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# **German respondent comments on the 1998 ISSP module What do they say? And what, if anything, do they tell us?**

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## **Summary**

The paper presents first findings from an analysis of comments which respondents made on the 1998 ISSP module, fielded in Germany as a self-completion questionnaire. (see Appendix B)

First we outline what respondent comments are, where they occur, and how we understand comments as a communicative contribution. Then we consider what research literature and researchers have to say about respondent comments and how this relates to the fact that comments are often neglected in methods research. We then consider the comments collected in the 1998 religion module in the light of what the literature suggests. Finally we discuss this form of respondent input in developing and improving questionnaires for cross-cultural implementations. While we see comments as an overlooked and relatively cheap source of information on studies in general, the focus in the final sections of the paper will be on the deliberate exploitation of comments for developing questionnaires when these are still being drafted and refined.

## **What are respondents comments in the context of standardised interviews?**

Respondents comments as discussed here are material or information provided by respondents at their own initiative above and beyond the responses required of them as answers to questions in a questionnaire. Comments may or may not be related closely or loosely to elements of the questionnaire or survey. We focus here on verbal material and do not consider, for example, pictorial commentary.

In closed format interviews, comments may be the only 'free' text respondents provide. Self-initiated, free-response comments (that is, those which get recorded) are more common in self-completion contexts than in interview contexts. In face-to-face contexts, interviewers may report on comments respondents make (in the sense of narrative reports of speech acts) or record particular comments made by respondents somewhere in their interview records. Interviewers may also be required to ask whether respondents have any comments to make at various places in an interview or at the end of the interview. They will then record these but do not normally record spontaneous comments made *en passant* by respondents. Conversational analysis of recorded interviewer–respondent interaction looks, of course, at everything which is said.

## **How comments differ from answers to various kinds of questions**

As indicated, comments as understood here are self-initiated communicative contributions. Answers to questions are researcher/questionnaire-initiated contributions. In participating in a survey, respondents enter into a communicative contract in which their defined role is to answer questions posed them (cf., for example, Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000 and literature discussed there and in Schwarz, 1996). This is why respondents will answer all sorts of questions as co-operatively as possible without, for example, being at all interested in a given topic. In voluntary questionnaires, they can choose not to answer individual questions. They tend only to balk at answering questions which conflict with other communicative and social principles of greater salience to them – such as privacy, taboo disclosures, etc. Closed format questions require respondents to check boxes or circles which correspond to pre-formulated responses. The respondents in a sense agree to answer in the words of others (Harkness 1995,

1996). Open questions allow respondents to formulate in their own words, just they as can in making comments. However, providing answers to open questions is a researcher-initiated conversational turn and often based on explicit requests to provide answers to a defined question. Those who do not provide an answer then fail or refuse to comply with a specific request.

Sometimes the space for respondent comments is presented as an open-ended 'wrap-up' question at the end of the questionnaire, along the lines of *Is there anything else you want to mention here?* Here again, the question prompts the respondent to reply. In our study, although we simply offered the space and did not ask a question of this kind, some respondents felt obliged to report that they had no comments to make. *Probe questions*, such as included in cognitive interviews and various forms of questionnaire pre-testing, allow respondents to formulate at some length. The control over what respondents actually refer to is less strict in such contexts. Nonetheless, the response is researcher-initiated. The question asked and the principles of conversational co-operation (Grice, 1975) and relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986) decide what counts as a relevant response.

Comments, in contrast, are not answers, but are reactions of various kinds to whatever prompts attention – questions, topics, and, importantly, whatever else respondents have associated with the survey experience. Researchers sometimes see this as a fundamental drawback or, depending on their view of additional information, as an advantage. Views on advantages and disadvantages of open questions are similarly divergent (see, for example, *pro* arguments in Labaw, 1980, versus *contra* arguments in Dillman, 1978, 2000) but also depend very much on the instruments. By and large, respondents initiate the comments and determine what it is they comment on. However, in self-completion contexts where an interviewer is present, the interviewer may influence whether respondents make comments and may also affect what it is respondents comment on by 'explaining' what is meant. The interviewer then unintentionally or intentionally influences what the respondent does. We return to this in the next section.

