

Chapter 1

European Social Survey Core Questionnaire Development

Overview

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1.1 Introduction

The central aim of the ESS is to develop and conduct a systematic study of changing values, attitudes, attributes and behaviour patterns within European polities. Academically driven but designed to feed into key European policy debates, the ESS aims to measure and explain how people's social values, cultural norms and behaviour patterns are distributed, the way in which they differ within and between nations, and the direction and speed at which they are changing.

Data collection takes place every two years, starting in September 2002, by means of face-to-face interviews of around an hour in duration, followed by a short supplementary questionnaire, which can be administered as a continuation of the face-to-face interview, or as a self-completion supplement. The questionnaire consists of a 'core' module lasting about half an hour – most of which will remain constant from round to round – plus smaller 'rotating' modules, repeated at intervals, each of which will be devoted to a substantive topic or theme. For Round 1, two such modules were selected following a Europe-wide competition. Thus, while the purpose of the rotating modules is to provide an in-depth focus on a series of particular academic or policy concerns, the core module aims instead to monitor change and continuity in a wide range of socio-economic, socio-political, socio-psychological and socio-demographic variables, and to provide background variables for the analysis of the rotating modules.

1.2 Determining the content of the core

Even during the embryonic stages of the ESS, which were funded and nurtured by the ESF, the early multi-nation group responsible for its conceptual development began to consider what the most appropriate composition of its core ought to be. Not concerned at that stage with individual questions but only with broader themes, they asked themselves (and other specialists) which key *perennial* topics needed to be stitched into the fabric of a new European Social Survey. Such decisions are always somewhat arbitrary, influenced as they are by factors that vary by discipline, as well as by time and space. In contrast, it was relatively easy even at that stage to *eliminate* certain classes of questions. For instance, an early decision was to exclude a variety of transient issues over which media opinion polls happily have a monopoly. A biennial ESS must perforce focus on longer term variations in culture and social structure within Europe, aspiring to be an instrument that could identify and interpret climate shifts in social circumstances and values rather than merely monitor changes in the weather.

Even so, hard choices had to be made in order to distil the 'essential' components of an ESS from the much longer list of desirable components. Although only one round of the ESS was in prospect in the first instance, we have always been all too aware that a *sine qua non* of the whole enterprise is to measure and explain **continuity and change** in three broad domains:

- **People's value and ideological orientations** (their world views, including their religiosity, their socio-political values and their moral standpoints)
- **People's cultural/national orientations** (their sense of national and cultural attachment and their – related - feelings towards outgroups and cross-national governance)
- **The underlying social structure of society** (people's social positions, including class, education, degree of social exclusion, plus standard background socio-demographic variables, such as age, household structure, gender, etc, and a few questions about media usage that help to identify the primary sources of people's social and political knowledge).

We thus commissioned a number of international academic specialists within these fields, asking each of them to prepare a paper recommending the sub-areas (and if possible any existing batteries of questions) which they considered to be essential components of an ESS with the emphasis proposed. As some of the specialists themselves noted in their papers, the eventual questions adopted on most of these topics will serve as both dependent and independent variables, according to their projected use.

We summarise below, in highly truncated form, the case for each of the three main domains in the core ESS questionnaire.

1.3 People's value and ideological orientations

Academic specialist consultants: Jaak Billiet, John Curtice, Shalom Schwartz, Jacques Thomassen

When we refer to people's values and ideological orientations, we mean the deeply rooted, abstract orientations that help to guide, justify or explain people's opinions, attitudes and actions¹. These orientations tend not only to predict and help to explain people's opinions, attitudes and behaviour patterns, but also to influence - and be influenced by - social, political and economic changes within their respective societies. The rigorous measurement of differences in value structures between countries, and of changes in their character and distribution, is one of the primary motivations for the ESS.

The problem, of course, is the absence of a comprehensive, well-tested and analytically-powerful set of tools for measuring underlying values across nations. Although the Eurobarometer, the European (and World) Values Surveys and the International Social Survey Programme have all made major contributions, which we have used, even their combined lists of individual items and, more importantly their combined array of validated scales, are by no means comprehensive enough for our purposes.

We are, however, fortunate in being able to include in the ESS the 21-item *Basic Human Values Scale*, developed by the Israeli psychologist, Shalom Schwartz.² Grounded in theory and well-tested internationally, this self-administered scale classifies respondents into ten distinct categories according to their primary psychosocial motivations (such as 'achievement', 'conformity', 'tradition' and other similar spurs). It will thus be both helpful analytically to ESS users and, we hope, capable of measuring change over time within and between nations.

In addition, it is important for the ESS core module to identify and monitor the key socio-political cleavages that exist across cultures and nations within Europe (and beyond). Robust measures of these dimensions tend to serve primarily as independent variables, helping to explain and predict other substantive variables such as party identification, voting behaviour and certain moral standpoints. But they too may serve on occasions as dependent variables in their own right, helping to describe and understand the nature of value changes in society, and on occasions political changes as well. Whereas the terms of debate about particular issues tend to vary from country to country, underlying values (such as in relation to 'equality' or 'liberty', or people's religious identification) tend in contrast to transcend nations and are thus more amenable to being tapped by multinational survey instruments such as the ESS.

