

WAPOR Session. Wednesday 14.30-18.00. Sept. 3, 1975

"Economic Policy Research & Social Indicators"

Mark Abrams: Social Indicators 1971-1975

I feel I must start with two brief comments on the printed programme about this session. The first relates to the title of the session itself; I hope we shall be dealing with social indicators in relation to social policy research rather than merely economic policy research. The second comment is in connection with the printed title of my own paper; I am not equipped to deal with anything so voluminous and wide-ranging as "social indicators 1971-75"; the most I can attempt is an account of the social indicator surveys carried out by the SSRC Survey Unit during the years 1971-75.

From the very beginning our work concentrated on subjective measures. That is, we considered that it was important to know how people felt about their circumstances. In part this was because we considered these perceptions to be the truly final measures of the worth of society's input of resources and policy; and, in part, because it was clear that many of the widely used objective measures of societal performance (e.g. crime rates, doctors per 1,000 population) were usually either arithmetically inaccurate or misleading in terms of citizen satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

At the same time we did not neglect the objective circumstances in which respondents lived since it seemed to us at least plausible that there might be some correspondence between the respondent's objective conditions (the size of his income, the type of house he lived in, the sort of job he held, etc) and his subjective evaluation of these conditions in providing him, or failing to provide him, with a satisfying life. Given this two-fold approach we expected to have

data that fell into four boxes:

Subjective measures of subjective phenomena (e.g. How much do you worry about feeling lonely)

Subjective measures of objective phenomena (e.g. How satisfied are you with your house)

Objective measures of subjective phenomena (e.g. How many tranquillisers do you take when you are worried)

Objective measures of objective phenomena (e.g. What is the size of your kitchen).

Since our interest in social indicators sprang largely from a hope that the findings would help shape policy we concentrated on those social areas most susceptible to change through governmental action. Accordingly, in all four surveys we asked the respondent to deal with the following ten aspects of his life: his job, his neighbourhood, the town he lived in, his house, his health, his leisure time, his standard of living, his financial position, his education, and his experience of the political system. In addition the respondent used a scale to indicate his 'global life satisfaction' on four perspectives - now, 4 or 5 years back, 4 or 5 years ahead, and what he felt he was entitled to.

Some of these life-domains were broken down into sub-domains so that, for example, we questioned respondents not only about their job as a whole, but also about sixteen different aspects of the job (e.g. pay, security, holidays, promotion, safety). This procedure was also used in connection with housing, and district, and, to a limited extent, with health, leisure and education.

On each domain and sub-domain respondents were asked to use a 10 to 0 scale to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with what they had.

The causal model on which the questionnaire was structured was a very simple one:

Respondent's level of satisfaction in any domain is the final outcome of a process that starts with his objective circumstances; these, through respondent's life history, are translated into perceived conditions, and these perceived circumstances are then compared by the respondent with his aspirations, expectations and values to provide him finally with satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

This basic model is the one commonly used by most people working on subjective social indicators. It has one implication which, in spite of its importance, is rarely discussed: it raises the possibility that despite substantial changes in respondent's objective circumstances his level of satisfaction remains constant over time. This can come about because the intervening perceptions, aspirations, expectations, etc. may be adjusted by the respondent to produce no change in his final level of satisfaction. For example, an elderly and ageing respondent with a falling material standard of living may maintain his level of satisfaction with his standard of living by a process of lowering his financial aspirations and expectations. Or again, a young person moving from a rather poor dwelling to what is structurally a better house may register no change in the level of his housing satisfaction because, despite the improvement in his objective circumstances, his expectations and aspirations have risen as a direct consequence of his new experience of better housing conditions.

The possibility that this self-adjusting mechanism is at work is suggested by our findings for the November/December 1973 survey and the March/April 1975 survey. The former was carried out at a time when, according to the opinion polls, there was little public awareness of the nation's economic crisis, the confrontation between the coal-miners and the Government had not yet taken place, and the unemployment rate was little more than 2 per cent. Eighteen months later there had been a change of Government, unemployment had almost doubled, the British rate of inflation was the highest in Europe, the international trade deficit seemed to be heading for an all-time high, and new taxes on consumption had been introduced.

