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Can Consumer Dissatisfaction and Complaints Guide Public Consumer Policy?

Zusammenfassung

Abstract
In this paper an account is given of some subjective indicators of consumer satisfaction with the quality of products and other aspects of purchasing and consumption. The indicators discussed are “problems”, “complaints”, and “reported satisfaction.” The difficulties inherent in interpreting such data are stressed. The author’s conclusion is that measures of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are almost unusable as a basis for setting priorities in public consumer policy, albeit concrete descriptions of consumer problems can give some guidance. In the main, however, the ambition must be to develop objective indicators of consumer welfare.

All institutions representing the consumer interest have limited financial resources and a modestly sized staff. This applies to ministries preparing laws, agencies with supervisory and investigative tasks, product testing institutes, voluntary consumer organizations and local consumer groups. Consequently, the setting of priorities must always be very urgent in planning the institution’s work. One basis, sometimes used for priority setting and resource allocation, is studies of consumer dissatisfaction with various phenomena in the consumption sphere. I do not maintain that such studies constitute the only, or even the most important, guiding principle (although in certain countries, they seem to be quite influential). It is obvious that many fundamental considerations of a different, political or ideological, character also play their role – and should play their role – in the choice of activities. What I want to discuss in this paper is a more limited problem: To the extent that consumer agencies desire to collect data about consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction as a part of the basis for setting priorities, what difficulties lurk in the interpretation of such data? Furthermore, since in this paper the emphasis is put on analysing such expressions of dissatisfaction (and satisfaction) which conceivably are useful guides to public consumer policy makers, other possible reactions to discontent such as abstention from buying – exit in Hirschman’s (1970) terminology – are largely disregarded.
SOME BASIC DISTINCTIONS

In the social indicators literature, a distinction is usually made between, on the one hand, such measures which build upon reports from individual citizens about their feelings of happiness, satisfaction, etc., and on the other, such measures which gauge welfare independently of the individual's appraisal of his own situation. The former indicators are as a rule called *subjective*, the latter *objective*, and although there is sometimes a risk that these terms are misleading or not precise enough, the established terminological convention is used in the present paper.

What has primarily been discussed as possible indicators of our well-being as consumers are unequivocally subjective indicators, i.e., the consumer's personal evaluation of products, stores, services, etc. However, objective indicators are also conceivable; both those for which data are collected by interviews with consumers, and those that are obtained without contact with the individual consumer. In the former case, the attempt is made in an interview to collect as much detailed information as possible about defects in goods which have been bought, the information that has been available in the purchase situation, the need for service which has emerged and how it has been met, etc. Instead of emphasizing attitudes and feelings, one obtains descriptions of facts, behaviours, habits, and knowledge. Undoubtedly certain subjective factors bias all measures which build upon a person's report of his own situation; still, a distinction can be made between interviews aiming at establishing facts (objective indicators) and those aiming at obtaining the respondent's subjective evaluations of these facts (subjective indicators).

Furthermore, it may be possible to obtain objective indicators of the consumer's situation without conducting any interviews at all. Some examples of this could be the distance (in time or space) from a household to its nearest food store; time series describing the development of quality, length of life, service costs and prices of various goods; studies of the informative content of advertising and other sales promotion; etc. Some further examples are given towards the end of the paper.

Another conceptual distinction also has to be mentioned. In U.S. literature, it has been suggested that a distinction be made between *macro-marketing system* dissatisfaction and *micro-marketing system* dissatisfaction (Renoux, 1973). To the first category would belong such discontent which is not directly tied to specific products, shops, or manufacturers. Discontent with the micro-marketing system can, in its turn, be divided into three subcategories, according to Renoux: shopping-system dissatisfaction, buying-system dissatisfaction, and consuming-system dissatisfaction.

Borderlines between such categories are of course often very arbitrary and difficult to draw. Still, Renoux's main dichotomy serves the function of drawing our attention to the fact that hitherto proposed indicators of consumer well-being, subjective as well as objective, primarily concern the micro-marketing system: products, stores, customer services, etc. To be sure, attitude studies have occasionally been published, in which the attitudes of consumers towards more fundamental aspects of marketing policies were ascertained (regarding the volume of advertising, the pros and cons of product development rates, product safety, environmental consequences of private consumption, etc.); see, e.g., Barksdale and Darden (1972), van Westendorp and Knecht (1974), and investigations of attitudes