

## Social-Science Research and the General Social Surveys

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### **The GSS Model of Social-Science Research**

During the last generation a new measurement instrument has emerged in the social sciences, the general social survey (GSS)(Davis, Mohler, and Smith, 1994; Smith, 1997). Traditionally, empirical research in the social sciences had been intermittent, varied greatly in data quality and generalizability, focused on a narrow set of issues and/or hypotheses, and led by a senior researcher or principal investigator pursuing his or her own research agenda. The GSSs embraced a new model of social-science research.

This article discusses 1) the GSS-model of social-science research including a) the creating of a social-science infrastructure, b) reliable, valid, and generalizable measurement, c) broad coverage of topics, d) a collective, community focus, and e) equal and widespread access and use; 2) the initial development of the GSS-model in the United States, Germany, Great Britain, and Australia, and 3) recent developments, especially in East Asia.

First, GSSs are on-going research programs building a social-science infrastructure, not one-shot endeavors. GSSs are designed to be repeated at regular intervals. This serves several purposes: 1) allowing the monitoring and modeling of societal change via repeated measurements, 2) permitting the study of sub-groups by pooling cases across replicating cross-sections, 3) facilitating the replication of scientific findings by allowing results from earlier rounds to be retested in subsequent rounds, 4) assisting the refinement of models by providing a set of core, replicating measures that could be augmented by additional items based on developing theory and earlier empirical results, and 5) providing an infrastructure for the social sciences and avoiding repeated, start-up costs and the continual reorganization of research efforts. Data are organized in cumulative files with each year being a sub-file. This makes all data accessible from a single source and also greatly facilitates both trend-analysis and sub-group analysis via pooling.

Second, the GSSs are based on high-quality, national samples. The surveys are directed by experienced, top-notch, social-science institutes following scientific protocols involving full coverage of the target population, full-probability samples, high response rates, a well-trained staff of interviewers and coders, and in general striving to minimize all aspects of total survey error. These surveys are designed to cover the adult population of each respective nation both so results will generalize to societies in general and so all sub-groups are proportionally represented via the combination of disaggregation and pooling.

The dedication of the GSSs to data quality is also shown by their extensive programs of methodological research. For example, the American GSS has a Methodological Report Series with over 100 papers covering virtually all aspects of total survey error (e.g. question wording, order and context, unit, supplement, and item non-response, mode, test/retest reliability, etc.). In addition, formal, controlled experiments have also been carried by several of the GSS programs. For example, in the US there have been replicated experiments on question wording related to governmental

spending priorities (Smith, 1987; Rasinski, 1989)

In Germany methodological work has included such topics as test/retest reliability (Bohrnstedt, et al., 1987), non-response (Koch, 1997; 1998), and changes in question wording (Blank and Wasmer, 1996).

Similarly, the British surveys have been used to examine, among other things, the implications of switching from a name-based, sample frame to one based upon addresses (Lynn and Taylor, 1993), the implications of moving from paper to computer based face-to-face interviewing (Lynn and Purdon, 1994), and the relative effectiveness of different forms of respondent incentives.

Third, the GSSs have lived up to their first name and covered a wide range of issues. The social sciences are by definition comprehensive in what they cover regarding humans. Moreover, all aspects of society interact with one another. This is true of sub-populations (e.g. men and women, social classes, cohorts), topical areas (e.g. religion, politics, jobs, family), and aspects of life (e.g. values, attitudes, behaviors). Only such an approach allows for a general understanding of society rather than a partial inspection of some restricted sliver of society.

