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ALLBUS: A German General Social Survey

By Michael Terwey

Introduction: National data generation programs

For a long time the development of social sciences has been stalled by the lack of a regular basic survey program. Regular official statistics are often too limited in their scope to qualify for many detailed sociological investigations. Numerous other scientific surveys have been restricted in their scope due to individual research interests, and they could not be regularly replicated. Moreover, only a small public may have access to these special social surveys. Sometimes the data sets are interpreted exclusively by the primary researchers who initiated the research program. In other cases these data sets do become available to a broader public, but only after several key evaluations have been completed by the initiators of the project.

On the other hand, writing applications for research funding is a time-consuming, expensive task that can end up in complete failure. Only a limited group of professionals feel confident to be quickly successful in it. This threshold can become a serious problem especially for students and persons outside of the professional core area. To provide these and other people with reliable data, there is a need for nationwide surveys which are easily accessible and which have such high data quality that they can be confidently and easily evaluated.

It is a declared mission of such general data generation programs to make high-quality, scientifically relevant data timely available to the social science research community (cf. Pappi 1987, Davies et al. 1994). Ideally, general surveys in this sense ought to be evolved into accurate, well administered research, detached from commercial interests. They aim at broad coverage, establishing time-series for social monitoring, high attention to data quality, and precise documentation. The most prominent forerunner of such a nationwide data generation program is the *General Social Survey (GSS)* in the USA.

Institutional profile of ALLBUS

As outlined before, the centerpiece of national data generation programs is a stable series of surveys with items covering central areas of concern for social sciences and related humanities. Plans for ALLBUS (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften) as a *German General Social Survey* started in the mid-1970s (cf. Mayer 1984). It was established as a joint project of ZUMA (Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen, Mannheim) and ZA (Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, Cologne), and performed in close cooperation with a scientific council of proven experts, the '*ALLBUS-Ausschuß*'. According to the concept of a national data generation program, the objectives of ALLBUS are the collection and distribution of high-quality data on attitudes, behavior, social structure, and changes in Germany.

Since 1980, the ALLBUS-surveys have been conducted biennially with the exception of an additional baseline survey in 1991 shortly after the German unification.¹ The individual ALLBUS data sets consist of independent random samples drawn from respondents living in private households who are at least 18 years of age. Since 1991 the samples were extended to the new Federal States and to German-speaking foreigners with residence in Germany. The number of respondents varies between 3000 and 3500. The basic documentation is available in comprehensive *codebooks* including full question-texts, marginals, and supplementary information. Special features of sampling, items, and interpretation are discussed in *methodological reports* and the introductions of the codebooks (e.g. ZA and ZUMA 1997, 1999).

The *ALLBUS-bibliography*, a synopsis of all publications using ALLBUS data as far as we know of them, is available via Internet.² Since 1980, ALLBUS is one of the most often used social science data sets in Germany (Terwey 1998).

Major substantial modules within ALLBUS

According to its name, ALLBUS items ought to cover a general, broad range of topics. The topics and their indicators have been chosen, drawing

¹ The surveys in 1980 to 1986 and an additional study in 1991 were funded by the German research foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG). Since 1987, ALLBUS has been integrated into the association of GESIS (Gesellschaft sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen) being financed by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) and the Federal States of Germany.

² Cf. the ALLBUS-startpage: <http://www.zuma-mannheim.de/data/allbus/>

on the experience and the advice of the 'ALLBUS-Ausschuß' and other distinguished social scientists, to cover topics strategic for empirical social sciences. Their composition is a mirror of important interests in contemporary research and proven surveys already archived. As regards content, we may divide the ALLBUS-items into two major parts. First, there are various groups of questions on subjective attitudes, opinions, values, and specific activities:

- Attitudes towards social inequality and welfare state; assessments of general and personal economic situation; subjective evaluation of respondent's own occupational success; opinions on incomes; perceived importance of social background.
- Opinions on family, education, children, and partnership; views on labor force participation of women; attitudes towards abortion; questions on AIDS.
- Importance of life aspects and job characteristics; leisure time activities; personal tastes, lifestyles, and networks; media use and opinions on media.
- Role of government; political views and participation; attitudes towards administrations and officials; trust in institutions.
- Fear of crime; perceptions of social conflicts and environmental pollution in Germany; subjective social pessimism (anomia).
- Religiosity, cosmology, and rituals; ideological orientations.
- Opinions on ethnic groups, Jews, and immigrants; national pride in Germany; views about German unification.