### **Where do we find respondents' comments, where do they occur?**

In conversational exchanges of informal nature, participants each have conversational 'turns' when one or the other has the floor to speak (see, for example, brief outline of conversational conventions in Heritage, 1997 and discussion of interview exchange structures in Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). Nonetheless, there are opportunities in informal discourse to comment on what is being said *while it is being said* (e.g., overlapping talk and interjections) or to comment/respond directly after a turn finishes. In more formal talk, turn taking – who contributes when to the interaction – is more strictly regulated, and in some contexts is very limited indeed. Questionnaire discourse interaction is highly regulated. This affects where and how comments appear. In self-completion formats, comments can theoretically appear wherever respondents feel motivated and find the space to make them – in margins, as interlinear glosses, alongside questions or response categories which may directly trigger the comment, on the covers of a questionnaire, as well as on notes respondents attach to questionnaires. In CASI applications, programming decides whether comments are possible or not.

However, self-completion questionnaire designs frequently include a space at the end of the questionnaire for respondents to add comments. And many comments appear precisely where such space has been explicitly left for them. In contrast to informal conversation, therefore, comments often do not appear next to what they refer to. In some cases there may be insufficient space in the body of the questionnaire. Alternatively, respondents may only become fully aware of the possibility of commenting at the end of the questionnaire, when they see a box 'for comments'. (In this instance, comments appear where the questionnaire designer felt they belonged.) Arguably, if respondents do not realise they can make comments until they reach the end of the questionnaire, this could undermine the 'therapeutic' or 'safety valve' function emphasised in the literature. Of course, not all comments refer to a specific part of a questionnaire anyway.

All the comments collected in the 1998 study were provided at the end of the questionnaire, in the space provided for them. Respondents often referred in their comments to specific question numbers and on occasion to a number of these. One possibility is that respondents

were aware of the space and kept turning to the back page to add a comment. Alternatively, they either had phenomenal memories or took the trouble to go through the questionnaire again once they were finished. Textual features of these entries (run-on text discussing several questions, argumentative contrasts between questions with numbers) suggest the last strategy was used.

### **What researchers and the survey research literature say about respondent comments**

Survey methods research literature is, obviously, highly interested in how respondents understand questions, how they arrive at answers to questions, and what respondents' answers mean in either open or closed format contexts. There is a rich cognitive research literature investigating how respondents process questions and answers and anything else they perceive as pertinent to answering (see, for example, discussions and literature in Sudman et al, 1996; Schwarz and Sudman, 1996; Schwarz and Sudman, 1994; Schwarz, 1996). A good part of the literature analyses free-text input from respondents during or after interview/questionnaire completion in the form of thinkaloud protocols, probe or intensive interviews, focus groups, and retrospective de-briefings, etc. Sophisticated methods of compiling and analysing this material are available and continue to be refined. The research pays considerable attention to the interview situation, to respondent processing during interviews, and to interviewer/respondent interaction and effects stemming from this. The interactive character of respondent processing of written questionnaire materials has received attention in particular within the framework of the total design method (e.g. those working in the tradition of Dillman, 1978 and 2000). To date, however, it is fields such as education, information technologies, and various forms of text analysis which are more centrally interested in how people process written materials. Most of the survey research methods literature focuses on questions and answers. Where free text is involved, this is usually, free text recorded during interviews or provided for open answers, not comments in self-completion contexts.

This is not to suggest that comments are always ignored, just that there is little *methods* research undertaken. Client-oriented research, to mention only one example, utilises the contents of whatever clients have to say, whether this is available in closed or open format questions or in extra comments. Two very different examples are web site documentation from a survey on features of an internet trade network ([wysiwyg://26/http:bc-ttrade.net/bctrade/survey97/page5.htm](http://wysiwyg://26/http:bc-ttrade.net/bctrade/survey97/page5.htm)). and one from the US Department of Education ([www.ed.gov/Survey/custmemo.html](http://www.ed.gov/Survey/custmemo.html)).

