

DISCUSSION

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If I correctly understand the underlying thrust and purpose of the work on which the authors of this paper are engaged, it is an attempt first to find or to select organizing concepts around which can be developed measures of social change, and then to encourage analysis and research in the selected areas.

It is of interest--and depending on one's point of view, might be regarded either as encouraging or discouraging--that the concepts which the authors have found most useful are the conventional categories of demography, labor force, production, consumption, family and kinship, and so on. Within each of these areas, they have identified analytic tasks still to be done. With this there can be no quarrel, except on details, and it would be fruitless to pick out details for discussion from the very broad range of topics mentioned in the paper.

I would like to comment on two aspects of the paper. First, on what I believe is a suppressed goal. In spite of, or because of, their critical remarks about the economists aggregate indicators, I have a notion that what the authors would really like to do is to develop as useful an overall index as the GNP but one which would apply to the entire social order, including its social and political as well as its economic dimensions.

The goal is one which should not be lightly dismissed. A large part of the advance in the social sciences has come through improved techniques of indexing information. Kenneth Boulding ^{1/} has suggested that ". . . it is probably fundamental to all knowledge processes that we gain knowledge by the orderly loss of information. . . . Indexing is a process of filtering out irrelevant information . . ." in such a way as to make clear the broad outlines of highly complex social systems. The economists began developing price indexes in the last quarter of the 19th century; the concept of the GNP stems from the 30's. The technique is now beginning to be applied in other disciplines as well. Data collection is still basic and essential for social science research, but we may have reached a time when the important seminal work will center around use of existing data to create crude indexes--which can later be improved and provide the basis for more sophisticated data collection.

I find it difficult, however, to conceive of any single measure of social order that could sum up all the components of the social system. I think the authors are well advised to deal with segments of the social structure. I suspect that as they move on, however, they will focus more sharply on problems of measurement and of index construction within sectors.

My second comment relates to the brief section of the paper on the meaning of welfare. This is the one section where the idea of monitoring is stressed. The concept of welfare could be the beginning of a significant synthesis of separate measures and indexes. The distinction between collective welfare and distributive welfare is useful. I would question, however, the idea that welfare as here defined can be regarded as the result of deliberate social change. Some welfare activities are, of course, deliberately decided on through the political process. Many others represent the consequences of structural change in the economic and social order not directed to this end.

If I may, I will illustrate this point by reference to some of our own recent work. Mr. Stephan suggested that I describe briefly some of the current activities of the Office of Research and Statistics in the field of social statistics. The Social Security Administration started many years ago to develop a series of trend indicators based on aggregate data. For example, estimates of the total income loss from sickness or in another series the total expenditures for health and medical care, and the percent covered by private insurance or public programs. The most inclusive of these macro-indicators is the social welfare expenditure series in which we bring together estimates for the public and private sector and relate them to trend data for the GNP, total government spending and other measures.

Last year, we developed a new indicator which measures distributive rather than aggregative performance. I am referring to the SSA poverty index, which has attracted some attention and has now been adopted by the Office of Economic Opportunity for use until such time as a more refined index--on which we are working--can be developed. I will not describe the index, which has been fully explained in two recent articles in the Social Security Bulletin. ^{2/} Its major feature is that it establishes different poverty cut-off points for families of differing size and composition, based on a concept of equivalent levels of living.

Now for my illustration of the importance of generalized and nonspecific welfare trends. Using our poverty index as a classifier for income data from the CPS, there were 35.3 million persons or 19 percent of the population, living in poverty in 1963. In 1964, before specific new anti-poverty measures got under way, the number had dropped to 34.1 million or 18 percent of the population. This happy result of general economic growth was, of course, differentially distributed among various subgroups in the population. Next year an effort will have to be made to disentangle the effects of general conditions from

the effects of the war on poverty. This will not be easy, but at least we have some basis for measurement.

If as social scientists we are really to monitor social change, we will have to give increasing attention to the development of indexes that are not only descriptive but also predictive. The beginning research program which Wilbert Moore has described is surely to be welcomed and encouraged for its potential contributions to this end.

1/ In The Meaning of the 20th Century, Harper and Row, 1964.

2/ See Orshansky, M., "Counting the Poor" and "Who's Who Among the Poor," in the Social Security Bulletin, January and July 1965.