Fourth, the GSSs have been collective and democratic in their orientation. They are not designed to further the personal, research agenda of a particular, principal investigator, but to first of all serve the overall research interests of the social-science community. This of course goes hand-in-hand with their general breadth. Rather than seeking to advance one specific model in some sub-discipline, the GSSs try to study a multitude of crucial social processes such as stratification and attainment, socialization, gender roles, social change, psychological well-being, etc. To facilitate the goal of representing the broad, social-science community, PIs of the GSSs need to both be aware of the varied interests and developments of the field and dedicated to the collective interest of their colleagues rather than their own specific research topics. Of course, it is hard for individual PIs to comprehensively monitor and represent all of the social sciences. A board of eminent, social scientists typically assists them in this task. Second of all, the GSSs represent the interests of social scientists and not of others. Much valuable data are collected by governments in censuses and major surveys like the Current Population Survey in the United States, the General Household Survey in Great Britain, or the Microcensus in Germany, by various commercial groups such as polls by Gallup, MORI, or Allensbach, or from the vast body of proprietary or subscription-access, market-research data. But these data are collected to further the purposes of their sponsors, not the research goals of social scientists.<sup>1</sup> Last of all, the wide-ranging data collected by the GSSs are shared with all researchers on an equal-access basis. The data are not the property of a research elite, but open to

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<sup>1</sup>The distinction between academic, GSS-model programs and governmental data collections is unfortunately confused by the fact that governments have also used the GSS name. For example, in 1985 Statistics Canada started a General Social Survey which is similar to the American CPS, not the American GSS, and similarly the Australian Bureau of Statistics operates a General Social Survey.

all in the social sciences and beyond. This includes scholars at universities and research institutes, their students, and those outside academia in government, journalism, the law, and other areas. Moreover, data sharing means full, immediate, and low or no-cost access to the surveys. Thus, both in design and dissemination the GSSs strive to serve the collective interests of the social sciences.

Finally, because of the wide-ranging content and easy and equal access, the GSSs have been highly utilized by social scientists, their students, and others outside of the academy. The American GSS has been used in over 9,000 research publications and except for the data of the US Bureau of the Census the American GSS has been analyzed in more articles in the top three American sociology journals (American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, and Social Forces) than any other data source (Smith, 2002a; Smith et al., 2004). Annually, it is used by over a quarter-million students. In Germany data are also widely used in research and teaching. The Allgemeine Bevoelkerungumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) is the most commonly requested dataset from the Zentralarchiv in Cologne. For example, in 2004 the archive distributed more than 2,000 ALLBUS files. Also, over the years about 40,000 special educational sub-sets have been distributed to schools (Terwey, 2003). The ALLBUS bibliography lists over 1,200 uses. Likewise, the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) is one of the most frequently requested datasets from the Essex Data Archive and is widely used by academics, their students, and policy specialists. For example, in 2003/04 Essex handled nearly 1,000 requests for BSA datasets.

### **Early Development and History of the General Social Surveys**

The GSS model of social-science research emerged with the founding in the United States of the National Data Program for the Social Sciences (NDPSS) at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, by James A. Davis in 1971. The NDPSS grew out of the social indicators movement of the 1960s which had as its ultimate goal the development of a comprehensive system of societal accounts modeled after the national income accounts developed by economics (Smith, 1981). Over the years its core funding has come from the National Science Foundation (NSF) with major supplemental support from both private foundations and other governmental agencies. Guidance to the PIs is provided by a Board of Overseers appointed by NSF. The NDPSS conducted its first General Social Survey in 1972 and the project soon became known as the GSS. The GSS covers adults living in households with full-probability sampling and in-person interviewing. Originally, the American GSSs were annual, but since 1994 they have been biennial. By 2004 25 surveys had been conducted with a total of 46,510 respondents in the main surveys. While the American GSS follows a basic, replicating, cross-sectional design, there have also been numerous reinterviews for both methodological and substantive purposes. These include two- and three-wave, test/retest studies in the 1970s and panel studies on such topics as civil liberties, negative life events, and Internet use in the 1980s through 2000s.

The American GSS balances replication, which is essential both for studying social change and the pooling of cases for sub-group analysis, with innovation which means that both new topics and refined models can be incorporated. Currently, content is about half replication and half innovation. The replication side of the American GSS has led to over 1,100 trends being monitored and the extensive use of cohort-turnover models to explain societal change. The innovation side has been marked by many seminal investigations such as the first national studies of ego-centric networks, the demography of emotions, congregations, altruism, and spiritual transformations. One

particular area of innovation has been in the use of hypernetwork sampling frames for studies of employers (the National Organizations Studies in 1991 and 2000), congregations (the National Congregation Studies in 1998 and 2002), and voluntary associations (the National Voluntary Associations Study in 2004-05).