When we first started working on comments in the mid-nineties, we asked representatives of ISSP member countries about respondent comments – whether they had them, what they did with them, and so forth. Many countries fielded by interview and did not have comments of this kind. Others fielded in self-completion modes (mail and interviewer attending) which resulted in respondents adding comments in Germany. One member referred to having keyboarded some 'once' but then never using them. Another stated that he never read them because they gave him a guilty conscience, since the information was not information that could be acted on and was often depressing self-disclosure. A third had 'never read a comment worth reading'. No member reported they looked at or used respondent comments.

Questionnaire design literature has long recommended that a space be left for respondent comments (e.g., Levine and Gordon, 1958, Jahoda et al, 1967; Berdie and Anderson, 1976; Dillman, 1978, 1983, 2000; Fuchs, 1994). The literature suggests that both respondents and researchers benefit. Respondents benefit in a number of ways which, as we see it, are related to increasing their satisfaction with their participatory role in the survey. Being able to make comments gives them space to have their say (Labaw, 1980; Harkness, 1995). Arguably, in closed format questionnaires, respondents do not have anything like a proper say, at least not in terms of speaking in their own voice. Instead they are required to work with pre-formulated answer options and to select from one of these as an approximation of the response they might choose to give (cf. for example, Deutscher, 1956; Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Labaw, 1980; Harkness, 1995, 1996). Being able to comment on their responses may reduce cognitive dissonance; they can, for instance, explain answers and reduce their dissatisfaction with questions and/or answer options that they were forced to 'work' with.

As far as benefits for researchers are concerned, the literature assumes, at least in part, that comments actually get read and are acted upon. Comments can providing additional

information on the responses provided and thus indicate how a particular response is meant (e.g., Levine and Gordon 1958; Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Dillman 1978, 2000). The possibility of being able to make comments can help reduce item non-response, 'satisficing' and interview break-offs. By reducing frustration or dissatisfaction for respondents, respondents are encouraged to continue to work constructively with the questionnaire (e.g., Deutscher, 1956; Dillman, 1978, 2000). A comments box at the end helps respondents recognise how to navigate the questionnaire text (e.g., Dillman, 1978). Flicking through the pages of a self-completion questionnaire and arriving at *Is there anything else?* respondents recognise this as a concluding component, which encourages them to process the preceding components in the intended order. Providing space to comment compensates in some senses for the questions posed by interviewers at the end of interviews (Dillman, 1978; Fuchs, 1994) and comments can be used to enhance report writing (e.g., Berdie and Anderson, 1976; Dillman, 1978). As far as questionnaire improvement is concerned, respondent comments can be used to refine questionnaires. The comments may point to problems respondents have with questions or answer response categories as well as areas neglected in a questionnaire. If comments are collected during the developmental stages, the information can be used to refine the questionnaire. If they are collected once a study has been completed, they can be used to help improve items for use in later studies. Given the popularity of 'tried and tested' items over totally new items (which in survey research may only mean items which have been already used), and given that comments are a source of information on the outcome of a questionnaire having been 'tried and tested', it seems only logical to look at them if we have them, particularly as important topics feature repeatedly in many surveys.

However, a number of drawbacks are also mentioned, several of which are discussed more frequently in the context of open questions than that of analysing comments (e.g., Berdie and Anderson, 1976; Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Bradburn, 1983). Indeed, many of the points made in the extensive literature on the relative merits of open and closed question formats are valid for comments, too. Comments can be both difficult to interpret and to code. Since the respondent decides not only what is commented on but also how, this is not material which can be readily standardised and incorporated in a data set. Poor communicative skills on the part of respondents are also a problem, making what they say difficult to interpret (Sudman and Bradburn 1982; Labaw, 1980). Interpretation is, in fact, a general problem, since texts always have multiple potential meanings (Harkness, 1996; Harkness and Schoua-Glusberg, 1997).

### **Why do some respondents make comments?**

The nature of comments made by respondents points to an underlying need on their part to increase their satisfaction with the communicative exchange. For example, respondents explain their answers, criticise questions they are unable or unwilling to answer, point to problems or weaknesses they see in the exchange in which they have been involved, or carry out socially desirable communicative acts such as praising interviewers.

