

# Subjective social indicators

Mark Abrams, *Survey Unit, Social Science Research Council*

## I. Introduction

Much of the past work on social indicators has been concerned with measures of 'hard' objective conditions – the number of slum dwellings, the proportion of young people in higher education, the ratio of doctors per thousand population, etc. The present article looks at another measure of the quality of life – the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction felt by people with various aspects of their lives. The 'objective world' is filtered through the individual's own perceptions and then weighed according to his expectations, experiences, attitudes, and present circumstances. These assessments have come to be called subjective social indicators and the main purpose of this article is to present the findings of two small pilot enquiries that explored the possibility, usefulness, and difficulties of using interview survey methods to measure them.

## II. Historical background

In announcing at the end of 1972 the first title *Social Indicators and Societal Monitoring* (Wilcox *et al*) in its 'Social Indicators Book Series' the publishers noted that it contained "more than 600 annotations from over 1,000 cited sources (and was) conceived to facilitate interaction between workers in the social indicator 'movement' ". The semi-apologetic single quotation marks seem hardly necessary when one considers the expansion of interest that has taken place in the past six years; before the mid-1960's such phrases as social indicators, social reporting, social accounts, quality of life were almost entirely absent from the vocabulary of either social scientists or politicians; today, we have reached the point where continuous work on social indicators is under serious consideration in at least half-a-dozen countries.

For the historian of social statistics in Britain this late explosion of interest and activity must be surprising. Apart from the Census material there has long been an abundance of series of data relating to topics other than national income, wages and prices. For example, the National Food Survey, with its measures of the adequacy and inadequacies of the diet of various types of British families, dates back to 1940 and has appeared every year since then without a break. In the private sector (but available to the general public through the SSRC Survey Archive) the National Readership Survey, with its annual reports over nearly twenty years, has provided an enormous (but largely unused) flow of information about many facets of the informational

and day-dreaming tastes and standards of the British people and the way they have changed (or often failed to change) as incomes have expanded and years of formal schooling have lengthened.

In the United States spasmodic interest in hard social indicators goes back even further. Under the stimulus of President Hoover and the Great Depression there appeared in 1933 the massive and scholarly publication "Recent Social Trends". Its potential as a starting point for continuing reports on social conditions was considerable, but its achievement small – probably because of the energy and excitement of President Roosevelt's policies to deal with the Depression. The opportunity was repeated almost ten years later when William F. Ogburn (editor of the original "Recent Social Trends") edited the May 1942 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, and with a team of outstanding social scientists (Philip Hauser, Louis Wirth, Gardiner Means, Margaret Mead, etc) went over much the same ground and brought the material up-to-date – urban decay, race relations, family life, the use of leisure etc. But again, presumably because of the war, there was little response either from government or from social scientists.

Almost another quarter of a century passed before the movement really got off the ground. We can reasonably regard 1966 as the take-off year and the United States as the launching pad when, with the appearance of works by Bertram Gross and Raymond Bauer, a receptive audience of legislators, civil servants, university teachers, and civic leaders became familiar with such phrases as social accounting, social report, social indicators and began to see what lay behind these concepts and to recognise their possible value in helping to shape public policies.

Some idea of the limitations of the resulting collections of 'objective' social indicators is gained if we look at a typical publication. The first report (March 1970) of the Urban Institute on "The Quality of Life in Metropolitan Washington (D.C.)"<sup>1</sup> is noteworthy for various reasons. First, and perhaps most importantly, it shows how a group of intelligent and active researchers using very simple techniques can bring together valuable comparative statistics with an acceptable level of reliability – acceptable, that is, for social action (see Otis Dudley Duncan). The established fact that over the two years covered by the report the infant mortality rate was 30 per cent higher in

<sup>1</sup>It compared social conditions in Washington (D.C.) with those in 16 other large U.S. cities.

Chicago than in Minneapolis indicated clearly enough the need for improving this aspect of the quality of life in Chicago.