More information on the American GSS are available on-line at [www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss) and [www.norc.org/projects/gensoc.asp](http://www.norc.org/projects/gensoc.asp)

In the 1980s other countries began to adopt GSS-model programs. The American GSS served as an inspiration for programs in other countries and the American GSS collaborated with the programs in other countries, but did not actively seek to establish them. Rather they arose out of independent, national efforts. The first, in 1980, was the Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) directed by the Zentrum fuer Umfragen und Analysen (ZUMA), Mannheim. ALLBUS is a joint project of ZUMA and the Zentralarchiv fuer Empirische Sozialforschung (ZA), University of Cologne, within the Gesellschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen (GESIS). ALLBUS receives guidance from an Advisory Board that decides on basic features, like the main topic of each survey. From 1980 to 1986 ALLBUS was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and since 1987 has been supported as part of GESIS by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research and by individual German federal states. The ALLBUS has been conducted essentially biennially from 1980 to 2004 with a total of 14 surveys and 44,526 respondents. It covered adult Germans in West Germany from 1980 to 1990 and since 1991 has sampled both Germans and foreigners in the unified Germany. ZUMA directs the ALLBUS, but the in-person interviewing has been conducted by various data-collection companies (GETAS: 1980-1984; GFM-GETAS: 1988, 1998; INFAS: 1990, 2002; and Infratest: 1986, 1991-1996, 2000, 2004).

Each ALLBUS focuses on one or two main topics (e.g. religion and world view, social inequality and the welfare state, sanctions and deviant behavior, ethnic minorities). Altogether almost 20 main topics have been covered. In addition there are smaller batteries on a broad range of topics such as attitudes towards immigration, value orientations, and attitudes towards marriage, partners, and family. To study trends, the main topics are usually replicated about every ten years. Other items and batteries are repeated every two to four years. In addition, every ALLBUS includes detailed demographics about respondents and their spouse/partner. Follow-up methodological studies have been done on such topics as test/retest reliability, non-response, and CAPI and PAPI data collection.

Since 1990, a special book series, ABlickpunkt Gesellschaft,@ has been edited presenting analyses of ALLBUS data to the social-science community and broader public. So far seven have been published (Schmitt-Beck et al., 2004). To improve responsiveness to various interests and developments in the social sciences, ALLBUS in 1998 started a Call for Proposals on Question Modules. Scientists are invited to compete for the opportunity to design a module reflecting their research priorities. The decision on the proposals is made by the ALLBUS Board of Advisors.

For more information about the ALLBUS the following site may be visited: [www.gesis.org/en/social\\_monitoring/allbus/index.htm](http://www.gesis.org/en/social_monitoring/allbus/index.htm)

Great Britain started a GSS-like survey when the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR), which was then known as Social and Community Planning Research, organized the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) in 1983. The BSA has been fielded almost annually (except for 1988 and 1992), making a total of 19 surveys with 55,864 respondents. The BSA covers Great Britain and

until 1996 also had included Northern Ireland. It is an in-person surveys of adults and also uses drop-off self-completion questionnaires as supplements. Each year=s BSA questionnaire covers a wide range of social, political and moral issues. The questionnaire is divided into a number of >modules=, each dealing with a particular topic. Many of the questions included in these modules duplicate those asked in earlier years, allowing a detailed analysis of the extent to which views about these issues such have changed over time. Examples of topics covered since the early days of the survey series include: political trust and participation, women and gender roles, the welfare state, the National Health Service, sexuality, and marriage and cohabitation. Other topics are relatively new to the survey, and deal with issues of emerging importance. Recent examples of new topics include access to the Internet, genetic therapy, and human cloning. Funding for each year=s BSA is obtained from the main British government departments, and from grant-giving bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council. Core funding is also obtained from the Gatsby Charitable Foundation (one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts).

The BSA has led to a number of spin-off surveys. Since 1999 an allied Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) has augmented the BSA in that country. The SSA covers some topics included in the BSA (in order to see how views vary between England and Scotland) and also examines issues of particular interest to Scotland in more detail. In 1994, 1998, and 2003 the BSA was also supplemented by a Young Persons Social Attitudes Survey which covered people 12-19 in the BSA households.

