

The GSS and International Surveys: Issues and Opportunities

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The GSS plays a key role in international survey research. In connection with the ISSP, it has produced cross-nationally comparable data measuring a wide variety of important social concerns. These data have been used extensively by social scientists, students and decision makers, and in connection with the emerging North American Social Survey, the GSS has an opportunity to play an even more significant role.

Although the data produced by the GSS has been a valuable resource for social scientists throughout the world, its value could be enhanced substantially through better coordination with other major cross-national survey research programs. There are several reasons why this is true. The most important one is that in order to carry out analyses of social change that can lead to conclusive findings, one needs much more frequent measures of key variables than are now being gathered.

As the GSS proposal to the NSF notes, most important processes of social change take place through intergenerational population replacement, which is almost always accompanied by period effects. Unless one has numerous and frequent measures of such variables, extending over a long period of time, it is almost impossible to distinguish between life cycle effects, cohort differences and period effects. Ideally, such variables should be measured at least once a year; the Euro-Barometers measure a number of variables that are of particular interest to the European Commission twice each year. As the figure below demonstrates, this has made it possible to identify a process of intergenerational value change that has major political and social consequences—the shift from Materialist to Postmaterialist value priorities—but which is complicated by period effects linked with economic fluctuations. Without frequent replication of the relevant questions, this type of analysis would be impossible—but it remains very much the exception rather than the rule.

Although numerous cross-national survey programs now exist, many of the key variables in terms of both theoretical importance and empirical explanatory power, are only measured sporadically—making it difficult or impossible to determine whether one is dealing with long term trends or situation-specific fluctuations. Better coordination of this research could result in agreements to replicate key measures in successive waves of several different programs, providing the type of data base that is essential for analysis of important social changes.

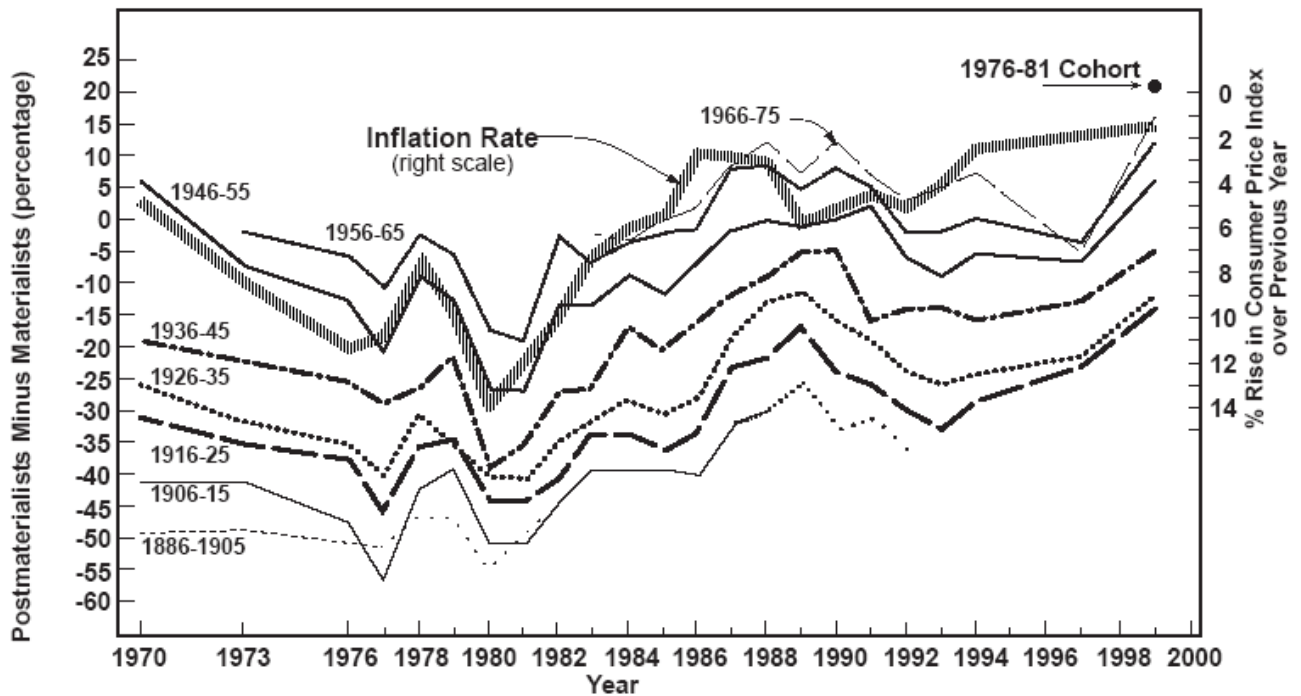


Figure 4-2. Cohort Analysis with Inflation rate superimposed (using inverted scale on right): % Postmaterialists minus % Materialists in six West European societies, 1970-1999.

Source: Based on combined weighted sample of European Community surveys carried out in West Germany, France, Britain, Italy, The Netherlands and Belgium, in given years, using the 4-item Materialist/Postmaterialist values index.

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Another strong reason for better coordination of cross-national survey research is that it would enable the GSS and its partners to triangulate their findings across a broader range of societies. Both the ESS and the ISSP research programs are carried out mainly in high-income democracies, complemented by a handful of middle-income countries, almost no low-income countries and virtually no non-democratic societies. In order to analyze some of the most important processes of social change, from secularization to the spread of gender equality to democratization, it is necessary to have a wide range of variation on the dependent variable. The World Values Survey will have covered more than 90 societies by the end of its fifth round of surveys, at the end of this year. These surveys include more than a dozen low-income countries, large numbers of both lower and upper middle-income countries, a score of ex-communist societies and a number of non-democratic countries, extending across every major cultural zone, including a dozen Islamic societies. More effective coordination between the GSS, its partners and the World Values Survey would enhance social scientists' ability to learn how key variables from the GSS function in a wider range of economic, political and cultural settings.

For this purpose, I suggest that it would be useful to establish a working group from the GSS, ISSP, ESS and WVS that would be entrusted with the task of identifying a limited number of key variables that have been used and validated in the respective surveys, and that show promise of

providing scientifically valuable returns if they were more widely replicated—and reaching agreement to do so in coming waves of each survey. Systematic coordination and cross-fertilization of this kind would enrich the surveys and provide even more useful material for social scientists around the world, especially for the study of social change.