’s SWB would
consequently be a lot lower than currently since he has very little time to be with friends and family and instead in his current life gets a lot of satisfaction from work.

Money was, as mentioned earlier, a topic that was brought up by the respondents in all interviews, both when they discussed the good life and their own SWB. It was however clear that it was ascribed varying significance in the construction of the good life, which seems to have been a determining factor for the estimated SWB.

A was reasonably satisfied with his income, but made clear that he wished for more money. D claimed to be satisfied but said at the same time that he also would wish for a little bit more. It is thus easy to draw a parallel between A and D, but what is interesting to keep in mind is that D has almost twice as high salary as A, and is not supporting a family with four children. However they both seemed to be of more or less the same opinion that they really should be satisfied with the money that they have, but that it would be nice to have a little bit more. B stressed several times that she did not find money particularly important, at least not in comparison to all other things that mattered to her. This view must be seen in the context where she recently, as a result of her year off, has gone down in salary to have an income that’s about half of A’s and a quarter of D’s. F, that had yet other prerequisites, with an income that is about half of B’s (a quarter of A’s and en eighth of D’s) seemed less satisfied than all of the other respondents with her income. Money was given a prominent role in her construction of the good life, but it is as likely that it is the actual shortage of money that directly affects her SWB. Money and income can therefore be assumed to have some sort of direct impact on the SWB, at least when it comes to levels as low as the subsidence level.

It is however evident that the objective variable, money in this case, cannot by itself explain the respondents’ estimated SWB, applying just arrow a. By examining the construction of the good life through the arrows b and c, a greater understanding of the SWB can be reached, where in this case B’s evaluation of money as relatively unimportant for the good life, signifies that she can be very satisfied with her life despite the low income.

Another example is the importance of in what terms relations are expressed to be a part of the good life, which also varied between the respondents. Respondents C, E and F claimed to have a much lower number of close relations than the other three. They all claimed to have between two and four close relations, which is quite a big difference to A, B and D that all claimed to have between 15-20 close relations. However all except for E claimed to be satisfied with the relations they had. Both C and F emphasized that they were satisfied with having a few numbers of good friends, even though F said that she sometimes wished for a male friend. C seemed to have done an active choice to focus on a few, very close friends, rather than a larger number of friends and acquaintances.

In analyzing the constructions of the good life it is thus not sufficient to solely conclude that relations in general seem to be a part of people’s constructions of the good life. Thoroughly investigations of the construction of the notions used are necessary, for instance if they are expressed in principally qualitative or quantitative terms, in order to determine the SWB of an individual, using the analytical model (figure 2) introduced in this paper.
6. DISCUSSION

The objective with the study was to investigate how people in different situations in life and with different backgrounds construct the idea of a good life and the importance these constructions may have in explaining subjective well-being. This has been done by conducting qualitative interviews with six persons selected by maximum variation sampling and analyzing the material with an analytical model based on social constructionist theory, various theories of a good life and happiness research, illustrating the causal connection between objective circumstances, the construction of the good life and the SWB. Below the results and methods used are discussed and evaluated.

6.1 A new model for measuring subjective well-being

The research conducted on happiness in the past decades, has opened up for a new academic discipline and in many ways contributed to the understanding of how SWB is generated. The basic argument of the paper has however been that this research needs to be complemented by a qualitative model for measuring SWB that in detail can investigate the constructions of the good life.

Despite the differences between themselves, the respondents’ constructions of the good life were shown to have a lot in common. Some factors in the good life were shared by the respondents, such as relations to other people, access to food, water and housing. In other aspects, such as money and time, the constructions of the good life differed from one another. This was concluded after examining both the significance ascribed to the various components of the constructions of the good life and the qualitative dimensions of the concepts used. In saying that relations are important, the respondents could for instance be referring both to the quantity and the quality and a notion such as time can be given in a number of different meanings.

Another finding was that the respondents used quite different criteria when evaluating their life. If this is a general pattern, possible to replicate in other studies, one may in the future be able to draw the conclusion that the construction of the good life indeed has an effect on our SWB.

If so assuming that people in the foundation have the same basic preferences, as often done in economic theory, may even lead to faulty conclusions in explaining happiness. Parts of what quantitative researchers might call reliability problems in the measurement of SWB is in this study regarded as variances systematically related to our constructions of the good life.

6.2 Implications for social policy and social work

If the old definition of welfare and quality of life, that focuses on the objective circumstances, is on the verge of shifting towards a definition that also takes the subjective experience into account, as indicated by the attention that has recently been given to SWB in media and at universities and research institutes all over the world, it will become inevitable for social policy to give more attention to SWB, just like Layard and Bentham once concluded. In the Kingdom of Bhutan this is already reality with the implementation of the Gross National Happiness instead of the Gross National Product as a basis for public policy, whereas the
welfare research, social policy and social work of Sweden have instead kept the focus on social indicators like resources and conditions of living.

Since one aim with social work is to improve the quality of life for individuals in the society, paying more attention to the clients’ constructions of the good life and their impact on the SWB, must be seen as highly relevant for social workers. A greater focus on increasing the clients’ SWB, would be facilitated by designing the social policy to put more emphasis on subjective indicators of well-being such as the subjectively evaluated life satisfaction instead of solely objective indicators such as resources and level of living.