One hallmark of the BSA is its annual book series, the British Social Attitudes Reports (e.g. Park, et al., 2004), now published by Sage. There are now 21 of these edited volumes and they introduce each new BSA to the social-science community as well as to a broader audience of interested parties.

Information on the BSA can be found at [www.britsocat.com](http://www.britsocat.com) and [www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk).

Then, in 1984 the Research School of Social Sciences at Australian National University (ANU) started what was then called the National Social Science Survey (NSSS), later known as the International Social Science Survey (ISSS). Unlike the three previous GSS-type surveys, the ISSS has used postal rather than in-person surveying. The ISSS did 12 surveys between 1984-85 and 1999-2000 with over 22,000 respondents. More recently, the ISSS has moved to Melbourne University and been replaced at ANU by the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AUSSA). The AUSSA is also a postal survey and conducted its first round in 2003 with 4270 cases. The AUSSA consists of a core of about 130 questions to track trends plus topical and cross-national modules. A second round is scheduled for 2005.

Websites for these two Australian programs are: ISSS - [www.international-survey.org](http://www.international-survey.org) and AUSSA - <http://aussa.anu.edu.au>

As the GSS-model spread internationally, an interest in comparative research developed . In 1982, the GSSs added a cross-national dimension with a collaboration between the American GSS and the ALLBUS (Smith, 2002b). This was followed up by a second, bilateral study in 1984. Meanwhile in 1983 the NCSR in Britain organized a meeting of NORC, ZUMA, RSSS, and itself to plan a broader international collaboration. This led to the formation of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1984 and its first cross-national round of surveys in 1985 involving the founding four, plus Austria and Italy. The ISSP has conducted annual, cross-national surveys since 1985 and steadily grown with 39 countries now participating. Some of the ISSP members involve

GSS-type programs, but others use a variety of vehicles to conduct the ISSP. Thus, a comparative perspective was added to the across-time perspective that had always been integral to the GSSs and the GSS model has since encompassed both perspectives as part of its basic approach and design. In addition, the ISSP itself regularly replicates modules. For example, the first module, role of government, was fielded in 1985 and again in 1990 and 1996 and it will appear next in 2006.

The ISSP website is [www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)

### **Recent Developments**

The GSS model has continued to expand both under the umbrella of the ISSP and in national series such as the Polish General Social Survey . Recently, the GSS model has spread to the Far East. The Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS) at Academia Sinica had a baseline survey in 1985 and became a time-series study after biannual studies started in 1990. Altogether there have been 33 surveys with a total of 72,013 respondents (the most in any GSS-model series). Major topics are replicated every five years. For example, mass media was a focus in 1993, 1998, and 2003 and cultural values in 1994, 1999, and 2004. Experimental ballots have not been employed. Cross-national collaboration with China and Korea occurred in 1996 when an East Asian Social Survey was held and since 2002 TSCS has been participating in the ISSP. The TSCS website is [www.ios.sinica.edu.tw/sc1/home2.htm](http://www.ios.sinica.edu.tw/sc1/home2.htm)

Then in 2000 a Japanese General Social Survey (J-GSS) was started at Osaka University of Commerce in cooperation with the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo (Iwai, 2004). It is funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. It has carried out four rounds in 2000-2003 and has interviewed 12,299 respondents. It adopted a number of item batteries from the American GSS. But the J-GSS is not part of the ISSP because another Japanese institute at NHK, the public broadcasting network, holds that position. Topics that have been covered include gender roles, crime, social networks, volunteering, and education. Like the ALLBUS and BSA, the J-GSS has started a series of periodical, edited volume of results (Iwai and Sato, 2002). The J-GSS website is <http://jgss.daishodai.ac.jp>