Secondly, the report exposes the fragility and ambiguity of many so-called hard statistics. The fact that the 'robbery rate' in Baltimore was 25 per cent higher than in the nearby city of Washington may mean no more than that the generally high level of unreported crime is much higher in Washington than in Baltimore.

Thirdly, the report demonstrated the impossibility of aggregating the multiplicity of indicators used into a single index expressing "quality of life". For example, of the 17 cities studied, Washington had the second lowest proportion of low income families and the highest proportion of men rejected for military service after undergoing their mental tests. Does this mean that the quality of life in Washington is higher, the same, or lower as compared with life in Cincinnati which had the second highest proportion of low income families and almost the lowest proportion of army rejects? It is true that the authors make no attempt to produce such an overall social indicator for each city, but others have suggested or hoped that such an index might eventually emerge.

Fourthly, in describing their fourteen 'quality of life' areas and the indicators used in each, the authors make clear that the 'hard' statistics they used were often very poor measures of the qualities they had in mind. For example, the quality of life in a community depends heavily upon the extent of what the authors describe as social disintegration, citizen participation, community concern, and racial equality; but can these be measured adequately by (respectively) known narcotic addicts per 10,000 population, voting turnout, contributions per head to charity appeals, and unemployment rates?

The more one considers these concepts the more one is persuaded that the way forward lies not in adding more measures of conventional hard statistics, but rather in supplementing the existing ones by adding in a clear-cut way a new dimension to the definition of 'quality of life' – a dimension of the satisfaction (happiness, contentment, psychological well-being, etc) felt by those who constitute the community and are the final consumers of society's output of 'goods' and 'bads' and therefore the best judges of society's performance. In short, it is the very thoroughness of work along the lines of The Urban Institute that compels one to turn to subjective social indicators and to the problems of reliable quantification of states of mind and mood that normally are regarded as 'hard' only by psychologists.

There is then no need for the social scientist to feel that he trivialises his discipline when he

embarks on the study of subjective social indicators. This does not mean, however, there are not substantial difficulties to be overcome. Different people will place different meanings on the word 'satisfaction' – from high elation to a mere absence of pain. Again, one person may give different meanings to the same word in different areas of his life so that when he expresses satisfaction with his job and satisfaction with his marriage he may be using two different and unrelated measurement systems. A further difficulty is created by the fact that people differ and change in the way they react to failure and defeat: some people maintain or even raise their satisfaction level over a wide and apparently unrelated range of areas through a diffused loss of self-esteem. And then, too, there is implicit the assumption that high levels of satisfaction are 'good' and low levels are 'bad'. On occasion the reverse may be true (and rational and healthy) both for the individual and for society.

### III. Subjective social indicators today

All these and other difficulties were known and appreciated by those who work on subjective social indicators, but this awareness has prevented the undertaking of two large-scale studies in the United States (Bradburn; Carr-Saunders and Converse) and two small-scale and exploratory studies in this country carried out by the SSRC Survey Unit<sup>2</sup>. In the first of the latter the interviewing of a quota nation-wide urban sample of 213 persons aged 16 and over was carried out in March 1971 by Research Services Limited; the second with a quota sample of 593 respondents in the seven largest conurbations in England was executed by Social and Community Planning Research in November 1971<sup>3</sup>.

The main purposes of our two British enquiries were those usually associated with questionnaire studies: first, to test the questionnaire for adequacy of range, its clarity of language, its sequence of issues, its length, its potential for eliciting additional important aspects of the research topic; and secondly to provide experimental responses to enable us to experiment with statistical techniques of analysis that would reveal the degree of interdependence between various domains and indicate those most difficult to measure reliably what we were looking for.

We have included here in simple form some of the elementary tabulations of the substantive findings from the two enquiries. We then discuss some of the lessons learned and the reasons

<sup>2</sup>John Hall of the Unit shouldered, with great patience and imagination, a very large part of the difficult tasks of developing our questionnaire and directing the analysis of the data.

<sup>3</sup>See Annex A for composition of these samples and comparison with larger probability samples.

which lies behind the structure of our third questionnaire.

