

GSS Content and Innovations

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GSS Content

As the wide-ranging usage of the GSS data in social science publications shows, it is hard to anticipate exactly what content will be useful for future scholars. However, it is fairly easy to see areas where the GSS has a “competitive advantage” over other sources of evidence. The *first* is trend studies using items that have been in the core for substantial periods of time. Therefore, I would urge that the impulse for innovation in this new grant cycle not overwhelm the extraordinary productivity generated by the stability of the survey’s design and core items. The *second* is substantive domains that can be usefully related to those core items. Since the survey has more socio-demographic information than most (especially in religion and family composition/background), individual level beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors and other cultural traits that tend to form strong “niches” in socio-demographic space are useful to measure. Also, items that relate to the “rotating core” of items already measured (with their emphasis on race, gender, religion) are more likely to be productive. The *third* area that is exceptionally useful is the ability to generate data on extra-individual units by asking questions about those units of the respondent. This feature allows an individual-level survey to generate useful data on units like voluntary groups, congregations, families and so on. While the data are typically limited to features that can be easily observed and reported by individuals (usually compositional and behavioral features, rather than attitudinal ones), these applications have allowed the GSS to contribute to areas of social science with which it could not otherwise connect. A *fourth* domain is perhaps less obvious. Substantive domains that are theoretically linked to the social and economic composition of the geographic area in which the respondent lives can be very useful, since the survey’s sampling design facilitates linkage to Census data on the PSUs (more on this in my recommendations for innovation below).

The development of the modular format (allowed the addition of sections at the end of the survey) for adding new content while retaining the stable core was an excellent innovation in the 1990s. This format allowed continual updating of the survey content (especially with regard to domains 2-4 above) while preserving the continuity of the core items. However, the need for a “pay as you go” policy for that modular format has reduced its usefulness. To field a module, researchers must have close to “insider knowledge” about how the survey is put together, obtain funding from other sources based on the assumption that their items will fit in the survey, and accomplish this well in advance of the survey questionnaire being finalized. This funding need has prevented the survey from opportunities that arise quickly (e.g., it was not possible to do a short follow-up to the 2004 NUMGIVEN question in the 2006 survey-- funding would have had to be generated in just a month or so). It also pushes the content of the survey’s innovations toward areas where much funding is available (e.g., health) and away from theoretically core sociological domains (because the NSF Sociology panel typically reacts to GSS module proposals by thinking “we already paid for that”). Funding for module space as part of the core GSS funding is needed, and should be allocated in an open competition among scholars (e.g., the new ANES format for submitting ideas through an on-line commons web site, with openly

announced calls for proposals and deadlines) would broaden both the survey content and the visibility of the module opportunities.

GSS Innovations

As I outlined in my discussion of GSS content, I think that the most useful source of GSS innovation would come from fully funded module time that could be opened to repeated competition from the larger user community. This innovation would provide a continual updating of the survey content each survey year, while preserving the core trends and maximizing the “value added” nature of the added material (because that would be a primary criterion for module selection).

Given the length of the core survey, substantive innovations should concentrate on items that can contribute a great deal while being measured in just one or two items. (A prototype item already in the survey is the single item health measure, which does a remarkably good job of assessing physical well-being with a single simple question.) We should resist the impulse to use other survey’s excellent measurement of some domains as a guide (e.g., the greater economic sophistication of the PSID or the greater depth of political content in the ANES). Indeed, these are probably domains to *avoid*, because other surveys do them more justice than the GSS ever could.

Three suggestions come to mind. One is adding a simple wealth item. While wealth could not be comprehensively measured in this type of survey, a question like “imagine that you sold everything that you own, including real estate, cars and your personal possessions—after you were done, and paid your debts, would you have money left over or not?” One could then follow with a rough assessment of how much debt or wealth would be left. While very rough, this item would supplement income measures as an indicator of economic well-being, separating those with negative net worth from those with more substantial assets. One could imagine similar simple questions that might get at “safety net” issues like health insurance, pension/retirement savings, etc. Again, the effort is not to do a serious assessment of these complex issues, but to separate the respondent population into those who have some coverage or none. This would help the survey connect with the growing literature on inequality that suggests that income is a highly incomplete indicator of financial well-being and stability.

The second suggestion is a direct analogue to the simple question on physical health, only related to mental health. Health researchers are developing such a question, and it could expand our understanding of the socio-demographic sources of well-being.

The third suggestion is actually a restoration rather than a true innovation. The voluntary association questions (MEMNUM and its components) were taken out of the core in the mid-1990s, just when interest in this type of social capital/weak ties was beginning to take off. It was asked in the network/voluntary association module in 2004 (although in a very different location). This set of items might be worth restoring in order to re-establish a trend, since it is of interest to scholars in several disciplines.

Finally, I propose that the geographic information from the relevant Census be linked and released with the survey data at the lowest level of geographic unit that privacy concerns will allow. Currently, scholars must request the linkage to create this data set (which is available for MSA/PSU levels, but requires additional funds at the county or Census tract level). If the geographic context information were released with the survey data (which would, of course, require additional funding for processing), there would be an explosion of theoretical interest in the impact of social/economic context on individual outcomes.

These innovations may sound like very minor things. They are. This is in keeping with my general belief that the GSS's primary contribution has been through its stability of content and design, together with its ready availability to a wide social science user community. If we could fund module space that would allow continual innovation, I believe that the core survey should not "chase" social science innovation, but rather allow that fashion to rotate back through the survey content. Who would have guessed 10 or 15 years ago that values would again be gaining traction in the social science literature? Who would have thought that whether or not one was willing to vote for a qualified woman for President would be so relevant in 2008? Given the time and care that it takes to field the GSS, any attempt to chase theoretical fashion will inevitably result in a survey that is speaking to yesterday's hot topics.