

Review of the Content of the GSS

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As a relatively new user of the GSS, I have found it to be an enormously important and well-documented resource for understanding social attitudes and behavior. After studying patterns of wage inequality using census data, I became interested in the question of whether Americans were aware of rising income inequality. I turned to the GSS because it was the best available data source for examining this question.

It is only within this very positive spirit, then, that I offer suggestions for possible improvements in the GSS. My suggestions are based on my experience studying a topic that has not been central to the GSS core or topical modules (but, rather, to the ISSP topical modules). Therefore, the issues I raise may not be shared widely by other users. Nevertheless, I hope they will be useful for discussion, or reconsideration as the case may be.

Linkages among Core and Topic Modules

One of the key advantages that the GSS has over other surveys is its scope (across time and subject matter). Even if the GSS replicates topics asked in other surveys (e.g., NES, WVS), it may have other variables and modules that those surveys do not, and it may have them over a longer time period. This provides a unique opportunity to analyze relationships among domains.

For example, although the NES has an extensive battery of questions on policy preferences, its questions on egalitarianism are worded in generic terms, making it difficult to examine attitudes toward the specific issue of growing income inequality. The GSS, on the other hand, is less focused than the NES on policy preferences but has the advantage of having fielded four cross-sections of questions on income inequality. However, the questions on policy preferences are not perfectly aligned, temporally, with the questions on income inequality in the GSS. Another example concerns questions about changing economic conditions for individuals and their families. Such conditions could be an important influence on attitudes about income inequality, but these questions were not asked in one of the four years that the income inequality questions were asked. And, as explained below, each available year of data is critical.

It is probably too much to ask for “perfect alignment,” so my more general suggestion is for greater attention to potential linkages among different topical modules and between elements of the core and the topical modules.

Studying Social Change: Cyclical/Structural Changes Versus Gradual Cohort Replacement

My sense is that gradual social change related to cohort replacement represents the dominant approach to studying social change among researchers using the GSS. For example, the 2004 NSF proposal for the GSS states that “most social change in attitudes is slow, steady, and cumulative, explained (in decreasing order of importance) by a) cohort-education turnover models, b) episodic shocks (e.g., wars and political scandals), and c) structural changes in

background variables” (p. 6). This assessment is no doubt true of the topics that have been studied extensively with GSS data (e.g., attitudes on social issues) and much social change does clearly transpire in this way.

However, should the GSS also facilitate analysis of social change related to episodic change and structural cycles or transformations? Again, income inequality provides an example. In understanding whether, and if so why, attitudes about income inequality shift, most researchers would argue that background conditions should be important, such as actual trends in income inequality and the business cycle, or knowledge of increasing inequality and structural economic transformations. If this is the case, timing is extremely important. For example, questions asked during the downturn as well as the upturn in a business cycle would be important for determining whether the business cycle influences beliefs about income inequality. The fact that the questions on income inequality were asked in 1992, for example, and inexplicably again in 1996 (because the Social Inequality Module of the ISSP was not asked in any other country besides the US), was extremely fortuitous. These years occurred during important parts of the business cycle, including a downturn.

Again, my general point here is not that the GSS provide questions on awareness of the business cycle (as the NES does) or that it try to time questions according to the US business cycle, which is impossible. Rather, it is to consider the degree to which some topics might be more sensitive to timing—because of their more episodic and cyclical nature—and thus in need of more regular or frequent intervals of replication. A related issue is the extent to which the GSS can act to replicate topical modules that are time sensitive but do not have advocates for replication, assuming that the overseers deem the issue of significant social and scientific importance.

Theoretical Background for Development of Questions and Question Wording

I suspect that there are a lot of users like myself from fields outside of social psychology (and perhaps inside social psychology) who are skeptical at first of many of the GSS questions (and their wording). Such scholars will not make productive use of the GSS despite significant interest in the topics covered by the GSS. I think this pertains to some of the questions about income inequality, in fact. It may be that the GSS does not need more users, but I think it would elevate the quality of research if documentation were available that explained the theoretical rationale of questions, especially those in the topical modules. Such information should be available from the proposals written for new questions. Perhaps these could be made public in some form.

Current Adequacy of the Core

My only suggestion here would be, if at all possible, to reduce the number of questions on some topics that take up a substantial share of the core. I defer to experts in the respective fields, but it seems that there are a lot of core questions on religion and family relationships, for example, that could be condensed without loss of information.