Conceptual Models for the Development and Use of Social Indicators

1. Introduction—Reflections on Wolfgang Zapf and German Social Reporting

Wolfgang Zapf is one of the leading members of the German social science community of the past 30 years. He was the pioneer in the development of social indicators in post-war Germany and in the production of the first German Social Report in the 1970s. One of us remembers well Professor Zapf’s defense of the social indicators used in the first German Social Report against an unrelenting attack by a fellow participant at a conference on social indicators and social reporting in 1978 at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France. The passing of time has stood Professor Zapf’s work well. The key importance of his work in the 1970s was that it was conducted and published and, thereby, provided a foundation upon which social scientists subsequently could build and improve.

In this contribution, as a tribute to Professor Zapf’s social indicators and social reporting work, we review some examples of how conceptual models can guide the development and uses of social indicators. We first review Land’s (2002) updating of his social systems model (first published in 1975) of how social indicators can be developed and connected conceptually for the assessment of impacts of social programs, organizations, and institutions on society. Then we sketch the essentials of Ferriss’s (2001) development of the “telesis” conceptual model as a device for showing how social indicators can be used to set goals and develop programs to change social conditions. As an illustration of the application of these conceptual models, we study the successes and shortcomings of the Healthy People 2000 program in the United States.
2. The Use of Social System Models in Social Impact Assessment—Updating Land’s 1975 Conceptual Model

Conceptual models for the definition, development, and use of social indicators can be quite useful. One of these, developed early in the social indicators’ literature by Land (1975), applied a social systems perspective to the definition and organization of several types of social indicators for the purpose of social impact assessment. Recently, in an essay on the use of social indicators for assessing the impact of private, not-for-profit sector on society, Land (2002) presented a modified and updated version of this conceptual model, which we now review.

Consider the problem of using social indicators to measure the impact of the nonprofit sector on society. For this purpose, Land (2002) adapted the social systems conceptual scheme for social indicator models introduced by Land (1975), as diagrammed in Figure 1. This diagram identifies five types of descriptive indicators bound together in the context of a social system model connecting all indicator variables, a mode which itself contains analytic indicators. This model begins with the conventional distinction between exogenous variables (those determined outside the model) and endogenous variables (those determined within the model). Within the class of exogenous variables, the scheme further distinguishes between input descriptive indicators (those exogenous variables which can be manipulated in a nonprofit organizational or institutional context) and nonmanipulable exogenous descriptive indicators (those exogenous variables which are determined outside the system under consideration and cannot be manipulated).

Similarly, within the class of endogenous variables, the scheme distinguishes between output descriptive indicators (indicators of the quantity and other characteristics of organizational or institutional products, as they relate to the primary mission of the organization/institution), end-product or outcome descriptive indicators (indicators of the benefits of organizational/institutional outputs for those individuals or populations served by, or otherwise involved with, the organization or institution), and side-effect descriptive indicators (indicators of general social conditions influenced by the output and outcome indicators).

The distinction of output from outcome indicators is a key point of updating of the schematic model of Figure 1 from that presented in Land (1975). When used in the assessment of the impacts of an organization or institution, it has become apparent in the intervening decades that it often is useful to distinguish the direct products produced from the benefits these products may have for those individuals or populations involved with the organization or institution. Specific examples in the case of a specific type of nonprofit organization are cited below.

Relating these five sets of indicators, the figure portrays a model or system of relationships which identify certain parameters or analytic indicators of the production and related processes represented in the model. The main relationships determining the output and outcome indicators are indicated by solid arrows and those deter-