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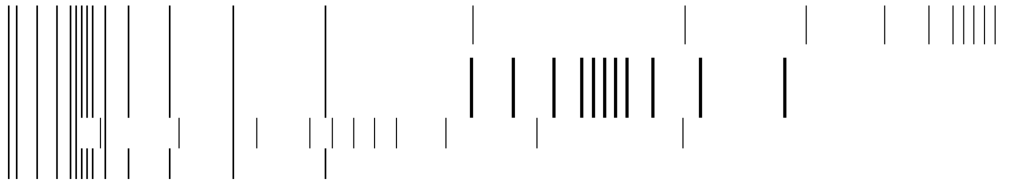

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MEASUREMENT TOOLS AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

For millions of Americans today, obtaining sufficient consumer goods is no longer a pressing concern. They have a decent house with furniture, a car or two, and the usual complement of electric appliances. For those with economic security, the good life involves more than investing in the stock market. It also means investing in the health of their community and society. Even among those who have not fully met their basic needs for comfort and security, working to create viable communities can be as important as private concerns. Thus, a common, if not universal, aim among Americans is to promote conditions of social health that complement the realm of market exchange.

One of the most important social arenas in which people develop a sense of community is their place of work. Yet, because of pressures, many find their work environment intolerable. They feel they are on a treadmill, having to work too many hours per week just to stay in place. Others feel they are not treated with respect. They want work to be satisfying, not just a way of earning money. All of these factors are products of the social environment that is as essential to well-being as consumer goods.

Parents are another group with interests that go far beyond what the market offers. They want safe neighborhoods and nurturing schools for their children. They want their children to be in a social environment where they won't be induced to buy drugs. They want their children taught in a manner that fits their moral values.

In a variety of other ways, Americans are upset about assaults on their social environment. They are frustrated about spending increasing time in traffic jams, not only in central cities, but in sprawling suburbs as well. Many are afraid to walk along the street in their own neighborhoods. Family life has become fragmented by the heavy work and activity schedules most members face beyond the age of sixteen. The store shelves are full, but life operates at such a chaotic pace, few have time to enjoy what they buy.

Americans have increasingly come to demand a healthy environment as well. Clean air and water, access to natural areas, and the protection of the global environment are not considered frills any more. There is a common desire to hand down to the next generation a world as ecologically abundant as the world we inherited.

All of these concerns add up to a yearning for conditions that are generally referred to as quality of life (or QOL). In addition to personal happiness and sense of purpose in life, people want social solidarity and healthy communities. There is considerable frus-

tration when hopes for these intangible elements in life are not realized. Our sense of well-being depends on what happens in the workplace, community, and nation, not just in the marketplace.

Social indicators can help clarify the definition of quality of life, but only if they are conceptually meaningful, and only if they encompass purposes that have broad social appeal.[1] Several generations of efforts to define and measure desirable goals or standards for society and its institutions have taught us that it is not a simple, straightforward process. Thus, the standard measures of QOL have been generally limited to traditional economic categories and basic physical needs. The evaluation of policy alternatives has also been constrained by what is easy to count.

This essay will address two problems associated with the development of social indicators. The first problem involves the ambiguity and complexity of any effort to reveal the values of a society. Most indicators that attempt to measure quality, whether of community life or of some aspect of it, such as education, are too literal-minded and too narrow in scope. They truncate the range of human experience and value. The second problem involves the ineffectiveness of indicators that gloss over controversy or conflict. The dispute over the relative importance of competing values lies at the heart of politics. If an indicator inspires citizens to move from knowledge to action, it is sure to be value-laden and thus political. Avoiding controversy in the name of consensus does not transcend politics; it means siding with the status quo.

Part 1 of this essay deals with the definitional ambiguities involved in designing indicators or measures of QOL. Indicators that represent QOL are necessarily indirect: qualitative aspects of life can be captured only as metaphors. Because the relationship between indicators and the qualities for which they stand cannot be directly observed and are open to interpretation, there will always be competing ways of defining the fundamental character of the good life. Both social and economic indicators have been based on utilitarian ethics, but that does not mean there are no alternatives. A genuinely new formulation of indicators could be based on a different ethical framework, such as the capabilities approach pioneered by Amartya Sen and other nonutilitarian approaches. Above all, these ethical alternatives demonstrate the potential for new ways of thinking about QOL.

Part 2 will examine the conditions necessary for QOL indicators to be effective in improving policy outcomes. There has been a tendency in the past to devise descriptive measures of social and environmental quality and to assume that the measures would spur citizens or government to action. They have failed to achieve desired political outcomes. In order to overcome that problem, the relationship between knowledge and

1. The term "social indicator" is used here with the broadest possible meaning. It includes social, economic, environmental, and other indicators that are related to human well-being in some form.

action needs to be reconsidered. Historically, efforts to produce indicators that are value-neutral and consensus-based have not led to political engagement. By contrast, value-oriented, ideological indicators promote a well-defined point of view, reflecting the political commitments of their authors. This means that conflict among indicators is a healthy part of the political process, not something to be suppressed.

PART I: DEFINING THE NATURE OF QUALITY OF LIFE

An analysis of indicators and their relationship to quality of life must begin with some understanding of what indicators are. Although it is easy to grasp the image of QOL in a vague sense, the process of creating a framework for assigning numerical values reveals the elusive character of the whole enterprise. Understanding that difficulty is a good place to begin in trying to make sense of indicators.

DIRECT VS. INDIRECT MEASUREMENT

The most important fact to understand about QOL indicators is that all measures of quality are proxies—indirect measures of the true condition we are seeking to judge. If quality could be quantified, it would cease to be quality. Instead, it would be quantity. Quantitative measures should not be judged as true or false, but only in terms of their adequacy in bringing us closer to an ultimately unattainable goal. They can never directly ascertain quality. Plato alluded to this in his metaphor of the cave. We can only have knowledge of the shadows projected on the back of the cave. We can never gain direct access to the truth, which is the light that creates the shadows. There is no way to step outside the metaphoric character of any definition of quality.

It might seem that there is a way around the quandary of having to rely on metaphors or indirect measures. Why not ask people directly about their feelings of happiness or satisfaction? This has in fact been done in surveys over many decades. The advantage of this approach is that it seems to go directly to the question of quality, without any need for proxies.

There is, nevertheless, good reason for skepticism that "subjective" or survey-based indicators will eliminate the need for "objective" measures of quality that are based on observation.[2] Treating self-reported measures as adequate representations of QOL pre-

2. The boundary between subjective and objective is not always clear in practice. Survey responses and observed behavior both emanate from subjective attitudes, and they are both made objective to an outsider (the interviewer or the observer). Thus, rather than distinguishing between objective and subjective measures, it is more useful to compare "stated" values (based on surveys) and "revealed" values (based on observation of what people do). Both types of evidence can be understood as simultaneously subjective and objective.

supposes that people are conscious of and able to articulate nuances of feeling, that transitory feelings represent durable conditions, that feelings are equivalent to values, that happiness or other reported feelings fully account for valued conditions, and that feelings can be quantified on an absolute scale. In addition, there is a pronounced difference between what people say they want and what they actually do, which causes some researchers to ignore survey-based indicators altogether.

