



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Trends in objective and subjective quality of life in the Netherlands since 1976

Lessons for policy-makers

Crétien van Campen & Jeroen Boelhouwer

Villa Vigoni, October 6, 2026



How to enhance quality of life in society?

Netherlands Institute for Social Research | SCP founded in 1973
More than 50 years of research into quality of life

See presentation by Jeroen Boelhouwer at this conference:
Social monitoring and reporting in the Netherlands since 1973



What is quality of life?

Quality of Life (QoL) is what people:

Have (resources)

Objective QoL

Do (participation)

&

Feel (well-being)

Subjective QoL



Research questions

1. What are the trends in objective and subjective quality of life in the Netherlands since the seventies?
2. What can policy-makers do to improve the trends in quality of life?



Monitoring QoL trends in the Netherlands

Objective quality of life

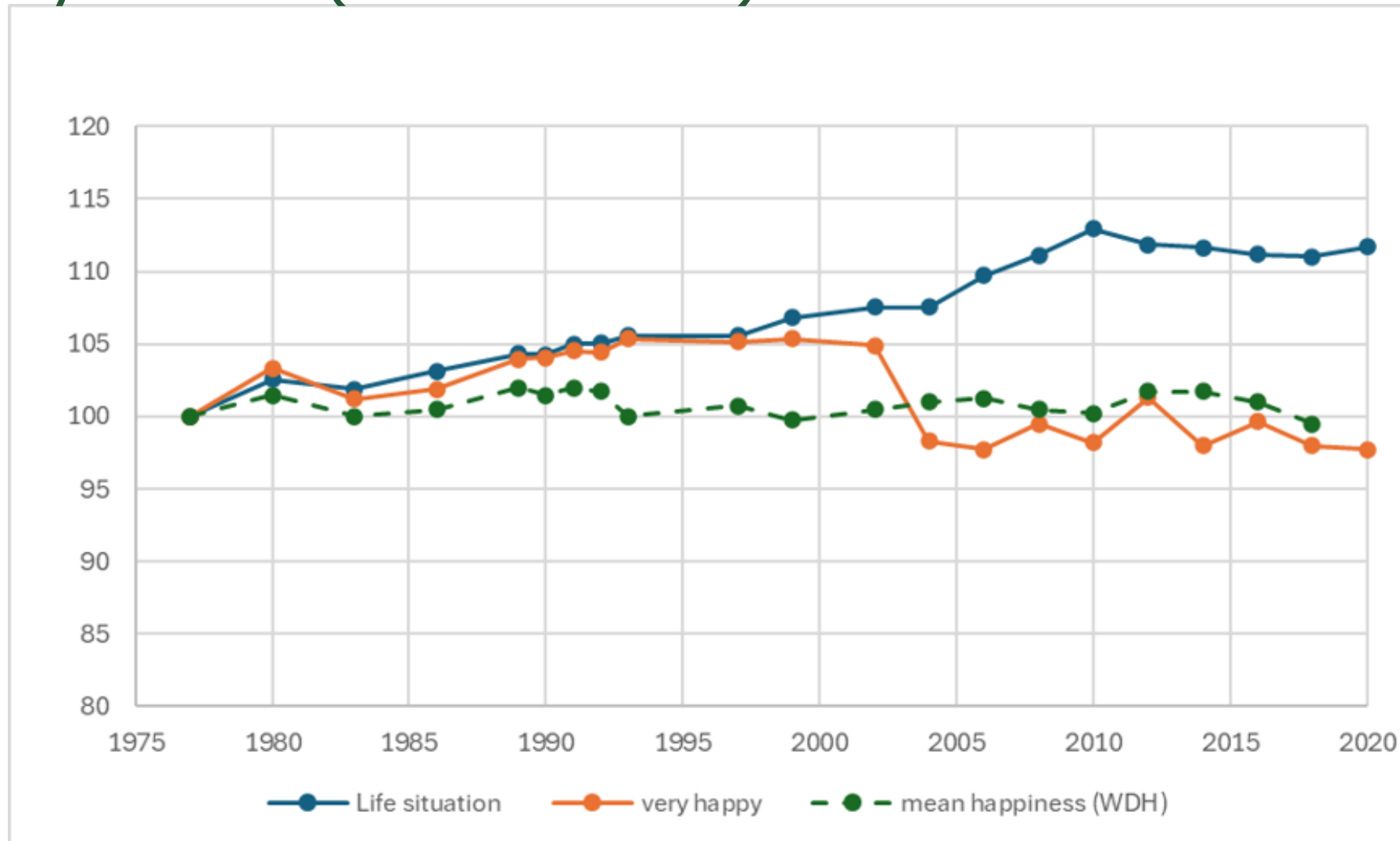
- Period: 1976 - 2020
- Instrument: Life Situation Index
- Method: non-linear canonical correlation
- Contents: eight aspects: health; housing; social participation; socio-cultural leisure activities; sport; mobility; ownership of durable consumer goods; and holidays.

