

Angus Campbell, Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan

Like many of you I have a strong interest in descriptive statistics and I found the reports the speakers are responsible for full of fascinating data. Perhaps a somewhat different selection of tables might have been chosen by people with different interests but as a collection of general interest data, I can't fault it. Some people might have preferred more textual material, more analytic interpretation of the data. The British publication Social Trends, for example, uses more commentary. But this takes up space and reduces the total display of data. It may also discourage readership--some people find it more congenial to scan through a succession of tables than to read someone's explanation of what they mean. I think I prefer the format these reports have followed, many tables with a minimum of comment.

I propose to restrict my comments to some observations as to the potential social value these reports have. You are certainly aware that social scientists are under some pressure these days to show the social relevance of the research they are doing, to prove that the utility of their research justifies the cost. I think myself that there is a certain amount of know-nothing, anti-intellectualism mixed up in this but some of it is coming from rather high places and we would be prudent to take the question seriously.

Denis Johnston says that Social Indicators 76 is designed to satisfy (or arouse) curiosity but not to provide "prescriptions for action" or "understanding." He has borrowed this terminology from Richard Stone at Cambridge University. Let me first consider curiosity.

I have no doubt that the data in these reports will stimulate the curiosity of many readers. I find, for example, in Health, United States, 1975, that black people in this country are less likely to lose their teeth than white people. This strikes me as very curious in view of the fact that loss of teeth is quite clearly associated with income level and that, on the average, black people visit a dentist only about half as often as white people do. That bit of information will remain a curiosity to me; it is not likely to affect any research I do or any decision I may be party to. But to an epidemiologist interested in dental caries it would certainly be much more than a curiosity, it would be close to the heart of his professional interests.

On the other hand, I see from The Condition of Education, 1976, that the percent of population participating in adult education activities has almost doubled between 1967 and 1975. And that is considerably more than a curiosity to me because it has far-reaching implications for my profession and the institution which employs me. The moral is, I suggest, that what is one person's curiosity is another person's obsession.

Now what about using these data as "prescriptions for action"? I think Denis Johnston is wise in pointing out that there are many considerations that intervene between the informational inputs that flow out of these reports and any subsequent acts of decision. There is, in my view, a good deal of naivete abroad in the land about how research gets turned into action. The picture of an anxious public administrator waiting for the one right table that will solve all his problems is surely not very true to life. And the expectations of some high level public officials that social science should produce an effective "fix" for such social pathologies as crime and the fragmentation of families is also not very realistic. It must also be admitted that some of our social science colleagues have got a little overheated in their belief that they had the one right answer in such programs as the War on Poverty. And some of the predications they launched on the public five or ten years ago do not look very good in retrospect.

There is no doubt that those of us in the social sciences have a great deal to feel modest about. At the same time there is clear evidence that policy-makers are listening to what the social scientists have to say. The Institute for Social Research has recently completed a study of the utilization of social science data by high-ranking officials in the executive offices of the federal government. This study, which was under the direction of Nathan Caplan, interviewed 204 people just below cabinet rank. These people were asked if they had at any point made use of social science information, other than specifically economic information, in their decisions as government officials. Nine out of ten said they had and they reported a total of 575 specific instances of such use. There was some duplication in these reports, leaving some 450 separate cases of the use of data growing out of social science research, excluding economic data.

Is this figure impressively high or disappointingly low? Perhaps some of both--it at least shows that these people were aware of some the output of social scientists. It would be interesting to know if this awareness is growing but that we cannot know from a single study. None of the reported instances of data use was crashingly dramatic. Many of them resulted from specific studies the agencies themselves had sponsored; half of them dealt with inhouse problems. However, a large fraction of them were drawn from survey research findings, demographic research and social statistics of one kind or another. Nearly all of these people expressed an interest in data which we classified as falling within the realm of social indicators.

It is interesting to see the priority these people gave to the uses of social science data, the order of utilities they saw in these data. They ordered their usefulness as follows:

1. Sensitizing policy-makers to social needs,
2. Evaluation of ongoing programs,
3. Structuring alternative policies,
4. Implementation of programs,
5. Justification of policy decisions,
6. Providing a basis for choosing among policy alternatives.

I don't cite the data from the Caplan study to demonstrate how important social scientists, other than economists, have become in public affairs-- I don't believe they demonstrate that. They may be useful, however as an antidote to the sense of despair some social scientists seem to feel, the feeling that no one is paying any attention to what they are doing. On the contrary, these federal executives were very much interested in what was going on in the world of social science and concerned with learning more about it.

Now let me return to Denis Johnston's statement and ask whether social indicators can be expected to provide "understanding." I would think this depends on what we mean by understanding." In 1960 Rensis Likert gave the presidential address to this Association; his title was "The Dual Function of Statistics." His argument was that data are of two kinds, those that describe the state of an organism or system and those that explain its nature. Johnston is saying that social indicators will describe the state of society but will not provide an understanding of its functioning, and in this he is probably right. I would point out, however, that we are very unlikely to achieve an understanding of the nature of our society's functioning until we know the basic descriptive facts about the state of our society.

