

Quality of life in Czech rural areas

Kvalita života na českém venkově

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Abstract: The paper deals with the quality of life in Czech rural areas and its measurement. The first part is focused on the introduction of the term “quality of life”, with particular emphasis on its analytic uses and the related issues. Building on the up to date research, we go on to conceptualize the term into seven groups of indicators. In the next part, we deal with living conditions in Czech rural areas and build our hypotheses, based upon them. We employ the methods of statistical analysis of the European Social Survey data to perform a rural vs. non-rural comparison for each of the seven dimensions identified. In the final part, we discuss the findings and match the conclusions with the current trends in Czech rural areas.

Key words: quality of life, rural areas, Czech Republic, European Social Survey

Abstrakt: Článek se zabývá měřením kvality života na českém venkově. V první části představujeme pojem kvalita života, naznačujeme jeho analytické využití i potíže s ním spojené a na základě dosavadního výzkumu jej konceptualizujeme do skupin indikátorů. V další části se zabýváme podmínkami života na českém venkově a z nich vyvozujeme hypotetická očekávání ve vztahu ke kvalitě života. Výsledky jsou získány pomocí statistické analýzy dat z European Social Survey. Pro každou ze sedmi identifikovaných dimenzí kvality života uvádíme srovnání venkovské a ne-venkovské populace a v závěru výsledky tohoto srovnání interpretujeme v kontextu současných trendů na českém venkově.

Klíčová slova: Kvalita života, venkov, Česká Republika, European Social Survey

There is some kind of magic hidden in the term “Quality of life”: More ambiguous than most other scientific or political terms, it still manages to find its way into researchers’ as well as politicians’ vocabularies and enjoys a wide prominence in the media. In spring 2008, Petr Gandalovič, the then head of the Czech Ministry of Agriculture, called for the improvement of quality of life in rural areas as one of the key goals of the agricultural reform¹. The trouble remains, though, that if we want something to improve, we need to find a way of measuring the improvement. This article is an attempt to do so. We have assumed that there is a way quality of life in Czech rural areas can be measured and compared to the non-rural settings, and we set off to find a way to achieve this.

In doing so, we relied heavily on the work of our predecessors, most notably the authors publishing their works in *Social Indicators*, which is a journal

specializing in issues related to quality of life. Among these, Hagerty’s (2001) crucial article has been our main source of inspiration, along with other texts by Cummins (2000), Spellerberg et al. (2007) and others, including the First European Quality of Life survey (Fahey et al. 2005). As for Czech authors, many of their academic texts and papers touch upon the issue, but only few are directly concerned with the quality of life. Two of those were of major importance for us: the works of Potůček et al. (2002), focusing on various objective indicators for the measurement of the quality of life, and research by Majerová et al. (2005), concerned with the “objective” aspects of quality of life as well as examining the differences in quality of life in urban and rural areas and the representations of them. The general problem with the up to date research seems to be its emphasis on international comparison: a vast majority of studies and measures of quality of life are designed in order

¹As quoted from an official print of the Czech Ministry of Agriculture: http://81.0.228.70/attachments/komplet_MZE_TZ%5B1%5D.indd.pdf (last accessed 27/08/2008).

to be employed as a comparative tool between different states and it becomes difficult to use the same indicators for the measurement of quality of life in rural and urban settings. To be able to do so, we have used the data from the European Social Survey (ESS), as will be discussed later on.

The second chapter of this paper shall deal with the term “quality of life”, its conceptualization and operationalization. As a result, the measuring index will be introduced. The third chapter will introduce various influences on quality of life in rural areas and the specifics of rural living in the Czech Republic. Hypotheses will be suggested, regarding the comparison between the rural and non-rural quality of life. In the fourth part, we will deal with the results of the quantitative comparisons and the fifth, final part, will attempt to discuss the findings in terms of broader trends and processes taking place in Czech countryside.

QUALITY OF LIFE AS A RESEARCH CONCEPT

There is an ambiguity inherent in the scope of the term “Quality of life”. Its broadness provides for a powerful general term, encompassing many social, economic and other dimensions, which is important in terms of political implications. On the other hand, the wide scope makes the analytical use difficult, as it is both multifaceted and interdisciplinary (Adámek, Němec 2005). As such, it would be useful to start with some initial clarifications and theoretical dilemmas.

First, a distinction needs to be made between quality of life understood as a state of things and quality of life as a process (Znebežánek 2007). It is important to note that the subjective perception of the quality of life comes about in terms of changes – life is felt as better or worse not in terms of its absolute value, but in terms of relative change, which emphasizes the temporal and process-oriented understanding of the quality of life. Nevertheless, the data available for our study make it impossible to adopt this stance and limit us to the temporal, structural view of the phenomenon. There is a related dilemma, with its roots almost ancient: is it possible to understand the quality of life as a set of dimensions and indicators, or do we need to approach it as a phenomenon *sui generis*, irreducible to its elements? Apparently, this question has serious consequences for the empirical

measurement of quality of life. Yet, we believe that the latter understanding is inappropriate for two major reasons: it ignores the objective (i.e. factual) conditions and aspects of the quality of life and its scientific validity is unclear since the measured concept becomes a “black box” which we have no means of seeing into.

