

NOTE ON A GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY IN WEST GERMANY

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This note has a double purpose. Its intent is to provide information about plans for a General Social Survey in West Germany, as well as to stimulate a discussion about the possibilities of cross-national cooperation.

The General Social Survey as organized and executed by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), Chicago, since 1972 can by now be regarded as a well institutionalized part of American sociological research. As an ongoing data diffusion project and as a program of social indicator research, the General Social Survey is a unique endeavour in the Western academic world. In addition to generating high quality time series data it provides social scientists and students who are not affiliated with large research centers access to fresh and interesting survey material at practically no cost.

The diffusion of innovations of this type always takes time. Recently, however, the German Research Foundation (DFG) has encouraged the Center for Survey Research (ZUMA) at Mannheim and the Central Archive (ZA) at Cologne to jointly submit a proposal for the implementation of a General Social Survey in West Germany.

In our first discussions we have of course capitalized upon the ideas and experiences as expressed in the many documents resulting from the General Social Survey in the United States. Thus, the general goals will be similar:

- (1) monitoring social and political change,
and
- (2) data generation for teaching purposes.

In addition it should serve as a data source for social reporting, a function that the American survey does not have.

The first goal clearly implies the replication of standard items over time. These items should represent mainstream interests of academic sociological research. In order to incorporate earlier research work the holdings of the Cologne Archive will be screened systematically for existing time series data. It is highly likely that only a few of such time series exist. Thus, we may have to resort to a replication of major parts of a single base-line study as, for example, the 1953 UNESCO survey on the social bases of West German politics. Duncan, Schuman, and Duncan (1973) have demonstrated that the latter approach is still worthwhile.

Another source for item selection is the current academic survey research in so far as it is national in scope. There are also not very many research groups of this type.

However, we can at least mention the ongoing work by Zapf (social indicators), Peisert (educational research), Klages (values), Wildenmann (political indicators), and Allerbeck, Kaase, and Klingemann (political participation). Everything will be done to identify further research groups in order to form a committee in which suggestions for inclusions of items can be discussed.

The format of the basic background data has already received careful attention. Here the suggestions as given by the Social Science Research Council's working group on the standardization of basic background data for U.S. household surveys (1975) have served as a guide line. After long discussions with academic and non-academic research workers, including those of the Bureau of the Census, Franz Urban Pappi (1977) has put together a German

version of the basic background items. These will be used for the General Social Survey in West Germany.

The second goal was data diffusion for teaching purposes. Here we are relying on the organization of the Central Archive. The institute will publicize this new data source and it is certain to generate a wide interest within the community of social scientists.

Technically we will rely on a national, multi-stage probability sample of the non-institutionalized German population 18 years and older. The Center for Survey Research (ZUMA) at Mannheim will be responsible for all steps up to the production of a machine-readable codebook.

The present state of the discussion does not allow for any further detailed presentation. Rather, we intend to use this early stage in our planning to suggest an additional dimension to the General Social Survey. The availability of two national surveys of this type opens up the cross-national perspective. Given the fact, that we do have at least four American surveys we are in a position to replicate some of the items which have been included since 1972. In this respect we are considering a replication of the Stouffer items on civil liberties in Germany. Davis (1975) has analyzed the over time changes in the United States which occurred between 1954 and 1972. Given the current political situation in Germany a cross-national analysis seems to be particularly interesting.

Beside this possibility one can envision an interview schedule which reserves a common segment of the total interview for a cross-national research problem. This might turn out to be the most interesting possibility of cross-

national cooperation. Here institutional arrangements would have to be found to link both of the surveys with respect to this particular problem area.

Whenever it comes to a common section in the American and German questionnaires the resulting data could also be distributed within both the American and German social science community via the respective national archives. The availability of high quality comparative data sets will almost certainly stimulate cross-national survey research as we could observe in the case of the German Electoral Data Project.

It may well be that a General Social Survey will be carried out in other countries as well. There has already been a declaration of interest on the Scandinavian side. Would an American-German comparative model work this could well serve as a prototype of a General Social Survey of the across-time and across-nation design.

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