Subjective quality of life

- Period: 1976 - 2020
- Instrument: single question
- Method: 10 points scale
- Contents: To what extent do you consider yourself to be a happy person?



Developments in Dutch objective and subjective quality of life (1976–2020)





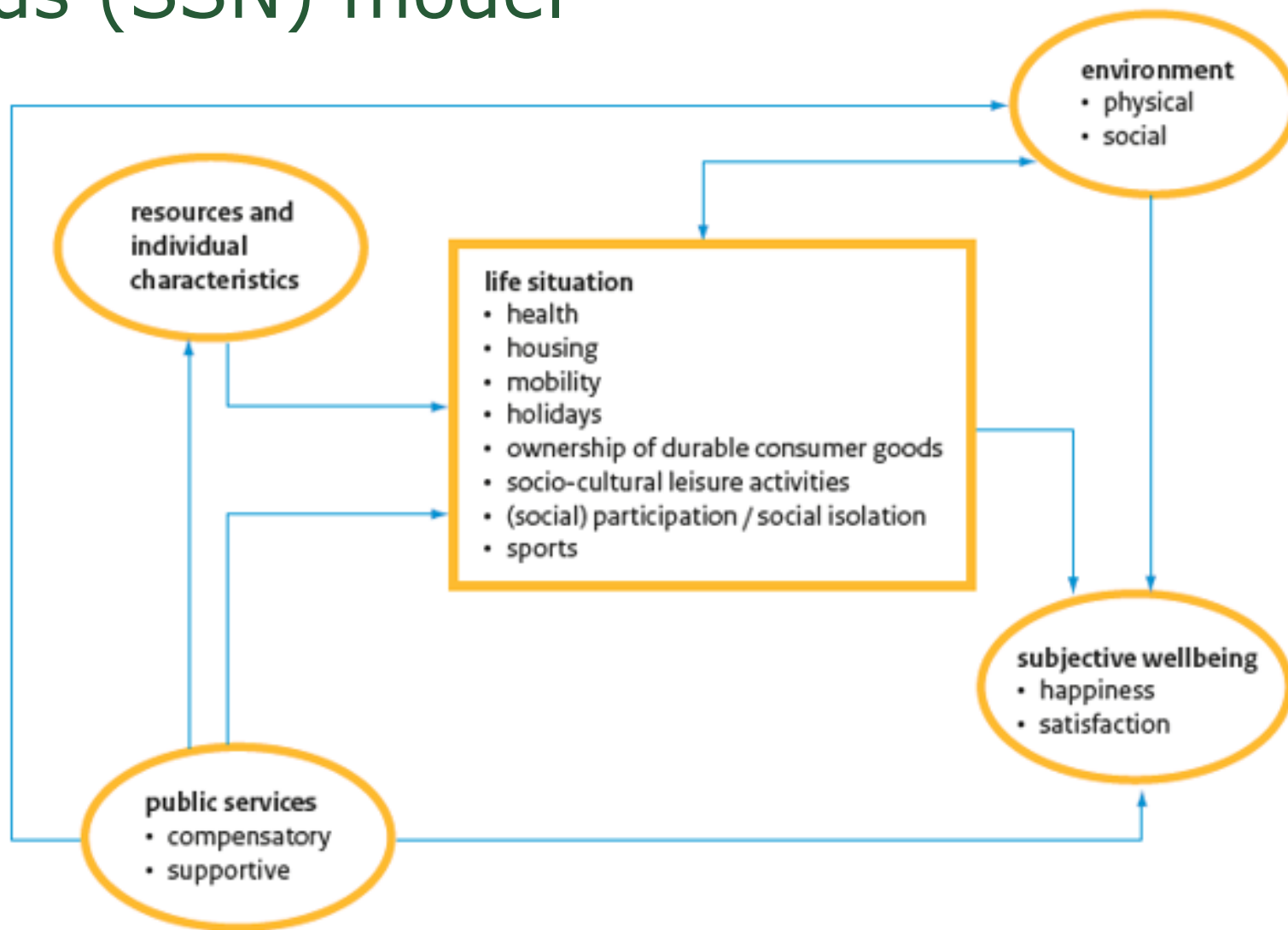
How to improve the trends in quality of life?