In spite of this drastic and well-publicised deterioration in objective economic circumstances respondents' mean levels of satisfaction (on the 0-10 scale) were slightly higher on all domains except two, and the global or overall level of life satisfaction was also a little up. This picture is all the more impressive when it is remembered that in both surveys the sample was drawn from the same urban wards throughout the country.

Table 1. Mean domain scores

<u>Domain</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1975</u>
Job	8.3	8.0
Dwelling	7.8	7.8
Town of residence	7.8	8.1
Health	7.7	7.8
District	7.5	7.9
Leisure	7.5	7.7
Standard of living	7.4	7.7
Education received	6.7	6.9
British democracy	6.7	7.3
Financial position	6.6	7.3
Life as a whole	7.6	7.8

Since it is unlikely that we are dealing with a nation of masochists it seems probable that what has happened over the past two years of economic deterioration in Britain, is that the average person has maintained his levels of satisfaction by lowering his expectations. If this is so, then one can either be defeatist and decide that the accumulation of subjective indicators is pointless since their apparent failure to reflect changes in objective circumstances means that they can give no guidance to the policy-maker; or, alternatively, one can be constructive and expand the scope of enquiry so that in addition to recording objective conditions and levels of satisfaction we also probe much further into: (a) in what sense the respondent is interpreting and using the idea of 'satisfaction'; and (b) changes in the respondent's aspirations and expectations in each domain and in his overall life.

Presumably at the time of our first survey in 1971 we were vaguely aware of the need for this more positive approach since in each domain we asked people to describe first what changes would make them more satisfied and then what would make them less satisfied. This unfortunately was not continued in the 1973 survey, but was incorporated in the 1975 survey in the section on housing satisfaction. A broad comparison of the 1971 and 1975 responses on this particular question shows:

- (i) Mean housing satisfaction scores in 1971 and 1975 were almost identical (7.9 and 7.8).
- (ii) In the former year the aspirations (i.e. the changes that would raise satisfaction) tended to be (by British standards) rather high - e.g. a built-in garage, central heating, a large garden, more rooms; in 1975 the aspirations were much more modest - e.g. a single-purpose kitchen, a damp-free bedroom, clear the place of mice.

Clearly this is only a start, but it is, I suggest, a start along the right lines since it shows that over a comparatively short period people's aspirations can change quite substantially - and apparently change in a way that enables a population to sustain its level of satisfaction. In terms of usefulness it is clear that for the policy-maker the fall in aspirations is more enlightening than the stability of the satisfaction levels.

In the 1975 survey we also attempted to clarify what interpretation respondents had put into the concept of satisfaction. To do this we included a semantic differential type question in which respondents, following the phrase 'My Present Life' were asked to fill in one of the seven horizontally set out boxes between the poles:-

Does not meet my needs in any way.....	Meets my needs in every way
Is very much worse than I deserve.....	Is very much better than I deserve
Makes me extremely unhappy.....	Makes me extremely happy
Is very much worse than it used to be.....	Is very much better than it used to be
Will get very much worse in the future.....	Will get very much better in the future
Makes me extremely dissatisfied compared to other people I know.....	Makes me extremely satisfied compared to other people I know
Other people think I am extremely dissatisfied with it .....	Other people think I am extremely satisfied with it
Makes me completely dissatisfied.....	Makes me completely satisfied

The replies on the first seven pairs all correlated positively with those on the last pair; i.e. they all played some part in deciding respondent's answers to the satisfied/dissatisfied polarity. The two highest co-efficients (.65 and .61) with the satisfied/ dissatisfied replies were those where respondent was comparing his life with those



of other people he knew, and where he was rating his life in terms of the degree to which he felt it met his needs. In other words, it would seem that in arriving at a sense of overall satisfaction with life the respondent has done so after monitoring two quite volatile criteria - his perception of what he thinks other people like himself have (e.g. the elderly respondent who says she is highly satisfied with life when she sees what other old people have), and his perceptions of his needs (e.g. the elderly respondent who says that at her age her needs are very simple and then describes them in terms of a very modest diet and opportunities to watch her favourite television programmes).

Again, this addition to the 1975 survey can be regarded as only a first step towards a meaningful compilation of subjective social indicators - meaningful in the sense that we learn something about the highly mobile feelings and perceptions that underlie rather inert levels of satisfaction.