

ON THE LIMITING PROPERTIES OF SOCIAL INDICATORS

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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of the population and economic measures that constitute traditional social indicators are compared with more recent "quality of life" measures to demonstrate that social indicators are always value statements at the policy level. The possibility of alternative perspectives is illustrated. It is suggested that an awareness of the assumptions implicit in any given indicator is as important as the data they provide.

The use of the term "social indicator" has been with us only since 1966 (Bauer, 1966). Nonetheless, social indicators have come to hold a place of high esteem in program planning. A United Nations Statistical Office survey documented no less than 29 countries with social trends books published or in preparation (Zapf, 1976). It is estimated that in the United States alone the federal government spent \$7.5 billion on social policy and program research from 1965 to 1975 (Moore, 1977). Increased quantification of social processes seems assured by an available technology, by an available skilled manpower (in part diverted from academic surpluses), and most importantly, by the federal government's interest in measuring the impact of social interventions and holding service providers accountable for their services. Government efforts at self-scrutiny, planning, and cost efficiency in social programming all call for increased social assessment and evaluation.

It is generally agreed that the measurement of social processes will provide needed information and open up new decision-making options for policy makers and administrators. Leaders in the field of measurement have addressed the advantages of doing social assessments (e.g., Riecken & Boruch, 1974; Rivlin, 1971; U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1969), especially as they relate to decision-making levels of government here and abroad (e.g., Biderman, 1966; President's Commission

on Federal Statistics, 1971; Stone, 1975). Presentations often focus on selecting the appropriate strategies for social assessment (e.g., Campbell & Converse, 1972; Gross, 1966, Land & Spileman, 1975; National Academy of Sciences, 1976; Olson, 1970; Sheldon & Moore, 1968) and on the information value of quantification (e.g., Gross, 1967; Hauser, 1975; Sheldon & Park, 1975).

The existing literature often suggests that social assessments are becoming more objectively correct as well as more technically correct and more common. For instance Flanagan (1978) speaks of "the empirical definition of quality of life" (p. 138) as if there was little doubt about the absolute social appropriateness of his set of measures. Also, the title of his report, "A research approach to improving our quality of life," suggests that we can expect to achieve social goals primarily through technical means.

Most of us in the social sciences are victims of a particular kind of "scientistic" myopia which allows us to treat data as if its usefulness depends entirely on its technical adequacy and its availability. In what follows I would like to illustrate why doing so is short sighted.

To begin with, it will be helpful to identify three kinds of social indicators. The first, usually called "social statistics," have been collected since the turn of the century. They include characteristics of the population such as mobility and family patterns, and economic measures such

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as the Gross National Product and unemployment data. Recently there have been efforts to compile existing economic and geographic data in a form that makes their use as social indicators more apparent to decisionmakers. For instance, the Office of Management and Budget (1974, 1977) of the federal government published *Social Indicators, 1973* and *Social Indicators, 1976* presenting data from existing sources, mostly Federal sources, in tabular and graphic form to "depict conditions that are likely to be dealt with by national policy" (Office, 1974, p. xiii). Eight areas of analyses were presented: health, public safety, education, employment, income, housing, leisure and recreation, and population. The goal of the presentation was to reflect a concern for

. . . health and long life, freedom from crime and the fear of crime, sufficient education to take part in society and make the best of one's abilities, the opportunity to work at a job that is satisfying and rewarding, income sufficient to cover the necessities of life with opportunities for improving one's income, housing that is comfortable within a congenial environment, and time and opportunity for discretionary activity (1974, p. xiii).

Drawing out the implications of economic and geographic data and making them available along with the data themselves is the second kind of indicator presentation. The third approach is to move away from economic indices and the implications that can be drawn from them and to focus directly on subjective indicators, often called "quality of life" measures. *Measuring work quality for social reporting* (Biderman & Drury, 1976), *Social indicators of well-being* (Andrews & Withey, 1976), and *The quality of American life* (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976), in addition to Flanagan's work cited above, are examples of this latter trend. The work of Campbell and colleagues illustrates the approach. They measured "the subjective world of perceptions, expectations, feelings and values" (p. 4) by asking individuals to report on experiences in their living communities, their family life, and their work, and to report on their overall experience of well-being. For instance, rather than presenting employment statistics from available labor force data, work was assessed by asking respondents if the physical surroundings of their work environment was pleasant, if they had enough time to get their work done, if their work was interesting, and if they had opportunity to develop their own abilities while working (p. 298). To Campbell and colleagues, emphasis on less tangible values rather than economic factors is consistent with national concerns and therefore an improvement over other methods (p. 1), especially when they are used in conjunction with more familiar economic indicators (p. 5).

These three kinds of measures differ in that social statistics are tied more closely to physical exemplars than subjective measures of quality of life. One can make an argument in preference of subjective measures as Camp-

bell et al. have done or, citing methodological problems such as the fallibility of data and the excess meaning of categories, make an argument for the primacy of indices that are unambiguous.

We have a tradition of recognizing that subjective measures such as self-reports are value laden. It accounts for some of the popularity of behavioral measures. We are less inclined to recognize that the compilation of data with physical exemplars like number (in the population) or amount (of income) is value laden also.