It has been noted that the term “quality of life” is often being used to describe the “soft” aspects of the general well-being, in a rather abrupt fashion of “if it cannot be expressed in terms of money, we will call it quality of life”, as represented in various images portraying rural inhabitants as poorer but living a better life than the urban dwellers. In our view, the economic situation of an individual is firmly bound with his or her quality of life; we try to approach the term as a general concept, including all plausible indicators, as well as topics which are largely individually determined (such as personal health or relations with family). Consideration of the economic aspect of quality of life, however, leads us to a most important distinction, separating the “objective” and “subjective” view on the quality of life (Cummins 2000).

The term “objective” refers to those characteristics that can be measured without asking about the way the actors experience them: income, car ownership or the number of hospital visits per year are good examples of the objective measures. The “subjective” aspects of quality of life, on the other hand, are always filtered by the inner experience of the respondent – that includes happiness, work satisfaction, feeling of safety and others (Cummins 2000; Hagerty et al. 2001)². There are two main advantages to the objective measurement of quality of life: first, the objective factors are far more robust and their measurement excludes individual idiosyncrasies and deviations, second, it is much easier for policymakers to influence the objective than the subjective. As such, the objective characteristics of living are often a subject of interest of those who plan to apply the research results in practice. Subjective factors lack these strengths, yet their one single (and crucial) advantage is validity. Only when measuring subjective aspects, we can be actually sure that we are actually working on quality of life and not just its pre-conditions or side-effects.

It would be easier to resolve the objective vs. subjective dilemma if we had the chance to see what the correlations between the two sets of factors were, in the previous research. There are studies exploring this,

²The terms “objective” and “subjective” are being used here in accordance with the tradition of the quality of life research. There is no real objectivity or subjectivity in the common sense meaning of the terms.

but the results are not exactly supportive. Boelhouwer and Stopp (1999) in their Dutch research found a correlation of 0.33, Cummins' (2000) study quotes only 0.12 (with the correlations within the respective groups ranging from 0.3 to 0.4). As Hagerty et al. note, it appears that the objective and subjective factors yield a decent correlations only in cases of a very low objective well-being, i.e. very poor or generally deprived people (Hagerty et al. 2001).

In their seminal paper, Hagerty and his colleagues (2001) suggests a model intended to clarify the debate. The model is called the systemic theory of quality of life and it rests on a three-pillar system (Figure 1).

The input category refers to the objective characteristics and measurable conditions as described above. The output stands for the individual choices and reactions to the conditions. This category is very important for our research, as it can have a large influence on the resulting quality of life – personal decisions and idiosyncrasies are capable of providing a decent quality of life even for a person from an ill-off background (Edgerton in Cummins 2000). Such examples leave us with a rather pessimistic notion that the objective characteristics have little

to do with the output category – i.e. the resulting, subjective quality of life (Hagerty et al. 2001). We shall base much of our work on this conclusion, yet we will not omit the objective indicators altogether: since the main point of focus of this paper will be the difference between rural and non-rural population, we will include some basic objective indicators in the analysis, as the subjective data that we have are of a secondary nature, not intended to measure the quality of life. Thus, we shall look for differences in the objective indicators too, with their role as pre-conditions and their limited validity in mind.

Hagerty and his colleagues have reviewed 32 quality of life studies and 22 different indices and ways of the quality of life measurement³. As a result, they have been able to identify 173 different indicators used to measure quality of life and to assign a relative weight to each one of these. We have adopted seven most important dimensions for our own research, although the ESS data often do not provide us with the appropriate set of indicators. The list of the quality of life dimensions, including their relative weight, as identified by Hagerty et al. (2001: 74), goes as follows:

