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The Changing Quality of Life Preferences in South Carolina

Patrick Tandoh-Offin

The idea of quality of life (QOL) in mainstream economics relates to an individual's evaluation of their own welfare in terms of the socio-economic considerations. Contemporary interpretations, however, suggest that quality of life is a multi-dimensional concept (Ferris, 2006)¹. While the concept involves subjective evaluations of individuals and their household welfare conditions, it has come to mean livability (Myers, 1987)², and exists as a local experience mostly in a single community. However, migration allows for city-to-city comparisons.

Quality of life is measured with social indicators such as the extent to which individuals and households possess certain goods, have access to certain services, or have opportunities necessary to advance their daily living and welfare or what is generally referred to as life satisfaction (Bognar, 2005)³. Meanwhile, people are deemed the best judges of their own lives so it is important that individuals be given the chance to evaluate subjectively their own life conditions through descriptive indicators (Ferris, 2006). Individuals are more likely to evaluate livability in their communities based on local quality of life trends rather than make comparisons with other places. In addition, researchers are able to measure objectively individuals and society life conditions by analyzing the descriptive indicators that capture the important life satisfaction conditions as reported by the affected individuals (Bognar, 2005).

1 Ferris, A. L. (2006). "A Theory of Social Structure and the Quality of Life." *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 1:117-123.

2 Myers, D. (1987). "Community-Relevant Measurement of Quality of Life: A Focus on Local Trends." *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 23(1): 108-125.

3 Bognar, G. (2005). "The Concept of Quality of Life." *Social Theory and Practice*, 31(4): 561-580.

Since late 2006, the *Self Portrait: How Are We Doing in South Carolina?* surveys have been conducted twice every year (one in late spring and another in late fall). The surveys ask South Carolina residents to assess the current and future socio-economic and community outlook for themselves, their families and the state. The surveys are a collaborative effort between the University of South Carolina's Institute for Public Service and Policy Research Survey Laboratory and the Jim Self Center on the Future at the Strom Thurmond Institute at Clemson University. The usefulness of such a process is twofold: first, it affords individuals and households a chance to evaluate subjectively their own well-being with regard to the prevailing socio-economic and environmental conditions. Additionally, decision makers and planners are able to understand and determine which preferences, attitudes and priorities are changing over time as well as the magnitude and direction of any such changes in South Carolina.

Since the inception of the *Self Portrait* surveys, South Carolina citizens have consistently identified the economy and economic factors as the most important issue facing the state. The total respondents to the question identifying the most important issue facing the state has ranged between 712 and 911, and the size of respondents who have consistently identified the economy and economic issues as the number one important issue have also ranged between 18.8 % in late 2006 to 61.4% in mid 2008 as can be seen in Table 1.

The variable, economy or economic issues, covers: jobs, employment and unemployment; wages, taxes and financial concerns; trade, industry and business development concerns; and issues of poverty in South Carolina.

The first three surveys cover periods before the most recent recession in the U.S. and global economies. Even though respondents still identified the economy as the most important issue, the other issues identified in those three surveys such as Education, Healthcare, Environment, and Population received respectable attention from respondents.

The mid (spring-summer) 2008 *Self Portrait* survey had almost two-thirds of all responses identifying economic issues as the most important. Since this is the period that preceded the collapse of several big banks and financial institutions that resulted in the financial bailout of major automakers, and mortgage meltdown, this response rate is not surprising. It is important to note that the media may have influenced how citizens responded to surveys. For instance, in the last two months before the 'mid 08' *Self Portrait*, in three of the major newspapers with statewide circulations (*Greenville News*, *The State*, and *Post & Courier*), issues concerning the economy and jobs were highlighted 108 out of 356 times, and that works to an average of 30.3%. During the same period, issues of war and terrorism, healthcare, and the environment were each highlighted on an average of about 6%.