Even if QOL measures based on stated values or feelings had none of these drawbacks, the results would still represent an indirect indicator of quality. The survey question is simply a method of asking individuals to use their own metaphors by observing the shadows on their internal psychological walls. People cannot observe their own happiness or satisfaction directly. (William James developed an entire theory of emotions on that premise.) The process by which individuals infer or intuit their feeling states is simply hidden from the interviewer and thus beyond testing for reliability. The indirect character of indicators persists.

The implications of this metaphoric character of indicators are hard to accept. We want to be able to talk about the elements of a good society in a clear manner, and yet every effort to describe what we regard as important will be slightly out of focus and never quite subsumed by any description. That is perhaps why it always seems easier to explain what is undesirable than what is truly cherished. The negative is often more sharply delineated than the positive.

COMMON SENSE VS. FORMAL THEORY IN DEFINING QUALITY OF LIFE

In order to measure QOL, one must have a theory of what makes up a good life. An explicit theory provides a coherent way of thinking about a subject and tells us where to look to find answers to problems. A theory of what constitutes a good society enhances the clarity with which we think about values and the behavior needed to achieve those values.

The usefulness of theory in devising indicators of QOL might not be self-evident. Common sense might appear an adequate basis for this work. However, common sense or conventional wisdom does not truly avoid theorizing. It merely treats theory unconsciously and takes for granted the fundamental questions that need to be addressed. As a result, the implicit theories on which common sense is based rely on untested and often conflicting assumptions. When people depend on conventional wisdom as a guide, they tend to presuppose, without reflection, that the values of their subculture are universal, when they are not.

The nature of "the good" has been the source of conflict among religions and philosophies for thousands of years. Only in the past century have people been bold enough to imagine that they would be able to devise a universal measuring rod that

could resolve the dispute once and for all. Even within Western culture, influenced by Greek, Jewish, and Christian thought, there has never been a consensus about the meaning of justice or virtue, the goal of individual life, or the feasibility of defining the nature of the common good.

THE DOMINANT THEORY: UTILITARIANISM

For several generations, the dominant image of valuation within the social sciences and in public life has been utilitarian. This way of thinking treats preferences, choices, or tastes as private, individual, unconditioned, and arbitrary. Even abstract preferences, such as the desire for security or freedom, are considered to be formed inside each individual. According to utilitarian theory, QOL involves the satisfaction of the desires of individuals, and the good society is defined as one that provides the maximum satisfaction or positive experiences for its citizens. (Utilitarianism is not limited to crude materialism. It is open to the possibility that generosity and altruistic behavior can be satisfying.)

Economics explicitly relies on utilitarianism.[3] It conceives of people with shopping baskets maximizing their own "utility" or values according to the purchases they make. This is particularly true in the traditional view of economics, which was limited to production and exchange within markets. Starting with the shopping-basket view of utility or value, some people have implicitly taken the gross domestic product or GDP (total purchases of products and services) as a reasonably good approximation of a society's well-being. (Although it is hard to find anyone who explicitly treats the GDP as a comprehensive measure of value, many projects or policies have been justified in terms of their contribution to economic productivity, which is a way of referring to their effect on growth of the GDP. It is an implicit way of proclaiming this measure as the ultimate indicator of a society's success.) This misuse of the GDP as a measure of value and social progress has prompted much critique.

Many of the measures that have been developed as alternatives to the GDP are merely extensions of the same premises. In these expanded measures, the "purchases" are no longer limited to items in a shopping basket. They include intangible amenities such as a crime-free neighborhood, breathable air, or even the comfort that comes from knowing that fewer people are homeless. In other words, the types of conditions that are often incorporated in QOL measures can be easily understood within the framework of utilitarian theory.

3. Economics can be divided into a positive side (factual relationships) and a normative side (ethical relationships). The normative side is the one that is utilitarian.

Alternative measures have thus paid economics the highest form of flattery: they have imitated the framework being criticized. This is most evident in the case of indices that expanded the GDP by adjusting for nonmarket transactions, but retaining the monetary valuation system. The Measure of Economic Welfare or MEW (Nordhaus and Tobin 1972) was the first of these extended accounts. The Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare or ISEW (Daly and Cobb 1989, app.; 1994, app.) used the same framework and incorporated environmental factors and income distribution. The Genuine Progress Indicator or GPI, which we have developed at Redefining Progress, continued along the same path, showing how a monetized utilitarian measure could be expanded to include purely social factors such as the cost of family breakdown and underemployment (Cobb, Halstead, and Rowe, 1995; Anielski and Rowe 1999; Cobb, Goodman, and Wackernagel 1999).[4]

Other indices also bear the signs of utilitarian influence. The Index of Social Health or ISH (Fordham Institute 1998), the Index of Environmental Trends or IET (Alperovitz et al. 1995), and similar composite indices (Annie E. Casey Foundation 1999; Andrews and Fonseca 1995; and Zero Population Growth 1997) represent attempts to move away from the economic framework by constructing indices of social and environmental pathologies—the inverse of quality of life.[5] Yet, many of the components in these indices reflect an implicit utilitarian premise by including negative outcomes or loss of enjoyment by individuals (poverty, health damage from pollution, poor housing, drug abuse). Some of their components may fit within a nonutilitarian approach (discussed below in this paper), but none of them explicitly makes that their framework.[6]

City and quality of life rankings by commercial publishers (Garoogian, Garoogian, and Weingart 1998; Heubusch 1997; Meltzer 1998; Mitchard 1997; *Money* 1998; Morgan Quitno Corporation 1998; Savageau and Loftus 1997; Thomas 1994; Toucan Valley 1997) also use utilitarian criteria to determine the "most livable" city or the "highest ranked" state. They use arbitrary formulas combining components as diverse as income, pollution, accidents, number of women-owned businesses, and library books per capita. By

4. The adjustment for income distribution in the ISEW and GPI appears to some critics to violate the utilitarian rule because it does not treat the experiences of individuals as purely additive. Nevertheless, it can be understood in a utilitarian framework if one conceives of extremes of inequality as diminishing the quality of life not only of the poor but of everyone in a society that tolerates it. Thus, it challenges the assumption that utilitarian value is purely individualistic, but not the utilitarian way of thinking itself.

5. The ISH, for example, is comprised of sixteen components, which can be divided into age-group categories: children (infant mortality, child abuse, and children in poverty); youth (teen suicide, drug abuse, and high school drop-outs); adults (unemployment, average weekly earnings, and health insurance coverage); aging (poverty among the elderly and out-of-pocket health costs for the elderly); and general (homicides, alcohol-related traffic fatalities, food stamp coverage, access to affordable housing, and the gap between rich and poor).

