Abstract

Urban quality of life (QOL) is an important component of overall life satisfaction and has broad implications for regional migration, economic growth and environmental sustainability. Subjective urban QOL stems from objective characteristics of the urban environment. However, few studies have examined links between objective and subjective indicators relating to urban QOL. In many other life domains such as income and health, links between objective and subjective indicators have been found to be surprisingly weak, as may be the case with urban QOL.

This thesis examined links between broad objective dimensions of the urban environment (underlying the urban structure in South East Queensland, Australia) and associated subjective evaluations of the urban environment. Two main research questions were addressed:

RQ 1: What are the strength of direct links between broad objective dimensions and subjective evaluations of the urban environment?
RQ 2: How do effects of psychological processes, individual and social group differences, and residential relocation influence these links?

The objective dimensions of the urban environment examined in this thesis were both physical and social. The objective physical dimensions related to distances from services and facilities; population, housing and road densities; distances to rural and semi-rural land; and distances from the coast. The objective social dimensions related to household structure; socioeconomic environments; disadvantaged environments; and ethnic environments. The associated subjective evaluations of the urban environment related to satisfaction with access to services and facilities; subjective ratings of urban problems; subjective evaluations of the natural environment, and subjective evaluations of the social environment.

The research questions were examined using quantitative analysis of secondary data. For the objective dimensions, data were obtained from Geographic Information System (GIS) datasets and the Australian population census while data for the subjective evaluations were gained from the 2003 Survey of Quality of Life in South East Queensland. Using GIS technology, the objective and subjective secondary datasets were linked by geocoding locations of residents responding to the quality of life survey. Relationships between objective and subjective aspects of urban quality of life were then analysed using Generalised Linear Modelling.
The findings in the first analytical chapter showed that direct links between various broad objective dimensions and subjective evaluations of the urban environment were weak. The following three analytical chapters examined the extent to which these weak relationships were explained by psychological processes, individual and social group differences, and residential relocation processes, respectively.

The chapter on psychological processes found that subjective judgement models were a plausible explanation of weak relationships between objective dimensions and subjective evaluations of the urban environment in the scenario where individual standards of comparison were close to and highly correlated with targets (i.e., the individual residential locations on objective dimensions of the urban environment). This scenario implied an underlying process which aligned standards of comparison with targets. However, such aligning was not explained by psychological adaptation after moving to a new residential location.

In the next chapter, individual and social group differences in the subjective importance of various attributes of the urban environment were examined as an alternative explanation for the weak relationships between objective dimensions and subjective evaluations of the urban environment. However, weighting objective dimensions by the subjective importance of associated attributes of the urban environment did not explain these weak relationships since this did not significantly improve prediction of associated subjective evaluations of the urban environment.

In the last analytical chapter, residential relocation was examined as a potential process for aligning individual standards of comparison and targets while searching for vacancies which meet individual standards. Support was found for residential relocation as a process which aligns standards of comparison and targets on objective dimensions of the *physical* environment but not on objective dimensions of the *social* environment. Further, social homophily (or the subjective importance of living near others with similar social characteristics) was not very important in explaining objective dimensions of the social environment, suggesting that links between objective dimensions and subjective evaluations of the social environment were inherently weak.

In the last chapter, the findings were drawn together into a multifaceted explanation of the weak relationships between objective dimensions and subjective evaluations of the urban environment. Then implications were drawn for urban QOL theory and urban planning; together with discussing limitations with this research and recommendations for future research.