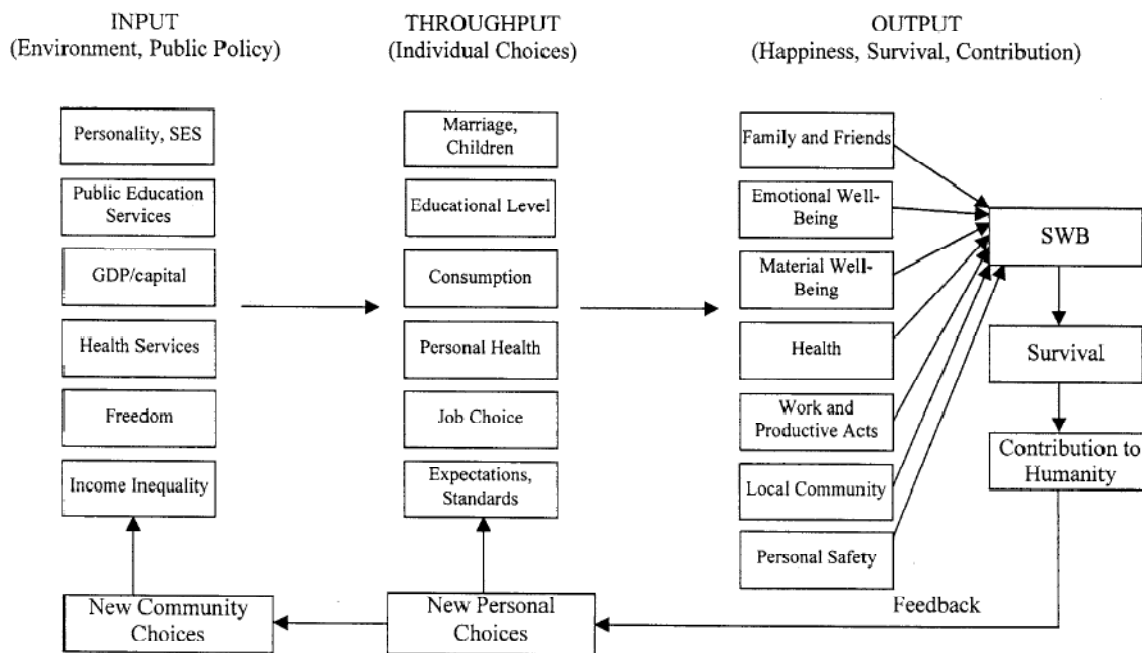


Figure 1. Systemic theory of quality of life

Source: Hagerty et al. (2001: 80)

³Health-Related QoL (HRQoL), WHOQoL, Consumer Confidence Indexes, Money's "Best Practices", Index of Economic Well Being (IEWB), Genuine Progress Index (GPI), American Demographics Index, Johnson's Quality of Life Index, Eurobarometer, Veenhoven's Healthy Life Expectancy, International Living, U.N. Development Index, Index of Social Health, Annual QoL in Virginia Survey, Estes' ISP Index, Diener's Basic and Advanced Index, Cummins' COMQoL, North America Social Report, Philippines' Weather Station, Netherlands LCI, German Social Indicator System and Swedish ULF.

1. relationship with family and friends	(relative weight 100)
2. emotional well-being	(98)
3. material well-being	(77)
4. health	(67)
5. work and productive activity	(61)
6. feeling part of one's local community	(29)
7. personal safety	(27)

THE SPECIFICS OF QUALITY OF LIFE IN RURAL AREAS

Results from the previous studies in Western Europe tend to suggest a higher level of quality of life in rural areas when compared to cities. This is especially true for the subjective aspects of the phenomenon, while the objective characteristics tend to show a reverse trend (Bell 1992; Fahey et al. 2005; Richmond et al. 2000; Spellerberg et al. 2007). Since we do not have a comparable survey for a Central or East European country, it is hard to introduce hypotheses in terms of urban-rural comparison in the Czech Republic. However, we do have statistics regarding the objective aspects and living conditions in rural areas and we shall, in this section, focus on these.

In order to do so, it is necessary to consider the way rural areas are defined here. There are inconsistencies between various definitions: those used most frequently include a definition by the number of inhabitants (with rural population usually defined as the population living in municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants) and by density (Maříková 2007). The definition the European Social Survey uses is based on the subjective self-categorization: those who have described the place where they live as "Country village" or "Farm or home in countryside" have been coded as "rural" in our research. The reason for using the subjective criteria is quite clearly the international comparison which would not otherwise be possible, given the differences amongst European countries.

Following the definition by the number of inhabitants (which is the one commonly used in the Czech statistics), 26.4% of Czech population could be described as rural as per January 2007 (ČSÚ 2007a). The demographic development of rural areas does not follow the pessimistic predictions of the 1990s: between 2000 and 2007, the total number of rural inhabitants has increased by 3.1%, while there has been no significant change in the overall population

of the country. While the increasing share of rural population could be considered a positive signal, there are also negative ones: this is particularly true for municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants, experiencing 8% depopulation over seven years (ČSÚ 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007a)⁴. For a more detailed analysis, see Dufek (2007).

Objective conditions

The demographic situation, as well as quality of life, is connected to the age structure and education levels in rural areas. While in 2001 the age structure of rural and urban areas was rather similar (the share of the youngest age group 0–14 was 16.9% in rural and 15.9% in urban areas, the share of the oldest group 60+ was 19.1% in rural and 18.2% in urban areas) (FSÚ 1992, ČSÚ 2002), the demographic development since 1991 has been slightly in favour of the rural population, with a decrease in the oldest category (as compared to the urban increase) and a smaller decrease in the youngest category. Again, the situation is the worst in the smallest municipalities: within rural municipalities, there is a direct proportionality between the municipality size and the share of inhabitants in age categories 0–14 and 15–59, and an inverse proportionality between the municipality size and the population share of the oldest group (ČSÚ 2002).