6. As a result of combining elements from more than one ethical theory, these measures suffer a lack of methodological coherence and a lack of a common metric. None provides a theoretical basis for bringing together diverse components.

that means, they compare the QOL of particular locations, as if they were adjuncts of the real estate business. In effect, these ranking exercises treat the attributes of a good life as a location to be purchased.

Not all measures of QOL or civic quality have attempted to combine components into a composite index. An even larger number of community groups and individual researchers have developed arrays of social indicators that reflect the range of issues or attributes that contribute to the health or pathology of a nation or city. Henderson, Lickerman, and Flynn (2000) and Miringoff and Miringoff (1999), for example, examine QOL at the national level in terms of a number of different social issues. At the local level, hundreds of groups have reported their findings through an array of indicators.[7] These arrays of social measures bypass the methodological problems associated with combining diverse elements into a single index number. However, without a focusing principle, they lack some of the rhetorical power of composite measures. In addition, to the extent the arrays consist of items based on utilitarian principles, they are no more able to transcend the economic worldview than composite measures.

Most indicators, it seems, are based on the idea that value consists of the availability or unavailability of potentially desirable experiences by individuals. Utilitarianism is such a common way of making judgments that it might seem to be the only possible method of valuation. The next section will consider an alternative way of thinking about the quality of life and thereby reveal the limitations of the utility framework.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: AN ALTERNATIVE TO UTILITARIANISM IN JUDGING QOL

Any effort to devise an indicator that measures a society's health or QOL and that is truly different from the economic mode of thought must begin by formulating a way of going beyond utilitarian ethical theory.

One of the best-known critiques of utilitarianism can be found in *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (1971), which develops a set of abstract rules for contractually determining the ethical allocation of benefits or entitlements in a society. Rawls argues that if people negotiated the rules of society from behind "a veil of ignorance" (not knowing what their position or status would be) that they would choose one in which basic liberties were protected and the benefits were distributed in proportion to the needs of the worst off rather than in a way that maximizes total happiness or utility. This approach has some kinship with the U.S. Bill of Rights: it is contractual or rights-based and shows greater regard for protecting a minimum level of dignity than for a maximum level of benefits. The idea of quality is defined through negation—the constraints that are *not*

7. See Tyler Norris Associates, Redefining Progress, and Sustainable Seattle 1997 for a list of community indicators projects as of the date of publication.

placed on individuals. Rawls is reluctant to assign value to positive freedoms, such as freedom from hunger or the ability to read.

Amartya Sen (1993), a Nobel laureate who teaches both philosophy and economics, shows no such reluctance. He explicitly asserts the need to take positive freedoms into account in defining quality of life. He challenges a basic assumption of the utilitarian tradition (the idea that value lies only in the attainment of personal happiness) by turning to the Aristotelian tradition and assigning value to human action or agency.[8] A society that enables its citizens to aspire to greatness, to develop virtues and loyalties, to become skilled and artistic, and to attain wisdom is far better than a society that merely provides the means to satisfy desires. Quality of life is determined by what Sen calls human "capabilities," the characteristics of each person that enable him or her to function in the world and lead a full life. Although those capabilities may not be universally valued (due to cultural and other differences), it is still possible to speak of them in terms of their family resemblances. Instead of depending on a utilitarian calculus that positively values end-states ("having" experiences), Sen believes QOL derives from states of being and opportunities for doing, which are both individually and socially constituted. Without capabilities associated with being (such as health, social connections, and self-esteem) and doing (political activity, intellectual challenges, and engaging work) a person is not able to take advantage of the benefits that the utilitarian takes for granted. The capacity to purchase commodities is a consideration, but it is only one aspect of a multi-dimensional assessment. Nor is the commodity itself the source of value. Rather, as Adam Smith ([1776] 1976, vol. 2, bk. 5, ch. 2) noted in describing the need for customary clothing to maintain dignity in public, the value of commodities lies in their facilitation of social interaction.

Rawls, Sen, and some other philosophers (Nussbaum 1993; Walzer 1983) can be understood as formulating a new version of the "basic needs" approach to defining quality of life. Whereas most earlier attempts to devise a list of basic human needs (and to evaluate the extent to which they are met) focused on the requirements of physical survival, all of the more recent efforts treat the requirements of a good life in a much more complex way. To avoid confusion with the traditional basic needs approach, the language of "human development" may be used to describe the broader categories.

The human development theories, for example, all emphasize the importance of freedom as a key element in any definition of the good society. The provision of adequate commodities to all members of a totalitarian society would thus fail the human development test. In addition, the new theories are concerned particularly about institu-

8. Sen is not actually an Aristotelian in that he does not accept any analysis that presumes to know in absolute terms what "functionings" are good for all individuals. Because of either cultural or genetic differences, no single set of categories would define the optimal thriving of human beings. What Sen derives from Aristotle is primarily a concern with potential conditions as opposed to actual conditions.

tions. They judge a society by the policies, procedures, and structures by which needs are met—whether they promote moral responsibility, rational choice, and other features of full human development as opposed to passivity and acquiescence. These institutional arrangements are as much the goals or ends to be established as any material comforts or personal satisfactions.

Finally, there is also general agreement among the human development theorists that each sphere of action (markets, politics, public rituals, family, school, work, and elsewhere) should be judged by a different set of norms and should be treated as incommensurable with the others. Progress in one area should not be regarded as a tradeoff for regress in another. A person with success in one arena should be prevented from using that to create advantage in others. (This issue is particularly addressed by Walzer [1983].) This principle of pluralism is already taken for granted in certain contexts. For example, even if the wealthy are in fact able to "buy" an acquittal in a criminal case, the influence of monetary advantage in the judicial process is regarded as a taint, a transgression, a crossing of a moral boundary. While there is no moral problem with using wealth to buy a better home or car, most Americans find it repugnant that it can also be used to influence the political and judicial processes, and many others do not believe that money should be a factor in providing better education or health care. This confirms the sense of the human development theorists that human cultures divide public space into different realms that are regarded as having distinctive moral rules.

The human development approach recommends that we should judge one society better off than another (or better off over time) only if its institutions are adding to the capacity of its members to lead a better life. The Human Development Index, produced by the United Nations Development Program, represents the first tentative move in the direction of measuring "capabilities" or positive freedoms. For each nation, it "indicates how far that country has to go to attain certain defined goals: an average life span of eighty-five years, access to education for all, and a decent level of income" (United Nations Development Program 1995, 18). In each of the three areas it considers (longevity, educational attainment, and income), the HDI calculates the distance between the level of attainment in each country and the target level. Thus, it is actually an inverse measure of deprivation, with 1 representing full attainment, and 0 representing complete deprivation.

