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# SOCIAL-SCIENCE RESEARCH AND THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS

*TOM W. SMITH, JIBUM KIM, ACHIM KOCH & ALISON PARK*

Social-science research has been transformed over the last generation by the advent and expansion of the general social surveys (GSS). The GSS model of research has created a infrastructure for the social sciences designed to address the interests and research agenda of scholars and their students; cover a wide range of topics; utilize reliable, valid, and generalizable measurement; and provide data both across nations and across time. This design in turn has generated widespread analysis and notably contributed to our understanding of social processes and societal change.

## 1 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 & 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 was 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 so that results will generalize to societies in general and 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 out 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 & 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, the implications of moving from paper to computer based face-to-face interviewing, and the relative effectiveness of different forms of respondent incentive (as reported by Alison Park).

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 status attainment, socialization, gender roles, social change, psychological well-being, etc. To facilitate the goal of representing the broad, social-science community, Principal Investigators (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 is typically appointed to assist 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 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 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 academia. 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

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1 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.

data are also widely used in research and teaching. The Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage 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.

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

### **United States of America**

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 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)

## Germany

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 für Umfragen und Analysen (ZUMA), Mannheim. ALLBUS is a joint project of ZUMA and the Zentralarchiv für 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, *Blickpunkt Gesellschaft*, has been edited presenting analyses of ALLBUS data to the social-science community and broader public. So far seven volumes have been published (Schmitt-Beck et al., 2004). To improve responsive-

ness 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

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 survey 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 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.britisocat.com](http://www.britisocat.com) and [www.natcen.ac.uk/natcen/pages/or\\_socialattitudes.htm](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/natcen/pages/or_socialattitudes.htm)

## Australia

Then, in 1984 the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH) 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>

## International GSSs

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

## 3 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 (Chang and Fu, 2004). 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>

The latest East Asian GSS is 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 3460 respondents. A number of items were adopted from the American GSS and the K-GSS joined the ISSP in 2003. The K-GSS website is [www.kgss.re.kr/eng/index.html](http://www.kgss.re.kr/eng/index.html)

The three East Asian GSSs are working together (Iwai, 2004; Kim, 2004) and are organizing regional studies among themselves and hopefully others in the area such as China. 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 Coordinating 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)

## 4 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 „tall 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 „Twenty-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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