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Balancing Well-being and Social Harmony. An Interdisciplinary Educational Approach

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Abstract

This article reviews the finalities and the methodology of a multidisciplinary educational course designed for students at the high school level. The course can be included in the conventional curricula of public or private schools or used for educational conferences by municipalities. The course is not based on conventional disciplines but rather on socio-economic indicators, which have been recently considered for a classification of the development of various countries. In particular, the course focuses on two indicators "social harmony" and "well-being" that are regarded as the most relevant indices of the quality of life. A brief assessment of cognitive science, relevant to the definition of the indicators, is included.

The introduction of elements of real life into educational curricula was pioneered by early educators. The lack of a balance between economic well-being and social harmony appears a primary factor in the conflicts prevailing in the world. It is expected that the introduction elements of real life in current curricula might promote a more balanced society, and also stimulate the development of an interdisciplinary socio-economic discipline.

Keywords: authentic development, interdisciplinary education, objective and subjective indicators, well-being and social harmony

1. Introduction

Social conflicts of various type: ethnic, class, gender, still hinder the social harmony of most countries. Unfair wealth distribution, access to qualified instruction and medical care also compromise the welfare in most countries.

It is generally agreed that the social harmony and welfare are main factors that promote authentic development (Goulet, 2006; Ciferri & Soldi, 2021). We proposed an empirical semi-quantitative determination of two "indicators" (Ciferri, Soldi & Bongianni, 2022), F and G, representing respectively social harmony and well-being. In the present paper we up-to-date the latter work and present a more critical analysis of the significance of the F and G indicators. The latter are characterized by subjective evaluations that cannot be easily associated to the "variables" used by scientist and economists that are claimed to have an objective significance. In the following section we discuss the characteristic features of the indicators that represent sociological features3. (Ciferri, Soldi & Bongianni, 2022)

2. 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 (Ciferri, 2016). Rubber elasticity is instead associated to a random flight model (Treloar, 2003). 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 extended by "artificial intelligence". A valuable model should also have predictive features and be consistent with the macroscopic behavior of the system. It is interesting to note that the "complexity theory" describes a top-down assembling mode based on the functioning of a complex when a unifying principle is not detectable on the assembling components (Mitchell, 2011). 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 (Romeu, 2023). 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 systems having a large number of dependent variables (Ciferri, Soldi & Bongianni, 2022).

In view of the difference between the approaches of sociologists and economists, their mutual understanding ought to be promoted (Abell, 2003; Banerjee & Duflo, 2012; Egidi, 2020). 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 (Abell, 2003). Furthermore, the motivation for the 2019 Nobel prize in Economics to Banerjee, Duflo and Kramer (MIT and Harvard University) (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012), stated that economists are greatly contributing to the fight to reduce 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 (Egidi, 2020).

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.

3. Educational Evaluation of Well-being 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 primarily associated to the strengths of social interactions (F), the other related to well-being (G) (Goulet, 2006). 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 high school or college students (Ciferri, & Soldi, 2021; Ciferri, 2019). Detailed methodology and results are described in a publication on the UNESCO educational journal (Ciferri, & Soldi, 2021). 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 got relevant information from a brochure elaborated by the Foundation and web analysis under the guidance of one or more teachers.

During the second semester, the students are exposed to an "*interdisciplinary*" (Keynes & The Open University, 2019) approach consisting in the analysis of main sociological and economical events that occurred in countries in North, Central, and South America. The students used the web and a book elaborated ad hoc (Ciferri, 2019). Each student analyzed in detail events occurring in two countries they have selected. The analysis is guided by a sociologist and an economist working "s*imultaneously*" rather than sequentially (Ciferri, & Soldi, 2021; Ciferri, 2019). The students expressed their ratings on F and G using semi-quantitative, normalized values between 1 (insufficient), 2 (average), 3 (excellent). The results of their selections is exemplified by the values reported for the USA (F=1 and G=3) and for Guatemala (F=3 and G=1).

Recently, we attempted the evaluation of selected components of F and G. In particular:

f_1 sociological impact of migration

f_2 sociological impact of job availability

f_3 gender and class conflicts

f_4 helping others

f_5 access and impact of quality education

and

g_1 GDP per person

g_2 wealth distribution

g_3 access to medical care

g4 economic impact of migration

Averages of the above components were used to assess the overall F and G values. The traditional components of well-being, the economic and physical ones, are represented by g_1 and g_3. Moreover, the selection of individual values of F and G components did not largely affect the corresponding F/G ratios, in contrast to the effects that individual l components have in classification studies (Sachs, 2012; Stiglitz, Fitoussi & Durand, 2020). Of course, both F and G must be larger than 1 for significant development to occur. (Mathews & Izquierdo, (Eds.), 2009)

In view of our educational aim, it is not essential to analyze all possible sub-indicators of either G or F.

The evaluation of each indicator, or of their individual components, was a moment of great enthusiasm and ACHIEVEMENT for the students. They felt to be able to tackle problems often ignored by their parents and friends and, particularly, to be able to suggest specific measures that local administrations could enact to balance the overall F/G ratios, aiming to authentic development. For example, an increment of the above f_1 component could be promoted by favoring repatriation of aged migrants. The students also acquire better informations on the type of activity they want to pursue in their future, such as the significance of voting, and helping others.

The selection of teachers in the case of multidisciplinary classes has not presented difficulties, a single teacher could deliver the propedeutic classes (Ciferri, & Soldi, 2021). In the case of the interdisciplinary classes, the interaction between sociologists and economists stimulated great interest of the students and promoted the identification of new basis for a socio-economic discipline. The Jepa approach was perceived to be consistent with current claims by inspired educators that conventional curricula are exceedingly doctrinal and often lack contraction with real life. A concept that had been earlier advocated by well-known educators such as Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, 2002) and Maria Montessori (Montessori, 2016).

Contributions of subjective and objective indicators related to development issues have been discussed in the literature. The Human Development Index (Roser, 2019), extensively used by the UN to assess the performance of various countries, includes three objective indicators. In the World Happiness Classification (Sachs, 2012) and in the OECD Better Life index (Stiglitz, Fitoussi & Durand, 2020) up to 11 subjective indicators are analyzed. The larger is the number of indicators identified, the better is expected to be the "classification" of the performance of various countries. Even in real life, simple ratios of subjective and objective indicators are often used, for instance the quality/price ratio. Nevertheless, these classifications may be obscured if the relevance of each variable changes from country to country and from person to person.

4. Conclusions

In our work we do not aim to establish any classification. We simply use the indicators in an educational project attempting to diffuse the concept of authentic development. The evaluation of the components of F and G is not as important as their balance, expressed by F/G ratio tending to 1.

Indeed, the value of Jepa courses is not the quantifications of debatable values of the contributions to F and G. It is rather the education of new generation to tackle problems that affect directly their life, stimulating also the establishment of a new socio-economic discipline.

Our students learn that when one of the two indicators is large (e.g., G in the USA) the balancing concept requires the adoption of measures that increase the other indicator, not blindly pursuing policies of exponential growth.

Our suggestion that subjective indicators such as F and G should be the basis for interdisciplinary courses addressed to high-school students is fully consistent with suggestions made by reputable educators (Gramsci, 2002; Montessori, 2016).

Economists have not spared sociologists from the accusation of irrationality. However, sociological problems cannot be easily evaluated at the present time due the complexity associated to the multiple dependent variables. In any event, human expectations need to be "understood", not just "addressed".

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

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