ABSTRACT. Modern societies in both developing and developed countries have real and legitimate concerns about the enhancement, maintenance, and redistribution of individual well-being. Indicators of perceived well-being provide direct measures of what societies are trying to achieve, permit cross-sector comparisons, can indicate the adequacy of coverage of 'objective' indicators, and can contribute to social policy making, in both the long and short run. Some commentators, however, have suggested perceptual indicators suffer from methodological weaknesses associated with their validity, interpretability, completeness, and utility. Each of these possible weaknesses is addressed in some detail. New research evidence and certain philosophical perspectives are presented, and it is concluded that none of these presumed weaknesses is sufficient to invalidate the development and use of perceptual indicators. Suggestions are made concerning methodological research needed to support the development of indicators of perceived well-being. It is noted that the materials and results developed in the author's research on Americans' perceptions of life quality may be useful for suggesting approaches to the development of indicators of perceived life quality relevant to other cultures.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is near-universal agreement that promotion of individual well-being, at least in the long run, is one of the legitimate goals – perhaps the most important goal – of the modern state. Under the optimistic plans of the First and Second United Nations Development Decades, there were hopes – some of which are being fulfilled – of substantially increasing the well-being of hundreds of millions of individuals in developing countries. But the promotion of individual well-being is not limited to developing countries; each of the more developed countries also is seeking to achieve increases in the well-being of its people. In short, promotion of individual well-being is a worldwide phenomenon.

With the growing recognition of actual and incipient global shortages of food and other critical resources, the hopes of the 1960's are being tempered by a new sense of the limits to growth imposed by the size and nature of our planet. In the mid-1970's issues concerning the maintenance and re-distribution of individual well-being may well become of as great
concern as the promotion of increased well-being. However, whether the focus is on enhancement, maintenance, or redistribution, the basic concern is with the well-being of individuals.

Well-being is broadly conceived to mean the ‘level’ of life quality — i.e., the extent to which pleasure and satisfaction characterize human existence and the extent to which people can avoid the various miseries which are potentially the lot of each of us.

Relatively little is scientifically known about such broadly conceived well-being — either in the makeup of its constituent parts, or in the conditions and influences which tend to bring it about. This is not to say, however, that people have not been concerned about the topic. Legions of philosophers and poets and religious leaders and revolutionaries, over several thousand years, have offered their insights on how to achieve the ‘good life’. However, the tools of modern social science — rigorous conceptualization, valid measurement, broadly representative data, and sophisticated analysis — have only recently begun to be adequate to permit exploration of individual well-being.

We would submit that the worldwide movement toward the development, monitoring, and increased use of social indicators is evidence of a desire to measure, understand, and influence individual well-being. The current movement to collect and collate an increasingly broad range of social indicators, a movement underway in most of the more developed countries, some of the developing countries, and in several international organizations, represents an exciting attempt to begin applying the insights and methods of science to this age-old human concern.

Social indicators currently being developed can be classified into two broad types, sometimes referred to as ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’. In general, the former consist of counts of various types of phenomena, whereas the latter are based on people’s perceptions and feelings.

To date, most efforts at developing social indicators have focused on the ‘objective’ indicators. One purpose of this paper is to suggest that the ‘objective’ measures are only indirect measures of individual well-being and that more direct perceptual measures also need to be developed, measured, monitored over time, analysed, and interpreted. We suggest that these measures provide a vitally important complement to the ‘objective’ measures which are currently receiving what may be a disproportionate share of time, energy, and attention.