Next came the Korean General Social Survey (K-GSS) directed by the Survey Research Center at Sungkyunkwan University and the Samsung Economic Research Institute with prime funding from the Korean Research Foundation (Seok, 2003). A pilot study was carried out in 2002 and full surveys in 2003 and 2004 with a total of 3,460 respondents. A number of items were adopted from the American GSS and the K-GSS joined the ISSP in 2003. The K-GSS is a watershed in the development of social science research in Korea. It stimulates empirical research on Korean society and lays the foundation to archive other data collected in the past, not just K-GSS. This infrastructure facilitates the restoration of the historical data to better understand social change in Korea. Social scientists can access these data from Korean Social Survey Data Archive (KOSSDA), by accessing the Korea Social Science Library, where the data are maintained at [www.kssl.or.kr/](http://www.kssl.or.kr/). The K-GSS website is [www.kgss.re.kr/eng/index.html](http://www.kgss.re.kr/eng/index.html)

The latest East Asian GSS, the Chinese GSS (C-GSS), began in 2003. The C-GSS is designed to be a cross-sectional survey of the Chinese mainland's urban and rural households sampled through a 5-stage stratified (urban-rural split and education) sampling procedure. New samples are to be drawn each year. The project is currently under the collaboration between the

Survey Research Center at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, and the Department of Sociology at People=s University of China, Beijing.

The pilot 2003 C-GSS had a sample size of 5,900 urban households, and no rural households were sampled. Beside basic characteristics of households and individual respondents, the main topics of scholarly interest are social stratification, occupational mobility, and social networks. The survey used face-to-face interviews that were conducted by student (90%) and non-student (10%) interviewers in the months of October-December of 2003, and the response rate was 77%.

The 2004 C-GSS was expanded to include both urban and rural households with a sample size of 11,000. Maintaining the variables of basic household and respondent characteristics from the 2003 questionnaire, the main topics of the 2004 C-GSS are internal migration, aging, and social support for the elderly. The survey was implemented by the statistical offices of provincial and municipal governments. Data are still being processed.

The 2005 C-GSS is to be fielded in the fall by a selected market research firm. The questionnaire is being drafted and is to be tested and finalized in the summer. The main topics are governance structure, civil society, and attitudes toward China=s socioeconomic transformations. The C-GSS website is [www.ust.hk/src/gss\\_e.html](http://www.ust.hk/src/gss_e.html)

The four East Asian GSSs are working together (Iwai, 2004; Kim, 2004) and are organizing regional studies among themselves. This collaboration is known as the East Asian Social Surveys (EASS). The first round is planned for 2006 and will focus on the family.

Another recent development was the founding of the European Social Survey (ESS) with support from the European Science Foundation. While not formally tied to the national GSS programs, there are strong personal and institutional connections between the ESS and both the GSSs and ISSP. About half of the institutes in the 20-some countries participating in round 1 of the ESS in 2002-2003 are also in the ISSP and the ESS Central Co-ordinating Team includes leaders from the institutes operating ALLBUS and the BSA. More information on the ESS is available at [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)

## **Conclusion**

The GSS-model has emphasized establishing a research infrastructure for the social sciences (roughly analogous to observatories for astronomers or cyclotrons for physicists) for on-going analysis of societal trends and the comparative observation of societies and serving the general research interest of the social-science community. The data collected by the GSSs have been made widely available to social scientists, their students, and others on a quick, easy, inexpensive, and equal basis. This has in turn led to thousands of important research publications covering virtually all major topics in the social sciences and greatly expanded our understanding of social processes, societal trends, and the organization and operation of societies.

An old Roman proverb states that Atall oaks from little acorns grow.@ And so it has been with the GSSs. The original NORC proposal to NSF blended the modest with the ambitious as it sought support for ATwenty-Some Questions: A National Data Program for Sociology@. Starting from an initial survey of 1613 respondents in 1972, the American GSS has collected 25 surveys with 46,510 respondents over the last 32 years. Internationally, GSS-model surveys in half a dozen countries have conducted scores of surveys with over 200,000 respondents and the broader ISSP has grown to cover 39 countries with hundreds of surveys and hundred of thousands respondents. And

growth continues with more countries joining the ISSP almost every year and GSS-model, times series moving forward. In fact, the original GSS acorn has germinated not just a tall oak, but a whole forest of flourishing surveys and fruitful research.



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