Chapter 9
Social Capital and Subjective Quality of Life

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes how in recent decades, the concepts of social capital and quality of life have attracted the interest of both theoreticians and creators of social life. Both on the micro-, meso- and macrosocial levels, social capital has been viewed as one of the key elements of human well-being. Its positive influence on social well-being has been underlined by academics, practitioners of social life. In this chapter, the authors evaluate the relationship between social capital and the mental well-being of individuals. Through empirical analysis, the results of a representative research conducted among residents of one of the biggest Polish cities were examined. This concludes that social capital and social interaction are essential to the health of the individual.

INTRODUCTION
Questions about good life and happiness are by nature existential, pervasive and rhetorical. Nevertheless, they are significant enough to follow people throughout their lives. This issue takes on a particular importance in our times. Apart from research into quality of life and attempts at creating an adequate methodology, a number of efforts are underway to discover the mechanisms which determine a good life. Scholars and practitioners alike search for determiners which may improve the well-being of individuals and communities. Among the mechanisms which shape quality of life are also socio-cultural factors. One of the ever more significant ones is social capital, defined as a network of relationships between individuals and groups, shared norms and values, and trust. “These networks constitute a resource or asset – hence the term capital – that can be valuable in a range of situations.” (Mclean and Page, 2005, p. 5).

The aim of this paper is to assess the relationships between social capital and subjective quality of life. The obtained data will be explored to verify the hypothesis that social capital is related to the mental well-being of individuals.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term “social capital” is ubiquitous in contemporary sociology. Its appeal rests, in part, on its capacity to stir in sociologists a renewed sense of the significance for collective action of social relations (Messner et al., 2004, p. 882).

Social capital is viewed as a set of resources created during the process of interaction which individuals have at their disposal in a given social situation (Halpern, 2005). Like any other type of capital, this value brings certain profits. If present, social capital may facilitate the production of individual and communal goods (Paxton, 2002). In Coleman’s words (1990, p. 304), „social capital facilitates the achievement of goals that could not be achieved in its absence or could be achieved only at a higher cost”. Social capital brings social, political and economic benefits. Its use is commonly explored from the point of view of a community and rarely in its individual aspect. This adds particular interest to the analysis of social capital as an individual resource, which according to numerous authors (Coleman, 1990, 1994; Burt, 2000; Baker, 2000;) contributes to personal and professional success.

Moreover, the existence of social capital explains why some people get along in life better than others, despite seeming equally talented (Coleman, 1990). These differences manifest as a higher income, wider influence or better quality of life. According to Burt (2005), connection to other people makes some achieve their goals better and more efficiently than others. The resource of trust and social networks plays a significant role in the active participation of individuals in many dimensions of social life. Nevertheless, its main importance is for the economic aspect. “Social relations and non-market interactions of actors influence their behaviours toward one another on the market. Individuals choose behavioural strategies taking into account their own benefits and the probable behaviours of others. … This includes mutual trust, assessment of the propensity to cooperate and the willingness to maintain mutual contact in the short and long run” (Bartkowski, 2007, p. 56).

Social capital also influences the subjective dimension of quality of life. Individual dimensions of social capital – networks, trust, norms of cooperation – have a positive influence on the mental well-being of individuals. It is believed that there is a association between sociability and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). In other words, people’s life satisfaction is determined by the relationships they enter. Some studies conclude that it depends on having a spouse (Argyle, 1987). It turns out that married people are among the happiest ones, followed by people living as married, then widowed, divorced and separated (Helliwell, 2002). Even Aristotle said that a happy man is the one who has many friends (Aristotle, Rhetoric). Family support, both mental and financial, is an important aspect of the relations between social capital and quality of life (Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000). It is commonly believed that interpersonal relationships – social capital – are one of the most valuable things in life because they give more joy and happiness than material goods and satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements. As Czapiński (2007) states, social networks played a crucial role among the adaptive resources after the changes which took place in Poland after 1989. A wide group of friends and strong social ties proved a rescue in this difficult situation. Single people were in a much worse mental condition than married ones.

The goal of this paper – to evaluate the relations between social capital and mental well-being of individuals – is not an easy task, not only due to the complexity of both concepts, but also due to the direction of this relation (meaning, does social capital impact quality of life, or is it the other way round). The literature of the subject favours heavily the first approach.