ABSTRACT. This article deals with perceived quality of life and its relationship to sociodemographic background variables in Norway. We try to answer two questions, viz (1) to what extent does the absolute level of quality of life as well as the relationships between quality of life and individual-level sociodemographic variables vary between Norwegian counties? and (2) are such variations related to specific characteristics of the various counties? Some between-county variation is found, but in most cases the pattern of variation is not replicated across surveys. For variation in the absolute level of QOL as well as in the relationship between an individual's education and QOL, however, there is a moderate degree of stability. Contextual analyses show that the relationship between education and QOL is positive and moderately strong in affluent counties, near zero or negative in economically more backward areas. The results are interpreted within the framework of a person-environment fit model.

INTRODUCTION

Empirical quality of life (QOL) research during the last decade or so has shown that the run-of-the-mill portfolio of sociological, "objective" variables rarely accounts for more than 10–15% of the variance in measures of subjective well-being (see below). These results cannot be written off on the ground that subjective quality of life indicators do not get at what they try to measure. A number of very thorough conceptual, methodological and empirical studies (e.g. Fordyce, 1972; Andrews and Withey, 1976; Campbell et al. 1976) seem to have established beyond reasonable doubt the basic reliability and validity of measures of QOL based on self-reports. Indeed, Atkinson (1982, p. 114) is probably correct in asserting that "subjective social indicators have been exposed to closer methodological scrutiny than any other attitudinal or value measure with the possible exception of the F-scale". In other words, we may feel quite confident that the percentage of "true" variance in subjective indicators is at least four to five times as large as that accounted for by the ordinary sociodemographic background variables. Thus, a major challenge to quality of life research today consists in unravelling the psycho-social preconditions for sustainable personal well-being in modern
societies. The present paper is an exploratory effort aimed at ascertaining the quality of life effects pertaining to levels of analysis not commonly focussed upon in ordinary survey research. More specifically we shall look into the possibility that contextual effects at the county level are sufficiently powerful to warrant their inclusion in future quality of life models. The main motive behind such a search is not only to come up with additional sources of variance in subjective indicators. Pinpointing stable and significant contextual effects in this field also may have rather far-reaching implications in terms of substantive theory-building since the nature and direction of such effects may be indicative of the content of the specific mechanisms mediating between objective life predicaments, personality factors and subjectively perceived quality of life. As of yet our knowledge about these processes is skimpy to say the least.

In sum, the present paper has a threefold purpose, viz (1) to spell out some of the theoretical notions that induce us to expect a relationship between sociodemographic variables and QOL in the first place; (2) to pursue in empirical detail the idea that ecological contexts may be of substantive importance in this field; and (3) to draw some tentative conclusions about the theoretical significance of our findings.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN QOL-RESEARCH

In its basic conception quality of life is an individual-level phenomenon. Nations may prosper and organizations may increase their output, but the experience of life quality may only be attributed to individuals. Even when we talk about a "happy" nation we in fact imply that in principle such a statement must be substantiated or refuted by measurement made at the level of individuals. To talk about a happy nation with no happy individuals in it would appear self-contradictory. Things stand differently, of course, when we talk about the causes of life quality. Quality of life may be caused by factors at the individual level (such as income, education, age and sex) or it may be a function of the nature of the social context in which individuals are embedded (say group cohesion, social integration, level of inequality). Measurement at the group level often proceeds by aggregating information about the individual members ("subunits") making up the group or collectivity, but in logical and substantive terms a contextual analysis represents a distinct approach since individuals are now assigned scores according to their