In addition to enabling comparisons to be made across nations, the HDI can also be used to compare regions or groups within a single nation. Just as the distribution of income within a society often reveals more than a simple average, the disaggregation of the HDI into different population groups creates an image of the inequities that exist. The HDI would presumably be strengthened if some measure of income distribution were included in the calculation. This transformation is particularly relevant in societies that equate personal wealth or income with social status.

Partha Dasgupta (1993) has proposed another amendment to the HDI that would bring it even closer to a synthesis of the human development theorists. He recommends (109) adding a measure of the extent to which citizens can participate in self-governance and of the availability and enforceability of civil liberties, or what might be called "negative freedoms." Although the human development approach emphasizes the positive freedoms associated with institutions that give people a sense of power and worth, it is important to include the negative freedoms as well, since the loss of the latter cannot be compensated with an increase in the former. The tension between the two types of freedom is painfully obvious in cases such as China where the government has explicitly stated that it is limiting civil liberties in the interests of development. This exemplifies the danger inherent in a definition of development that is oriented exclusively to feeding the belly and depriving the soul.

There is another danger, less dramatic: a crude and oversimplified version of the human development approach to indicators could become an apology for the welfare state. It is easy for government agencies to claim, without evidence, that their programs are beneficial because they enhance the capabilities of citizens. If that claim were enough to justify programs, there would be no means of distinguishing the gems from the junk. Treating every new service as an improvement in QOL would also involve a serious corruption of the ideas of the theorists discussed here. Sen (1993, 37, 49), for example, has made it clear that he considers "agency" (the ability to act autonomously) as important as "well-being." A government that directly provided its citizens with all they needed for a good life could undermine the development of responsibility and initiative, key aspects of agency. This is not to say that there are no cases in which governments should provide services to citizens, only that a "capabilities" or human development approach to QOL does not automatically endorse such services.

It would also be unfortunate if the HDI or a variant of it became the new comprehensive measure of social health or quality of life. The logic of the capabilities approach contradicts the idea that any composite of diverse factors can represent quality of life with a single index number, as the HDI does. Education, political freedom, self-confidence, and income are important capabilities, but they cannot be measured on a single scale. Thus, the human development perspective necessarily embraces pluralism or distinctive "spheres of justice" (to use Michael Walzer's phrase). A true picture of QOL using the capabilities framework would be based on a variety of scales and methodologies.

Another obstacle to the effective use of the human development or capabilities approach to QOL is the abstractness of the principles involved. Explaining the basic ideas is not easy, and they could easily be misrepresented or misused in the world of practical politics. The proponents of nonutilitarian approaches to social issues tend to be academic philosophers who do not focus on the methods by which their ideas might

be implemented. Thus, there may be a need, as an interim step, for some simplification of the human development concept that clearly differentiates it from utilitarianism in more common language. One way of approximating the distinction between utilitarianism and a capabilities approach is by talking about the difference between "having, being, and doing."[9] In crude terms, utilitarianism is limited to "having" (possessions and experiences) whereas the human development idea includes "having," but also encompasses "doing" (accomplishments and craftsmanship) and "being" (character or psychological health). Because of its narrow scope, utilitarianism can come up with precise answers to policy questions. The broader scope of nonutilitarian thought offers only fuzzy, but nuanced answers. The "having, being, doing" set explains why there can be no common measuring rod for determining QOL in a world of pluralistic values.

Behind the overt difference between the utilitarian and nonutilitarian views about values and quality of life is an implicit dispute over the nature of being human. The utilitarian conceives of people as being separate, autonomous units, each with a bundle of desires or preferences that cannot be explained. Those personal or "internal" feelings are absolutely private. They are the hallmarks of individuality. That is why economists and other utilitarians are so strongly opposed to making value judgments about the preferences of individuals. There is an almost sacred quality associated with the privacy of choices and decisionmaking in the utilitarian worldview. To the economist, as a result, the world is made of individuals and their possessions, including their possession of certain social amenities. Having is everything. There is no room in this worldview for being or doing.

By contrast, the nonutilitarian regards people as constituted by the culture they inhabit. That means values and attitudes are not internal or private matters. They are derived from the social context. The world of choice is constructed through linguistic and social conventions and is partially given and partially contested by subgroups and individuals. The meaning of QOL is a product of the symbolic interactions that occur within a person's social matrix. The focus is thus on being—on the way people are constituted by their surroundings, not by the ways in which individuals possess parts of the world. People don't possess a context; they are possessed by it.

The human development theorists can therefore explain the intrinsic value of social patterns or institutions that remain opaque to the utilitarian. Their model of the good society demonstrates the importance of both negative and positive rights, productive habits, and conventions governing social relationships. None of those elements fits readily within the utilitarian framework of "having" satisfying experiences. For the human

9. I am indebted to Neva Goodwin for this way of thinking about alternative value frameworks. Allardt (1993) distinguishes "having, loving, and being." Since these are not exact concepts, the particular way of framing the alternatives may not be very important.

development theorist, by contrast, those institutional contexts are the factors that give value to life.

ALTERNATIVE IDEALS

In evaluating quality of life, one may or may not accept the capabilities approach, which I have also called a human development theory or a model of "having, doing, and being." Regardless of one's views on the idea that happiness, well-being, or satisfaction is only one of several values to be considered in making judgments, the availability of an alternative is itself important. The existence of a thoroughly investigated ethical option at least means that utilitarianism can no longer be taken for granted.

The capabilities or human development approach is not the only perspective from which one can critique utilitarianism. Neither approach considers the possibility that nature might have some intrinsic value that does not contribute to human well-being or functioning. A comprehensive understanding of quality of life might therefore evaluate the value of a society and its institutions according to their impact on the totality of life, not just human life. The fact that this idea is incomprehensible to most Americans today does not mean that the culture could not change to accept this view.

The key point in all of this is the plurality of ways of thinking about how to measure QOL. There is no single "right" way to make overall judgments about a society. Differences in indicators of QOL are not superficial. They can be traced to philosophical premises that are at odds with each other, such as alternative conceptions of the self, its relation to others, and its relation to the natural world. As will become clear in Part 2, the inevitability of pluralism is the basis for perennial conflicts about what to measure and how to measure it. For those who feel strongly that only one approach is correct, the multiplicity of ways of thinking about the proper order of society (and nature) can be frustrating. Nevertheless, a society is healthier if its many voices and competing values can all be considered.

PART II: POLITICS, IDEOLOGY, AND QOL INDICATORS TO IMPROVE POLICY

Thus far, this essay has considered QOL measures in a static, definitional sense. Examining what indicators *are*, however, does not reveal what they *do*. Except for a few academics, most people presume that indicators serve a useful purpose only if they lead to improvements in policy and in the lives of citizens. The history of social measurement suggests that indicators have seldom been put to use when they are developed. Only occasionally has this form of knowledge led to action. The relevant issue, then, is the precise conditions under which indicators are most likely to be influential in shaping collective behavior.

