

Conceptual and Methodological Innovations & Contribution of the GSS to Sociology and Its Broader Impacts

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Conceptual and Methodological Innovations

The proposal outlines a wide range of innovative changes to the GSS that, in my opinion, are justified, timely, and of great value. Here I comment on the value of those innovations and make suggestions about future developments. I rely mainly on the recently funded proposal as well as supplemental materials provided. I also rely on my own experience with the GSS over many years.

The most obvious innovation is the introduction of a panel component to the GSS. I read an earlier draft of this proposal and was not convinced that the GSS should move in this direction. There are a growing number of excellent longitudinal studies now, and I was uncertain whether the GSS would add value beyond that currently provided by sources such as NLSY, PSID, Add-Health, and the many other surveys that lend themselves to general social-science applications. I am now convinced that this new strategy is valuable, especially because of the retrospective panel proposed. By re-interviewing respondents from earlier rounds of the GSS, panel data would become available immediately to users. Since GSS was not designed as a panel, however, this new design will encounter some problems.

The proposal mentions the need for a panel to facilitate studies of individual changes and transitions. While this is certainly the primary rationale for any panel, the current GSS proposal goes specifically to life-course transitions like entry into cohabitation, employment, marriage, divorce, births, and so on. This may present a problem. The GSS has not asked about age at first marriage (or age at subsequent marriage – variable AGEWED) since the 1994-95 administration. Cohabitation, divorce, retirement, and other life event dates present a comparable problem. With respect to fertility, similar issues arise for all but the first birth. A 10-year retrospective panel, therefore, could not establish marriage cohorts, nor permit research on life-course transitions that require dating of events. These problems reflect the initial design of the GSS that did not anticipate a panel component. I believe, however, that any future innovation proposed must give serious attention to event-history issues. In fact, one of the additional ‘follow-up and auxiliary’ studies currently being considered focuses on partners, and another on intergenerational transfers. Both of these will require considerable detail on the composition and dates of events. Future administrations of the GSS, in short, will need more detail on event histories.

The proposal outlines an ambitious and needed augmentation to the “contextual and geographic data” component of the GSS. The lack of GIS information to the average user has increasingly limited the attractiveness of the GSS. Widespread availability of GIS software that easily integrates Census and non-Census data with geographic information has made surveys without geographic identifiers less attractive to students, especially, and to those researchers who are

interested in context more generally. I am happy to see that the proposal acknowledged the growing request NORC has received for geocode data. I believe this will be a major improvement for GSS generally and will expand its usage, especially among urban and environmental scientists, political scientists, as well as sociologists. As I outline below, future applications of the GSS should allow simple mapping of variables by geographic unit to the extent that cases support it.

Web access to the GSS, while widespread, is rather primitive at present. The current GSSDIRS is out of date and limited in its utilities (especially statistical and graphic). Factfinder (Census), for example, allows the user to conduct very basic elementary analyses, but also produce graphs and maps. In fact, Census provides a model for how data may be analyzed or distributed on the Web. The GSS is still analyzed, most frequently, by accessing a file of raw data (especially for years that are not easily available on the Web except from several university archives (e.g., Berkeley). The average user should be able to conduct basic and moderately advanced analyses on-line without the need to download data. I am not sufficiently familiar with the DDI XML protocols, but assume these will take GSSDIRS to the state-of-the art. This is overdue and represents a very significant enhancement to the GSS.

The Spanish language translation of the GSS is an obvious and much-needed innovation. The proposal was somewhat vague on how the translation is to be done and/or how conventional vernacular English terms will be converted for a Spanish-speaking population that includes Mexican, Cuban, and other Spanish groups (e.g., does “respect” mean to feel equal to someone as in English, or does it mean to look up to someone as in Mexican Spanish?). I presume that NORC has sufficient experience in both language translation and meaning translation to make these accurately. I am undecided about whether additional language translations might be justified, and hope the group might discuss this.

Finally, the proposal outlines two strategies that will encourage greater participation in the ISSP by less developed nations. These make good sense. But it is not clear how it might happen.

Contribution of the GSS to Sociology and Other Social Sciences and its “Broader Impacts”

I believe the proposal adequately and faithfully represents the enormous contribution that the GSS has made both in the academy and elsewhere. As a GSS user for over 30 years, I have seen widespread applications of these data by colleagues (and students) in sociology, political science, economics, and in the federal government. All of these are summarized in the proposal.

The proposal also mentions the widespread use of the GSS in the classroom, noting how several leading research-methods and statistics books include modules that rely on these data. The proposal also mentions how teaching packages are often developed by instructors for using the GSS. My undergraduate students typically produce simple frequency distributions from the GSSDIRS site (or an alternative) in the first week of class. Beyond that, however, the student needs a significant amount of instruction and assistance to conduct meaningful analysis beyond simple tabulations. This is especially so when a student is interested in conducting analyses over time, recoding many variables, creating many composites, and so on. For these applications, the instructor typically must first teach students something like SAS or SPSS, and then provide a

data file for analysis. This works well, but requires significant effort and resources before the student sees much in the way of results.

The PSID has a series of teaching modules that help students access the data, combine or alter them as needed, and produce results. These are found in the “Tutorials: PSID in the Classroom” section of their site. These teaching modules are well designed with objectives, and analysis-results questions that test the user’s understanding. Though the PSID is vastly more complex than the GSS is currently, the addition of a panel component will change that very quickly. Students (and many seasoned researchers) will need more help at that point. And even in the current version of the GSS, such modules would be particularly valuable for educators. How, for example, might a student conduct a birth-cohort analysis of political orientation, and so on? This would be a simple module to develop and would add significantly to the teacher’s resources when moving into longitudinal designs. A similar module on the ISSP would be particularly valuable. My basic point is that while the GSS is unquestionably valuable in the classroom, there is too little instructional information available to facilitate its use.

To the extent that such instructional materials could be provided, the larger impact of the GSS would probably increase. Those who are less familiar with survey research and basic statistics, for example, will struggle with the GSS as it is now. But this is not so for resources such as the PSID where step-by-step instructions guide a novice user (presumably a second or third year undergraduate or senior researcher without the requisite skills) through the steps required for analysis (and includes a test of whether the user did things correctly). I strongly encourage greater development of teaching materials for the GSS, both elementary and advanced.

As the proposal mentions, the items included on the GSS are probably among the most tested available. The design of the questionnaire, likewise, represents the best known strategies. Since the transition from paper-and-pencil instruments, however, it has been difficult to know the entire range of items included in the GSS. The indexing on GSSDIRS is good, but still misses many topics and themes because the variables are not linked to the variety of issues some users might search for. For example, there is no entry for FERTILITY, though there is for CHILDREN. It is this type of index linkage that I am hoping will be included in the newly designed web resource. But more generally, the novice user struggles to understand the range of issues and topics covered in the GSS. This, I believe, limits its broader impact, especially to those who are not students, academics, or trained researchers. I would suggest that something similar to what one finds for the NSFH be included, that groups comparable elements of the questionnaire by broad topic and allows the user to link directly to those variables. Since an Interview-to-Internet and extensive hyperlinks are proposed, I believe it would be worth considering the development of a concise (one or two page) index that links the user to all related materials associated with those broad headings (neither GSSDIRES nor the Berkeley GSS site offers this).