

Globalizing Survey Research

The International Social Survey Program

By Tom W. Smith

Increasingly, social scientists are realizing not only the utility but the necessity of comparative research. As Nikolai Genov 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.”

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 both to identify general patterns that prevail across human societies and to measure the variations that occur in patterns.

On the one hand, cross-national replication of research 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, or 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.

Tom W. Smith is director, the General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

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.” Prominent in this growing recognition has been the work of the International Social Survey Program.

The ISSP is a continuing annual program of cross-national collaboration. It brings together pre-existing social science projects and coordinates research goals, thereby adding a cross-national perspective to individual national studies. Alex Inkeles has lauded the ISSP for “making a great contribution for everyone working to understand social processes, both in the US and worldwide.” Likewise, Henry E. Brady has described the ISSP

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), at the 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 dataset is available from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan.] Another collaboration was carried out in 1984, this time on class differences, equality, and the welfare state.

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as one of the most influential cross-national studies ever conducted.

ISSP evolved from a bilateral collaboration between the Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfragen der

Meanwhile, in late 1983, the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR, then known as Social and Community Planning Research) in London, which was starting a social indicators series called

Around the World for 16 Years

The annual topics for ISSP are developed over several years by a subcommittee and pretested in various countries. The annual plenary meeting of ISSP then adopts the final questionnaire. ISSP researchers especially concentrate on developing questions that are meaningful and pertinent to all countries and can be expressed in an equivalent manner in all relevant languages. The questionnaire is originally drafted in British English and then translated into other languages using standard translation procedures.

Since its inception, the ISSP has introduced modules exploring the following themes:

- 1985—The role of government. Covered attitudes towards civil liberties, education and parenting, welfare and social equality, and the economy.
- 1986—Social networks and support systems. Contained detailed behavioral reports on respondents' contacts with various friends and relatives, followed by a series of questions about where one would turn for help when faced with situations such as financial need, minor illness, career advice, and emotional distress.
- 1987—Social equality. Concerned beliefs about what factors affect one's chances for social mobility (e.g., parental status, education, contacts, race), explanations for inequality, assessments of social conflicts, and related questions. Asked people to estimate the average earnings of various occupations (e.g., farm laborer or doctor), and what they thought the average earnings of these occupations should be.
- 1988—The impact on the family of the changing labor force participation of women. 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.
- 1989—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).
- 1990—First repetition of the role of government theme. By replicating substantial parts of earlier modules (approximately two-thirds), ISSP offers an over-time perspective in addition to its cross-national perspective. One is not only 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.
- 1991—The impact of religious beliefs and behaviors on social, political, and moral attitudes. Included questions on religious upbringing, current religious activities, traditional Christian beliefs, and existential beliefs. Non-religious items concerned such topics as personal morality, sex roles, crime and punishment, and abortion.
- 1992—Replication and extension of the 1987 social equality module.
- 1993—The environment. Included an environmental knowledge scale, along with attitudinal and behavioral measures.
- 1994—Repetition of the 1988 module on gender, family, and work. Added items on household division of labor, sexual harassment, and public policy regarding the family.
- 1995—National identity. Assessed nationalism and patriotism, localism and globalism, and diversity and immigration.
- 1996—Second replication of the role of government module.
- 1997—First replication of the 1989 module on work orientations.
- 1998—First replication of the 1991 religion module.
- 1999—Second replication of the social inequality module fielded in 1987 and 1992.
- 2000—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.

Data from the first 15 modules, containing over 250 national samples with more than 350,000 respondents, are presently available from the Zentralarchiv and various national archives, such as the Roper Center in the United States and Essex in Britain.

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.

Cross-National Reading

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:

Roger Jowell, Sharon Witherspoon, and Lindsay Brook, eds., *British Social Attitudes: Special International Report*. Aldershot: Gower, 1989.

J.W. Becker, James A. Davis, Peter Ester, and Peter Ph. Mohler, eds., *Attitudes to Inequality and the Role of Government*. Rijswijk, The Netherlands: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 1990.

Roger Jowell, Lindsay Brook, and Lizanne Dowds, eds., *International Social Attitudes: The 10th BSA Report*. Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1993.

Alan Frizzell and Jon H. Pammett, eds., *Social Inequality in Canada*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996.

Alan Frizzell and Jon H. Pammett, eds., *Shades of Green*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997.

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.

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:

Zentralarchiv fuer Empirische Sozialforschung, University of Cologne—<http://www.gesis.org/issp/>

ISSP Secretariat—<http://www.issp.org/> or Tom W. Smith, NORC, 1155 East 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637. Phone: 773-256-6288 Fax: 773-753-7866 smitht@norcmail.uchicago.edu

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the British Social Attitudes Survey, similar to the ALLBUS and GSS, secured funds from the Nuffield Foundation to hold meetings to further international collaboration.

In 1984, representatives from ZUMA, NORC, NCSR, and the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, organized ISSP. They agreed to develop jointly topical modules dealing with important areas of social science; to field the modules as fifteen-minute supplements to the regular national surveys (or as special surveys if necessary); to include an extensive common core of background variables; and to make the data available to the social science community as expeditiously as possible.

Each research organization collaborating in the ISSP funds all of its own costs; there are no central funds. The merging of the data into a cross-national dataset 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, which are listed at www.issp.org. Other nations have replicated particular modules without being ISSP members.

ISSP marks several new departures in the area of cross-national research. First, the collaboration among organizations is not special or intermittent, but routine and continual. Second, while necessarily more circumscribed than collaboration dedicated solely to cross-national research on a single topic, ISSP makes cross-national research a basic part of the national research agenda of each participating country.

Finally, by combining a cross-time with a cross-national perspective, two powerful research designs are being used to study societal processes. ●