You are well aware that there is a certain impatience in some circles with what is called "measurement without theory." People with this point of view would like to have a model or theory that explains the nature of society before one undertakes to take measurements of the state of society. This argument is reviewed by Dudley Duncan in his Russell Sage monograph, Toward Social Reporting, and I cannot resist a brief quotation from it.

"To sum up, if not caricature, the two positions: The 'theorist' says, 'Let us think long and hard about what we want to measure and why. Then we will feel confident about what ought to be done by the way of making observations.' The 'inductivist' responds 'Let us see if we can measure something, for whatever reason, and standardize our measurements so that we achieve an acceptable level of reliability. Then let us study how the quantity being measured behaves. If we can figure that out, we will have come to understand why we made the measurement in the first place.

It is suggested that the history of science will provide instances in which each

of these approaches was successful. Anything that works cannot be dogmatically rejected. The strategic question at a given moment, of course, is where to place one's bets. My own assessment at this time is that those who have approached the problem of social reporting with the strongest theoretical presuppositions have possibly made the least impressive contribution thus far."

If we take a less exalted definition of understanding than I think Denis intended I think it is clear that social indicators do have an important influence on what decision-makers and the public at large understand social reality to be. Descriptive data can change their perceptions, their cognitive map of society, and the consequences may be far reaching.

Consider for example the change in the racial situation in this country since World War II. I would not argue that the development of descriptive data about the status of black people was solely responsible for this change but I believe firmly that it contributed significantly to it. When I began teaching social psychology in 1936 there was virtually nothing I could assign my students on the realities of the caste system in the United States. To these white, middle-class young people the black population was virtually invisible. Toward the end of this decade there came a series of books describing the lives of black people, Franklin Frazier's The Negro Family in 1939, John Dollard's Caste and Class in a Southern Town, the American Council on Education series on black youth, and in 1944 Gunnar Myrdal's The American Dilemma.

What these books did was to heighten the awareness of the book-reading public to the facts of life about black people, to the racial system of caste and class. In the modern idiom, they were "consciousness raiding." Or to use the language of our study of federal executives, they "sensitized policy-makers to social needs."

I think the same kind of case can be made concerning the change in public policy toward poverty. Fifty years ago poverty was generally understood as a failure of will or a weakness of moral character, people in poverty were thought to be to blame for their condition, and the accepted solution was for these misled people to straighten up and go to work. Some people still see poverty in those terms. But a great deal of information about people in poverty has been publicized in this country in the last 25 years and we have moved to a different perception of the realities of being poor, a realization that very few of the poor are able-bodied men who are avoiding work and that most of the poor are trapped in situations from which they have very little possibility of escape. Because this change in understanding has come about, it is now possible for the Congress to give serious consideration to legislation to guarantee a minimum annual income, a proposal which would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

In my view the major value of the kinds of statistics we see in these publications is that they

restructure people's view of the world; they introduce reality into their perceptions of society. They may also occasionally provide a piece of information that is specifically relevant to some action decision but more importantly they provide what Albert Biderman has called "enlightenment."

I want to make one additional observation about Denis Johnston's paper. I want to compliment him on his courage in supplementing the objective measures of well-being he will include in Social Indicators 76 with subjective measures of satisfactions and other aspects of life experience. I should point out in this connection that The Condition of Education also presents a number of such measures. I say "courage" because, as you well know, there are a good many statisticians and economists who cannot feel comfortable with measures that do not have the qualities of a ratio scale, with a true zero point and equal intervals. For them subjective measures are simply "too subjective" and they would far rather use some surrogate whose measurement qualities they have confidence in.

Unhappily, as John Tukey has recently pointed out, "It is often much worse to have a good measurement of the wrong thing than to have poor measurement of the right thing--especially when, as is so often the case, the wrong thing will in fact be used as an indicator of the right thing." Nowhere

is Tukey's observation more pointedly relevant than in current efforts to measure quality of life. Despite what is to me the obvious fact that the quality of a person's life is known only to him through his personal experience, there persists an obstinate conviction that we can get a truer measure of this experience by counting that person's income and savings than we can by asking him how his life feels to him.

I think Denis is absolutely right in stating that "one of the ultimate objectives of the social indicator movement is to enhance our ability to assess the quality of our lives and that it is "far-fetched" to imagine that we can accomplish this with any single composite index. What we obviously need is continuing development of both objective and subjective measures and a determined effort to discover how they are related to each other and how they both may be optimally used to help understand the changes which are taking place in American society.

I recently came upon a quotation which I think is particularly apt to our discussion today. It reads, "If we could first know where we are and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it." These lines were spoken by Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, on June 16, 1858. He was not talking about social indicators but his observation is as appropriate to our time as it was to his.