

Discussion

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Within the past two or three years, we have witnessed considerable development of efforts to measure social change as a basis for public and private decision-making. Both through scholarly research and writings and through proposed federal legislation, we have observed a drive to develop a system of national social accounting comparable to that of economic accounting of the past two decades or so.

Where and how this concerted effort to establish a system of social indicators got new impetus is not entirely clear, but several recent additions to the research literature have focused on the topic. The 1966 volume entitled Social Indicators edited by Raymond Bauer, with contributions by Bertram Gross and Al Biderman, among others, provided frameworks for measuring the relative progress which the society was making toward the achievement of national goals and values. Two special issues of the Annals edited by Gross, with contributions by a number of persons in various areas of social life, helped to focus on measurement problems in specific social fields. A Russell Sage Foundation program, initiated by Wilbert Moore and Eleanor Sheldon and reported on at an earlier ASA meeting, will lead to another published volume on monitoring social change.

These scholarly approaches have been complemented by the legislative approach of Senator Mondale of Minnesota and ten of his senatorial colleagues who proposed a "Full Opportunity and Social Accounting Act", which provides for (1) an annual Social Report of the President, (2) a Council of Social Advisers, and (3) a Joint Congressional Committee on the Social Report (consisting of 8 Senators and 8 Representatives) to review the Report and transmit the findings to the Congress, each of these to parallel the present system of economic advice and reporting. Congressional hearings have been held on this proposal.

It is probable that both scholarly and legislative discussions of social accounting found root in the published series of social trends and indicators developed by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare several years ago, and in the Social Indicators Panel of experts set up by that agency to advise it. Additional impetus for the movement has come from the National Commission on Technology, Automation, and Economic Progress which found that "our ability to measure social change has lagged behind our ability to measure strictly economic change," and from the President's call to HEW to "develop the necessary social statistics and indicators to supplement those prepared by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Council of Economic Advisers."

These several developments suggest that the time is perhaps ripe for a new era of broad

social accounting similar to that of purely economic accounting in earlier years, and that it is only a matter of how quickly the necessary federal legislation will be passed and the machinery created to provide the basis for charting the direction and pace of social change in our society.

If, in fact, this new era is upon us, social scientists have little time in which to help decision-makers formulate a sound basis for indicating changes in the society. The term "social indicators" itself lacks common definition. On the one hand, it is used to refer to rates, ratios, and other indexes, singly or in combination, which provide signs of increasing or decreasing trends and stability or fluctuation of social phenomena. On the other hand, it is sometimes used to refer to the more complex multivariate models of change, providing not only signs of change but analysis of interrelationships of variables and of factors producing the change.

Both types of approaches have proved useful in tracking the state of the economy. The unemployment rate, GNP, interest rates, consumer price indexes, and other single measures have aided us in detecting when the economy was prospering or had weaknesses, and more detailed economic analyses of the labor force, the market place, and the monetary system suggested alternative avenues of action, if action was needed. With regard to other social phenomena, similar accounting would seem appropriate.

Several steps appear necessary in developing and employing social indicators. Enumeration of these steps and examination of the phenomena of social stratification and welfare in these terms provide one way of discussing two of the papers presented here.

1. Conceptualization of the phenomenon we want to measure. What is the phenomenon in question, and what do we want to know about it?

2. Operational indicators of the phenomenon. What specific items of information can we obtain to operationally measure the phenomenon? Are they valid measures of the phenomenon?

3. Collection of data on the operational indicators. Are they reliable? Are they available frequently enough? Are they collected at critical points in time?

4. Standardization of operational indicators. What are the appropriate statistics for comparing the indicators over time and among groups?

5. Analysis and interpretation of operational indicators. What amount of statistical

change or difference is required to speak of a "real" change or difference? What can we conclude about the operational indicators?

6. How should the operational indicators lead us to interpret the condition of the phenomenon in question, and what action, if any, should be taken on the basis of this?

Dudley Duncan's paper on the trend in social stratification does not come to grips with all of these questions. He first limits his discussion to certain aspects of the general area of social stratification, distinguishing between the static aspects of stratification--the range and distribution of social ranks, which he chooses not to deal with--and the dynamic aspects. On the dynamic side, he distinguishes between measuring the extent of social mobility in the society and the dependence of an individual's achievement on his social origins, the latter which he takes as his central analytical problem.