The single most important factor in determining the success of indicators is whether they are designed with a purpose in mind—more specifically, a political purpose.[10] The formulation of a political purpose requires an ideology, which simply means a set of ideas or theories about what works and doesn't work. With an ideology, the advocate of a policy or program can tell a story about how conditions can be improved. In other words, an ideology provides its adherents with an account of how the past informs the present, how nature and society function, and how change can be achieved. This story creates a context that gives general meaning to particular events. Social indicators can be woven into that story to amplify it, justify it, or show its connection to people's experience. In short, without an ideology there is no story, and the absence of an effective story is a recipe for political failure.

Part 2 of this essay examines why indicators have often failed to make a difference in political deliberations in the ways their advocates intended, and what might be done to remedy that weakness. First, indicators have historically produced disappointing results

10. Suggesting that political influence is the sole purpose of indicators may seem overly narrow, particularly to people who regard "education" as the aim of a project. The broad meaning of the term "political," which is intended here, includes not only the desire to achieve immediate legislative action, but also the effort to persuade others to take a particular set of issues seriously, a type of action that some might call "educational." Although some indicators projects may intend their work to have educational effects only in the narrow sense of increasing the level of public understanding, I suspect that most people involved with indicators want that understanding to be translated eventually into some change in public policy. In that respect, the "educational" and the "political" merge. That large area of overlap is the meaning I have in mind here.

because their proponents mistakenly assumed that descriptive information would automatically lead people to take action. Since the failures of the past have been ignored, they have been repeated. Second, indicators are already being used in subtle, but effective, ways to preserve the interests of those who benefit from the status quo. This becomes apparent when the ideological nature of apparently neutral indicators is understood. Any indicator that is introduced into a society on the basis of universal values will actually represent the perspective of particular groups. Third, a number of social scientists believe that value conflicts are based on predictable patterns in every society, not on the arbitrary preferences of individuals. Increased awareness of those standardized patterns will enable people to treat conflict as both equitable and socially productive rather than as something to be avoided or suppressed.

THE HISTORICAL FAILURE OF DESCRIPTIVE INDICATORS

Using indicators to measure and report on quality of life or social conditions has led to disappointment largely because of confusion about the relationship between knowledge and action. Indicators have offered false hope to citizen groups that the numbers they report can inspire a response, even though the indicators themselves do not reveal the appropriate response. Community groups have often finished a lengthy process of developing indicators and then asked, "What should we do with them?" Their separation of thought and action, intended to achieve universality or neutrality, actually produced passivity. They believed that descriptive indicators of social problems would automatically lead to solutions. This detached or unengaged approach has been tested many times in the last hundred years, only to produce failure. Unless an organization starts with a hypothesis about a problem and collects statistics to demonstrate that hypothesis, it is unlikely that its indicators work will ever lead to action.

In the early part of the 1900s, the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF) initiated a process remarkably like the "community indicators" movement of the 1990s. Around 1910, RSF provided a grant to the Charity Organization Society (of New York) to survey industrial conditions in Pittsburgh. "The project lasted eighteen months and produced a six-volume study of Pittsburgh's housing, sanitation, and working conditions" (Smith 1991, 40–41). After the study was released in 1914, the Foundation provided technical advice to groups around the country that conducted over 2,000 local surveys on education, recreation, public health, crime, or general social conditions. The process by which this information was expected to affect decisionmaking was not much different from today: "These groups then relayed the findings of the technical experts to the public who, enlightened by the facts, were expected to mobilize public opinion and press for appropriate reforms" (41).

The methodology RSF and its imitators employed was guaranteed to fail: the surveys yielded information about symptoms, but they were not tied into any specific political goals or any concept of how reform might flow from the static measures. "The professionals [who did the surveys] presumed that there were causal relationships and, thus, implicit remedies for social problems. But the surveys usually explained much less than met the eye. In reality, they were less an instrument for testing hypotheses and designing reforms than for arousing a community's conscience and 'quickening community forces'- for reform, as one staff member of the foundation put it" (Smith 1991, 42). That is why "the actual political results [of the surveys] seldom lived up to the organizers'expectations" (41).

The same problem plagued the first official report by the government on national social trends (President's Research Committee on Social Trends 1933). In more than 1,000 pages, the volume assiduously avoided any claims that could be remotely considered as evaluative. It was released in the depths of the Great Depression without any hint of the magnitude of the problems facing the country or any suggestions about what might be done about them. It merely provided statistical data describing various social phenomena. The three volumes of social indicators compiled by the U.S. government in the 1970s followed the same pattern (OMB 1973 and U.S. Census 1977, 1980). Again and again, when the government has tried explicitly to analyze the condition of society, its sanitized methods have made the efforts ineffective. In each case, the results have largely been ignored.

The failure of social indicators or QOL measurement to link action to knowledge became a pattern. The social indicators movement of the 1960s and 1970s followed in the footsteps of the Russell Sage Foundation. In fact, one of the key documents of the period, *Indicators of Social Change* (Sheldon and Moore 1968), was published by RSF. Eleanor Bernert Sheldon and others at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) also perpetuated the idea that social indicators should remain outside the political arena. She opposed the creation of the Council of Social Advisers, an initiative of Senator Walter Mondale and others, on the grounds that the application of social indicators to social policy was premature.[11] Instead, she argued, the pressing needs were better data series and basic research (Sheldon 1983, 79).

Not everyone wanted to keep the measurement of social conditions locked in a closet away from politics. The authors of *Social Indicators* (Bauer 1966) advocated the development of a system of social accounts that could help guide policy decisions. As Sheldon

11. Senator Walter Mondale, along with Senators Kennedy and Harris, put forth legislation from 1967 to 1973 to set up a Council of Social Advisers, comparable to the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) (Booth 1992, 380–85). The CSA was to issue an annual "Social Report" like the *Economic Report of the President*. Underlying this effort was the belief that the creation of the CEA had institutionalized the use of economic information and the power of economists. Creating a comparable institution to address social problems seemed like a logical next step.

says, comparing the work funded by RSF with the Bauer volume: "The Foundation's program was somewhat different in that its primary motivation was to establish a theoretical base, data, and measurement techniques for understanding social change. It was not that we eschewed the importance of 'policy analysis'but rather that we considered our effort as parallel—or even a precursor—to it" (Sheldon 1983, 79). Nevertheless, the work by Bauer and his associates never went beyond the theoretical level.

The indicators movement of the 1960s failed in large part because it was of limited use to policymakers (Andrews 1990; Noll and Zapf 1994; Bulmer 1990). Advocates could provide few examples of how indicators could be used to bring about reform. Failure was not simply due to the lack of political will (which the indicators were supposed to help create) or to inadequate theories of social change. It stemmed, instead, from the inability of the advocates of social indicators to offer any analysis that would be useful to reformers.