The value ladenness of *all* indicators comes from the fact that we chose to collect particular data and that we chose to compile them in particular ways. Johnston (1976) makes this point in his discussion of *Social Indicators, 1976*. He states that the "primary task . . . (of the person who produces social indicators) is the judicious selection and presentation of information relating to a number of social concerns. In practical terms this means that judgement, reflecting some set of values, must be exercised in carrying out that selection and in devising some mode of presentation" (p. 102). Johnston cites divorce as a specific example. The appearance of divorce rates in data sources "reflects what is presumed to be a widely shared concern with one of the basic values of society: family stability" (Johnston, p. 102). More generally, Cochran (1978) observes that selectivity exists at the individual, interpersonal, and technical levels of data aggregation.

Values are implicit in all data collection procedures. The reason for identifying three kinds of indicators at the beginning of this essay is to leave no confusion about the inclusiveness of this "indictment." It pertains to social statistics like census data as much as it does to subjective measures like quality of life assessments. Values are expressed in what we identify (divorce, for instance) and in the way we compile and compare information. For example, social assessments are typically made by having individuals report on their own status. Comparisons are then made across traditionally recognized cultural subgroups such as race, sex, level of education, and to a lesser extent, categories like geographic location and family background. We learn which groups are most often employed, which live in substandard housing, which are satisfied with their medical care, and so on. Implicit in these procedures is the notion that progress is made as averages increase on positive scales, such as income or job satisfaction, and decrease on negative scales, such as infant mortality or dissatisfaction with living conditions. In many ways these foci and methods of aggregation have provided valuable information. They are particularly well constructed to support political activity leading to individual equities of various kinds at a time when society is concerned with equality. (It is interesting to contemplate the possibility that the availability of data helped define the problem as well as provide information about it.)

The weakness of any data collection procedure is that society can not necessarily translate data that developed

from one set of values into information that is organized to support a different set of values. The structure of data — the way it is collected, aggregated, and juxtaposed with other data — is not easily altered. The point can be made by relating a personal experience. The market near our home employs a young man to keep the shopping carts in order. Customers appreciate the service. He is conscientious about his work and seems to enjoy being responsible in that limited sphere of activity. Most other kinds of employment would probably be beyond his capacity. In fact, if he were not employed at a simple, repetitive job, the young man would probably experience the indignity of being totally dependent on family or government, even during the years of his life which society has defined as productive years.

Using present methods of making social assessments, the datum about this young man's employment can be picked up in labor statistics, and he stands as much chance as anyone else of being reported in a representative sample asking about life satisfaction. But if one is interested in the social importance of that incident, it cannot be recognized by current statistical information. We can not learn, for instance, about the characteristics of the situation that makes this man's employment possible nor about the stability or instability of similar situations in our culture.

Consider another example. Late one summer afternoon I watched a yellow school bus stop and discharge a five- or six-year-old passenger carrying a lunch box and a beach towel. She was apparently returning home from a day-camp program. While the bus flashed its lights, warning the four lanes of traffic to stop so the child could cross the street, an adult, waiting to cross in the opposite direction, moved into the middle of the lanes farthest from the bus and stopped traffic as crossing guards do. The safe passage of the child was assured. What occurred to me as I watched was that one way of measuring societies' success is by how we care for the vulnerable members of society.

From this point of view, vulnerable groups would be an obvious focus in inquiry — the young, the poor, the elderly who need care, persons alone, to name a few examples. But more is involved than simply adding new categories to social assessments or highlighting some of the data we now collect. If we wanted to move to a social climate where people evaluated their life situation in units that are

larger than their own individual gains, our present methods offer little help.

The way we collect data is important because it determines, in part, how we will act. *The New York Times* published an article on Family Focus, a modern version of Chicago's settlement houses. The center is a place where young parents of young children "get together to share the frustrations and uncertainties of raising small children in an urban setting" (King, 1977, p. 60). In addition to offering contact and companionship, the center provides for organized learning experiences in a time frame and environment that complements the schedule and responsibilities of young parents. Family Focus and many other organizations like it have a very difficult time raising money to sustain their programs.

If data about young parents were collected and reported regularly, perhaps like data on full employment or national productivity is now collected and reported, Family Focus might exist under more advantageous circumstances. The practice of soliciting funds and defending their right to financial support might be replaced by routine and unchallenged provisions for financial support, something like current priorities which subsidize railroads and the postal service.

The purpose of this essay is not to condemn current strategies of collecting social indicators. One purpose is to illustrate that measurement strategies have consequences. They restrict our perceptions at the same time they expand them. Data are not neutral, not even when they are collected "objectively," when the sample is large, or the assessment thorough. In a sense, data are tacit definitions of social problems. They delimit what we understand about social processes and restrict apparent solutions to some subset of all the solutions that are actually possible. Data about society help determine where we "automatically" allocate resources and which groups must be defensive about their right to resources. Nor is the purpose of this essay to suggest that social indicators be abolished. They provide needed information. They also provide a focus for a critical appraisal of the assumptions implicit in their use. The second purpose of this essay is to suggest that those critical appraisals may be as useful as the data themselves.

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