There are significant differences in education levels between rural and urban settings. The share of persons with only basic education is higher in rural areas (28.9% compared to 21.6%), while the share of those who finished their "maturita" exam is substantially higher in cities (30.5% compared to 22.2%). The same is true for university graduates (10.5% compared to 4.2%) (ČSÚ 2002). The difference is furthered with regards to the categories of municipalities by the population size: there were 31.8% people with basic education and 3.4% with university education in municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants (compared to 16.8% for both groups in large cities) in 2001 (ČSÚ 2002). The ESS data report a similar difference, although the actual figures are different, most likely due to the different conceptualization of rural population and education categories used: 8.6% of non-rural residents have reached "the first stage of tertiary education", while only 4.4% rural inhabitants achieved this.

As for employment conditions, there is a substantial share of workers in agriculture within the rural population. This share is inversely proportional to

⁴Oddly enough, the statistics do not show major depopulation for municipalities with less than 99 inhabitants; the likely reason is that larger municipalities (100–199) descend into this category continuously.

the total population⁵ and it was 11% in municipalities with less than 2 000 inhabitants in 2001 (Spěšná et al. 2008). At the same time, there are higher shares of industry workers (33% compared to 21% in cities) and building industry workers (10% compared to 8% in cities) in the rural areas. The one sector which is comparably underrepresented in rural population is the dynamic and well-paid sector of services. While the role of agriculture in rural areas is no longer prominent, there remains a strong connection both in terms of human resources (by 2001, 63% of all agricultural workers were rural inhabitants) (Spěšná et al. 2008) and in terms of caring for the landscape and the agriculture environmental functions. The environmental link has direct implications for quality of life in rural areas.

Unemployment levels in rural areas have been slightly higher than in cities since 2003. The estimates of the rate of the registered unemployment⁶ were 6.9% in rural areas and 6.6% in the whole country for 2007. Still, long-term unemployment seems to plague rural and non-rural populations equally, as the share of the ESS respondents claiming they had ever been unemployed for a period longer than three months is similar for cities and rural areas (20.1% or 19.5%). The situation in rural labour market is tied to the issues of commuting. Typically, the percentage of commuters in a population is inversely proportional to the municipality size, with commuters constituting from two thirds to three quarters of rural population (76.9% in municipalities with less than 200 inhabitants and 65.1% in municipalities between 1000 and 1999 inhabitants) (ČSÚ 2002). The overall number of commuters has been rising since 1991, which is, however, true for towns and cities as well as rural areas and it reflects the changes of transformation labour markets in general. Nevertheless, commuting has substantial consequences for rural social life, as people are forced to spend less time in their village, which weakens the informal ties and social capital of the area.

What are the expectations for the quality of life in rural areas? The hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned “objective” conditions and the previous research, we have laid down

our hypothetical expectations, regarding the targeted concepts:

1.–2. Relations with family and friends and emotional well-being

As for the first two concepts, we have no data available that would suggest any substantial urban-rural relationship, therefore we laid no hypotheses.

3. Material well-being

We expect urban population to be slightly better-off building on the available data (ČSÚ 2007b). The ESS data also suggest a higher average income (479 Euro in non-rural areas as compared to 442 Euro for rural residents), but this indication is based on a rather limited sample.

4. Health

Following the findings of Chmelová (2005) and with regard to the aforementioned comparison of age structure (esp. the number of seniors) in rural and urban settings, we expect the subjective health condition to be better in rural areas.

5. Work and productive activity

Although the division between rural and urban labour market becomes blurred by the massive commuting, we still expect the urban situation to be better.

6. Feeling part of one's local community

Again, there are no appropriate data to base the hypotheses on.

7. Personal safety

In accordance with the Chmelová's (2005) findings, we expect the countryside to be safer than the city. This assumption is also based on the ESS objective data findings, whereby 21.2% non-rural respondents claimed they or their household member have been victims of burglary or assault in the past five years. Of the rural population, only 10.5% percent claimed so.

THE DATA AND RESULTS

The data

The empirical data we use come from the second round of the European Social Survey (ESS), taking place in 2004⁷. The reason why we chose the ESS rests mainly in its complex scope, encompassing a

⁵The extreme poles being approximately 20% in municipalities with less than 100 inhabitants and less than 1% in cities over 100 000 inhabitants.

⁶This is an estimate of the rate of registered unemployment, calculated by the Institute of Agricultural Economics and Information, based on the figures published by the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

⁷26 countries participated in the second round of the ESS. The third round took place in 2006, but the Czech Republic did not participate.

broad range of mostly subjective-based data (including the issues of family, work, emotional well-being and others), which allows us to cover all the dimensions introduced in Hagerty's quality of life index (Hagerty et al. 2001). Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that the ESS remains a secondary data source, not primarily intended to measure the quality of life. The basic distinction between the urban and rural population was made by merging two of the self-report categories ("country village" and "farm or home in the countryside") into the "rural population" category and the remaining three ("a big city", "suburbs or outskirt of a big city", "town or small city" into "non-rural population". This way, the sample of 3 026 Czech respondents was split into 855 rural and 2 171 urban dwellers.

