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Balancing Wellbeing and Social Harmony

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Abstract

Authentic Development has been described in terms of substantial and balanced contributions of social harmony and wellbeing. Whereas objective indicators of wellbeing may be elaborated using the approaches of economists, objective indicators of social harmony are extremely difficult to define due to the exceedingly number of interdependent variables. Nevertheless, we discuss here recent elaborations of an interdisciplinary educational approach that allows students to elaborate semi-quantitative components of social harmony and become aware of real life complexities.

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Cognitive features for objective and subjective analyses

The cognitive features of natural scientists and economists are greatly different from those of sociologists. A natural scientist may be trained to describe the physical world in terms of models that mathematically relate microscopic to macroscopic processes. For instance, the spontaneous assembly of biological fibers is associated to a macroscopically described excluded volume model^[1]. Rubber elasticity is instead associated to a random flight model^[2]. These systems are characterized by a small number of “independent variables” and, for this reason, the cognitive features of a natural scientist are said to have an objective character. Note that an experienced natural scientist would not handle a model having more than four or five independent variables. That limit would likely be expanded by “artificial intelligence”. A valuable model should also have predictive features and be consistent with the macroscopic behavior of the system.

The objective character is also typical of data elaborated by economists, using mathematical concepts such as variables,

equations, identities, graphs, diagrams and statistical analysis.

On the other hand, Sociology is the study of human social behavior. Sociologists use qualitative research methods, such as observations, interviews, questionnaires. They also use more quantitative treatments of the above data based on the "grounded theory", that allows a systematic analysis of the consistency of the data and their historical evolution. Note that the use of term "quantitative" to characterize sociological research does not include any reference to a plausible model. The complexity of the systems handled by sociologists is well evidenced by a typical article written by a sociologist, directed to specialists in cognitive science. The article emphasizes "enactivism", which relates cognition to a dynamic interaction of an acting organism with its environment^[3]. Therefore, the cognitive features of sociologists have a prevalently subjective character that would be difficult to analyze in view of their large number of dependent variables involved. The term "indicator" was therefore introduced to characterize collectively systems having a large number of dependent variables^[4].

In view of the difference between the approaches of sociologists and economists, their mutual understanding ought to be promoted^{[5][6][7][8]}. In 2003 Abell advocated a closer association between economy and sociology and suggested that this association would enlarge the vision of both, with sociologist appreciating the intellectual rigor of economists^[5]. Furthermore, the motivation for the 2019 Nobel prize in Economics to Banerjee, Duflo and Kramer (MIT and Harvard University)^[6], stated that economists are greatly contributing to the fight to reduce the poverty, and related problems such as education of young generations. In 2020 Egidi still advocated the needs of unified common principles between sociologists and economists^[7].

Indeed, behavioral economics, which couples elements of economics and psychology, has greatly expanded in recent years and tackles ideas that can be traced back to Adam Smith. Sociologists have been less concerned about adopting the intellectual rigor of economists.

Educational evaluation of wellbeing and social harmony

In the course of our development work in Guatemala (**in cooperation with** the Swiss based Jepa Limmat Foundation) we reached the conclusion, originally discussed by Denis Goulet, a French Philosopher, that "authentic" development requires the "balance" of two sizable contributions, one associated to the strengths of social interactions (F), the other related to economical well being (G)^[8]. The ratio:

$$F / G \longrightarrow 1$$

(with individual values of F and G > 1) embodies Goulet's balancing recipe for authentic development and implies the evaluation and control of one subjective and one objective indicators, and the consideration of the approaches of economists and sociologists discussed above.

We proposed a semi-quantitative evaluation of these indicators using an educational project that involved students at the high school or college level.^{[9][10]} The rationale for such an approach is the realization that a detailed evaluation of the F indicator would be extremely problematic.

Detailed methodology and results were described in a publication on the UNESCO educational journal^[8]. The students have shown great interest for such Jepa courses. During the first semester students are exposed to *multidisciplinary*, propedeutic classes based on notions of culture, religion, ethnicity, political systems and economics. The students get relevant information from a brochure elaborated by the Foundation and a textbook developed ad hoc^[9], under the guidance of one or more teachers.

During the second semester, the students are exposed to an *interdisciplinary* approach consisting in the analysis of main sociological and economical events occurring in countries in North, Central and South America^[9]. The analysis is guided by a sociologist and an economist working *simultaneously* rather than sequentially. The student analyzes socio-economic components of events occurring in the countries they had chosen. For instance, recent and planned classes include the following components of F:

- f_1 migration
- f_2 satisfactory job availability
- f_3 gender and class conflicts
- f_4 helping others
- f_5 access to quality education

and the following components of G:

- g_1 GDP per person
- g_2 wealth distribution
- g_3 access to medical care

The students express their ratings of F and G using semi-quantitative, normalized values between 1 (insufficient), 2 (average), 3 (excellent). The values of F are obtained from the average of the above f values. The values of G are obtained from the average of the above values of g.

The final step is a moment of GLORY for the students. They feel to be now able to suggest specific measures that local administrations could enact to balance the overall F/G ratios, thus achieving authentic development. For example, the f_1 component of F could be increased by favoring repatriation of aged migrants.

The selection of teachers in the case of multidisciplinary courses has not presented difficulties, a single teacher could deliver the course^[10]. The interaction between sociologists and economists attracts the interest and participation of the students and promotes the identification of the common ground of a socio economics discipline.

Moreover, the approach of the Jepa courses is entirely consistent with current claims by inspired educators that

conventional curricula are exceedingly doctrinal and often lack contact with real life^[11].

Conclusions

Economists have not spared sociologists from the accusation of irrationality. However, the complexity of the multiple dependent variables included in F renders almost impossible its rational modeling and evaluation, at the present time.

The main problem is that sociological problems cannot be easily evaluated and the real need is “understanding”, not just “addressing”, human expectations.

The value of Jepsa courses is not the quantifications of debatable values of the contributions to F and G. It is rather the education of new generation to solve problems that affect directly their life, stimulating also the establishment of a new discipline for social economics.

Our conclusion that the analysis of social harmony should be included in classes for future generations is consistent with the trend to make conventional education more consonant with issues of real life^[11].

The Jepsa Limmat Foundation is ready to share additional information and cooperate with schools interested in adopting Jepsa courses.

About the Authors

Alberto Ciferri is a former Chemistry professor from the University of Genoa and Duke University. He published over 200 articles and edited books in the area of self-assembly of functional bio-structures. More recently, he published in the advanced education area. He has now retired to his home country, and serves on the Board of the Swiss-based Jepsa Limmat Foundation promoting educational projects in Central America. Cinzia Bongianni has been a social worker in Italy for over 30 years and is now a board member of the Jepsa Limmat Foundation, promoting advanced medical projects in Central Asia and Central Africa.

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