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# The International Social Survey Program - ISSP

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## The International Social Survey Program – Goals and Intentions of the ISSP <sup>2</sup>

International Social Survey Program (ISSP) is a continuing, annual program of cross national collaboration. It brings together pre-existing national, social science projects and coordinates research goals by adding a crossnational perspective to the individual, national studies.

ISSP grew out of a bilateral collaboration between the Allgemeinen Bevoelkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) administered by the Zentrum fuer Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen (ZUMA) in Mannheim, West Germany and the General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), University of Chicago. Both the ALLBUS – a joint project of ZUMA and the Zentralarchiv – and the GSS are replicating, time series surveys. The

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<sup>2</sup>This overview is based on: Tom W. Smith (SCPR) in: NSSD (ed.), EPD Newsletter, No. 63, Bergen, June 1987

ALLBUS has been conducted biennially since 1980 and the GSS annually (except for 1979 and 1981) since 1972. In 1982 ZUMA and NORC devoted a small segment of the questionnaires on job values, importance of areas of life, abortion, and feminism. In 1984 the collaboration referred to questions on class differences, equality, and the welfare state.

Meanwhile, in late 1983 Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), London, which was starting a social indicators series (the British Social Attitudes Survey) similar to the GSS and ALLBUS, secured funds from the Nuffield Foundation to sponsor meetings to further international cooperation. A meeting was held in London in June, 1984 with representatives from ZUMA, NORC, SCPR, and also the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. This group, soon to be christened the ISSP, agreed to 1) jointly develop topical modules dealing with important areas of social science, 2) this module would be a 15 minute supplement to the regular national surveys (or as a special survey if necessary), 3) include an extensive common core of the background variables, and 4) to make the data available to the social science community as soon as possible. Each national institution funds its own data collection and bears any costs that it incurred through participation in the cooperative effort.

Since its initial meeting in 1984, ISSP has grown to include eleven nations, the original four - Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, plus Austria, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Hungary, Norway, and Israel. Other countries are currently applying for membership.

#### Participating Organizations

RSSS	Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Australia
IS	Institut fuer Soziologie, Graz University, Austria
ZUMA	Zentrum fuer Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen, Mannheim, Federal Republic of Germany
SCPR	Social and Community Planning Research, London, Great Britain
TARKI	Tarsadalomkutatasi Informatikai Tarsulas, Budapest, Hungary
EURISKO	Ricerca Sociale e di Marketing, Milano, Italy
SSUC	Department of Social Science, University College, Dublin, Ireland
Israel	Tel Aviv University, Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, Ramat Aviv, Israel
NSD	Norwegian Social Science Data Archives, Bergen, Norway
SCP	Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, Rijkswijk, The Netherlands
NORC	National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, USA
ZA	Zentralarchiv fuer empirische Sozialforschung an der Universitaet Koeln, Federal Republic of Germany

ISSP's first theme was the role of government. This covered attitudes towards civil liberties, and law enforcement, education and directing the economy, and welfare and social equality. The second theme was social networks and support systems. This included a detailed account of one's contact with various relatives and friends and then a series of questions about where one would turn to for help when faced with various situations such as financial need, minor illness, career advice, and emotional distress. The third module, on social equality, is now being developed. Questions focus on equality of income, wealth, and opportunity. Respondents are asked for their perceptions of the extent of present inequality, explanations for inequality, and support for government programs to reduce inequality. The fourth module (1988) will deal with working women and the family, and fifth

(1989) with work and leisure.

In 1990 ISSP will repeat the role of government theme. By replicating substantial parts of earlier modules, ISSP will not only have a cross national but also a time perspective. We will be able to compare nations and test whether similar social science models are valid for different societies. We will also be able to see if there are similar international trends and whether equivalent models of social change hold true for different nations.

ISSP brings several new features to the area of cross national research. The collaboration among nations is not sporadic or intermittent but routine and continual. Although the international collaboration carried out by ISSP is more circumscribed than special cross national research projects, ISSP makes cross national research a basic part of the nation's research agenda.

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### **The Zentralarchiv in Cologne serves as the "ISSP Archive"**

At the 1986 ISSP conference in Mannheim it was agreed that the Zentralarchiv would function as the central archive for the ISSP, while each participant would continue to send the ISSP data to their own national archives. The Archive would be furnished with the data of all countries who produced a data tape, with SPSSx set-up files. These could be distributed with no restriction. The Zentralarchiv would produce a merged file for the ISSP module plus the agreed demographic variables, and would produce a "common core" codebook, and thus provide data sets for cross national comparison.

The data files transmitted to the Archive will contain the ISSP module, common background variables, plus nationally specific background data and national addenda (i.e. other data collected). The common data are delivered in a pre-defined format, according to a common core-codebook (together with SPSS or SPSSx set-up files). The Archive merges the common-core data and distributes them, together with full documentation, as an integrated file.

An ISSP working group will develop the code for the common-core of background variables after consultations with the group, including schemes for merging the background variables according to the principle of "functional equivalence". On receipt of the working group's proposal each institute returns a re-coded version of their background variables so that anomalies could be identified before the integrated codebook was distributed.