"There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Kurt Lewin)

Three theoretical approaches

1. Socio-economic
2. Social stratification
3. Individual life course

Social State of the Netherlands (SSN) model



Insights

Resources are important drivers of both objective and subjective quality of life.

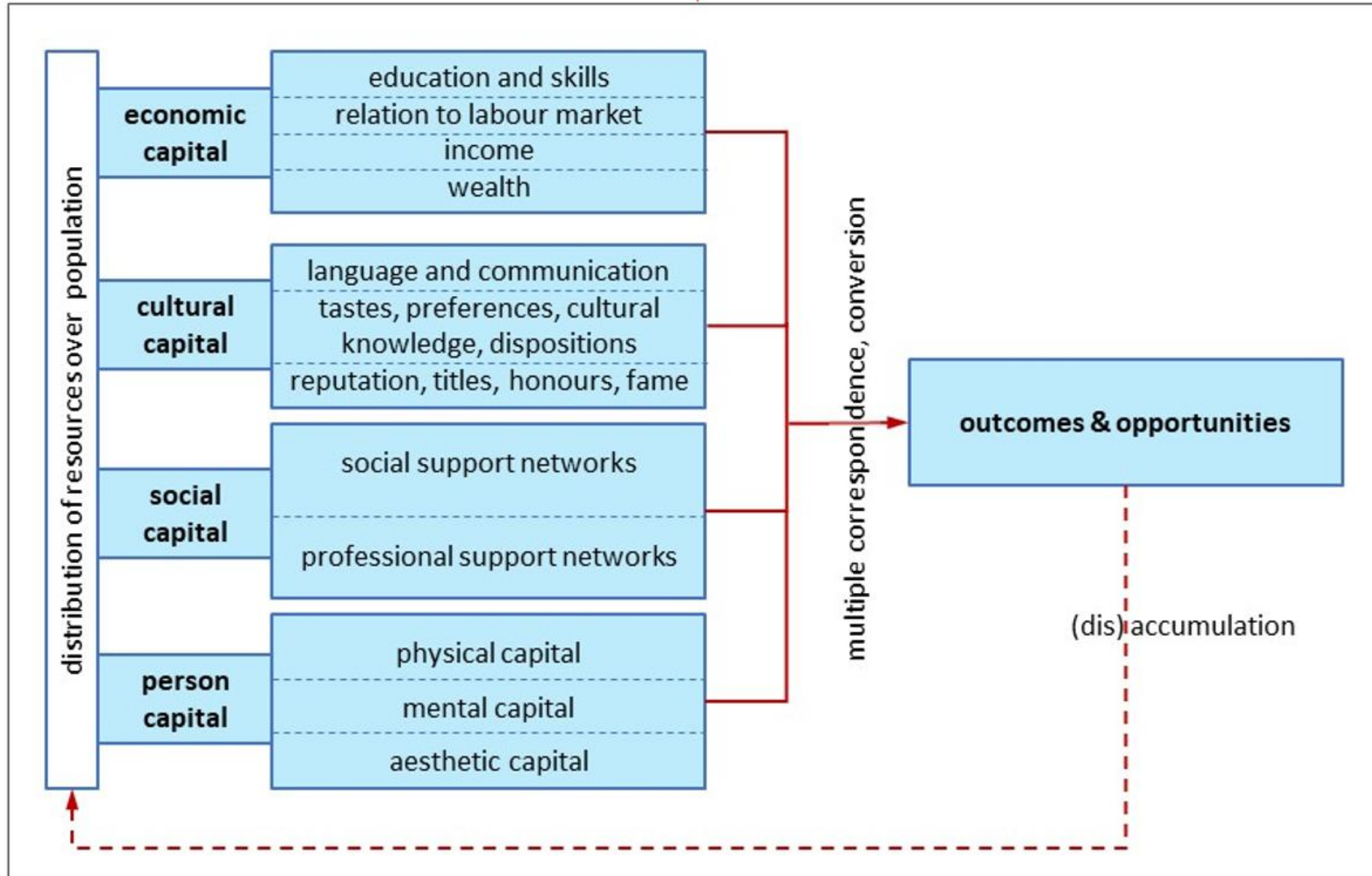
Resources are more important than individual background characteristics