Table 1: Responses to "the most important issue" question from all seven surveys

%	Late 06	Mid 07	Late 07	Mid 08	Late 08	Mid 09	Late 09
Education	16.5	25.8	13.8	11.3	12.1	20.3	10
Economy	18.8	34.3	20.6	61.6	34.4	44.7	39.4
Healthcare	15.8	5	16.9	5.8	13.8	4.2	17.4
Environment	7.9	2.9	11.7	1.7	6.4	0.8	4.5
Growth & Dev't	10.4	5	5	4.1	3.2	2	1.8
Population	3.1	7.7	5	4.3	3.7	3.4	1.9
Gov't Services	5.6	5.2	4.6	3.8	6.9	11.9	4.3
Civil Liberties	1.6	4.6	2	1.7	1	0.7	1.9
Crime	2.6	4.6	1.4	3.3	1.5	1.2	1.3
War	1.5	4.1	0.5	0.6	0.1	~	~
Other	7	1.8	16.7	1.2	4.1	0.6	3.5
Don't Know	15.6	~	1.7	0.7	12.9	10.2	13.9
No. of Responses	786	744	807	759	911	812	712

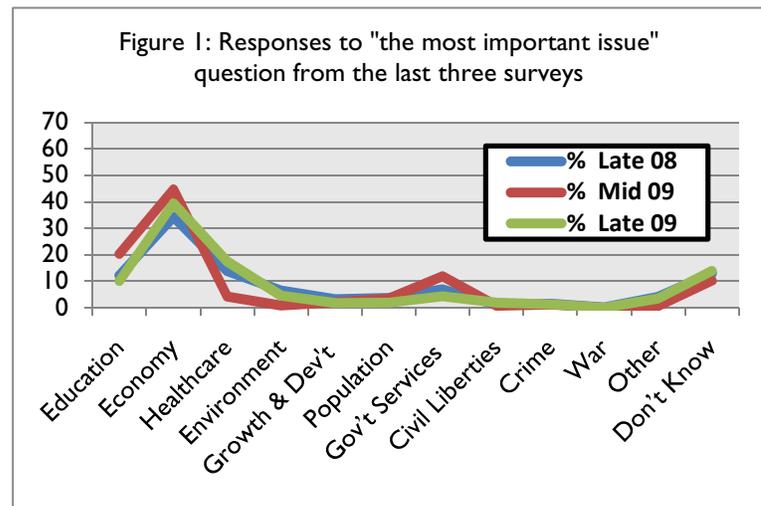
Evidence from the above suggests that the issues and events projected or highlighted by the media about the national or global economy have a bearing on how individuals and households perceive variations in the socio-economic structure of their environment during the different survey periods.

The last three surveys carried out after the 'mid 08' surveys have all highlighted an important phenomenon of interest to

regional science researchers. That is, individuals' evaluations of their internal household economic conditions are based on the general economic outlook of their local, regional or even national economies. Ferris (2006) has argued that experiences of quality of life are conditioned by community social structure and community institutional structure. The community social structure is made up of demographic characteristics, culture patterns, institutional composition, and social psychological situation.

The community institutional structure is made up of life satisfaction activities such as economic and neighborhood institutions (family, health, finance and paid employment), recreation and leisure time, religion, government, education, and other forms of institutions. Participation in any of the community activities leads to life satisfaction for individuals and their communities (Andrews and Withey 1976⁴; Mukherjee 1989⁵; Schwartz 1994⁶; Cohen 2000b⁷; and Ferris 2006).

Focusing on the last three *Self Portrait* surveys as depicted in Figure 1 above, respondents consistently identified Government services as an equally important issue in addition to issues of economy, education and healthcare, which were identified as the most important issues. Government services include fiscal responsibility, strong and vibrant institutions, leadership and the various social services and welfare programs that serve as a safety net to citizens. These



4 Andrews, F. M., and S. B. Withey (1976). *Social Indicators of Well-being: Americans' Perceptions of Life Quality*. Plenum, New York.