Following the seven dimensions of Hagerty's index, the relevant indicators for each concept were chosen and the responses were analysed for rural and urban populations using the SPSS software. The ESS data also provide a basis for international comparison of rural living conditions, which the authors presented elsewhere (Pospěch, Delín 2008).

Results

Relations with family and friends

Three indicators from the ESS survey have been assigned to represent this complex and most important dimension. These are represented by the following questions: *How often do you socially meet with friends, colleagues or relatives?* (variable "sclmeet"), *How often do you take part in social activities compared to others of same age?* (sclact) and *Have you got anyone to discuss intimate matters with ?* (inmdisc) The body of research known to us does not provide us with results of the previous research and our expectations were a little unclear, since we are aware of the fact that sociability – be it relations with neighbours or family members – in rural areas might take on quite different forms from that of the urban population. Following this, we also need to add that the indicators mentioned are only useful for numerical comparison: there is a little use for them (just like for quantitative studies in general) when it comes to explaining the differences in practice and the experience of these relationships.

The differences found were almost negligible. *The scores on How often do you socially meet with friends ...* were 4.18 (non-rural) or 4.27 (rural) on a 1–7 scale, with seven representing the "most often" option. The scores for *Taking part in social activities* reached 2.61

and 2.63 on a 1–5 scale (5 being the most sociable again). None of the relationships was statistically significant. The last indicator, having *Anyone to discuss intimate matters with* yielded some differences (in a dichotomy question, the percentage of negative answers reached 24.5% in rural areas and only 19.6% in non-rural), and while the difference is statistically significant, the correlation is still very weak (both Phi and Cramer's V reach the value of 0.054). Apparently then, we were not able to find a difference between the rural and non-rural settings in terms of the quality of relations with family and friends. The fact that non-rural dwellers find it slightly easier to discuss their intimate problems might be understood in terms of anonymity and privacy as the "luxury of urban life" as Jacobs (1961) calls it. That, however, is an "explanation by city" and thus out of the scope of this section.

Emotional well-being

Although unclear in scope and conceptualization, this dimension is fairly well covered by two of the ESS indicators. The relevant questions are: *How happy are you?* (happy) and *How satisfied with your life as a whole are you?* (stflife) As mentioned before, we had no data to base our hypotheses on, with the exception of the FEQLS (Fahey et al. 2005) findings, which shows that in the "rich" (GDP-wise) EU countries, life satisfaction and happiness are usually greater in rural areas while in the poorer countries, urban population tends to be happier. However, the FEQLS results are not published on a national level and thus cannot be compared to our findings.

Just like with the previous dimensions, the differences found were absolutely negligible, as the Table 1 presents. The results are based on a 0–10 scale with

Table 1. Questions "How happy are you?" and "How satisfied are you with life as a whole?"

		How happy are you	How satisfied with life as a whole
Non-rural	mean	681	643
	N	2 149	2 135
Rural	mean	68	635
	N	847	842
Total	mean	681	641
	N	2 996	2 977

On scale where 0 = extremely unhappy/dissatisfied, 10 = extremely happy/satisfied; N = number of respondents

Source: European Social Survey 2004, selection for the Czech Republic

10 representing the highest level of happiness or life satisfaction (Table 1).

The differences shown are within the range of statistical error. To understand the results in terms of “rural happiness”, otherwise typical for the richer EU countries, does not appear to be right, though, as the absolute levels of happiness and life satisfaction in Czech rural areas are significantly lower than in Western Europe (Pospech, Delín 2008). We will be further discussing this in the final part of the paper.

Material well-being

Most of the available data on the objective conditions of quality of life have been discussed before. Material well-being is the most important dimension as it determines other aspects of the quality of life, most notably deprivation which can be experienced in relation to any other dimension (research on poverty and deprivation has shown that insufficient resources might hamper health, relations with family, etc.). Material well-being is also a dimension which can, due to its “objective” nature, be influenced by state policies and interventions, thus becoming more attractive for politicians and policymakers. With all that in mind, it is unfortunate that the ESS does not cover the subjective dimension of material well-being extensively. There are a few “objective” indicators and one subjective indicator, *Feeling about household's income nowadays* (hincfel). The results of its analysis are shown in Table 2.