Resources are more important for the life situation than for individual happiness

Table 3.2 Differences between social groups, according to individual characteristics, in the life situation and satisfaction with life, as scored using the SCP Life Situation Index (index scores 2002=100) and mean happiness scores (scale 1–10) (2019)

	Life situation	Satisfaction with life
All	105	7.8
Background characteristics		
18–34 years old	107	7.8
35–64 years old	107	7.8
>65 years	98	8.0
65–74 years old	102	8.0
>75 years	97	8.0
Living alone	98	7.5
One-parent household	103	7.2
Couple without children	105	8.0
Couple with child(ren)	110	7.9
Men	106	7.8
Women	104	7.8
Resources		
Lowest 20% income	96	7.5
20%–80% income	106	7.8
Highest 20% income	113	8.1
Lower education	96	7.6
Average education	105	7.8
Higher education	112	8.0
No paid job	98	7.6
Paid job	109	8.0
Chronic condition, illness, or disability	99	7.5
No chronic condition, illness, or disability	109	8.0
Lower sense of mastery / low feeling of control over own life	100	7.4
Higher sense of mastery / high feeling of control over own life	108	8.3
No basic computer skills	82	7.4
High basic computer skills	109	8.0

Social Stratification model

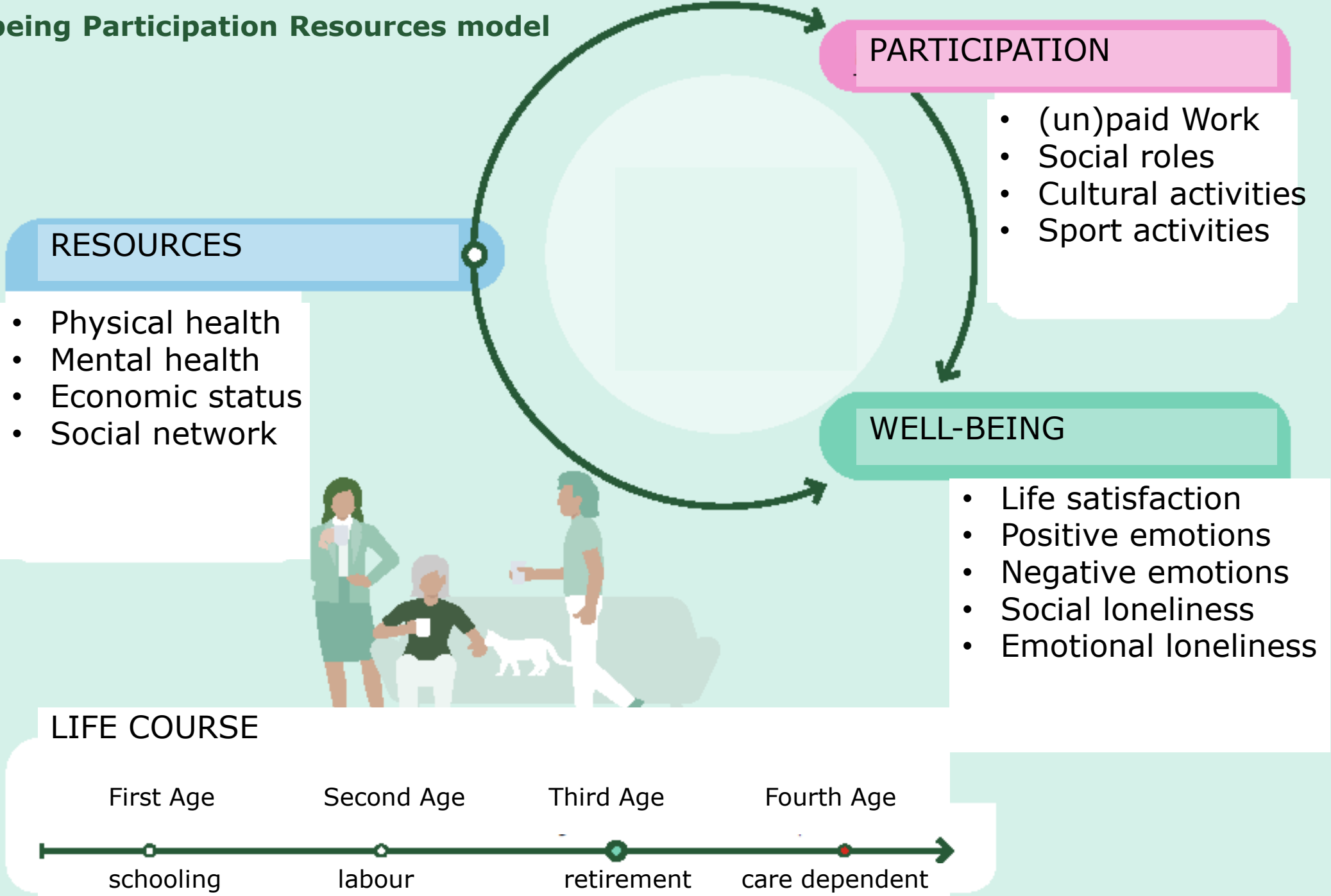




Insights

- There are seven social classes in the Netherlands, with different patterns in the possession of the four types of capital.
- Class structure is associated with different views on one's own life, politics, and Dutch society.
- Types of capital and class structure predict subjective well-being.

Well-being Participation Resources model





Insights

Changes in resources and participation are important predictors of subjective well-being in the future life course.

Changes in mental capital resources and cultural participation have the largest effects on subjective well-being in future life course

Table 3.4 Effects of changes in resources and participation on subjective well-being within individual life courses (standardized coefficients of fixed effects regression, n=5052, 17,680 observations)

Changes of resources

1. Person capital

a. Physical health

Hearing (auditory limitations) -0.03 **