Professor Duncan would certainly find disagreement from some sociologists concerning his conceptual formulation, since there is still considerable sociological debate regarding the theoretical framework for viewing social stratification. Whether one wishes or not to call the hierarchy of social positions in a society "social stratification" is a matter of semantics. It is clear that the nature of inequalities in social ranks is a matter of social importance, as is the intergenerational transmission of status. In the one case, we are more concerned with the structure of the society; in the latter case, we are more concerned with individual opportunities to achieve. Recognizing this distinction, I would be quick to point out that the author is entitled to single out that aspect of the more general problem which he will treat in a relatively short paper.

With regard to operational indicators of status, Duncan does not attempt to make a case for choosing the variable "occupation." There is a vast literature which supports the choice of occupation as the best single indicator of social status, and yet there are many aspects of status which are imperfectly measured this way. For example, the very topical national issue about the distribution of power and opportunity to achieve it is certainly an element of the social stratification system but is not adequately indexed by occupational rank alone. In terms of availability and reliability of data, the selection of occupation as an operational indicator of one aspect of social stratification seems highly justified. What weaknesses there are in the data are specifically recognized by the author, and his evaluation of these data and attempt to standardize data from different sources are to be admired and emulated.

Duncan's analysis and interpretation of the data he is working with reveals high levels of sophistication and objectivity. His use of

correlation and regression methods, and particularly of path analysis, permit him to reach reliable and meaningful conclusions about the trend in social stratification, at least of changes in the intergenerational transmission of occupational status.

In summary, Duncan's careful analysis of occupational data for fathers and sons enables him to reliably conclude that there has been no significant trends in the intergenerational transmission of occupational status. Trends in other aspects of social stratification remain open to question and need to be examined. More attention needs to be paid to problems in the development of operational indicators of social status, both of a substantive and methodological nature. It is no criticism of the author to point out these apparent weaknesses in his paper, since those who know his broader work in this area realize that he has been concerned with all of the issues mentioned. As a student of social stratification, I sleep better at night knowing that Dudley Duncan is devoting much of his energies to this subject.

As I read Dr. Merriam's paper, it seemed that "welfare," as she defined it, was not unrelated to "social stratification," in its broader context. Assuming this, it was interesting that she chose income, the economist's favorite, as the best indicator, in contrast to occupation, the sociologist's favorite.

Dr. Merriam was considerably vague in her conceptualization of general welfare and did not attempt to be convincing in her choice of income as an indicator of welfare. She does not deal with non-economic theoretical views of welfare, reflected in the recent statement of S. M. Miller and associates that "...income is only one of the dimensions of poverty and inequality today" and that there are "...six dimensions of well-being--income, assets, basic services, education and social mobility, political position, and status and self-respect."

Dr. Merriam does evaluate income data, including its relation to assets, but satisfies herself that the high correlations involved justify dealing with current money income alone as an indicator of welfare. She distinguishes between two major approaches to measuring income inequalities--the poverty-line approach and the income-shares approach--and properly identifies these as independently useful measures of separate but equally relevant national problems--of poverty and of the general distribution of income. Her paper does not specifically explore the matter of interpretation of data, nor does she, any more than Professor Duncan, discuss the transition from analysis of operational indicators to understanding of the general phenomenon in question.

In viewing systems of social indicators generally, several points, some of them made by other persons at other times, need emphasis.

1. We need to know what the indicators are for. Biderman's framework of assessing achievement of stated national goals appears to be a logical one and, if agreed upon as a framework, may engender more explicit statements about goals.

2. Distinction between relatively simple indicators of goal achievement and more complex understanding of change needs to be made and both need doing. The latter is crucial to guiding policy-makers to proper social action.

3. The development of new data sources, where information about assessment of goals is lacking, and greater flexibility in data-collection techniques, where some information is available but some is not, should be a concern of government leaders.

4. Problems of definition, analysis, and interpretation of critical variables require greater attention. Utility should take priority

over tradition. Such data illnesses as "multiple seriosis" (or inconsistencies among different data sources in the purported measure of the same phenomenon), what Gross has called "hardening of the categories" (or rigidity in the operational measurement of phenomena regardless of utility), and "withdrawal symptoms" (or reluctance of data-gathering agencies to collect data in areas where politicians fear to tread) must be remedied.

Raymond Bauer has written that "For many of the important topics on which social critics blithely pass judgment, and on which policies are made, there are no yardsticks by which to know if things are getting better or worse." If policy-makers are now to adopt and institutionalize a system of social indicators, it is important that knowledgeable social statisticians make recommendations at the outset and continue to advise on modifications and additions. A good start has been made, but we must step up our activity and present our case lest policy-makers go it alone.