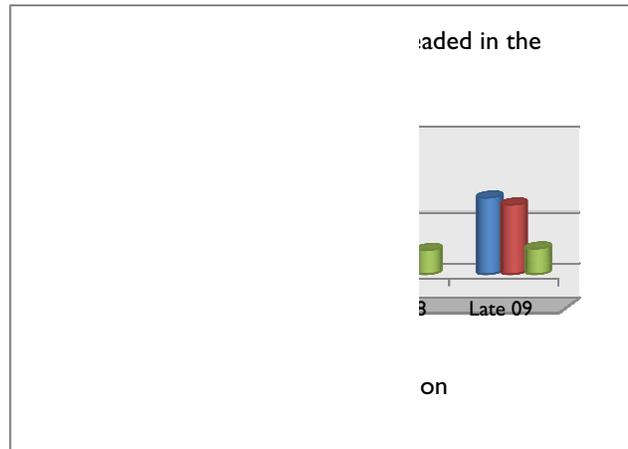
5 Mukherjee, R. (1989). *The Quality of Life: Valuation in Social Research*. Sage, New Delhi/ Newbury Park/ London

6 Schwartz, S. H. (1994). *Beyond Individualism-Collectivism: New Cultural Dimensions of Values*. In : Kim U., Triandis H.C., Kagitchibasi C., Choi C., Yoon G., (Eds). *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method and Applications*. Sage, CA.

7 Cohen, E. H. (2000b). "A Facet Theory Approach to Examining Overall and Life Facet Satisfaction Relationships." *Social Indicators Research*, 51(2): 223-237.

Government services also form the basis for social capital development and can enhance the quality of life for individuals and their communities (Berger-Schmitt, 2002⁸).

In two of the seven Self Portrait surveys carried out to date (late 2006 and mid 2009), South Carolina residents were asked to identify the “most important factor” they consider in choosing a place to live. In the late 2006 survey, when the national economy was deemed to be stable, respondents mainly identified “community vitality” (32%), “Proximity to natural resources” (22%), and “Good schools” (20.2%) as the top three most important factors. However, in the mid 2009 survey, when respondents were asked the same question, they identified as most important factors “Proximity to jobs” (26.7%), “Good schools” (22.6%), “Proximity to family members” (15.1%), and “Cost of living” (11.7%). Thus, over the period, there was a shift from what may be considered amenity factors to necessities.



Community Vitality refers to the availability of infrastructure such as good local and trunk roads, healthcare facilities, shopping within easy reach, places of historic significance, stable communities with resources for creative and performing arts and amenities that make living in a community satisfying. Good Schools also refers to the availability of quality formal and basic Pre-K to 12 educational facilities. The responses from the 2009 survey reflects more on the economic situation at a time which forced households to make decisions with little regard for recreation and amenities (Kirchler, 1999)⁹ while still paying close attention to the importance of education.

Meanwhile, periods of economic downturn are felt by individuals and households much the same way as the state, regional or national economies. Quality of life is considered to result from the interaction of economic, health, social, cultural, and environmental conditions that influence the shared experiences of individuals, households, and communities (Myers, 1987; Ferris 2006). Surveys such as the *Self Portrait* offer individuals opportunities to evaluate their socio-economic situation in relation to or based on events in their regional or national economic environment. For instance, since its commencement in 2006, the *Self Portrait* surveys have asked South Carolina citizens in its annual editions (late 06, late 07, late 08, and late 09) to assess

⁸ Berger-Schmitt, R. (2002). “Considering Social Cohesion in Quality of Life Assessments: Concept and Measurement.” *Social Indicators Research*, 58: 403-428.

⁹ Kirchler, E. (1999) “Studying Economic Decisions Within Private Households: A Critical Review and Design for a “Couple Experiences Diary” *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Volume 16 (3) September 1995, Pages 393-419.