### March 1971 pilot survey

After a handful of unstructured pre-pilot discussions with members of the public it was decided to build the questionnaire around eleven domains:

Housing	Family life
Neighbourhood	Friendships
Health	Education
Job	Police courts
Financial situation	Welfare services
Leisure	

On each domain the respondent was asked:

- to indicate on an 11-point scale (from 0 to 10) how satisfied he (or she) was;
- what changes would be needed to make him more satisfied; and
- what changes could happen to make him less satisfied.

In addition to these satisfaction/dissatisfaction ratings in each domain, the respondent was asked to give:

- an overall self-rating on 'things in general'
- an overall rating for his position on the scale 'about 4 or 5 years ago'
- where he expected to be on the scale 'about 4 or 5 years from now'
- where on the scale he felt that people like himself were 'entitled to be'.

In addition to these points of reference across time, in order to obtain points of reference across social classes, the respondent was asked to use the same 0 to 10 scale to indicate where he thought various groups currently stood; these were:

- unskilled manual workers
- skilled manual workers
- office workers
- professional people (e.g. doctors, teachers)
- company directors, business executives
- shopkeepers and small businessmen
- old age pensioners
- investors and shareholders

Each respondent was then asked to indicate to which one of these eight groups he considered he belonged.

In an attempt to relate responses to socio-psychological circumstances the questionnaire also included a modified Srole anomaly scale<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, the classification material collected related mainly to the domains dealt with in the body of the questionnaire, i.e. it recorded respondent's occupation, income, educational background, household composition, use of the welfare services, housing accommodation.

### Satisfaction/dissatisfaction 'in general' self-rating

#### Whole sample

Respondents showed very little difficulty in using a 0 to 10 numerical scale to indicate their levels of satisfaction with life. On each of the four main perspectives offered them (now, 4-5 years past, 4-5 years future, and 'entitlement') at least 96 per cent of the respondents chose for themselves specific points on the scales. Table 1 groups and summarises the self-ratings of the whole sample.

Table 1 Satisfaction ratings

	Percentages			
	Perspective of self			
	Now <sup>5</sup>	4-5 years past <sup>1</sup>	4-5 years future	Entitlement
Satisfaction rating:				
0, 1 (low)	6	3	8	1
2, 3	14	9	14	3
4, 5	29	36	14	20
6, 7	27	27	24	51
8, 9	20	18	26	10
10 (high)	4	7	14	15
Average rating	5.53	5.86	6.17	7.45

<sup>1</sup>For a brief reminder of some conditions in March 1971 and March 1966-67 see Annex B.

The present is seen to be a little less satisfactory than the past; and the future is expected to be better than both the past and the present. But the most striking gap is between what one currently has in the way of a satisfactory life and what one feels entitled to - the average NOW rating is only 74 per cent of the average ENTITLEMENT score.

#### Sub-sample groups

##### Satisfaction: NOW

The various sub-samples can be grouped into three categories: those with an average self-rating of at least 6; those with an average rating

<sup>4</sup>For an account of the scale that was used see Annex C. Briefly a low anomaly score reflects confidence in one's fellow men and confidence in the future; conversely, a high anomaly score reflects distrust, pessimism and cynicism.

of 5 or less; and the remainder. Those coming within the two extreme categories are:

Self-rating 6 or more:		Self-rating 5 or less:	
Business executives	6.8	Unskilled workers	4.8
Income £2,000 and over	6.7	Old age pensioners	4.7
AB social grade <sup>5</sup>	6.6	DE social grade <sup>5</sup>	4.7
TEA 19 and over <sup>6</sup>	6.4	Small shopkeepers	4.1
Office workers	6.0	Widowed	4.1
Unmarried	6.0		

The intermediary 'remainder' category contained the following groups: men (5.5), women (5.5), married (5.7), aged 15-34 (5.5), 35-54 (5.8), 55 and over (5.3), TEA 15 or less<sup>6</sup> (5.3), TEA 16-18<sup>6</sup> (5.8), C1 Social Grade<sup>5</sup> (5.6), C2 Social Grade<sup>5</sup> (5.4), all those with incomes below £2,000 per annum (5.2), skilled manual workers (5.6), and professional workers (5.9).