The individual topics chosen within this heading are:

- Left-right orientation
- Libertarian-authoritarian orientation
- Environmentalism

¹ Rokeach M, 1973, *The nature of human values*, London: Collier-Macmillan

² Schwartz S, 1997, 'Values and culture', in Munro *et al*, eds, *Motivation and culture* (pp. 69-84), New York: Routledge

- Basic human values (Schwartz scale)
- Satisfaction with democracy
- Trust in institutions, confidence in the economy
- Interest in politics, party affiliation and voting turnout
- Personal and system efficacy

- Religious orientation, present and past
- Church attendance
- Belief in God

1.4 People's cultural/national orientations

Academic specialist consultants: Jaak Billiet, John Curtice, Juan Linz, Kees Kersbergen, Frans van Waarden

Over four decades ago, a large slice of western Europe, later to be greatly expanded, turned itself into much more than a collection of nation states alone. Since then, the strength and robustness of the European Union has continued to cut across traditional ideas of nationhood, providing a supranational social and political structure that exists alongside national governments. The EU has always challenged longstanding ideas of national sentiment too, now perhaps more than ever, with the abandonment of national currencies in much of Europe. Moreover, with increasing European integration still irreversibly on the agenda, cross-pressures between old nationalisms and a new sense of 'supranationalism' may well grow, accompanied by a greater public recognition of the extent to which the economy of each member state in 'Euroland' depends on the success of the others. A European Social Survey has a special responsibility to chart and interpret these developments³.

But in doing so, we cannot ignore the wider context. We must simultaneously monitor the growing tension both within many member states and, perhaps increasingly within the EU as a whole, between an inclusive sense of citizenship and patriotism on the one hand and an exclusive sense of nationalism and ethnocentrism on the other.⁴ While citizens of EU members states take advantage of their right to live and work anywhere within EU boundaries, thus eroding monolithic notions of citizenship and national identity, will they simultaneously wish to seal the EU's borders more and more effectively against settlement from outside - whether by 'economic migrants', asylum seekers or refugees? And how might such a trend affect inter-group relations within the EU? Will attitudes towards 'outgroups' become more grudging and exclusive?

In all these respects Europe remains in a state of flux, needing continually to adapt to new forms of governance and to grapple with new issues of inclusiveness and exclusiveness. To the extent that the ESS is able to get beneath the surface and aid understanding of the intricate set of relationships involved, it will have served its purpose well. As shown by the ESF's *Beliefs in Government* programme,⁵ in an era of falling turnouts and declining trust in government, there is still a pressing need for solid evidence about changes in public attitudes towards governance, both at a national and a supranational level.

The individual topics chosen within this heading were:

- Citizenship and national identity
- Prejudice towards 'outgroups'
- Attitudes to the EU and other forms of multi-level governance
- Attitudes to migration

³ The Eurobarometer already tracks general public attitudes to EU institutions to good effect.

⁴ Dowds L & Young K, 1996, 'National Identity', in Jowell *et al* eds, *British Social Attitudes: the 13th Report*, Aldershot; Dartmouth Publishing.

⁵ Kaase M and Newton K, (1995), *Beliefs in Government*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

1.5 The underlying social structure of society

Academic specialist consultants: Robert Erikson, Jan Jonsson, Ken Newton, Joachim Vogel

The importance of a person's social and economic position in society tends to be determined by, and in turn to determine, a number of other factors. So, the level of one's education, for instance, tends to be integrally related to one's occupation. Independently and in combination, however, both education level and occupational status tend to be closely related to one's income on the one hand and one's values on the other. We cannot properly understand and interpret values and value change in the absence of detailed collateral socio-economic and socio-demographic background information. It is, for instance, a specific policy aim in certain countries to increase the proportion of young people who go on to tertiary education. To the extent that they succeed, it will have a secular impact not only on the labour market in those countries, but also – according to extensive social science evidence⁶ – on people's values: education is positively associated with more libertarian social values. So a serious multi-national study such as the ESS must investigate and attempt to interpret the relationship between each country's socio-economic structure on the one hand, and its socio-political (and moral) climate on the other.

A key component of the social and economic structure of nations, and one to which the ESS needs to give special attention, is the extent and distribution of 'social exclusion'. This concept is multi-faceted and until now has been rather ill-defined, but it is nonetheless at the centre of EU policy concerns. Now that attention is focused on the Atkinson report on social exclusion,⁷ with its list of 33 components, the ESS offers a good opportunity to attempt to operationalise some of the measures which do not necessarily fall neatly out of existing national social or economic statistics.

The individual topics chosen within this heading are:

- Respondent and household demographic characteristics
- Education of respondent, children (and partner)
- Racial/ethnic origin
- Work status and unemployment experience of respondent (and partner)
- Occupation and SES of respondent (and partner)
- Economic standing/income of household
- Subjective health status of respondent
- Social trust and networks
- Subjective indicators of poverty
- Experience and fear of crime
- Access to and use of mass media

⁶ Ingehart R (1990), *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁷ Atkinson A, et al (2001) *Indicators for social inclusion in the European Union*, Paper presented at the Antwerp Conference of the Belgian Presidency, 14-15 September 2001.