In the past decade or so, a number of civic groups, business groups, and even some local governments have developed indicators that are intended to measure the quality of life (or social progress, sustainable development, or any number of other terms) in their communities. Those groups have been surprised and frustrated that their efforts did not pay off in terms of significant changes in public life. They learned too late that the world has little use for a set of indicators that lacks a connection to political life. Like Plato, who despised democracy and longed for government based on pure reason and untarnished by politics, the proponents of indicators have implicitly assumed that they could devise rational measures of social value that would transcend politics and ideology. Even though they frequently used "participatory" processes, they still managed to remain disengaged from political issues and thus irrelevant to most people's concerns.

In contrast to the apolitical world of the indicators "movement," activist groups that have started with goals and then developed QOL indicators to help achieve them have had no difficulty determining how to "use" indicators. This is typical of groups seeking environmental justice, for example. They begin with a commitment to the well-being of neighborhoods that have traditionally been treated as dumping grounds for waste, and they have ideology that factors power into the determination of how to respond to that condition. In other words, they know that they will need to gather statistical evidence (indicators) to demonstrate that they have been treated unjustly; but they also know that they will have to do more than publish the data in order to bring about justice. The indicators are only one tool in a set of tools that they will use in their struggle.

COVERT AND OVERT IDEOLOGIES

The advocates of indicators based on universal values have been frustrated by their lack of success at achieving social change. Their difficulties have not been accidental.

They flow directly from the technocratic ideology that presumes adequate information will permit experts to devise solutions to social problems. Since this particular perspective is so pervasive in our society, its adherents are generally unable to recognize it as an ideology. They just assume it is common sense. Since ideologies are generally impervious to evidence that contradicts them, demonstrating the failure of the technocratic belief that better information will automatically lead to effective action has proven an elusive proposition in a culture that takes that premise for granted.

The difficulty of exposing the ideological nature of all indicators is an even bigger obstacle to understanding how they might be used. Historically, the ideological basis of social indicators has been overt only if the implicit values were in conflict with some group in power. If an indicator did not challenge the ideology of a strong group, it remained covert or hidden, particularly from the proponents of the indicator.

When social statistics (or "moral statistics" as they were then called) made their debut in the 1830s, they were introduced by social elites (Coleman 1982; Cullen 1975; Eyler 1979). Physicians and upper-class social reformers developed measures of social pathology in terms of the incidence of drunkenness, criminal behavior, and other social vices that were observed in working-class households. The researchers hypothesized that individual moral failure was the cause of social problems. As long as their analysis was applied to the behavior of relatively powerless, lower-class households, no one charged the reformers with an ideological bias. They imagined they were simply observing "reality," with no awareness that they were looking through a class-based lens.

When, in 1850, the Census Bureau proposed to study the institution of slavery using the same techniques that had earlier been used to study social problems, a furor erupted in the U.S. Senate (Anderson 1988, 40–41)[CC1]. Some of the questions implicitly assumed that slaves were human beings, with family ties, which indirectly undermined the moral premise of slavery. This time the bias of the researchers (census designers) was challenged because it threatened powerful interests. Now it seemed that their innocent questions were actually ideological, or at least that is the way they looked to slaveholders. The census takers were prohibited from asking some of the planned questions.

A few decades later, when the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics was established, followed by the creation of the federal bureau, Carroll Wright became the director of both. He had learned to create the impression of being nonideological by avoiding conflicts with those in power. He took over in Massachusetts from a strong labor advocate who had sought to use statistics to demonstrate the injustice of the current wage system. The bankers and manufacturers who were offended by an ideology that conflicted with their interests had become skeptical of statistical indicators of social conditions. Wright persuaded them that indicators could be reported in a manner that conformed to the technocratic ideology that treated problems as incremental rather than systemic (Leiby 1960, 60–63). Wright himself appears to have been unaware of his own value ori-

entation. He believed he was merely making his reports as factual as possible. In so doing, Wright set the tone for all future statistical work by government agencies.

In the 1880s and again in the 1920s, movements developed to restrict immigration on the basis of a racist ideology that was openly supported by the Census Bureau (Anderson 1988, chap. 6). Francis Amasa Walker, Superintendent of the Census Office in 1870 and 1880 and a harsh critic of the 1890 census, promoted the idea that the character of the nation was being eroded by immigration from southern and eastern Europe. The dominant population, which was of northern European descent, feared a loss of national "vitality" if immigration were allowed to continue unchecked. A 1909 study by the Census Bureau was used by the proponents of immigration restrictions to support the National Origins Act in 1924. The issue throughout this period was "quality of life," as it was then defined. By siding with those in power, the Census Bureau was allowed to promote an overtly ideological position, although it presumably appeared neutral and scientific to those who agreed with it.

All of these examples from the past help us see with a distant mirror the ways in which social measurement, both official and unofficial, inevitably embodies the values of the group doing the measurement. If only politically marginalized groups voice objections to the categories being used, the indicators can easily appear to be neutral and non-ideological. That is why the ideological character of official statistics becomes harder to detect as we approach the present. Our own ideology is usually invisible to us.

IMPLICIT IDEOLOGY OF OFFICIAL INDICATORS

The ideological character of official indicators is buried under a mountain of denial. Governments are expected to remain neutral—untainted by particularistic values. Political parties are clearly driven by values or ideological considerations, but once in power, elected and appointed officials are supposed to be motivated only by the good of an entire jurisdiction and all of its people. This is especially true of professionals within the civil service. If a government agency devised an openly value-laden set of categories for ranking cities or measuring QOL, the officials would certainly come under attack for failing to remain impartial.

Yet, government agencies produce indicators that subtly take sides and express an ideology. Even the driest and most technical statistical work has a value orientation, represented by the choice of categories. Perhaps the single strongest bias of official statistics is an implicit defense of the mission of the agency that collects them. Thus, it is not surprising to find that statistics support claims by an agency that its work is valuable and that it needs more resources.

For example, for many years, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation from police reports, were the only information available

about crime in the United States. The UCR tells only one side of the story—what the police choose to define as crime and report to the FBI. Historically, those statistics have been used by law enforcement agencies to convince the public that crime was increasing and that more police were needed to control it. Only after the Bureau of Justice Statistics began publishing the results of National Crime Survey (NCS) in the 1970s did the public realize *(a)* that the FBI's estimates of crime rates have more to do with police procedures than with actual crime and *(b)* that the rate of violent crime from the victims'perspective actually fell during periods when the UCR showed an increase (Walker 1989, 3–4). The survey of crime victims contains its own biases since definitions of crimes may be not be consistent, and since it requires people to recall events from many months prior to the questionnaire. Nevertheless, the NCS demonstrated what many experts already knew—the UCR is highly biased in support of higher funding for law enforcement.