Within each of the two extreme categories there is, of course, much overlapping of the groups; in the high satisfaction category AB grade people tend also to be those with the highest incomes, with a high incidence of higher education, and are often employed as business executives. At the other extreme those in the DE grade are often unskilled manual workers, old age pensioners and elderly widows of manual workers.

#### Satisfaction: NOW AND THE PAST

One rough measure of satisfaction with life is indicated when respondents gave to their present conditions a higher rating than the rating they gave to their conditions as of 4 to 5 years ago. On this basis, as we have seen, the sample as a whole felt that the quality of life had declined in recent years - from an average rating of 5.86 with things as they were 4 or 5 years ago, to 5.53 with conditions today - a fall of 6 per cent. But this sense of decline was not common to all sub-sections of the sample; in some it was much greater than 6 per cent, and in others there was no decline at all, but instead a feeling that NOW is appreciably better than the recent PAST.

Those groups where comparative past and present self-ratings indicated a sense of improvement in life over the past few years were the young (aged 15 to 34), the unmarried, those who had received full-time education at least until the age of 19, and those in the middle class (i.e. with relatively high incomes and with executive jobs in business and industry). Those indicating on the same basis a more than average sense of deterioration were the elderly (mainly old age pensioners and widows), and the lower middle class (shopkeepers and owners of small businesses).

<sup>5</sup>The four social-occupational groups used were: AB=middle class; C1=lower middle class; C2=skilled manual workers; DE=unskilled and those mainly dependent on social security for income.

<sup>6</sup>Terminal Education Age=age when full-time schooling finished.

NOW rated higher than PAST—by at least 5%:		NOW rated lower than PAST—by at least 15%:	
Unmarried	+15%	Widows	-35%
15-34 age	+8%	Pensioners	-32%
£2,000 p.a. or more	+8%	Shopkeepers	-29%
Business executives	+8%	Income below £650	-24%
TEA 19 and over	+5%	C1 social grade	-23%
AB social grade	+5%	Age 55 or more	-22%
		DE social grade	-16%

Again there is much overlapping of the groups within each category and additionally it is clear that for the most part those who had given themselves a high NOW rating were also the groups most likely to register improvements over the past 4 to 5 years. And, conversely, those registering low NOW ratings were also the groups who felt that their decline has been greatest over recent years.

#### Satisfaction: NOW AND THE FUTURE

For the sample as a whole the average score on the 0 to 10 ladder when they were asked "Where would you put yourself as you expect to be about 4 to 5 years from now?" was 6.17. The highest average levels (7 or more) were recorded by the unmarried (7.0), those with a TEA of 19 or more (7.2), AB grade (7.4), and business executives (7.4).

The lowest average FUTURE scores (5.4 or less) came from widows (4.8), DE grade (5.2), those with incomes below £650 per annum (5.4), shopkeepers (4.9), and old age pensioners (4.9).

However, when FUTURE ratings are related to NOW ratings it appears that every group, even old age pensioners, expects to be more satisfied with life in 4 or 5 years' time than it is today. Those expecting the highest relative increases in satisfaction with 'things in general' over the next few years were often those who had given a low rating to their present position; thus, widows looking ahead raised their expected ratings by 19 per cent, unskilled workers by 32 per cent, and small shopkeepers by 44 per cent. The outstanding exception to this widespread optimism among the under-privileged was found among the elderly; those aged 55 or more gave themselves a 5.4 FUTURE rating as against their NOW rating of 5.3 - a mere 2 per cent improvement.

#### Satisfaction: NOW AND ENTITLEMENT

When respondents were asked to use the 0-10 ladder to indicate the level of satisfaction with life that they thought people like themselves were entitled to there was a substantial jump in ratings; the average worked out at 7.45 - 35 per cent higher than they had rated their present level of satisfaction. This large gap between 'reality' and entitlement was most marked among those who had given themselves low NOW scores; the gap was usually at its lowest among those well

satisfied with present conditions. Every group, however, said that NOW fell short of ENTITLEMENT.