1.6 Quality assurance of the core questionnaire

Unlike the rotating modules (see section III.ii), the core questionnaire is effectively the sole responsibility of the CCT, though with as much help and guidance as possible from the SAB and other commentators.

As noted, the design of the core questionnaire started early on, when the former Steering and Methodology Committees determined their priorities for topics to be included within it. Expert papers were commissioned to provide both a substantive overview of the concepts in each selected field and, where possible, a set of recommended questions that would successfully tap these concepts cross-nationally. It was on the basis of these reports⁸ that we collaborated with our colleagues in the Irish Social and Political Attitudes team - Michael Marsh, Richard Sinnott and John Garry - to produce a first (incomplete) draft of the ESS core questionnaire. The Irish team fielded this first version of the core in autumn 2001 as part of their own work and allowed the CCT access to the results for use at the final stages of questionnaire design.

It soon became apparent to the CCT that we needed extra specialist papers to help decide whether and how remaining gaps in the coverage of the first draft ought to be filled. These additional papers, where they relate to the final core questionnaire, form part of section III.iii.⁹

⁸ On Socio-structural position of the individual in society (Erikson and Jonsson); Citizenship and identity (Linz); Religious identity (Billiet); Social exclusion (Vogel); Political background (Thomassen); Value orientations (Schwartz); Media use and evaluation (Newton)

⁹ On Ethnicity and ethnocentrism (Billiet); Socio-political cleavages (Curtice and Bryson); Multi-level governance (Kersbergen and van Waarden); Lifelong learning (Stoop); and Personal security (Mohler)

1.7 The questionnaire design process in detail

After the appointment of the Questionnaire Design Teams in November 2001 (see section III.ii), the process of questionnaire development for the core and rotating modules began to coincide. The remaining stages of the process were co-ordinated by the CCT, in close collaboration with the two Questionnaire Design Teams and the group of academic specialists who were consulted on the core module. Wherever possible and appropriate, questions that found their way into the final version of the questionnaire had been 'tested' in other surveys, ideally in more than one language or country. In any event, the CCT took great care to ensure not only that every question passed a quality threshold (the particular responsibility of Willem Saris and his colleagues at the University of Amsterdam), but also that it could plausibly be asked within all participating nations.

The stages of the questionnaire design process were as follows:

Stage 1

The first stage was to ensure that the various concepts we wished to include (based on the specialist papers) were actually represented as precisely as possible by the candidate questions and scales. Subsequent data users require source material that makes these links transparent and the information compiled in this report charts all stages of the design process.

Stage 2

To achieve the appropriate quality standard, the questions and scales, wherever possible, underwent an evaluation using standard quality criteria such as reliability and validity. These evaluations were carried out by Willem Saris and his colleagues, using the program SQP developed for the prediction the reliability and validity of questions on the basis of more than 1000 questions evaluated by MTMM studies.¹⁰

But validity and reliability are not the only criteria that matter. Attention also has been given to other considerations such as scalability and internal consistency, comparability of items over time and space, expected item non-response, social desirability and other potential biases, and the avoidance of ambiguity, vagueness and double-barrelled questions.

Stage 3

The next step was the first translation from the source language (English) into one other language for the purpose of two large-scale national pilots. The translation panel, which is convened by Janet Harkness at ZUMA, guided this process to ensure optimal comparability between the two versions.

¹⁰ Scherpenzeel A and Saris W, 1997, The Validity and Reliability of Survey Questions: a Meta Analysis of MTMM Studies, *Sociological Methods and Practice* 25, 341-383.

W.E.Saris, W.v.d.Veld and I.Gallhofer (2003) Development and improvement of questionnaires using predictions of reliability and validity. In Presser S., J.Rothgeb, M.Couper, J.Lessler, E.Martin and E.Singer (Eds) *Questionnaire development, evaluation and testing*. New York, Wiley

Stage 4

The fourth step was the two-nation pilot itself, which also contained a number of split-run experiments on question wording alternatives. Most of these experiments were in a drop-off self-completion supplement, but some were in the main interview questionnaire.

Stage 5

The pilot was analysed in detail to assess both the quality of the questions and the distribution of the substantive answers. Problematical questions, whether on grounds of weak reliability or validity, or because they turn out to produce deviant distributions or weak scales, were sent back to the drawing board.

Stage 6

The final step was the production of a fully-fledged 'source questionnaire', ready for translation from English into all ESS languages. The questionnaire was then annotated to aid the translation process. This annotation was carried out in collaboration with the various question authors, and attempted to avoid ambiguities by providing definition and clarifications of the concept behind questions, especially where the words themselves are unlikely to have direct equivalents in other languages. Each participating country then carried out a small-scale pre-test to iron out any remaining translation or substantive issues.

In the next chapters the development of the core questionnaire is discussed in detail. Each chapter discusses a different set of questions.