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HAVE WE LEARNED ANYTHING FROM THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY?

by

James A. Davis
Harvard University
and

Tom W. Smith
National Opinion Research Center

The General Social Survey is a national sample survey of about 1,500 adults conducted annually for the years 1972 to 1978 and biennially beginning in 1980 by the National Opinion Research Center and the University of Chicago. It provides an important source of data for the description and analysis of social trends in the United States. The specific contents of the data and of the source volumes that describe the General Social Survey (GSS) have been reported in previous issues of the Social Indicators Newsletter. (No. 7, July, 1975; No. 14, August, 1979; No. 15, Dec., 1980; No. 16, August, 1982).

Over 650 reports and publications have flowed from studies utilizing the GSS. But what have we learned? The data have produced an extremely diverse, sometimes surprising, array of findings. For example:

Educational level is as important as religion in affecting attitudes to abortion (Arney and Trescher, 1975).

There are no important sex differences in life satisfaction (Clemente and Sauer, 1976).

There has been little change in belief in life after death over the last forty years (Greeley, 1976).

Workers with better vocabularies earn more money, even after one controls for formal education and family background (Peterson and Karplus, 1979).

At first it appears that people in smaller towns are more satisfied with their lives, but the difference vanishes when race and health are controlled (Sauer, Shehan, Boymel, 1976).

Single people are less happy than married people and only slightly more happy than the widowed or divorced (Ward, 1978).

Intriguing - but do such findings mean anything more than the interesting snippets

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one finds in the "life-style section" of the daily newspapers? Hundreds of investigators have analyzed nearly five hundred variables in a multitude of surveys (eight GSS files plus dozens of base line studies) to produce the more than six hundred reports. [A complete listing of studies that have employed the GSS survey appear in *Annotated Bibliography of Papers Using the General Social Surveys*, by Tom W. Smith and Martin Selzer (1980).] Is it possible to glean from this work some broad patterns and generalizations that contribute to our scientific understanding of American society? We think so.

A review of some of the major themes in the GSS research suggests the following conclusions and this is by no means a systematic or comprehensive list of what can be found.

— The last twenty-five years have seen a remarkable increase in social liberalism but exceptions exist and the trends may have reached a plateau.

— Mass attitude change hits all parts of the social structure about equally and conversion is as important as replacement in producing attitude trends.

— Intergenerational transmittances shape attitudes and behaviors as well as socioeconomic status.

— Membership in subgroups and subcultures has a significant influence on a wide range of attitudes.

Attitude Change

GSS data combined with prior readings from base line studies have enabled researchers to plot trends in racial attitudes (Taylor, Sheatsley, and Greeley, 1978; Smith, 1981; and Condran, (1979); sex roles (Cherlin and Walters, 1981; Spitze and Huber, 1979); abortion (Evers and McGee, 1980; Tedrow and Maloney, 1979); and free speech (Davis, 1975). Anyone who lived in America during the post-World War II decades realizes that there have been vast changes in the attitudinal climate, but only systematic research involving repeated measures on a spectrum of topics - the sort provided by the GSS - can document specific conclusions such as these:

While most attitude and issue items moved in a liberal direction, attitudes toward crime and punishment are a definite exception (Smith, 1982; Stinchcombe, et al., 1980).

Most "social issue" items showed an approximately linear shift toward the liberal pole from the end of World War II to the early 1970s, the '70s seemed to show a plateau (but not a reversal) for most of them (Smith, 1982; Davis, 1980).

Only a long-term eclectic program of data collection can assess the shapes of such trend lines and identify meaningful inconsistencies across content areas. Since the GSS contains an unusual number of detailed measures on "objective" personal characteristics, in addition to attitude and opinion items, researchers have been able to study how these changes develop. For example, when change occurs it seems to operate in all parts of the social structure. That is, all age groups, educational levels, and religious groups tend to move together in the same direction (Davis, 1980; Davis, 1975). There is a conspicuous and important exception to this proposition - progress in racial tolerance among whites was much more rapid in the South than in the North during the post-World War II period (Smith, 1981). But most GSS studies show change in all groups when there is significant change in any (Smith, 1978; Cutler, Lentz, Muha and Riter, 1980).