Activities of Daily Living (ADL) -0.06 **

Chronic physical disability -0.05 **

Number of chronic diseases -0.04 **

Alcohol use 0.01

Smoking -0.01

b. Mental health

Cognitive impairments -0.01

Information processing speed 0.07 **

Self esteem 0.15 **

Mastery 0.18 **

Perceived self-efficacy 0.10 **

2. Economic capital

Income 0.05 **

3. Social capital

Social network size 0.04 **

Changes of participation

(Un)paid work 0.04 **

Social roles 0.07 **

Cultural activities 0.08 **

Sport activities 0.07 **

Notes: * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$;



Summarizing

- The three models are aimed at improving public policy.
- The resource-based class structure of the Social Stratification Model helps in designing policy aimed at reducing disparities and in understanding the relationship between resources and subjective opinions.
- The Well-being Participation Resources model helps in understanding how policymakers can leverage resources and participation to enhance people's subjective well-being and quality of life in general.
- The Social State of the Netherlands model shows that the other two models have room for improvement by including of contextual factors, such as environmental or neighborhood characteristics. SCP research could be extended in this direction



Conclusion

Three lessons learned for policy-makers to enhance quality of life

1. Take a broad social and cultural perspective on resources, participation and subjective well-being (instead of an economic perspective)
2. Monitor variation and group trends in quality of life (instead of national averages)
3. Develop tailor-made well-being policies (instead of one size fits all policies).



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Thank you for your attention



Upcoming: J. Boelhouwer & C. van Campen *Trends in Quality of Life in the Netherlands. Developments Since 1976 and the Role of Resources*. C. Suter & J. Chester (Eds) [Comparative and Longitudinal Perspectives on Well-being] (*Preliminary title*). Springer Publishing

Crétien van Campen
c.van.campen@scp.nl

 english.scp.nl
 @SCPonderzoek
 Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau