Editorial

Indicators of Social Quality

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To date the social quality project has been dominated by theoretical, philosophical and policy agendas. This double issue of the Journal marks a point of departure as it reports on the results of the European Network Indicators of Social Quality (ENIQ) programme which lays the foundation for the empirical analyses of Social Quality in European Union member states.

An introductory paper by van der Maesen and Walker outline the theoretical background to the four key empirical dimensions of Social Quality:

- *Socio-economic security* – the command of adequate resources over time in the domains of financial resources, housing and the environment, health and care, work and education.
- *Social cohesion* – the extent to which social relations, values and norms are shared in the domains of trust, integrative norms and values, social networks and identity.
- *Social inclusion* – the ability to participate in the normal social, cultural and economic activities of a society in the domains of citizenship rights, labour market, public and private services and social networks.
- *Social empowerment* – the ability to act in the context of social relations in the domains of knowledge base, labour market, openness and supportiveness of institutions, access to collective action and cultural activities and support for personal relations.

Details of the indicators and measurement of Social Quality based on these four broad empirical dimensions are presented in papers on fourteen European Member states: Belgium, Britain, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. The views of two important NGOs are presented in papers by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), European Region. In the final paper in this issue Peter Herrmann presents some cogent arguments that the concept of empowerment should be seen as the core of social quality.

Indicators

Many (most) indicators collected by government and international organisations are designed to measure the negative aspects of society, such as the extent of ‘problem’ groups (e.g., the poor, the unemployed, etc.). Similarly, indicators derived from administrative statistics tend to be primarily concerned with process rather than outcome, e.g., the numbers of children attending school rather than the quality of education they receive. In order to adequately measure social quality a shift in emphasis will be required from ‘negative’ indicators to ‘positive’ indicators and from ‘process’ to ‘outcome’ indicators.

International research on indicators of child well-being (Ben-Arieh 2000) has produced guidance which can be adapted to critically assess the success of the social quality indicators. Ideal criteria (Moore 1995; Barnes 2001) for sets of social quality indicators might be:

- Indicators should assess well-being across a broad array of social quality outcomes and processes.
- Indicators should have the same meaning in varied societal groups, within and across nations.
- Indicators should help track progress in meeting social quality goals at the national, state and local levels.
- Indicators should be available for relevant population sub-groups.
- Indicators should assess both positive and negative aspects of social quality.
- Indicators should be easily and readily understood by the public.
- Age-appropriate indicators of social quality are needed from birth through adolescence and adulthood.
- Indicators are needed that assess dispersion across a given measures of social quality, the duration that adults and children spend in a given status, and which assess cumulative risk factors experienced by adults and children.
- Indicators should have the same meaning over time.
- Indicators should be collected now that anticipate the future and provide baseline data for subsequent trends.
- Coverage of the population or event being monitored should be complete or very high: data collection procedures should be rigorous and should not vary over time.

Comparative Empirical Research

Many members of the European public incorrectly believe that empirical indicators and social statistics are objective facts. However, statistics are social constructs which were developed for specific historical and cultural purposes (Dorling and Simpson 1998). Since the member states of the EU have had different cultural and economic histories it is unsurprising that there are many differences between their social statistics. This is not problematic for analysis within EU countries, but it raises substantial problems when trying to compare countries.

Comparative studies often face four main difficulties (Affichard *et al.* 1998):

- Managing research in international networks.
- Differences in the legitimacy of research topics and objects of study in different countries.
- Differences with the conceptualisation of key issues.
- Problems with accessing information.

Comparative studies and social policies have often failed to achieve their aims due to inadequate knowledge of the contexts in which state intervention and statistical measurement have taken place and due to inadequate comparative data to aid policy development.

For example, there are major differences between national systems of vocational training. Some member states have developed a system of full-time training within the educational system, whereas in others apprenticeships continue to play a major role. These institutional differences have a significant impact on an indicator that is commonly used to compare the performance of employment and educational systems: the rate of unemployment among young people. In effect, the denominator used to calculate this indicator is the economically active population (and not the entire population of the age bracket concerned), which includes apprentices: a higher number of apprentices results in a lower rate of youth unemployment (Jobert, Marry and Tanguy 1995).

Out of necessity, policy decisions at European level have often been based on simplistic assumptions concerning the disappearance of national differences and the belief that European integration will emerge quite naturally from the harmonisation of social policies (Affichard *et al.* 1998).

Problems with Comparing Statistics in EU Member States

Although there are United Nations and EU conventions regarding the collection of social statistics and the calculation of indicators, there are no

international agreements on socio-demographic data comparable, for example, to the International Classification of Causes of Death developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), according to the rules of which most countries now report their mortality data (Colman 1999). International compilations of social indicators, therefore, either have to take as read the differences in definition and usage employed by participating countries, and present them with appropriate warnings, as do the Council of Europe and the OECD, or instead attempt to harmonise them by re-computing indices from raw data, as Eurostat does for EU member states. Harmonisation by Eurostat improves comparability (Everaers 2000) but after such processing, some data will no longer be identical to that reported by the national statistics offices in question.

For example, results from the same Labour Force Survey produced by Eurostat, the Luxembourg Employment Study and the national statistical office of an EU member state may often differ, even though the same dataset is being analysed. It is therefore important to make clear which source is being used in any report.

In some cases harmonisation by Eurostat has proved to be very difficult, for example net pay is often understood to mean pay before social security contributions. In countries where the system of tax deduction at source prevails, however, net pay means pay net of social security contributions and direct taxes. This example shows that it is not sufficient for statisticians to reach a common definition to eliminate ambiguity: people questioned in surveys may not necessarily provide answers that comply with the harmonised definition. Difficulties with harmonisation have resulted in only limited use being made of the Household Expenditure Surveys from member states, despite considerable efforts by Eurostat.

The major problem with many comparative studies that make use of social statistics is that many simple concepts appear to be unambiguous and not open to the possibility of measurement differences. This is an illusion: there is not a single social indicator that is measured in the same way in every EU member state. To illustrate this fact the examples of age and lone-parent families will be discussed below.

Age

Anthropological studies indicate that all societies have a concept of 'age' and that this is certainly true for all countries within the EU. The concept of age may seem simple and not open to definitional variation. Unfortunately this is not the case: two definitions of 'age' are in use in different countries of the EU. The first is 'age in completed years' (i.e., a

given birthday having been reached). The second is ‘age achieved during the calendar year in question’, even when the birthday has not been reached. For every one year of birth there are two years of completed age, and vice versa. With classification by completed years, events at a given age apply to persons on average half a year older than when the age is that reached during the year. This makes a difference to statistics on mean age of the workforces, mean age of mother at first birth, etc.

In addition, a number of surveys in EU countries have used a third definition of age: that between birth and some fixed date relating to the survey, such as the survey start or end date.

In 1990 Eurostat adopted the ‘SYSCODEM’ system for the production of harmonised, comparable demographic indices. This is a French acronym for ‘Community System of Demographic Observation’ devised by M. Gérard Calot when director of the Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques (INED) in Paris (Calot 1984; Eurostat 1992, 1994). Eurostat calculates both kinds of age-specific measures but gives emphasis to that of ‘the age reached during the year’ (that is, referring to a single calendar-year birth cohort). It does so, even if only data by completed year are available, by using a number of complicated statistical methods.

Lone-Parent Families

Lone-parent families might appear not to be open to any major ambiguity of interpretation, and yet this is an especially heterogeneous category. There are significant variations in the age criterion applied to children between EU member states, and the position taken regarding consensual unions also has a marked effect on the numbers of lone-parent families.

Research by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has given the following example of French and German practice (Affichard *et al.* 1998).

According to the German Statistisches Bundesamt [Institute of Statistics], in 1989, lone parent families accounted for some 13.5% of all families in West Germany, which meant that it was a much more common family form than in the majority of other Western countries: in France, for example, the figures indicated that lone parent families accounted for just 10% of families in 1989. These figures have been widely cited in sociological studies and a number of international comparisons, and yet, it would seem, paradoxically, France has a higher divorce rate than Germany and, in particular, an extra-marital birth rate that is three times higher than in Germany.

However, the German statistical category of lone parent families covers a very different reality from that covered in France: whilst 40% of German

lone-parent heads of households are widows and widowers, the figure is only 20% in France. The difference is explained by the way the category is constructed. The German category includes all households in which there is a lone parent and at least one unmarried child. In other words, an 80-year-old widow living in her 60-year-old daughter's home is included in the category of single parents, as is a young unmarried mother with a two-year-old child. The Statistisches Bundesamt includes unmarried couples with children under the category of lone parent families. This means it is not the biological tie (which nonetheless prevails in the attribution of German nationality) that gives rise to official recognition of the family relationship, but the marriage tie. Hence, a father who lives with his partner, without being married to her, with one or more of their children is deemed to be a *familienfremde Person* [person outside the family but living in the same household].

Thus, the definition of lone-parent families seems to be based on essentially legal criteria in Germany, whereas in France the INSEE follows a completely different approach to classification, based on a more sociological criterion that takes account of the economic dependence of children: the INSEE defines family circumstances on the basis of 'de facto families' (one or two parents, whether legally married or not, with children).

Conclusion

It is clear that any project for producing internationally comparable operational measures of Social Quality faces huge intellectual and practical difficulties. However, the papers in this issue show that a great progress has been made by the ENIQ project and that an empirical framework for social quality research has now been successfully established.

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