ABSTRACT. The explanatory value of two theories expounding the quality of life are compared and discussed. To make this comparison possible, it is necessary to distinguish between rather clear theoretical assumptions and avoid a mix of theories: the variance explained by comparisons (multiple discrepancies) is compared with the variance explained by resource. Data obtained from the Vienna Student Survey (n = 350) are presented. Although multiple-discrepancies theory (MDT) does explain far more variance than the resource approach, critical comments and proposals complete the study.

1. THE PROBLEM

In order to explain the quality of life, a theory is required which is able to link the concepts with a number of prior conditions. In empirical research, a number of “independent variables” are connected with a “dependent variable”. This dependent variable is usually the (social) problem to be explained by combining it with something “behind” it.

The explanations themselves are logically identical to prognosis and technology (the Hempel-Oppenheim paradigm), i.e. a good theory should not only explain something, it should also be suitable for prognosis – or better – it should be able to be applied to improve human living conditions. Besides the many criteria of a good theory, its usefulness should also be tested in the solution of social problems, following Popper’s ideas, and giving this criterion its importance (Popper, 1959).

This paper compares different theoretical approaches to explain the quality of life. The first theory to be discussed here is multiple-discrepancies theory (MDT), and the second approach, a rather traditional one: satisfaction and happiness as seen as a result of certain living conditions.
conditions. If the living conditions are better, i.e. more favorable with respect to personal and social needs, we may speak of better resources for the fulfillment of needs. Researchers should investigate relevant resources that establish a high level of quality of life.

At first, we will discuss the theories. Are there connections, or it is possible to clearly distinguish between theoretical elements? Do they contradict each other, or is it possible to link them within a wider approach? With a view upon operationalizations, do they really represent the concepts? How objective is the measurement of "resources"? The Austrian data of the student survey organized by the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada (A. Michalos) is used here to illustrate some ideas and draw proposals for further research.

Whether global satisfaction, global happiness or domain satisfactions, the dependent variables are not to be discussed in this paper. Particularly since Andrews and Withey (1976) have shown that there are high intercorrelations between different operationalizations, we will employ Michalos' suggestions and regard satisfaction and happiness as two aspects (cognition vs. affect) of the subjective quality of life.

2. THEORETICAL POSITIONS – CRITICAL COMMENTS

Within his MDT, Michalos (1991) has developed an elaborate theoretical framework to explain the quality of life. MDT is first seen as a cognitive approach based on different comparisons. The objectively measurable discrepancies are not measured but rather the "perceptual core of the theory" (Michalos, 1991: 65) which starts off with perceived discrepancies influencing the perceived discrepancy between what one has now and what one wants (self/wants variable); this variable, at least, explains "net satisfaction" (domain satisfaction or global satisfaction). This framework has been expanded to include a group of variables which Michalos calls mediators and conditioners.

These variables not only include sociodemographic ones but also self-esteem and social support (see Figure 1). Sociodemographic variables themselves frequently do not explain more than 10% of the variance of the quality of life (Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 1984).