Social indicators and social equity

Mark Abrams

People's own, and an outsider's, judgment of their happiness differs notably. Research reveals a widespread feeling of cheated expectations.

In a recent small survey carried out for the Social Science Research Council Survey Unit, two men were interviewed on the same day in a large industrial town in the midlands—a college teacher in his middle thirties and an old-age pensioner in his early seventies. From the conventional "hard" data on the completed questionnaires, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the teacher was "better off" than the pensioner. The teacher's take-home pay was over £2,000 a year. His education had included a post-graduate year at a training college. He owned the house in which he and his wife and two children lived. His domestic goods included a car and a telephone, and his most recent holiday had been spent in France and Italy. The pensioner's income was little more than 10 per cent of the teacher's gross salary, and he lived alone in a council flat. His formal education had finished at the age of 14. Like his younger neighbour, he had a television set. But unlike him, he had no car, no garden, no bank account, no telephone; and he had not been away from home for a holiday for several years.

Yet when the two men were asked to use a 1 to 7 scale to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with their lives (7=complete satisfaction, 1=complete dissatisfaction), the teacher gave himself a rating of 2 while the pensioner pointed to a score of 6.

The rationale behind the teacher's self-rating of 2 began to emerge as he talked about particular aspects of his life. He thought the district needed a lot of improvement. "It would be better if we had a community centre, better public transport, and a children's playground." He would "like to add an extra room over my garage, and put in complete central heating." And his "job would be more satisfying if I could get promotion and more money." He would like to see some substantial changes in the welfare services. "We need a vast improvement in hospital and maternity services; a vast increase in dental services; no charges for any medical services and extra help for unmarried mothers; assistance in the home for the aged and physically handicapped; free public transport for old-age pensioners; and all school meals free up to the age of 16." Looking back on his life, there are many things he would want changed. "A different type of education. I should have studied the arts and music more; and ideally prepared for a different job—one where I had a good measure of freedom and autonomy, and where I had technical skills on which the lives of others depended and which gave me more opportunities to meet interesting and exciting people."

Behind the pensioner's high level of satisfaction with his life, there were some regrets and disappointments, and a few fears, but of an entirely different order from those that beset the teacher. He thought it a pity that wages had been so low and jobs so scarce in the years after the Great War when he was in his prime. He rated his health as "reasonably good, but I'd like to get rid of this sciatica, it stops me from getting about. In fact, any sort of illness would be bad because I haven't anyone to look after me. And apart from illness, I suppose I would like it if more people were able to come in and see me and spend a bit of time talking." His views on the social services were brief: "I really don't know; I haven't had much to do with the welfare."

It is this sort of paradox—material prosperity being sometimes linked with frustration, while apparent satisfaction with life is expressed by some who live in poverty—that has led to a second wave of thinking in the "social indicators movement." The "movement" had its origins in the mid-1960s when American social scientists expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional economic indicators (unemployment rates, income per head and so on) as adequate measures of social improvement. They put forward the argument that performance could be better assessed by bringing together a range of other statistics—for example, rates of crime detection, number of prescriptions dispensed, size of school classes, number of houses built.

There are two obvious shortcomings in this approach. First, it is impossible to aggregate the various series into a single index of total wellbeing. Secondly, private discontent may well grow with some forms of social improvement. Both would limit the usefulness of the "indicators" for social policy decision-makers.

To try to overcome these two weaknesses, some American social scientists have been developing subjective measures of the quality of life. Professor Angus Campbell of Michigan says: "The quality of life must be in the eye of the beholder and it is only through an examination of the experience of life as our people perceive it, that we will understand the human meaning of the great social and institutional changes which characterise our time." As a means to this end, both he and Professor Norman Bradburn of Chicago have carried out nationwide sample surveys in the United States to measure, by face-to-face interviews and lengthy questionnaires, "the aspirations, attitudes, satisfactions, disappointments, grievances, expectations and values" of the population as a whole in social matters.

In March 1971, the SSRC Survey Unit carried out in this country a first small survey based on similar thinking (it had 213 respondents). A second and larger sample (600) was interviewed in October and November 1971. It is the findings from the larger and more recent sample that I am reporting in this article.

The respondents were representative of the total population aged 16 and over in the seven largest conurbations in Britain. The questionnaire was built around twelve social "domains," and the respondent's perception of his own circumstances and experiences in each. The domains in the questionnaire were listed in the following order:

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1: Housing	7: Spare-time, leisure
2: District or neighbourhood	8: Health
3: Democratic process	9: Marriage
4: Standard of living	10: Family life
5: Being a housewife	11: Religion
6: Job	12: Education

The questioning on each domain usually opened by dealing with some specific aspects of it. Then the respondent was asked to use a numerical scale to indicate his level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his circumstances in that particular domain. To do this, he was given a card with all the numbers 1 to 7 set out vertically. 1, at the bottom, indicated complete dissatisfaction; 7, at the top, registered complete satisfaction. Finally, the respondent was shown a card listing all the domains and asked: "Which three on the list do you think are most important for you personally in determining how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with your life in general these days?"

In terms of average levels of satisfaction the domains fall into three groups:

1. Those with extremely high scores: marriage (6.5), family life (6.1) and job (6.0).
2. Those with average to high scores: district (5.7), health (5.7) being a housewife (5.7), spare time (5.5) and housing (5.4).
3. Those with average scores well below average: standard of living (5.1), education received (4.9), religion (4.8) and the quality and practice of democracy in this country (4.7).

Towards the end of the interview, each respondent was asked to take into account all the aspects of life that had been discussed, and use the scale to indicate his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his life as a whole (a) now, (b) where he would have put himself five years ago, (c) where he expected to be in five years' time, and (d) what he thought he was entitled to nowadays.

For the sample as a whole, the mean *current* rating worked out at the comparatively high figure of 5.67. This was an increase on the average rating they gave themselves for five years ago (5.27). Expectations for five years hence continued the upward trend to an average of 5.96. But, even at that point, the average person's level of satisfaction would be substantially below what he currently feels he is entitled to *today*—6.34. He feels that, even in the future, he will somehow be deprived of what he is entitled to.

This sense of "social equity relative deprivation" is widespread. We found it in all socio-economic grades, in both sexes, and in all age groups. Admittedly, 54 per cent of our sample felt they were already getting at least as much from life as they were entitled to. But 25 per cent said that, on the 7-point scale, there was *already* a 1-point deficit between what they had, and were entitled to. Another 21 per cent felt there was a deficit of 2 or more points.

It would be foolish to claim that this experiment in the development of subjective "soft," social indicators (of which I have not here gone into all the details) has overcome the weaknesses of "hard" indicators. But at least it can supplement them by throwing light on some important aspects of the quality of life that might otherwise be neglected by statisticians. For many people, their perceptions of the quality of their life will not be notably raised without political and financial measures that satisfy their standards of social equity.

And it should be remembered that these people are not only to be found among the conventionally underprivileged living in poverty. Our college teacher had a SERD shortfall of 3 full points and when shown the list of domains, and asked to indicate the three most important, his comment was "far and away the most important is the level of effective democracy in this country and that includes an end to racial discrimination, full economic and social equality for women and the separation of justice from the ability to buy legal services."