

Improvement of Quality of Life through Adaptation?

A Qualitative Longitudinal Approach on Households in Precarious Prosperity in Three European Countries

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Abstract

The present study investigates adaptation to precarious prosperity through linking quality of life research with social inequality research. The focus is on households in a specific socioeconomic position termed precarious prosperity. These households struggle to maintain a degree of secure prosperity and are a concern addressed by researchers and policy makers. The topic of adaptation is analyzed in the same population group by means of three theoretical approaches, two methodological perspectives, and three country contexts (Romania, Spain and Switzerland). The objective of the dissertation is to advance research on adaptation by contributing to the empirical, theoretical and methodological debate.

The qualitative approach adds an innovative perspective to the quantitatively dominated debate on adaptation. Based on international collaboration, the research contributes to the methodology of cross-national comparisons. Moreover, it investigates longitudinal data, which is rare in qualitative research. The three published articles have been elaborated in an iterative process by working alternately on literature, theories and analysis. The processes of sampling, data collection, coding and analysis are clearly documented. The data corpus I analyzed is composed of two or three waves of qualitative interviews conducted in three countries between 2008 and 2014. The three articles adopt the same analytical approach and contain elements from content analysis and analytic induction.

Empirical results provide evidence that adaptation occurs when households do not perceive it possible to change their living conditions, and also that specific processes of adaptation are linked to social experiences. The qualitative approach to quality of life in precarious prosperity is empirically enlightening, because it allows for revealing adaptation processes and better understanding them.

The research refines theoretical approaches for analyzing adaptation, quality of life and precarious prosperity from a qualitative perspective, referring to how the three concepts are theoretically linked. Article 1 brings together objective situations and opportunity structures on the macro level with households' subjective well-being and agency on the micro level to identify their quality of life. Article 2 refers to the concept of social bonds (Paugam 2008) to conceptualize opportunities for protection and recognition. Article 3 applies the framework for agency in poverty (Lister 2004) in the situation of precarious prosperity.

The investigations result in a definition of agency in precarious prosperity: agency is considered a purposeful action that is influenced by the social context and individual experiences. It may be individual or collective, is oriented to the short term or the long term, and aims at improving subjective well-being or changing living conditions. I argue that in order for the theoretical concepts for analyzing quality of life in precarious prosperity to be fruitful, adaptation must be integrated as a pattern of agency for improving subjective well-being when dealing with structural constraints.