

**Globalizing Survey Research:  
The International Social Survey Program**

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## The State of Cross-National Survey Research

Increasingly social scientists are realizing not only the utility, but the necessity of comparative research. As Genov (1991) has observed, "contemporary sociology stands and falls with its own internationalization.... The internationalization of sociology is the unfinished agenda of the sociological classics. It is the task of contemporary and future sociologists." As the Working Group on the Outlook for Comparative International Social Science Research has noted, "A range of research previously conceived as 'domestic,' or as concerned with analytical propositions assumed invariant across national boundaries, clearly needs to be reconceptualized in light of recent comparative/international findings." Unless a comparative perspective is adopted, "models and theories will continue to be 'domestic' while the phenomena being explained are clearly not (Luce, Smelser, and Gerstein, 1989)."

Cross-national research allows us to compare human and social processes across different nations. It puts each nation's experience into comparative perspective. It allows us to identify both general patterns that prevail across human societies and to measure the variations that occur in patterns. On the one hand, cross-national replication of findings indicates that the examined relationships are generalizable and may apply to industrial societies in general. Similarly, models that work in the same manner across nations can be considered robust and well-specified. On the other hand, differences across nations indicate that the process being studied is contingent on particular aspects of the various societies and that these differences (e.g. in cultures, social structure, political systems, historical development) must be incorporated into any general model of the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, social science knowledge is advanced by cross-national research both when similarities and when differences are found.

Fortunately the social sciences are increasingly recognizing the advantages and necessities of cross-national research. As Roberta Miller has noted, one of the major recent changes in the social sciences has been that they are "beginning to emphasize the global rather than the national basis of a growing number of social and institutional phenomena (1992)." Prominent in this growing recognition has been the work of the International Social Survey Program which Alex Inkeles (1995) has lauded as "making a great contribution for everyone working to understand social processes, both in the US and world wide." Likewise, Brady (2000) described the ISSP as one of the most influential cross-national studies ever conducted.

### The ISSP

The ISSP is a continuing, annual program of crossnational collaboration. It brings together pre-existing, social science projects and coordinates research goals, thereby adding a

crossnational perspective to the individual, national studies.

ISSP evolved from a bilateral collaboration between the Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfragen der Socialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) of the Zentrum fuer Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen (ZUMA) in Mannheim, West Germany and the General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), University of Chicago. Both the ALLBUS and the GSS are replicating, time series studies. The ALLBUS has been conducted biennially since 1980 and the GSS nearly annually since 1972. In 1982 ZUMA and the NORC devoted a small segment of the ALLBUS and GSS to a common set of questions on job values, important areas of life, abortion, and feminism. (A merged data set is available from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), University of Michigan.) Again in 1984 collaboration was carried out, this time on class differences, equality, and the welfare state.

Meanwhile, in late 1983 the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR) (then known as Social and Community Planning Research), London, which was starting a social indicators series called the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) similar to the ALLBUS and GSS, secured funds from the Nuffield Foundation to hold meetings to further international collaboration. Representatives from ZUMA, NORC, NCSR, and the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University organized ISSP in 1984 and agreed to 1) jointly develop topical modules dealing with important areas of social science, 2) field the modules as a fifteen-minute supplement to the regular national surveys (or a special survey if necessary), 3) include an extensive common core of background variables, and 4) make the data available to the social science community as soon as possible.

Each research organization funds all of its own costs. There are no central funds. The merging of the data into a crossnational data set is performed by the Zentralarchiv fuer Empirische Sozialforschung, University of Cologne in collaboration with the Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos y Politicos in Spain.

Since 1984, ISSP has grown to 38 nations, the founding four-- Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia-- plus Austria, Italy, Ireland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Israel, Norway, the Philippines, New Zealand, Russia, Japan, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, Sweden, Spain, Cyprus, France, Portugal, Slovakia, Latvia, Chile, Bangladesh, Denmark, South Africa, Switzerland, Venezuela, Brazil, Flanders, Finland, Mexico, and Taiwan. In addition, East Germany was added to the German sample upon reunification. The affiliated organizations are listed at [www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org). Other nations have replicated particular modules without being ISSP members (e.g. Poland, in 1987, and Switzerland, in 1987 and 1993).

The annual topics for ISSP are developed over several years by a sub-committee and pretested in various countries. The annual plenary meeting of ISSP then adopts the final questionnaire. The ISSP researchers especially concentrate on developing the questions that are 1) meaningful and relevant to all countries and 2) can be expressed in an equivalent manner in all relevant languages. The

questionnaire is originally drafted in British English and then translated to other languages using standard back translation procedures.

