

Chapter 3

The ISSP and its Approach to Background Variables

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1. INTRODUCTION

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) is a cooperation between national general social surveys of different countries which every year jointly prepare a questionnaire for one substantive topic and conduct their surveys in a similar manner (Braun 1994; Davis and Jowell 1989). General social surveys are research projects designed to collect and distribute social science data for academic research and teaching. Since 1972 the American General Social Survey (GSS) and since 1980 the German ALLBUS have been conducted annually or every second year. The British Social Attitudes Survey began in 1983. Most of the general social surveys have 3 primary goals: (1) to study social change, (2) to provide key data for researchers and students who have no direct access to national samples and (3) to provide data for continuous social reporting. The national research teams realised that the provision of internationally comparable data would greatly enlarge the scope of analyses possible (Küchler 1987).

2. A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF ISSP

In the early 1980s, bilateral cooperation started between the German ALLBUS and the American GSS: Identical questions were introduced into the national questionnaires. It was perceived as highly desirable, however, to do international research on a more regular basis and to have more than just two countries involved. The first steps towards a durable cooperation

between institutes from four countries – Germany, the United States, Britain and Australia – were taken in 1983. There was an agreement to have an annual jointly prepared study added to the single national surveys. 1985 these intentions were realised with a survey on the ‘Role of Government’. Thus, ISSP was constituted as a research network. There was wide interest from other countries to participate in this enterprise. That became obvious by the fact that Italy and Austria immediately joined in and administered the questionnaire. In 1986 the Netherlands, Ireland and Hungary became members, in 1989 Norway and Israel. From 1990 onwards many former socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe joined the network and many more countries from all parts of the world were added, in particular Western Europe, East Asia and South America. Single ISSP studies have also been administered in countries which at the time of the survey were not members of the ISSP. Today the ISSP has 38 country members from all over the world, while others are considering membership. The ISSP secretariat (see <http://www.issp.org/> for the secretariat’s web site) which is elected by the members every three years provides the necessary coordination and a Methodology Group (http://www.gesis.org/en/social_monitoring/issp/methods.htm) has the task of monitoring procedures and making suggestions for improvements. Sample recommendations for collecting and documenting demographic information are presented in the Appendix of this chapter.

The questionnaire which requires some 15 minutes to fill in should be constructed in a format that allows for mail interviews. As a rule, however, it should be administered as a drop-off to the national personal interviews. Each country should use a representative random sample and try to realise at least 1000 interviews per survey. The respective national questionnaires should be transcriptions of the British English master instrument that is designed together by all the member groups. The conduct of the surveys is monitored to some degree and deviations are sanctioned by the group, which might lead to countries losing their vote at the Plenary Meetings (e.g. if they have failed to field and deposit two consecutive surveys at the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research) or being excluded from ISSP altogether. However, smaller deviations occur now and then, in particular translation errors, and have to be documented in the codebooks.

3. STRENGTH AND WEAKNESSES OF ISSP

There are several strengths, but also some weaknesses of the ISSP project that should be mentioned here. One major strength obviously is the continuity of the project. The participating nations convened on an open-ended research effort. All the modules of the series will be replicated after some

time – as a rule that will be time intervals from five to ten years. Because replications assume a central place in the design of the programme, ISSP is different from one-shot projects or those where it depends on the interests of single personalities whether renewed measurements are achieved say 10 or 20 years after the first study. By the design as replicative surveys ISSP data offer to monitor social change on a long term basis. In this way questions of social change could be addressed in an interculturally comparative perspective. Not less important is the strategy ISSP uses to single out important topics and determine the most adequate operationalisations. New topics and new concepts are first discussed in plenary meetings in which all countries have an equal say. That ensures that the interests of the majority of the countries are respected. Themes which have been recommended for inclusion in the programme are then handed over to a drafting group which ideally consists of a miniature of the ISSP plenary meeting. In that phase the fact that first-hand knowledge of the topic and of peculiarities of individual countries and the problems of asking questions in a interculturally comparable way can be fully exploited, is a big advantage. That distinguishes ISSP from ‘imperialistic’ forms of organizing research – where one national team figures out a study and implements it in foreign countries relying at best on some technical advice from indigenous pollsters, only – and makes the most efficient use of the competences of the national teams. The number and the distribution of countries across the planet is an additional asset of ISSP. Although increased membership causes some difficulty in the organisation of the research network and quality insurances (Jowell 1998; Küchler 1998), the possibilities provided by the data base and the international contacts are rarely matched by other projects.

The problems of this kind of international cooperation are undeniable. They can be formulated as complements to the advantages mentioned above. The selection procedure in the past regarding new member countries was largely one of first self-selection and second screening rather than active acquisition. This means that there was no procedure to acquire countries which might be desirable for specific research purposes. Thus, ISSP has not yet reached full coverage of all EU countries. Also, there is no way to make sure that every country will run every module in time and some countries might even drop out again – if, for example, financial difficulties arise.

The fact that most of the participating groups add the ISSP as a drop-off to their ongoing national surveys helps reducing the costs of membership and is, at least in some cases, a prerequisite for participation. However, as most of these national surveys are older than the ISSP, they often have national traditions which are, partly for good reason, quite resistant to change. This hinders a homogenisation of the resultant national ‘peculiarities’ in sampling, mode of administration, questionnaire construction, and

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