While the results tend to speak in favour of city inhabitants and the difference is statistically significant on the 95% level, the actual strength of the relationship, as measured by bivariate coefficients, is very weak (the values of Sommers' d and η^2 range between 0.06 and 0.08). However, there is a notable difference in the top and bottom categories – while the domination of urban dwellers in the “Living comfortably” category could be expected with reference to the income distribution in the ESS sample, the balance of respondents who find it “very difficult” to cope on the present income is shifted towards the rural population. Yet, we cannot claim our hypothesis to be confirmed since the rural vs. non-rural difference is not valid for the majority of population.

Health

There is a general “folk belief” in good health conditions in rural regions, which has deep cultural and historical roots. Chmelová (2005) has demonstrated that this belief is shared by rural inhabitants themselves: the share of her rural respondents, who believe that life is healthier in cities, exceeds 95% both for young people and for seniors. Obviously, such data is valid mainly for analyzing the opinions and representations, since we cannot be sure about how many of the respondents actually had a chance to compare the rural and urban experiences themselves. In order to be able to compare subjective health as an element of the quality of life, we are left with the options of

Table 2. Feeling about household's income nowadays

		Living comfortably on present income	Coping on present income	Difficult on present income	Very difficult on present income	Total
Non-rural	<i>N</i>	198	937	559	249	1 943
	%	10.2	48.2	28.8	12.8	100.0
Rural	<i>N</i>	38	377	227	133	775
	%	4.9	48.6	29.3	17.2	100.0

N = number of respondents

Source: European Social Survey 2004, selection for the Czech Republic

Table 3. Hampered in daily activities by illness/disability/infirmity/mental problem

		Yes a lot	Yes to some extent	No	Total
Non-rural	<i>N</i>	144	522	1 481	2 147
	%	6.7	24.3	69.0	100.0
Rural	<i>N</i>	66	235	540	841
	%	7.8	27.9	64.2	100.0

N = number of respondents

Source: European Social Survey 2004, selection for the Czech Republic

self-response or self-description. Two ESS items were used to measure this: the respondent's *subjective general health* (health) and whether he or she is *hampered in daily activities by illness, disability, infirmity or a mental problem* (hlthhmp).

Another approach to analyzing the health-related problems in rural and urban areas is looking at the availability of health care. That is a very demanding process, given the fact that the temporal distances matter more than the spatial and that the quality of the health care in the target area has to be taken into account as well. We are aware that there are geographical solutions to this riddle, yet to employ them here would go beyond the scope of this text, as well as beyond the scope of our abilities as sociologists.

Quite the opposite of what we had assumed in our hypotheses, rural inhabitants were reporting their subjective health as slightly worse: on a 1 (very good) to 5 (very bad) point scale, the non-rural population scored an average of 2.36, while their rural compatriots' average reached 2.45. Although the relationships' strength is negligible (0.035–0.04), the difference is persistent and brings some cracks into the belief in the healthy rural life (Table 3).

As for the second indicator, again, there is no sign of the rural population being better off in terms of illnesses or problems influencing their everyday life. The figures presented in Table 3 even point to the opposite direction, although the statistical importance of the rural-urban difference is, again, tiny. Nonetheless, we have to refute our hypothesis about the rural inhabitants enjoying a higher subjective health. Not only the ESS data stand strongly against it, in fact there is a subtle tendency towards the opposite, which should not be overlooked.

Work and productive activity

Closely tied to material well-being, this dimension is mostly intended to include work outcomes which are not possible to be expressed financially. To measure these, two indicators were chosen from the ESS list: *Job security* (jbscr) and whether *wage or salary depends on effort put into work* (wgdpeft), the former intended to identify the share of people who consider their work dangerous, the latter describes the effectiveness and, to a certain extent, the autonomy of the respondent in his or hers job.

Following our hypothesis, we expected both indicators to score in favour of the non-rural population. However, this was only partly true. Work security is

a bigger problem in rural areas (23.2% assessing the statement "my job is secure" as "not at all true", compared to 18.3% non-rural residents), which is mostly connected to higher levels of services employment in cities, a relatively safe employment as compared to industry or agriculture. The second indicator, on the other hand, has been found to score in favour of rural populations: 22.5% rural residents assess the statement "wage/salary depends on effort put into work" as "very true", compared to only 18.4% non-rural residents. Similar results are recorded for the assessment "true" (38.6% vs. 37.1%). For "a little true" and "not at all true" on the other hand, non-rural population scores higher shares. Although the statistical relationship is far from strong, the results suggest that while the objective working conditions might be worse in the country, there may be subjective factors present that contribute to work satisfaction.

Feeling part of one's local community

Not having the appropriate data to base the hypotheses on, we did not introduce any. The issue is most likely connected to the concept of social capital, conceptualized in the broad way (Putnam 2000) – the research is in progress on the issues of social capital in Czech rural areas⁸. For our research, we used two indicators again: a well-known general opinion scale for measurement of trust *Most people can be trusted or you cannot be too careful* (ppltrst) and a practically oriented question on how difficult *Borrowing money* (brwmny) is for the respondent. We assumed that a person rooted in his or her community will have less trouble finding someone willing to lend them money.

