RUUT VEENHOVEN

WHY SOCIAL POLICY NEEDS SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS

ABSTRACT. There are many qualms about subjective indicators, and some believe that social policy would be better for not using them. This paper consists of a review of these objections. It is argued that policy makers need subjective indicators, the main reasons being:

1. Social policy is never limited to merely material matters; it is also aimed at matters of mentality. These substantially subjective goals require subjective indicators.
2. Progress in material goals can not always be measured objectively. Subjective measurement is often better.
3. Inclusive measurement is problematic with objective substance. Current sum-scores make little sense. Using subjective satisfaction better indicates comprehensive quality.
4. Objective indicators do little to inform policy makers about public preferences. Since the political process also does not reflect public preferences too well, policy makers need additional information from opinion polls.
5. Policy makers must distinguish between ‘wants’ and ‘needs’. Needs are not observable as such, but their gratification materialises in the length and happiness of peoples’ lives. This final output criterion requires assessment of subjective appreciation of life-as-a-whole.

INTRODUCTION

There is a longstanding controversy in social indicators research between the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ approach. In the objective approach the focus is on measuring ‘hard’ facts, such as income in dollars or living accommodation in square meters. The subjective approach in contrast considers ‘soft’ matters such as satisfaction with income and perceived adequacy of dwelling. The objective approach roots in the tradition of social statistics, which dates back to the 19th century. The subjective approach stems from survey research, which took off in the 1960’s. The objective approach is similar to mainstream economic indicators.
research, though the topics differ, the method is the same. The subjective approach is akin to the psychological stream found in economic indicators research, which monitors things like consumer trust (Katona, 1975) and subjective poverty (VanPraag et al., 1980).

The objective approach is currently central in the Scandinavian countries, in particular in the Swedish ‘level of living’ studies. From the beginning the basic tenet has been that social policy needs hard facts in the first place (Johansson, 2001). Hence Scandinavian social surveys do not involve items on matters like ‘trust’ and ‘happiness’. Similarly, the Dutch ‘welfare-index’ focuses on material living conditions (Boelhouwer, 1999). Though the Dutch welfare survey contains items about happiness and stress since the 1970’s, these data are seldom reported. The subjective approach originates from the US. Landmark studies have been published by Campbell et al. (1975) and by Andrews and Withey (1976). This approach is further refined in the German ‘welfare studies’ (Glatzer and Zapf, 1984). Specializations have been developed on subjects such as perceived poverty (VanPraag et al., 1980), values (Inglehart, 1990) and happiness (Veenhoven, 1997).

Defenders of the objective approach hold that social indicators serve to guide social policy and that social policy makers need information about (1) the actual state of social problems, and (2) the effects of attempts to solve these problems. This information should be of an indisputable nature, in other words ‘objectively true’, and this scientific truth should enable rational social engineering. In this view, subjective indicators will distort the technocratic policy process and will give a voice to the irrationalities that have always hampered scientific management.

In this paper I evaluate the objectivistic position. To do this, I first examine the difference between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ indicators in more detail. Then I take a closer look at the misgivings to be found about subjective indicators. Next I will explain why social policy still needs subjective indicators and why objective indicators taken alone are inadequate.