The ideological dimension of official indicators is also betrayed by what they avoid revealing—the absence of certain measurements. This is, of course, even harder to detect than the perspective imbedded in published statistics, but it is a more important form of bias. The values reflected in "missing" statistics are most likely to be those of the most powerful interests in a society. For example, despite a quasi-official ideology in the United States that there is no class system, that social mobility allows anyone to succeed through hard work, and that everyone has an equal voice in political affairs, it is very difficult to test those hypotheses with official data, particularly with data on the identity and property holdings of the super-rich (centimillionaires and billionaires). Since large concentrations of wealth are often a key factor in influencing state and local political decisions, the secrecy surrounding the identity of commercial and industrial property owners in cities strongly suggests that an elitist ideology is at work.[12]

The ideological character of seemingly neutral official measures goes beyond the content of the indicators themselves. Official indicators play an important role as tools of symbolic politics, usually by enabling governments to shift attention away from disputes over real resources and thereby preserve the existing distribution of power in a society. The process was analyzed in *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* by Murray Edelman (1964), who argued that government officials promote public quiescence with symbolic gestures that permit them to avoid actions that would be costly to dominant interests. (Some examples Edelman used were regulations that protect the industries they supposedly control, labor-management disputes that were a cover for higher prices *and* wages in

12. Whitman (1978, 256), for example, argues that "the distribution of wealth among American citizens is . . . a legitimate matter of public concern," but that "data on wealth or net worth is surprisingly sparse." "Land," he continues, "is obviously an important element of national wealth; but, if ownership is secret, it may be impossible to relate it to other forms of wealth and to draw conclusions about aggregate distribution." He concludes (301–2) that "no jurisdiction in the United States has come to grips with the issue of mandatory disclosure of beneficial ownership of land" and that any efforts to collect information on ownership will have to take into account "the manifold methods of evasion that ingenious counsel may invent to protect the secrecy of their clients."

the industry involved, and tax policies that create the impression of redistributing income without actually doing so.) A great deal of political energy is devoted to maintaining control over the images that shape public opinion. Regardless of their particular content, official indicators that are used to reassure the public are ideological just by playing that role.

COMPETING POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although indicators have been used to buttress the power of elites, they can also be used as evidence to validate competing perspectives. Developing indicators can be a means of entering political debate over contentious issues and undermining the legitimacy of alternative ideologies. Political parties, interest groups, and citizen activists all have reason to make use of indicators to promote a particular vision of the good society. That is part of the process by which people with commitments to particular values try to convince uncommitted citizens to join them.

It might seem that on a global basis there are innumerable ways of thinking about the nature of the good society or quality of life. Indeed, there are countless specific formulations of positive outcomes. Nevertheless, if we look at the procedures actually used for making decisions about the good life, the number of possibilities diminishes substantially. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has developed the startling notion that the apparent diversity of procedures for judging QOL can ultimately be subsumed under four basic patterns that constitute the contending perspectives in any culture.

Douglas (1982) proposes that there are enduring value conflicts within every culture. She argues that there are four stable types of value systems at odds with each other. Each cosmology represents a distinctive view of nature, risk, and authority. She represents the competing political perspectives or "cultural biases" in a two-dimensional matrix. On one axis are varying degrees of affiliation with what they call "grid," which refers to the degree to which people identify with social customs, rules, and structures. The other axis is defined by "group" identity—the extent to which people are constituted by their membership in family, clan, sect, or other association. This approach yields a four-part typology: hierarchy, isolates, individualism, and enclave or sect. The four corresponding methods of reaching decisions about the good life are through authoritative expertise, an indifference to all systems, competition, and egalitarian deliberation. (In counterclockwise order, their relative positions in the matrix are: upper right, upper left, lower left, and lower right.)

Hierarchists trust experts and traditional authority figures. They support indicators that reveal the necessity of relying on formal rules and structured systems (such as bureaucratic agencies). Individualists see rules and reliance on experts as threats to freedom and believe that risks can be overcome through impersonal processes such as mar-

kets. They trust indicators that demonstrate the effectiveness of self-regulating processes and the waste of resources caused by government interference. Sectarians believe the social order is under constant threat from elites who abuse power. They use indicators to show the social risks associated with unequal power and the need for more egalitarian institutions. Isolates fatalistically assume that risk is unpredictable and that nothing can be done to avoid threats. They don't engage in political or cultural debates, and they are indifferent to indicators. The conflicts among these perspectives are based on incommensurable values. Compromise is uneasy and likely to be short-lived. That is why there will always be competing views of the social situation and a demand for alternative indicators.

In the United States today, the pressure to develop indicators comes largely from a communitarian or republican philosophy, which is located at the intersection of quadrant I (the hierarchists) with quadrant IV (the sectarians) of the matrix. Resistance to those efforts comes mostly from people whose loyalties might be described as libertarian, in quadrant III (the individualists) in the matrix.[13] Whereas communitarians believe in the feasibility of defining the elements of a good society, libertarians are fearful that this will lead to oppressive policies. Communitarians regard tradition and collective norms as a source of authority, while libertarians point to reason and personal experience. Communitarians focus on the risk of social disintegration; libertarians fear oppressive institutions that limit individuality.

The conflicts among the competing worldviews within each culture can never be finally resolved. None can ever put the others to rest. It might seem that one could appeal to evidence as the final authority to demonstrate one orientation as the clear winner. Yet, the definition of what constitutes evidence depends on the paradigm from which one operates. Wildavsky and Tenenbaum (1981) demonstrate this in their discussion of the debate in the 1970s over the supply and price of energy. Conservationists (hierarchists) argued that the world would soon run out of petroleum and that government should intervene to solve the problem. Consumer advocates (sectarians) asserted that shortages were artificially induced by oil companies to raise profits. Economists (individualists) claimed that shortages were temporary aberrations in the market, that higher prices would induce new exploration, and that increased supplies would return

13. Labeling forms of identity is always problematic, since identity is a matter of fluid tendencies that are shaped by competing cultural loyalties. In addition, the meaning of terms changes over time. The term "liberal" has come to mean being supportive of a social safety net, supported by high taxes, and operated by an interventionist state, which connotes an orientation that is almost the direct opposite of the original ideal of individual rights, freedom of choice, and limited government. It is now necessary to use the term libertarian to convey that meaning, although something is lost in translation. The term "republican" once referred to the notion that society should be governed in accordance with civic virtues based on a shared vision of the good life—a political philosophy with strong Platonic overtones. Nowadays, the term has little resonance except in speaking of a political party. Thus, the term "communitarian" has come to bear much of the weight that was earlier carried by republican philosophy.

prices to a normal level. The debate could not be resolved with evidence, because each party pointed to different indicators. The conservationists discussed physical stocks of petroleum (proven reserves); the consumer advocates found statistical evidence of reduced drilling investments by oil companies to support their conspiracy theory; economists appealed to evidence of unwise government regulation in markets and to previous cases in which high prices had induced expanded supply.

