An Analysis of GSS Usage Among Sociologists

by

Tom W. Smith
National Opinion Research Center

GSS Project Report No. 4

June, 1981

This research was done for the GSS project directed by James A. Davis. The project is supported by the National Science Foundation, Grant No. SOC77-03279. Funds for the survey of sociologists were provided by the National Opinion Research Center.

The General Social Surveys have been widely used in scholarly research and teaching. We have tried to keep track of the research uses by compiling our annual annotated bibliography (Smith 1981; Smith and Hune, 1981). Information of the use of the GSS as an instructional tool has been much sparser. In a 1974 survey that used a sample of heads of sociology departments with graduate programs in the United States and Canada to identify professors using computers for class room teaching, Anderson (1976) found that "While several said they used survey data from Michigan's Institute for Social Research, the most popular is the General Social Survey (1972 and 1973) from the National Opinion Research Center, used by at least 15 percent of all respondents." Similarly, Cutler (1978) reported that "Of some forty data sets available to Oberlin College students, the GSSs are unquestionably used far more frequently than any others."

Data

To gather up-to-date information on instructional uses of the GSS we used the lists maintained by the Educational Directory to draw samples of people teaching courses at four year colleges and universities in the United States in a) Introduction to Sociology, b) Research Methods in Sociology, and c) Statistical Analysis (Sociology). Sample members who had died or left college teaching were deleted, leaving us with a net sample of 213 introductory teachers, 268 methods teachers, and 194 teachers of statistical analysis.

A two-page mail questionnaire (see Appendix) was sent out on March 22nd and a follow-up questionnaire was sent to non-respondents on April 12th. A subsample of 50 nonrespondents was drawn on April 26th

for telephone follow-ups. The final response rates were 48.4 percent for introductory teachers, 65.3 percent for methods teachers, and 73.2 percent for teachers of statistical analysis. Most of the difference in response rates resulted from more introductory teachers no longer being at their listed college. (In fact, in a majority of cases, the current addresses were not even known by the university of record.) If we exclude those nonrespondents who were unreachable because of job changes, we find that the voluntary response rates were much closer--65.2 percent for introductory teachers, 71.5 percent for methods teachers, and 76.1 percent for teachers of statistical analysis.

To gauge possible nonresponse bias we compared the known characteristics of nonrespondents and respondents and examined the small group of telephone interviews and late arrivals. Nonrespondents did not differ from respondents on either the subjectively evaluated standing of the college or on their regional distribution. On these two variables at least respondents appeared to be representative of all sample members. Next, we looked at the responses of certain hard-to-get cases. The literature suggests that hard-to-get respondents will often resemble nonrespondents more closely than easy-to-get respondents. We found no major differences between the hard-and easy-to-get respondents. The difficult cases did not significantly differ on using the GSS, but did show a greater tendency to use computers as an instructional tool (+12.0 percent points). All in all, we believe that the respondents were generally representative of the sample on the variables measured.

Findings

The GSS is known by a majority of sociologists. Among introductory teachers, 55 percent have heard or read about the GSS, and the

figures for methods teachers and teachers of statistical analysis are respectively 60 percent and 63 percent. Of those who know of the GSS, it has been used for teaching, research, survey design, or other purposes by 36 percent of introductory teachers, 55 percent of methods teachers, and 48 percent of teachers of statistical analysis. Teaching is the most frequent application counting for a plurality of uses for each group of teachers.

Computers are used as an instructional aide by 37 percent of introductory teachers, 70 percent of methods teachers, and 71 percent of teachers of statistical analysis. The GSS is the most widely used data set by all three groups for computer instruction. Combining the three groups (since results were quite similar) we find that of all data sets mentioned, 26.6 percent were primary data (personal or student), 24.6 percent the GSS, 8.5 percent the American National Election Studies of the Center for Political Studies, 5.6 percent Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research subsets, 5.0 percent USPOP, 3.6 percent ASPS, 2.6 percent SIMSEARCH, 2.4 percent U.S. Census, 1.5 percent IMPRESS, 1.5 percent GHETTO, 18 percent miscellaneous others. (Since both the ICPSR Subsets and IMPRESS include both the American National Election Studies and GSS it is possible that some uses of these data sets are included in the former figures.)

In addition, there appears to be a great deal of interest in the GSS by those unfamiliar with it. More information was requested by 60 percent of the introductory teachers, 82 percent of methods teachers, and 75 percent of teachers of statistical analysis who had never heard of GSS.

Looking into the future, we predict increased use of the GSS as an instructional tool among sociologists. This prediction is based on

three indicators. First, the GSS has not apparently saturated its core market among sociologists. Many are unfamiliar about the GSS but interested in finding out more about these programs. With an increase distribution of information through the appropriate scholarly journals and targeted mailings, it should be possible to reach much of this uninformed group. Second, GSS use in the scholarly literature continues to increase. This should expose more teachers to the data and eventually lead to more classroom applications. Third, all signs point to a continued increase in instructional computing (Anderson, 1981). Since GSS use is much higher among computer users than among nonusers, the growth of instructional computing should result in more instructors using the GSS.

In sum, GSS occupies an important place in sociological instruction. It is the most widely used instructional data set by teachers of introductory courses, research methods, and statistical analysis. As instructional computing grows and the GSS becomes more valuable with a lengthening time series and a larger accumulation of cases and variables, it will probably become a standard resource for sociological teaching.

References

Anderson, Ronald E., "Instructional Computing in Sociology: Current Status
1981 and Future Prospects," Teaching Sociology, 8 (Jan.), 171-195.

Anderson, Ronald E., "Diffusion of Computer Utilization Among Sociology
1976 Instructors," Computers and the Humanities, 10, 201-207.

Cutler, Stephen J., "Instructional Uses of the General Social Surveys,"
1978 Contemporary Sociology, 7 (Sept.), 541-545.

Smith, Tom W., and Hone, Martina, "Annotated Bibliography of Papers
1981 Using the General Social Survey," 3rd edition, Chicago: NORC.

Smith, Tom W., "Who, What, When, Where, and Why: An Analysis of Usage
1981 of the General Social Surveys, 1972-1980," GSS Technical
Report No. 27, Chicago: NORC.