First, there was almost no difference in the level of trust: on a 1–10 scale where 1 stood for "you can't be too careful" and 10 for "most people can be trusted", rural residents scored an average of 4.11 and non-rural residents 4.19, differing within a negligible range. The second factor, however, yielded more interesting results, as shown in Table 4.

There is a statistically significant difference (although relationship-wise weak – Sommers' and Kendall measures scoring within the range of 0.03 to 0.04), indicating that rural inhabitants find it slightly more difficult to borrow money. Considering this, we need to be reminded of the second dimension (Relations with family and friends) with the rural inhabitants more often claiming not to have anyone

⁸Findings were presented at the conference *Countryside-Our World*, 16.–18. 4. 2008 in Kutná Hora. This includes contributions by J. Bernard, R. Matoušek et al. and a project led by V. Majerová.

to discuss intimate matters with. We shall return to this point in the conclusion.

Personal safety

Following Chmelová's (2005) research, we hypothesized countryside to be a safer environment than the urban landscape, or, to be precise, we expect the inhabitants to consider it a safer place (Table 5).

The results for the variable *Feeling of safety of walking alone in the local area after dark* (aesfdrk), as presented in Table 5, are slightly in favour of our hypothesis, although the difference is far from substantial (correlation coefficients reaching about 0.05). This might come as a surprise, given the actual lesser incidence of criminality in rural areas, described above.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the results from a wide perspective gives us an ambiguous feeling. Apparently, there is no support whatsoever for any of the simple images of countryside. Being neither an underdeveloped and deprived region in a post-communist country, nor a happy place secluded from the perils of the modern urban civilisation, Czech rural areas resist to be understood in simple terms and comparisons. Although in majority of the findings, there were little or no substantial differences from the city, some of these were still surprising.

The two "softest" dimensions – and, at the same time, those most important on the ladder of the quality of life dimensions – yielded almost no difference at all. This might be surprising most notably in terms of emotional well-being, especially given our introductory theoretical analysis on the subjective and objective aspects of the quality of life. The point here is that although, in terms of objective factors, such as income, unemployment or qualification, rural areas seem to be worse off (ČSÚ 2002, 2007b), the levels of *happiness* and *satisfaction with life* are equal. This indicates an existence of a certain factor that works as a buffer, balancing the life conditions of the rural populations to the level of their urban compatriots. Our task here is to hypothesize what this factor is.

Following Pavlíková's (2005) findings about the mutual help in rural areas, we could hypothesize that the factor we are looking for is actually the community and being-together popularly believed to be stronger in rural areas than in cities. Such an assumption, however, is ill-founded: while the rural vs. non-rural scores were equal for two of the 1st dimension indicators (*taking part in social activities* and *meeting friends and relatives*), both of them describe only the process of participation, not an actual help. The two indicators that could really measure the help potential of the countryside (*anyone to discuss intimate matters with* and *easiness of borrowing money*) actually scored worse for rural areas. Does this indicate that rural inhabitants tend to help each other less? Not exactly. A likely explanation goes hand in hand with the aforementioned quotation of Jacobs (1961) about

Table 4. Borrow money to make ends meet, difficult or easy

		Very difficult	Quite difficult	Neither easy nor difficult	Quite easy	Very easy	Total
Non-rural	<i>N</i>	385	643	574	261	68	1 931
	%	19.9	33.3	29.7	13.5	3.5	100.0
Rural	<i>N</i>	177	272	199	103	20	771
	%	23.0	35.3	25.8	13.4	2.6	100.0

N = number of respondents

Source: European Social Survey 2004, selection for the Czech Republic

Table 5. Feeling of safety of walking alone in the local area after dark

		Very safe	Safe	Unsafe	Very unsafe	Total
Non-rural	<i>N</i>	130	1 185	556	157	2 028
	%	6.4	58.4	27.4	7.7	100.0
Rural	<i>N</i>	61	498	212	29	800
	%	7.6	62.2	26.5	3.6	100.0

N = number of respondents

Source: European Social Survey 2004, selection for the Czech Republic

privacy being “the luxury of urban life”. The fact is that urban dwellers will find it easier to get out of their personal and financial trouble, since they can solve these in privacy and anonymity. This is not the case of rural population. It is not that rural people would be less willing to help (with a friendly advice or with money). The case here is, that it is more difficult to ask for help when one lives in a village, because by doing so, one is immediately threatened by the risk that “everyone will know”. This difference in the nature of community life does have implications for the quality of life as well.

Two more suggestions are at hand to explain “the rural happiness factor”. Both were suggested by Chmelová’s (2005) respondents who described rural life as safer and healthier. Based on our analysis of both of these indicators, we must refute the latter, as there is no evidence of rural inhabitants enjoying a better *subjective health* or being less *hampered by illnesses and other health problems*. On the contrary, the non-rural population tends to be slightly better off, which is barely influenced by the age structure, which is more or less balanced in rural and non-rural settings. The answer is more complex for the personal safety issues: there is objectively less danger for rural inhabitants, although their views on their own safety at night do not acknowledge this⁹. However, it is still likely that if the question was put in the same way Chmelová’s (2005) question was – i.e. as a comparison between the city and the country, the answers would be in favour of the latter.