Partisans in debate over policies use indicators as evidence to demonstrate the validity of their case. Since there is no neutral or value-free standpoint to determine which statistics are relevant, the numbers do not speak for themselves. If they did, they might resolve conflicts; but in fact, they simply reinforce existing perspectives. Groups are predisposed by their ideologies to look at only one type of data and to discount the evidence from other groups. In the example above, physical stocks, drilling data, and prices were chosen to conform to pre-existing theories or models. Each set of numbers is treated as objective evidence only within the framework that made that data set relevant.

THE COMMUNITARIAN IDEOLOGY OF CIVIC INDICATORS

Civic groups that develop national and community indicators could generally be classified as communitarian, which contains elements of both the hierarchist and the sectarian categories. In keeping with the hierarchical value system, they present social problems as if expert management can solve them if enough political will and formal authority can be summoned. Because this value competes with the sectarian value that indicators should be democratic or participative, the reliance on experts is rarely made explicit. Nevertheless, it shows up in the habit of offering the public a chance to engage in discussion about general values but leaving technical details to others. It can be found in the understanding that participation is useful in framing the general types of indicators, but that the task of devising specific indicators should be turned over to people with expertise in data analysis, who are presumed to be neutral. In effect, this means deferring to the values of professionals.

Indicator project participants also generally endorse the hierarchical view that every problem can be solved through a careful balancing of interests. This creates the illusion that their indicators are above the fray of political partisanship. It tends to make indicators politically conservative in the sense that they pose only a slight challenge to the status quo.

Those who develop social indicators are also swayed by sectarian tendencies. For example, they overtly distrust experts and authorities. This obviously creates a tension with the hierarchist value of relying on expertise. It is resolved either by focusing on the "democratic" aspects of the indicators development process or by downplaying the role of experts and reframing the purpose of indicators as a method of increasing the num-

ber of people involved in public deliberation. The latter process goes under various names: promoting civic engagement, building trust, investing in social capital. To sectarians or egalitarians, this ideal seems nonideological: Who could possibly oppose participation? Yet, even this is a partisan perspective. It treats expressive values as more important than instrumental ones, and, in so doing, it implicitly sides with existing authority. It regards discussion of public affairs as an end in itself, regardless of whether any change occurs in the economic and social well-being of citizens. This fits right in with Edelman's thesis that symbolic gesture displaces real transformations of power.

Another sectarian tendency found among indicators practitioners is the high value placed on consensus. The effort to achieve consensus as an end in itself means that: (1) potentially disruptive people will not be invited to join the process, (2) opportunities for dissent will be minimized, (3) dissent will be ignored or channeled into ineffective forms of expression, or (4) the outcome will represent the lowest common denominator. Another possibility is that no agreement will be reached and that the process will be declared a success simply because people disclosed their views to each other. Some people may regard this as a nonideological position because they see the search for consensus as a universal or uncontroversial value. They assume that people with good intentions will eventually reach agreement. This is clearly an ideological perspective since the premise can never be tested—failure merely indicating that "they didn't talk long enough." In addition, the ideological character of the insistence on consensus is apparent to those who are left out of the process or whose dissent is not taken seriously.

EMBRACING THE IDEA OF TAKING SIDES

The idea that an argument is ideologically based is an embarrassment in this country. Americans are proud of being pragmatic, independent thinkers, neither hamstrung by philosophy, nor limited by prepackaged principles. Like Sergeant Joe Friday on the television series *Dragnet,* Americans are famous for wanting "just the facts." The argument made by Wildavsky and Tenenbaum, Douglas, and many other scholars is, however, that any effort to state mere "facts" will immediately draw the investigator into a partisan position. As soon as someone wants to use the facts to achieve a political purpose, those facts become implicitly ideological. The evasion of ideology is simply not possible. In order to be taken seriously in public life, one must take sides.

The cost of trying to avoid ideological thought is that indicators projects lack focus and remain politically ineffectual. An ideology provides a context for understanding social problems and assigning responsibility for them. It generates questions for research and tells where to begin looking for solutions. More important, an ideology enables advocates to give a coherent account of the meaning of statistics; a meaning that would otherwise remain buried in a pile of numbers.

A public conversation about ideology is long overdue in America. Indicators could contribute to that dialogue by revealing the richness and complexity of ideological thought in our culture. There is often an assumption that there are only two political poles in America: liberal and conservative. The conflicting models used by conservationists, consumer advocates, and economists, as analyzed by Wildavsky and Tenenbaum, point to at least three ideological perspectives that can found in indicators. Douglas suggests there are four.

Ideological conflict is not something to be feared. It should be embraced as an inevitable part of public life that makes us stronger. The Anglo-American tradition of adversarial proceedings in law (in contrast to the Continental European common pursuit of truth) is based on the belief that contested truths are more reliable than ones reached directly through agreement. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other authors of the principles embodied in the Bill of Rights correctly understood the social value of bringing differing viewpoints into the open. This permits ideas to emerge that would be effectively silenced by an insistence on consensus.

Consensus is desirable, but not so much about outcomes as about procedures. Democracy requires that citizens be willing to put their beliefs to the test, both in legislative and judicial contests, and to accept the results peaceably. In other words, democracy is not so much about agreement as about carefully controlled conflict.

CONCLUSION

Social indicators have the potential to play an important role in formulating policies to create a better society. That potential will remain unfulfilled if the practitioners in this field perpetuate a set of ideas about indicators that have been taken for granted:

- that indicators are direct measures of quality of life
- that QOL is necessarily measured by happiness, satisfaction, or other utilitarian criteria
- that effective indicators are consensus-based, nonideological, and above politics

All of those premises are either false or overly simplistic.

First, there is no direct way to measure what is of value. All definitions of quality of life are necessarily roundabout or metaphoric. The desire to know with clarity and certainty the ends or purposes of life is understandable, perhaps even laudable, but impossible to fulfill. As a result, there will always be disagreement about which metaphors are most helpful in thinking about the nature of value. Social indicators are inevitably constrained by that elementary feature of reality.

Second, the utilitarian premise that actions are ultimately to be judged by their contribution to happiness or "utility" is only one of several possible ethical frameworks. A new starting point is needed for those who want to devise indicators that are truly distinctive from the economic worldview. Thus far, indicators based on nonutilitarian premises (such as Sen's capabilities approach) have reached the conceptual stage, but they have yet to be realized in concrete form. Yet, if there are to be genuine options in the measurement of QOL, this is the direction in which future research is most needed.

Finally, if indicators are to be useful in resolving social problems, they cannot stand above the fray. In order to fashion politically relevant stories that inspire commitment to ideals, indicators have to be constructed from some standpoint or ideology. The effort to achieve neutrality and universal acceptance has been a recipe for preserving the status quo. If indicators are to promote the kind of reform that their proponents often seem to hope they will achieve, they will inevitably challenge accepted conventions and institutions. That may be less comfortable than designing indicators that avoid controversy, but no social progress can occur unless we accept the virtue of rational conflict.

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