This paper does by no means appeal to abolish social indicators as markers of well-being. As demonstrated, for instance in the analytical model used in this paper, they are central since they seem to have a direct impact on the SWB. However, in order to fully comprehend how SWB is produced subjective factors such as the constructions of the good life, will also have to be taken into account.

This paper has taken one step towards a better understanding of how SWB is formed, focusing in particular on the construction of the good life. There is however a need for more research, of the traditional kind, that focuses on the causal correlation between SWB and objective circumstances, as well as studies that further examines the importance of how the good life is constructed, which with advantage may be done using qualitative methods. It would also be significant to further investigate which circumstances in life that can be seen as universal and which ones that seems to be constructed.

6.3 Methodology discussion

In order to give prominence to the use of qualitative methods in contemporary happiness research, given that this is a fact largely ignored in the field, using qualitative methods was a prerequisite for the realization of the study. In the interviews a number of qualitative nuances of the respondents’ constructions of the good life were detected, that would have been hard to discover with a quantitative research method. It is however likely that quantitative method also would be able to detect certain differences in the constructions of the good life, but probably not as thoroughly and full of nuances.

The interviews were somewhere on the scale between being unstructured and semi-structured. A less structured model, without relating to certain subcategories of the topics, would have allowed the respondents to present their independent constructions of the good life without the influence of the interviewer. This would however made the empirical material a lot more difficult to deal with and interpret. A more structured interview guide would probably have facilitated the analysis, but made the material less interesting and nuanced. For this reasons the middle course was chosen.

The third topic in the interviews about the SWB could perhaps easier have been measured by using a quantitative scale, such as letting the respondents evaluate their life satisfaction a scale ranging from 1-10. It would have facilitated the comparison between the respondents, and maybe decreased the risk that the interpretations made by the author were arbitrary. The advantage with the qualitative approach regarding this third topic was however that the interviewer had the possibility to ask clarifying questions, follow up and further investigate how the SWB was evaluated.
A general drawback with conducting interviews is the so-called interviewer effect, which emphasizes the risk that the interviewer affects the respondents, often unintentionally, so that they for example respond with what they think that the interviewer wants to hear. This must however be put in relation to the advantages with using interviews as a method such as the possibility to follow up and clarify the respondents’ narratives and go deeper into each topic.

REFERENCES


Appendix 1 – Chart of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job/Income (SEK/month, before tax unless indicated otherwise)</th>
<th>Education\textsuperscript{13}</th>
<th>Ethnical background</th>
<th>Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Carpenter, 27-28 000</td>
<td>year 1-9</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Trough friend/ other contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Social worker on a year off\textsuperscript{14} 9 500\textsuperscript{15}</td>
<td>year 1-12 and &gt; 3 years at university</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Trough friend/ other contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Student, 6 500\textsuperscript{15}</td>
<td>year 1-12 and 2 years at university</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Trough friend/ other contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Managing director, 400 employees, 50 000</td>
<td>year 1-12 and ? years at university</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>By email.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Grocery store assistant, 17 000</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Kurdish</td>
<td>Trough friend/ other contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Disablement pensioner, 1 800-3 000\textsuperscript{16}+incomes from selling Situation Stockholm\textsuperscript{17}.</td>
<td>year 1-8\textsuperscript{18}</td>
<td>Finish</td>
<td>On the street.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{13} In the Swedish school system year 1-9 are compulsory, primary and secondary school, year 10-12 of upper secondary school are optionally.
\textsuperscript{14} In the Swedish social system, a person has the right to take a year off from his or her job, with 85 % of the unemployment benefit maintained, if an unemployed person can take the job in the meantime. The idea behind this is to decrease stress and provide unemployed persons with an opportunity to get into the job market (Försäkringskassan, 2007).
\textsuperscript{15} untaxed
\textsuperscript{16} untaxed income after rent and household bills.
\textsuperscript{17} Magazine sold by persons that are homeless or that run the risk of getting homeless, as a step on the way to becoming self sufficient.
\textsuperscript{18} In the Finish system the primary and secondary school were at that time eight years
## Appendix 2 - Interview guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tell me about yourself</td>
<td>Age, Occupation, Income, Educational background, Family situation, Close relations, Living arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How would you define a good life?</td>
<td>Social indicators/needs (food, housing etc.), Money, Relations, Love, Variations between individuals, Variation over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do you look upon your life in terms of goodness?</td>
<td>Possible improvements?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3 - Jeffersonian Transcription Notation

Symbol Name       Use
[ text ]           Brackets  Indicates the start and end points of overlapping speech.
=                  Equal Sign  Indicates the break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance.
(# of seconds)    Timed Pause  A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
( . )              Micropause  A brief pause, usually less that 0.2 seconds.
( v )              Period or Down Arrow  Indicates falling pitch or intonation.
( ^ )              Question Mark or Up Arrow  Indicates rising pitch or intonation.
( , )              Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation.
( - )              Indicates an abrupt halt or interruption in utterance.
( >text< )        Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
( <text> )        Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
( ◦ )              Indicates whisper, reduced volume, or quiet speech.
( ALL CAPS )      Indicates shouted or increased volume speech.
( underline )     Indicates the speaker is emphasizing or stressing the speech.
( : )             Indicates prolongation of a sound.
( (hhh) )         Audible exhalation
( • )             Audible inhalation
( ( text ) )      Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.
( (( italic text )) ) Double Parentheses  Annotation of non-verbal activity.