ENTITLEMENT at least 40% higher than NOW:		ENTITLEMENT up to 25% higher than NOW:	
Widows	62%	Unmarried	23%
C2 social grade	42%	TEA 19 and over	15%
DE social grade	45%	AB social grade	23%
Unskilled	49%	Income £2,000 p.a. or more	14%
Shopkeepers	56%	Business executives	21%
Pensioners	46%		

In short, a sense of being deprived of their just rewards runs through all sections of British society, but is felt most deeply by the working class and (not necessarily the same) the poor.

### Other people's satisfaction

As another basis for comparison each respondent was given a card on which was listed eight types of persons and asked, using the 0-10 scale, to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied the respondent thought each group is today. Broadly, the middle class types were thought to be highly satisfied, while the working class types were thought to be fairly dissatisfied; rated sharply at the bottom in terms of putative satisfaction came old age pensioners.

The respondent was then asked to indicate to which of the eight he thought he belonged; (all but two people were able to do this matching). This step enabled us to compare the whole sample's assessment of a social category with the assessment given to themselves by those in the category when asked: "Where on the ladder would you put yourself nowadays?" The discrepancies were sometimes quite striking. For example, the sample as a whole gave old age pensioners a satisfaction rating of only 2.5, but people who identified themselves as pensioners gave themselves a satisfaction self-rating of 4.7. By contrast, the sample gave professional people

a satisfaction score of 7.0, but those who described themselves as professional people turned in a satisfaction self-rating of only 5.9 for themselves.

	Imputed average rating by whole sample (a)	Self-rating by those in the category (b)	(b) as percentage of (a)
<i>Social categories:</i>			
Business executives	8.0	6.8	85
Professional people	7.0	5.9	84
Investors, shareholders	6.4	6.0	94
Office workers	5.9	6.0	102
Skilled manual workers	5.6	5.6	100
Shopkeepers	4.9	4.1	84
Unskilled manual workers	4.3	4.8	111
Old age pensioners	2.5	4.7	188

### The domains

The eleven domains were all dealt with in the same way: the respondent was asked:

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with . . . x . . . ? (Using the 0 to 10 ladder);

What changes would be needed in . . . x . . . to make you more satisfied?

What sort of things could happen in . . . x . . . to make you less satisfied?

After this stage had been completed the respondent was then shown a card which listed the 11 domains, asked if he wished to add any more which were important in affecting his overall satisfaction with life, and then from the total list asked to indicate which one he thought was most important in determining his general satisfaction with life, which next most important for him, and finally which he thought least important. (In fact, very few additions were made to the list by respondents.) To arrange the replies to these supplementary questions in a ranking order, 2 points were awarded for each 'most important', 1 point for each 'next most important', and -1 for each 'least important'. The findings are summarised in Table II below.

Table II Satisfaction ratings for domains

	Scale rate <sup>1</sup> (percentages)						Average rating	Satisfaction order	Importance order
	0, 1	2, 3	4, 5	6, 7	8, 9	10			
Family life	1	2	6	10	27	54	8.8	1	2
Friendships	1	4	9	17	31	38	8.1	2	7
Health	1	3	8	19	38	31	8.0	3	1
Housing	1	3	7	25	30	34	7.9	4	5
Job	2	1	11	25	36	25	7.8	5	4
District	2	6	14	18	32	28	7.4	6	9
Leisure	2	8	13	18	33	26	7.3	7	11
Children's education	3	8	12	21	32	24	7.2	8	8
Police and courts	3	6	18	26	29	18	6.9	9	10
Welfare services	4	12	18	24	28	14	6.5	10	6
Financial situation	10	12	25	25	24	4	5.5	11	3

<sup>1</sup>Range of assessments: 0 represents complete dissatisfaction; 10 represents complete satisfaction.