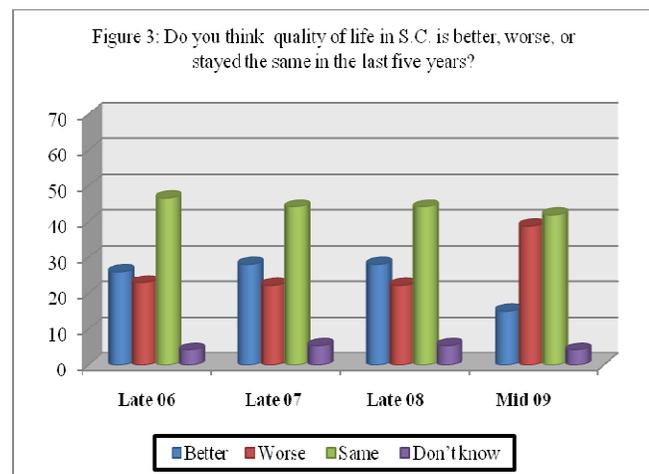
whether they think South Carolina is on the right or wrong track. The results are captured in Figure 2.

The percentage of respondents who say the state is on the right track drops from its record high of 69.9% in the late (fall) 2006 surveys to 44.6% in late (fall) 2009 edition. At the same time, respondents who say the state is on the wrong track more than double, increasing by about 110% between 2006 and 2009 with the highest increase (about 75%) recorded during the late 2008 survey.

Another variable employed in the *Self Portrait* surveys to assess citizens' evaluation of their well-being in South Carolina is to ask survey participants whether the overall quality of life (QOL) in the past five years has improved, worsened, or remained the same. Over the period that the surveys have been conducted, the majority response has been that the quality of life has remained the same as can be seen in Figure 3.

Further analysis is warranted of respondents who say the quality of life generally has improved or worsened. From the first three surveys, participants who say the QOL has improved remained significantly the same, much like those who say things were worse. However, in the 'mid 09' survey (carried out around late spring-early summer 2009), respondents who say the quality of life has worsened were more than twice those who think the QOL has improved (38.9% vs. 15%). Here again, it is important to put things in perspective. A tabulation of the major news headlines from five major newspapers in South Carolina (*Greenville News, The State, Post & Courier, The Beaufort Gazette, and the Herald-Journal*) in the one month before the late 2009 *Self Portrait* survey revealed the following: whereas economic issues (30%) dominated the headlines in the period under consideration, healthcare issues (13.6%) also received significant coverage in the newspapers during that period. The ongoing debates about proposed plans to reform healthcare amidst the recovery efforts still make those issues important for public and private debates.

The foregoing leads one to the conclusion that individuals' consideration of their socio-economic well-being or more succinctly, quality of life evaluation involves the overall economic situation of their regional or national economy regarding job and employment opportunities. Additionally, citizens see enhanced interactions among economic issues, health care and environmental conditions that generate opportunities for life satisfaction as important variables for improved quality of life. Other equally important variables in individuals' evaluation of their quality of life conditions are educational opportunities, and viable social safety nets in the form of family members and neighbors.



Furthermore, the role of the media in individual and household assessment of changes in the quality of life preferences in South Carolina cannot be overlooked and public officials and private businesses need to recognize the dynamics of these interactions. The findings from the *Self Portrait* surveys and analyses, especially those that focus on how individuals and households subjectively evaluate their own well-being with regard to the prevailing socio-economic and environmental conditions, could provide useful pointers to policy makers. With this information, decision makers and planners are able to ascertain which preferences, attitudes and priorities are changing over time as well as the magnitude and direction of any such changes in South Carolina. In today's situation, the *Self Portrait* responses about factors considered important in selecting a place to live are indicating that during trying financial times, citizens value social cohesion as well as strong economic and social safety nets more than amenity factors such as proximity to natural resources and community vitality factors.

Patrick Tandoh-Offin is a research associate with the Jim Self Center on the Future and a PhD student in the Policy Studies PhD program at Clemson University.



Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs

Pearman Boulevard

Clemson University

Clemson SC 29634-0125

864.656.4700

www.strom.clemson.edu

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