Second, there is a major group of demographic data (ALLBUS-Demography) and, finally, supplementing information on the interviews:

- Respondent's demographic profile (e.g. gender, age, church affiliation, education, occupation, income, marital status); data on marital history and demographic characteristics of spouses; details on steady life partner (not married to respondent); education and occupation of parents; questions on citizenship, length of stay in the Federal Republic of Germany, housing, place of residence; details on household composition and children; data on respondent's children, friends, and acquaintances; memberships in various organizations and associations.
- Information on respondent's dwelling-place and on the course of interview; demographic data on the interviewers.

The general design of the program puts emphasis on replication, the literal repetition of items. A *cumulative file* comprises the ALLBUS-data from

these replications and thus supplements the series of cross-sectional samples with a valuable tool for social monitoring.³ The cumulative ALLBUS-file (ZA-Nr. 1795) contains all time series which have been established in this program since 1980 and some of these were already selected from earlier surveys extending the time series (cf. national comparative data in ZA and ZUMA 1983). The forthcoming version of cumulative ALLBUS is going to have a total of 34.956 respondents and more than 800 different variables joined together.

Time series and cross-national comparisons

Replication obviously aims at facilitated research on social change and stability. For instance, the regular inclusion of many demographic items permits well-differentiated analyses of social backgrounds and structural changes. ALLBUS time series have already contributed to manifold studies on social change (cf. ALLBUS-bibliography in the Internet – footnote 2). Another helpful result of cumulation is an enlarged number of respondents in small subgroups. Since each survey adds in new cases and all replications are merged into the cumulative data base, the combined samples pool such strong respondents together into larger subsets. These are suitable for more efficient analysis as long as differences across time can be neglected to some degree. For example, in ALLBUS 1994 there were only 62 persons from the new Federal States who attended church at least once a month, but across the 1991–1998 ALLBUSs a total of 361 respondents with such church attachment is available for studies of organized religion. Besides, eastern persons with high church attendance appear to be a rather interesting subgroup for analyses of some secular attitudes, too (cf. Alba et al. 2000, McCutcheon 2000, Terwey 2000).

Chart 1 shows an example of subjective trends in Germany. The propositions and measurements of Ronald Inglehart have led to one of the most prominent and widespread controversies in social sciences. An increase of 'postmaterialistic' orientations is expected after a period of continuously good economic conditions. According to the assumptions of Inglehart (1971), an index constructed from four items was integrated into ALLBUS from 1980 on. At first sight, ALLBUS-data show an increase of postmaterialism in the former Federal Republic of Germany (old Federal States). This was according with Inglehart's expectations since for several years the 'Wirtschaftswunder' resulted in widespread good material conditions. How-

³ Users who are particularly interested in German panel data may choose to do their analyses with the German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP; cf. <http://www.diw.de/soep/>).

ever, after the German unification in 1990 the trend turned, and a significant decline of postmaterialism in West Germany occurred (1990: 32%, 1992: 23; cf. chart 1). The shares of postmaterialists show no stable recovery in the following years.

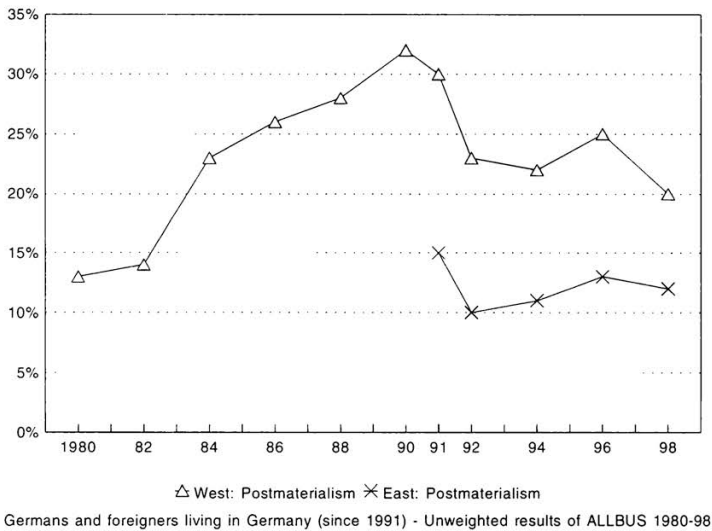


Chart 1: Postmaterialism in Germany

The percentages of postmaterialists in East Germany started and remained on a comparatively lower level (1991: 15%, 1998: 12%) – a finding which may easily be considered to be in accordance with Inglehart's assumptions, as the former GDR offered less individual experience of material affluence than the former West Germany. Note that the issue whether the trends shown in chart 1 could be interpreted as a change in lasting values or rather in volatile opinions is not to be thoroughly examined in this short overview.

