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THE SOCIAL MEANING OF SOCIAL INDICATORS*

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ABSTRACT. While new modes of data processing have provided reams of data, there has been relatively less effort in seeking to comprehend the social meaning of results of empirical work. A set of previously developed indicators of urban social structure is here examined for its link to theory, and to the social structure of the city itself. The original indicators (size, social class, racial composition and community maturity) were empirically derived. In this paper, each is taken in turn, and explored with respect to several possible social meanings. Size, for example, is considered to be itself an indicator, and an imperfect one, for system complexity; percent non-white is seen to be itself an indicator for a slowdown in the mobility process, or a slower social metabolism. These and other results are suggestions, with illustrations, but not conclusive support, from other than the original data. While it is hoped that the theoretical suggestions may themselves be of interest, it is also hoped that approach itself can indicate the fertility and usefulness of going back to theory once empirical measures have been developed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research often alternates between empirical assessment on the one hand, and theoretical formulation on the other. Where one begins the process is largely a matter of choice and personal history, as long as one does not remain in that particular phase. Let us begin by considering the empirical development of community indicators, and then move to a discussion of the social context and meaning which each of them may have.

The rather large amount of data developing on the local community throughout the 1950's and 1960's was providing a great source of richness for social investigators. Yet, it was also becoming increasingly difficult to use much of the data because of the processing difficulties, slight differences in definition of units, and so forth. One of the first attempts to address this problem directly came from Professors Hadden and Borgatta (1965) in their volume, American Cities, Their Social Characteristics. From a variety of published sources, the authors selected 65 variables thought to be key indicators of various dimensions of community structure. These variables were factor analyzed, and considered by different size classes of city, as well as by 'all cities', and 'central cities'. The results of these analyses were a set of 12
variables which Hadden and Borgatta felt described key dimensions of community structure. These were as follows:

- Total Population
- Median Income
- Percent Non-White
- Percent Foreign Born
- Density
- Percent Same House, 1955–60
- Percent Population Increase, 1950–60
- Percent Single Dwelling Units
- Median Age
- Percent Migrants
- Index No. 1: Deprivation Index
- Index No. 2: Educational Center

These variables provided a useful point of commencement for the development of an understanding of community structure. As reported in the book, however, they were simply an empirically derived list, and attached to no specific conceptual frame reference. For that reason, it seems appropriate to consider them indicators of community composition, rather than social indicators, or aspects of social structure, because the relationship between the variables themselves and social structure needed to be detailed.

A beginning attempt at this work is reported in an earlier paper entitled ‘Critical Dimensions of Community Structure: A Re-Examination of the Hadden-Borgatta Findings’. (Tropman, 1969). Four concepts are employed to account for the original 12 variables. The reorganization is shown in Figure 1. Basically, it seemed that Size, Class, Race, and Maturity/Growth were key concepts which could be used to describe the community. The variables clustered in a way as to suggest that there were several measures of maturity/growth, and a single measure of class.1

The four variables provided a point of departure. We had some confidence that these dimensions would prove to be salient aspects of community structure. Yet several cautions had to be borne in mind. First, the original work had an empirical, not a conceptual thrust. Despite the ‘reexamination’, there was work to be done in the area of understanding the social meaning of the variables. Secondly, one must recognize that 65 variables are actually a