It has been suggested that the fact that non-urban dwellers tend to consider their jobs more secure is to be explained by the higher percentage of urban citizens working in services. However, the whole image becomes blurry, if we consider the objective data on commuting: the number of villagers who leave their village every day on their way to work is so high that the rural – urban division itself becomes questionable. This phenomenon is enabled partly by the dense networks of public transportation in the Czech Republic, and, more importantly, by the geographic characteristics and the density of towns and cities (Horská et al. 2002). This is a major factor, which needs to be stressed: Czech countryside

is urbanized and industrialized, the villages being strongly tied to towns and regional centres (Horská et al. 2002; Perlín 2008), in many aspects coming up to Louis Wirth’ classic notion of “urbanism as a way of life”. The other side of this is that with many people leaving to work in cities, some villages, especially those located close to major cities, become little more than “dormitories”, weakening the community ties in the place.

Another hypothetical explanation comes in terms of trust: this has been developed by Sztompka, who considers trust one of the basic “integrating mechanisms of creating and sustaining solidarity in social relations and systems” (Sedláčková 2007: 50). Sztompka understands trust as a replacement of tradition, ranging from the lowest levels (personal and categorical, including friends, family and local community) to the most abstract ones (trust in social order, etc.). The sheer incidence of the face to face relations as well as the aforementioned lack of privacy and anonymity in rural areas (as compared to urban environment) indicates that the closer and more personal levels of trust¹⁰ are more present in rural areas. This, again, can be seen when looking at the renaissance rural traditions, organized by voluntary associations: annual feasts, fairs, harvest festivals, concerts and others events. This effort, although already reflexive rather than unknowingly traditional, might be understood as an endeavour to face the perceived rapid changes in the world, which are represented by city dwellers and their lifestyles.¹¹ Such local commitment, based on the ground levels of trust, might play a substantial part in levelling the worse objective preconditions for the quality of life in rural areas. The same kind of living together which makes it difficult for rural inhabitants to borrow money or to talk about their personal problems, is, at the same time, a source of inclusion and social control which, in the end, can reinforce the personal-level trust and community life as a result.

Regardless of the explanations in terms of factors enhancing rural quality of life, we cannot ignore the fact that the differences of the subjective quality of life are becoming weak, calling for reconsidering of the urban-rural dichotomy. With that in mind, we need to

⁹For an explanation of this apparent discrepancy, see for instance Lupton D., Tulloch J. (1999): Theorizing fear of crime: beyond the rational/irrational opposition. *British Journal of Sociology*, 50 (3): 507–523 or Covington J., Taylor R. (1991): Fear of crime in urban residential neighbourhoods: Implications of between- and within-neighbourhood sources for current models. *Sociological Quarterly*, 32 (2): 231–249.

¹⁰“Situational facilitation of trust” as described by Sztompka, takes place in small, intimate communities, secluded and transparent for the insiders, with dense, interdependent and long-term social relations (Sedláčková 2007).

¹¹Not surprisingly, the level of trust in abstract systems and institutions, as calculated from ESS data, tends to be higher in cities

take into consideration the various typologies of rural settlements, with respect to the municipality size or the proximity of employment opportunities, including the research of inner peripheries, as described by Musil and Müller (2008) in their work on exclusion. It seems that the traditional image of countryside, as an idyllic, yet deprived place, has found its counterpart in the reality of the inner periphery. This notion is also evidenced by the fact that the prime defining element of inner peripheries – a high share of population working in agriculture (Musil, Müller 2008) – used to be typical for all rural areas not long ago.

Apart from these inner peripheries, it seems that rural areas are becoming a part of what Castells has termed the “network society” (Keller 2004; Hubík 2007), where the geographical borders are being crossed by the strings of networks, tying together what, until recently, has been disconnected. Abstract relations of trust (Sedláčková 2007) are connecting the remote places, events and institutions, while the “dromocratic society” (as termed by Paul Virilio), introduces speed as an opposing force to tradition. The slow but inevitable process has been described by Hubík as an “accelerating dromocracy of the global network interactivity, which is the ultimate fate of countryside” (Hubík 2003: 5), since the very existence is more and more being understood as an existence within a network.

While this text has identified the discrepancy between the subjective and objective quality of life in rural areas, our attempts to explain it are, more often than not, of a hypothetical nature. In order to be able to introduce more plausible explanations, we believe more attention should be focused on the values of rural inhabitants as compared to the non-rural populations. We believe that understanding their view of the world will help us to apprehend what makes Czech countryside attractive and what sort of problems are its inhabitants faced with.

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