Finally, the international aspects of General Social Surveys should be briefly considered. While primarily being collaborations dedicated to national social research, high quality data attract international interest, motivate cross-national replication, and make international comparisons a more realistic goal of the national science agenda. From 1980 on, ALLBUS has also had a cross-national component (e.g. international comparative data in

ZA and ZUMA 1983). In 1982 there was bilateral collaboration between the ALLBUS and the American GSS on questions about religion, job values, important areas of life, abortion, and feminism. A merged data subset is available from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR, University of Michigan). Furthermore there are other survey programs similar to GSS and ALLBUS. The 'British Social Attitudes' (BSA) and 'Polish General Social Survey' (PGSS) have also introduced GSS or ALLBUS questions into their programs, as some parts of these surveys are particularly designed for international comparisons. Last but not least, the 1986 to 1996 German modules of *ISSP* (International Social Survey Programme) have been added to the respective ALLBUS-interviews.⁴

Conclusion: A major resource for research and professional training

The central preparation of national data programs, their documentation, archiving, and the sharing of the data facilitate open scientific research and expert training. Investigators having access to the same data can challenge each other's findings and conclusions. As these data are widely available, joint self-correcting in science can work effectively towards a common progress of knowledge. Experience from the programs facilitates new research and tests of alternative methods. Sometimes the data will even be used in ways that had originally not been foreseen. Improved methods of data collection and measurement are finally enabled for various other surveys drawing from the repeated examination of ALLBUS by different researchers and careful observation of the past sampling-processes. General social surveys reduce research costs by diminishing reiterated efforts for research applications and data collections. The collaboration initiated thus between various researchers and organizations is not only an occasional one, but may become a continuous institution.

Last but not least, programs like ALLBUS provide an important resource for *training of researchers and students*. Real data on our society are extremely valuable to students as a didactic tool in education and as a guidepost for their own future work. For twenty years, ALLBUS data has been widely used for teaching survey methods, statistics, and various substantive research areas (cf. amongst others Wagner (1995), Brosius and Brosius (1995), Wittenberg (1998), Sander et al. (1998)). One of the easiest ways currently

⁴ The integrated items and ISSP-documentation are available at the Central Archive as a special data base, which are projected to be discussed later in this series of data-presentations. An introduction to ISSP can be found in the Internet: <http://www.za.uni-koeln.de/data/en/issp/>

available to introduce ALLBUS to beginners, occasional users, or students is the *WWW-download for ALLBUS 1994 and 1996*.⁵ This special download is free of charge and no additional registration is needed.

Still more comprehensive is the current ALLBUS-CD-ROM. The *complete data and codebooks* of ALLBUS are presently available to the customers of the Central Archive (Cologne) on one CD-ROM for a special price (50 DM). This special collection can be ordered via traditional mail or Internet.⁶ As the examples of the new download-facility and the ALLBUS-bibliography show, there is a continuously augmented fund of information, data, and search engines in the WWW. The access of ALLBUS-materials via CD-ROM or via Internet facilitates educational usage compared to circumstances in the early eighties, when documentation was primarily restricted to books and data were mostly distributed on large tapes. However, paperback books documenting the surveys complement the collection as before (e.g. ZA and ZUMA 1983, 1997, 1999; charge 75 DM per volume). A special methodological report is additionally published for each ALLBUS (available on the CD-ROM, via Internet, and in the paperback codebooks). Finally, the books in the series 'Blickpunkt Gesellschaft' (Spotlight on Society) offer numerous exemplary analyses with these data (e.g. analyses of ethnocentrism in Alba et al. 2000). All in all, there is a large potential waiting for further analyses.

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⁵ Cf.:

<http://www.social-science-geis.de/order/data/allbus/allbus-download-www.htm>

⁶ Cf. the overview of ordering, distribution, and charges:

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