This does not mean that small differentials don't exist. GSS studies sometimes show the younger and better educated Americans changing faster. But the general pattern casts doubt on some well-established

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SSRC Center for Social Indicators
1755 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

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statistical data. It is edited by Charles G. Renfro and is published by Elsevier. Reprints of the article may be ordered from the Social Science Research Council, Center for Coordination of Research on Social Indicators, 1755 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Please enclose with your order a check in the amount of \$2.00 per copy to cover postage and handling.

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notions. Isolated and anecdotal evidence had suggested that mass attitude and opinion change operates through a "trickle down" mechanism in which new ideas start in bellwether groups (e.g. the young and better educated or big city dwellers) and spread to the rest of the flock. Most GSS analyses do not show this. More important, perhaps, is disconfirmation of the notions that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" and "aging makes people conservative." GSS studies almost always show the opposite: Even the oldest groups tend to shift in a liberal direction when the rest of society changes (Cutler, Lentz, Huha, and Riter, 1980; Cutler and Kaufman, 1975).

Granted that "conversions" are common, change in attitudes and opinions also takes place by "cohort replacement." Since the younger generation has been better educated and both educational attainment and membership in a recent generation has promoted liberalism, the nation is subject to a quiet, glacial change in attitudes, and opinions as older, less well-educated cohorts die and younger, better educated cohorts enter the adult population. This model of attitude change was first proposed by Samuel Stouffer in 1954, and GSS research (Davis, 1975; Smith, 1976a; Taylor, 1978) has documented how "cohorts and conversions" both contribute to the extraordinary shift in the post-World War II climate of attitudes and opinions.

Career Achievement

Although attitude and opinion research is probably the most common application of GSS data, the GSS has not been isolated from the "achievement process" research that has been so central to empirical sociology since the publication of Peter Blau and O.D. Duncan's

The American Occupational Structure in 1967. The GSS contains fully detailed data on achievement process variables (parental education, father's occupation, educational attainment, income, etc.), and these data have allowed social scientists to study the attainment process and to extend this research in at least two important directions: the analyses of women's careers and a consideration of subjective variables.

Most mobility research has been limited to men, but it is no secret that women comprise half the population and a steadily increasing proportion of the work force. Since the GSS covers the total population, its design allows researchers to extend their analyses to women (Glenn and Albrecht, 1980; McClendon, 1976). By and large it appears that the variables affecting men's careers influence women's and that the transmission of prestige from generation to generation involves the same mechanisms for daughters as for sons. Nevertheless, enough differences have been found to make all-male achievement research a dubious model for future studies.

GSS not only expands the sampling universe for achievement studies, it also enables researchers to add "subjective" variables to the original models which were limited to "objective" and demographic factors. For example, a number of studies of social class self-placement justify the conclusion that in the contemporary U.S. whether one considers one's self to be "middle class" or "working class" (hardly any one opts for "upper" or "lower") is not just a matter of income, but an additive function of several achievement variables (Evers, 1976, Van Velsler and Beeghley, 1979; and Vanneman and Pampel, 1977).

A number of studies have shown how achievement variables do and do not affect various attitudes and opinions, i.e. assessing the importance of social class and stratification for values, politics, ethical standards, and the like (Davis, 1979; Grabb, 1979; Sheffield, 1977;). Perhaps the major theme to emerge from this work is the central importance of educational attainment (Davis, 1979). While social science theorizing and popular discussions (e.g. "hard hats", "old families", "upper crust") suggest the importance of income, occupational level and family background, empirical GSS

(General Social Survey, cont'd)

studies generally show years of schooling to be the dominant factor in shaping opinions on social issues, politics, family matters, prejudice, etc. Since schooling is more amenable to deliberate control than other social standing variables, this conclusion has profound implications for society.

