

The General Social Survey: Innovation and Dissemination Comments for NSF Workshop on the GSS

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Innovation in the GSS

The GSS has a spectacular and still growing record of innovation. Maintaining the capacity to innovate conceptually and methodologically should be a high priority for the next decade and beyond.

There are two senses of “innovation.” Innovation can mean introducing something completely new to the world, or it can mean changing previous practice in ways that, while perhaps not inventing something completely new, refresh an enterprise and keep it on the cutting edge. The GSS’s record of innovation is impressive in both of these senses.

The GSS’s record of innovation in the first sense includes inventing the very concept of an ongoing *general* social survey, helping to inspire and create the ISSP, advancing measurement validity and reliability through question-wording and context experiments, producing new substantive knowledge on too many subjects to name, developing time series that are available nowhere else, and facilitating the generation of new, high-quality samples at other levels of analysis (e.g. employing organizations, religious congregations, voluntary associations).

The GSS has from the beginning been innovative in the second sense as well. Most recently, significant innovations to the GSS include adding Spanish-language interviews (in 2006), introducing a panel supplement to the cross-sectional time series (the first re-interviews of panel members to occur in 2008), and implementing a new two-stage sampling design that more efficiently uses available resources to achieve a high weighted response rate (in 2004). The GSS is not the first national survey to incorporate these elements, but their recent incorporation illustrates well the GSS’s proven and ongoing capacity to adapt in ways that keep it at the forefront of survey research on American society.

The highest priority innovations for the next decade of the GSS are, I think, two initiatives described by the PIs in the background documents for this workshop:

1. Increase the capacity for cross-national research using the GSS, including augmenting the ISSP and creating the North American Social Survey. Cross-national research using surveys of individuals within countries is an increasingly fruitful strategy for advancing knowledge on many fronts. The GSS should continue to be a leader in international efforts to further enhance our capacity to conduct cross-national research of this sort.
2. Add geographically-based contextual data. Enhancing our ability to locate GSS respondents geographically and socially will advance knowledge of the correlates and causes of the many attitudes and behaviors measured by the GSS.

To these top-priority innovations, I might add four others to consider in the coming years:

3. Gather data from other members of GSS respondents' households to further deepen our knowledge of the social contexts in which respondents live.
4. Collect biomarkers from GSS respondents. The GSS could be a leader in the increasingly important effort to integrate biological, behavioral, and social/cultural levels of analysis.
5. Continue to improve measurement on the GSS by implementing cognitive pretesting of all new items.
6. Pending the outcome of initial tests, implement the multi-level, integrated, database approach described in our background materials.

The core mission of the GSS is to gather high-quality data on the attributes, attitudes, and behaviors of people in the United States in order to document and explain trends and constants in those attributes, attitudes, and behaviors. Candidate innovations should be prioritized by their potential to significantly advance that core mission. In my view, enhancing our ability to integrate different levels of analysis—whether by placing GSS respondents in their geographic and social contexts, placing U.S. data in a cross-national context, or examining biomarkers along with attitudes and behaviors—seems the most fruitful way to advance that core mission given the current state of sociological knowledge, methodological sophistication, and technical possibility. This is why my top four priorities for future innovation all involve efforts to enhance our ability to integrate different levels of analysis.

The recompetition notice should make clear that future GSS leaders will be expected to push the GSS forward in these important ways. More generally, and whatever specific innovations are pursued, future leaders should possess a demonstrable capacity for building on the GSS's established legacy of innovation and leadership in survey research on American society.

Dissemination of the GSS

GSS data and results have been disseminated remarkably widely. The background materials document a staggering level of productive use of GSS data by researchers, teachers, students, journalists, and government officials: it is the third most highly used dataset (after the Census and the CPS), with almost 9,000 published uses, 188,000 datasets downloaded, 19 million visits to GSS/ISSP web sites between 1999 and 2003, 90 data extracts distributed with textbooks, and 250,000 students annually enrolled in courses that use the GSS. It is clear that GSS dissemination efforts have been wildly successful and, faced with numbers like these, it is tempting to say that the recompetition notice should simply state that GSS leaders should be prepared to continue current dissemination efforts without any change in current practice.

Still, I think it is fair to point out that internet access to GSS data and documentation is not state-of-the-art. GSSDIRS may have been state-of-the-art when it was developed in 1999-2000, but resource constraints have prevented updates of that system, and the GSS consequently has fallen behind the curve in internet dissemination. For example, there is no one definitive, up-to-date

GSS web site where a user can find all GSS data and all relevant documentation. New GSS data sets are first distributed through the Roper Center, from whom users must purchase them. The data sets are deposited at ICPSR and made available through other data archives within a few months, but this arrangement means that there is a several month period during which new data are available only via purchase from the Roper Center. To mention another example, the “GSS Methodological Reports” button on the GSSDIRS site produces a list of papers, but the full text of most of these papers is not available via the site. I think many users of GSS data would now expect to be able to read all GSS Methodological Reports at the click of a mouse.

The need to bring the GSS up to speed in internet dissemination—and keep it there—is made more urgent by the increasing complexity of the GSS. The subsampling design implemented in 2004, the panel data that will be introduced in 2008, and the potential addition of contextual geographical data all make it even more important that users have the easiest possible access to technical documentation as well as to the most recent data.

I understand that GSS staff already is working to develop a new, fully current project web site to be launched some time this year. That’s great. Still, as the history of GSSDIRS illustrates, *keeping* a web site current in both function and content is as much of a challenge—perhaps more of a challenge—than creating it in the first place. Perhaps, then, the point here is simply that the GSS recompetition notice should make clear that, in the coming decade and beyond, NSF expects the GSS to *stay* at the forefront of internet dissemination of data and documentation, and it will provide the resources to make that possible.