During the 1987 ISSP conference in Budapest it was resolved that each nation would send to the Zentralarchiv the following information in English:

- sample size – planned and completed
- type of sample – detailed sampling procedures, stratification factors, information on clustering
- response rates and how they are calculated

- known systematic properties of the sample: bias, differential attrition, sampling efficiency and information on design effects
- weighting - details of weighting and its effects
- fieldwork dates
- fieldwork methods - whether drop off, postal; self-completion or personal interview
- context - other topics in the questionnaire, their placement vis a vis the ISSP modul
- known deviations from standard ISSP question wording must be clearly marked
- a note on coding and editing procedures and a blank questionnaire
- the names of the principle investigators at each institution

The absence of any of these details would render the dataset incomplete. This would mean that it could not be included in the combined dataset until information was passed to the Archive.

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### **The Cluttered Reality of Comparative Data Sets**

Processing the 1985 module on "Role of Government" proved that agreement and practice cannot easily be brought to coincide, thus the Zentralarchiv invested more time and resources to prepare the prototype of the 1985 ISSP modul then was agreed during the different ISSP meetings. Especially the timing was badly off. The first dataset of the 1985 modul reached the Archive in April 1986 -- the last one arrived in September 1987.

The amount of information sent with the datasets varied from a few notes on a sheet of paper to a complete codebook. Languages varied from the vernacular to well prepared English with versions of foreigner's English in-between. Nearly every case of documentation created problems.

As the ISSP self-completion questionnaire was part of the "general social surveys" in some countries and was conducted under financial restrictions in others, the background questions in the main followed the tradition within those countries more than they conformed to the common-core which was agreed upon. In order to maximize comparability it was necessary to identify, recode and merge variables within countries. Filter conditions had to be reconstructed, recoding procedures required some time to go back to the original data, variable labels and names were far from being standardised and hard to interpret. Questions from the ISSP modules were missing in some countries, definition of missing data varied, some SPSS system files ran into capacity problems etc.

Literature e.g. about educational systems in the participating countries, about the occupational structure or about the party systems had to be consulted to permit documentation in the appendix of the resulting codebook. Country-specific wording of questions and translations into English had to be added to the documentation, too.

In the meantime the 1985 ISSP module - data and codebook - have been distributed to the participating institutions. Upon request data sets were also supplied to the national data archives. Supplying the national and international scientific community with data from the project is, in addition to merging the national files to one international dataset, a major task and function of the ISSP-Archive.

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#### ISSP data at the Zentralarchiv (July 1988)

1985 module: "Role of Government"

Carried out in:	ZA study No.:	Sample Size:
Australia	1496	1528
Austria	1495	987
Federal Republic	1491	1048
Italy	1493	1580
United Kingdom	1492	1530
USA	1494	677
Integrated codebook and dataset available	1490	

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1986 module: "Social Networks"

Carried out in:	ZA study No.:	Sample Size:
Australia	1622	1250
Austria	1495	1027
Federal Republic	1500	2809
Hungary	1498	1747
Italy	1640	1027
United Kingdom	1623	1416
USA	1563	1470
Integrated codebook and dataset in process	1620	

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 1987 module: "Social Inequality"

Carried out in:	ZA study No.:	Sample Size:
Australia	not yet available	
Austria	not yet available	
Federal Republic	1641	1397
Hungary	1497	2606
Italy	1640	1027
The Netherlands	1673	1990
United Kingdom	1668	2847
USA	1636	1819
Integrated codebook and dataset planned	1680	

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1988 module: "Family and Sex Role"

1989 module: "Work Orientation"

## Planned to be carried out in:

Australia  
 Austria  
 Federal Republic  
 Hungary  
 Ireland  
 Italy  
 The Netherlands  
 United Kingdom  
 USA

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**Perspectives for the future**

The International Social Survey Program is by now a dependable, continually enlarging and effective cooperation producing a valuable cross-national data with also some time-series quality. The trade off between ambition and pragmatism which is always necessary in such a heterogeneous international group of social scientists has reached a very high level of quality. This forces the Zentralarchiv to think about new and effective forms of services for this special data-collection.

As for now the main work is to merge the individual modules into a single file for international comparisons. For the future we have to plan an additional design. In doing so, we have to take into account that a complex data base will grow in which topics will be replicated over time. Indicators may be added, deleted or changed and additional countries will join the program. A kind of data organisation has to be found which is easy to handle on the side of the user-community and which allows the organization of a large enough body of data to serve most of the potential retrieval and research tasks. Similar to the concept of the ALLBUS the ISSP data-base could in the final step be organised in a data-base management system (DBMS) leaving options open to different needs as e.g on-line analysis or on-line retrieval, custom-tailored PC solutions, teaching packages and whatever else is conceivable. Thus the ISSP can serve as a prototype for forthcoming cross national studies also in terms of data management while it is already an example of cooperation and coordination between national and international researcher groups.□