The rich vein of family background and social origin data on the GSS has also allowed social scientists to move beyond the basic achievement model both to test other intergenerational transmittances and to examine the impact of intergenerational achievement on attitudes and behaviors. Schepelle (1978) found that having a working mother increased the feminist attitudes of daughters, but not sons. Sedgely and Lund (1979) discovered that being hit as a child increased tolerance of interpersonal violence by about 25 percentage points. Religious switching in particular has been intensively studied (Newport, 1979; Roof and Hadaway, 1979; and Greeley, 1979). Important work has also appeared on the inheritance of broken marriages (Nock, 1980; Pope and Mueller, 1976). The accumulated evidence indicates that many aspects of the family of origin have lasting and substantial impacts not only in the area of attainment but in many other areas. On the other hand research indicates that some of the theorized consequences of intergenerational mobility such as status inconsistency does not have an impact on attitudes and behaviors (Davis, 1981; Tuch and Smith, 1976; and Hengst, 1975).

Subgroup Membership

We have always "known" that ethnicity, religious denomination, and specific occupations create subculture influences that cut across the "vertical" axis of social standing (education, occupation, income, etc.). However, much of the evidence has come from anecdotes, isolated cases, or local samples. Single national surveys, with the traditional sample size of 1500, simply do not yield enough cases in particular subcultures to permit objective analyses. However, the cumulative GSS permits a considerable expansion of case bases. For example, the cumulative GSS contains 260 elementary school teachers and 169 secondary teachers, which permits the analyses of these specific occupations (Lacy and Middle-

ton, 1979). Or again, the cumulative file contains 322 Episcopalian, 146 members of Pentecostal churches, etc. so one may examine specific denominations (Hadaway and Roof, 1979; McIntosh, Alston, and Alston, 1979; and Peek and Brown, 1980).

Among the 75 percent of respondents who were able to report a single or dominant origin, GSS respondents scatter over more than 40 groups of which 15 generate 100 or more cases in the cumulative file. If a researcher wishes to seriously examine the effects of "ethnicity", a crosstabulation of race by nationality by religion by region would be required and because of the large number of empty cells (e.g. black-Swedish-Jews living in the South) would be a statistician's nightmaré. Examination in terms of the individual variables would be highly deceptive due to the very strong "confounding." A standard solution to such problems is to form "typologies" from the crucial combinations. When this approach is taken in the GSS data with respect to the question: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she is married and does not want more children?", some interesting findings emerge. The results are complex, but the following conclusions seem warranted:

1. There is a striking variance in the range of approval: from 85% among Jews to 25% among Mexican Catholics.
2. Each major Race-Region-Religion group contains a wide range associated with national origins. Among the Catholics approval ranges from 51% (English) to 25% (Mexican). Among non-Southern Protestants the range is from 75% for French to 32% among Finns.
3. The black Northern population is far from homogeneous. Northern born, Northern living blacks are above the national norm in approval (52% v. the national figure of 43% while Southern blacks living in the South are at the bottom (26%). Black migrants from South to North are approximately halfway between.
4. There appears to be a distinct regional effect: a. Among blacks, the regional difference is very large. b. Among white Protestants, the French, Scotch, English, and Irish show much less approval among the Southern born.
5. There seems to be a religious effect:

(General Social Survey, cont'd)

Catholic Germans, French, English, and Irish are less favorable to abortion than their non-Southern Protestant counterparts.

6. In all three comparisons (Southern Protestants, Northern Protestants, and Catholics) the Irish show lower approval than the English. Other nationality differences are not very consistent.

A full analysis of such data would require controls for socioeconomic status, especially educational attainment, but these findings illustrate how an unusually large data set, containing a variety of background variables and including religious measures of the sort not used in government surveys can tell us a lot more about ethnicity and subcultures than the standard crosstabs by religion or race or region.

Fewer studies have been cited for this theme than for the others, largely because only in recent years has the cumulative file grown to a size where such analyses become rewarding. But we feel it is safe to forecast that if the program is continued, a major result will be extensive research on ethnicity and subcultures that will give this field of research the scientific data base previously enjoyed only by achievement and stratification researchers.

In sum, certain special features of the General Social Surveys (replication of base line items and time series building, wide-ranging coverage of topics, inclusion of demographics with attitudes and behaviors, ability to examine subgroups) have facilitated research in many important areas and added substantially to our knowledge of American society.

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