The first theme of the ISSP in 1985 was on the role of government covered attitudes towards a) civil liberties, b) education and parenting, c) welfare and social equality, and d) the economy. The second theme was on social networks and support system. It contained detailed behavioral reports on contacts with various friends and relatives and then a series of questions about where one would turn for help when faced with various situations such as financial need, minor illness, career advice, and emotional distress. The third module, on social equality, concerned beliefs about what factors effect one's chances for social mobility (e.g. parental status, education, contacts, race, etc.), explanations for inequality, assessments of social conflicts, and related questions. It also asked people to estimate the average earnings of various occupations (e.g. farm laborer and doctor) and what the average earnings of these occupations should be.

The fourth module covered the impact on the family of the changing labor force participation of women. It included attitudes on marriage and cohabitation, divorce, children, and child care and special demographics on labor force status, child care, and earnings of husband and wife. The fifth module on orientations towards work dealt with motivations to work, desired characteristics of a job, problems relating to unemployment, satisfaction with one's own job (if employed), and working conditions (if employed).

The sixth module in 1990 repeated the role of government theme. By replicating substantial parts of earlier modules (approximately two-thirds), ISSP not only has a crossnational perspective, but also an over time perspective. One is not only be able to compare nations and test whether similar social science models operate across societies, but is also able to see if there are similar international trends and whether parallel models of social change operate across nations.

The seventh module covered the impact of religious beliefs and behaviors on social, political, and moral attitudes. It included questions on religious upbringing, current religious activities, traditional Christian beliefs, and existential beliefs. The non-religious items concern such topics as personal morality, sex roles, crime and punishment, and abortion. The eighth module in 1992 replicated and extended the 1987 social equality module. The ninth module in 1993 was on the environment. It includes an environmental knowledge scale along with attitudinal and behavioral measures.

The tenth module in 1994 repeated the 1988 module on gender, family, and work. It also added items on household division of labor, sexual harassment, and public policy regarding the family. The 11th module in 1995 was on national identity. It assess nationalism and patriotism, localism and globalism, and diversity and immigration. The 12th module in 1996 was the second replication of role of government. The 13th module in 1997 was the first

replication of the 1989 module on work orientations. The 14th module in 1998 was the first replication of the 1991 religion module. The 15th module in 1999 was the second replication of the social inequality module fielded in 1987 and 1992. The 16th module in 2000 was the first replication of the 1993 environment module.

These will be followed in 2001 by the first replication of the 1986 social relations and social support module, in 2002 by the third replication of the gender, family, and work module, and in 2003 by the first replication of the 1995 national identity module.

ISSP marks several new departures in the area of crossnational research. First, the collaboration between organizations is not special or intermittent, but routine and continual. Second, while necessarily more circumscribed than collaboration dedicated solely to crossnational research on a single topic, ISSP makes crossnational research a basic part of the national research agenda of each participating country. Third, by combining a cross time with a crossnational perspective, two powerful research designs are being used to study societal processes.

Data from the first 15 modules on role of government, social networks and support systems, social equality, the family, work orientation, role of government II, religion, social equality II, the environment, the family II, national identity, role of government III, work orientation II, religion II, and social inequality III are presently available from the Zentralarchiv and various national archives such as Essex in Britain and the Roper Center in the United States. These first 15 rounds of the ISSP contain over 250 national samples with over 350,000 respondents.

The 2000 environment II module will be available shortly and the other modules will be released periodically as soon as the data can be processed.

Publications based on the ISSP are listed in a bibliography available from the ISSP Secretariat (see below). It currently lists nearly 1,100 publications. Uses have grown considerably over time and now over 150 publications appear annually.

There are also seven collections of ISSP research 1) Roger Jowell, Sharon Witherspoon, and Lindsay Brook, eds., British Social Attitudes: Special International Report. (Aldershot: Gower, 1989); 2) J.W. Becker, James A. Davis, Peter Ester, and Peter P. Mohler, eds., Attitudes to Inequality and the Role of Government. (Rijswijk, The Netherlands: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 1990); 3) Roger Jowell, Lindsay Brook, and Lizanne Dowds, eds., International Social Attitudes: The 10th BSA Report. Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1993; 4) Alan Frizzell and Jon H. Pammett, eds., Social Inequality in Canada. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996; 5) Alan Frizzell and Jon H. Pammett, eds., Shades of Green. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997; 6) Roger Jowell, John Curtice, Alison Park, Lindsay Brook, Katrina Thomson, and Caroline Bryson, eds., British - and European - Social Attitudes: The 15th Report. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998; and 7) Niko Tos, Peter Ph. Mohler, and Brina Malnar, eds., Modern Society and Values: A Comparative Analysis Based on ISSP Project. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana and ZUMA, 2000.

For further information there are two Web sites that one can contact:

1) Zentralarchiv fuer Empirische Sozialforschung, University of Cologne:

<http://www.esis.org/issp/>

2) ISSP Secretariat: <http://www.issp.org/>

For further details contact the ISSP secretariat, Tom W. Smith, NORC 1155 East 60th St. Chicago, IL 60637. Phone: 773-256-6288 Fax: 773-753-7866 Email: [smitht@norcmail.uchicago.edu](mailto:smitht@norcmail.uchicago.edu)

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