One general and basic motivation for comments which comes across clearly in the 1998 study is that respondents expect social science research to address socially relevant issues and be useful. Respondents comment when they see this expectation disappointed:

There are more important things to investigate with a survey

I would like to know what use a survey like this is

What is the sense of abstract surveys like this? Is it occupational therapy?(....)

What does a survey like this have to do with our real life situation in XX?(....).

The fact that respondents may not perceive a given study as relevant is, we suggest, at least as much a problem for researchers as participating in the survey may have been for the respondents. Terminology used to describe why space should be left for respondents is often implicitly negative. The suggestion, for example, that questionnaires might function as emetics (Fuchs 1994) is problematic; we can expect any questionnaire with this effect to be seriously flawed. Faced with publics increasingly unwilling to participate in surveys (de Leeuw and de Heer, in press; de Heer, 1999), we would also be well advised to turn attention to increasing respondent satisfaction with the communicative process and outcome.

### **Contextual factors affecting whether respondents make comments**

Our findings suggest that the design of a questionnaire and details of the implementation process affect whether comments are offered or not. Given the opportunity to comment, and left space to do so, a fair number of respondents made comments. Although we cannot go into details here, a comparison across five ISSP surveys in Germany indicates that providing space is the most important component. In self-completion modes with an interviewer attending, interviewers also clearly influence whether respondents take (are allowed to take) the time to make comments or not.

Research on the design of open questions indicates that the design and amount of space offered to provide answers is perceived by respondents as an indication of what is expected (e.g. Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Smith, 1995; Gendall, 1996). In other words, the length of answers is not determined solely by the physical space provided but also by the thematic space this physical space is taken to imply. In effect, if a lot of space is offered, respondents conclude the topic warrants corresponding input. At the same time, the amount of information offered can be taken as an indicator of effort (cf., Groves, 1989, de Leeuw, 1992). This can be readily related to other research on cognitive processing of questions and answer options which demonstrates that respondents process all sorts of information in a questionnaire in order to arrive at what is required and how to best comply with these requirements (cf. compact overviews and extensive literature in Schwarz, 1996).

### **Research on respondent comments**

Compared to the rich and growing literature on material from the interview process, content from respondents' comments is largely neglected in methods research for improving questionnaire design and process issues. Handbooks mention that comments can be useful to researchers, too, but the lack of published methods-oriented research on their content seems indicative of disinterest. Leaving space for comments is accepted as justified for what we describe as a 'placebo effect', rather than a 'complaints box'. (Complaints boxes, after all, are usually acted on.) The game, if this is what it is, is then to give respondents the chance to make comments to help them feel better about their participatory role in a survey and perhaps incidentally improve co-operation. The pretence, however, is that researchers are 'out there and listening' and that they are interested in anything (more) respondents have to say. The message to the scientific community, we suggest, is that the comments themselves can be safely ignored (cf. Fuchs, 1994).

Several factors help explain this state of affairs. In paper and pencil questionnaires, the comments box, if present, generally comes on the last page. A relatively small part of respondents may then provide comments. Reasons for this are multiple and the number actually providing comments can differ greatly, as Table 1 (see Appendix C) indicates for ISSP studies conducted in Germany. Comments may look difficult to collect and key; ticks and a couple of open questions are sometimes difficult enough. The effort necessary may seem considerable and the benefits mentioned in the literature as either questionable, not applicable to one's own survey, or too slight to be worth pursuing. For example, one suggestion is that comments can help explain answers and allow researchers to interpret the data. Comments which explain answers in a fashion that would result in re-coding may be few and far between. They are also only found by processing all the comments. Moreover, it can be argued that this information is not available to explain the response selections of the other respondents and may not improve data quality. Depending on what is being sought, sifting for only one kind of information may well not be worth the effort. In later sections we suggest that analysis of comments only really becomes profitable if they can be exploited to the full.

### **Comments collected in the 1998 ISSP module in Germany: What did respondents comment on? What did they say?**

The topics covered in comments were in keeping with what the literature suggests about what comments deal with and how they might be utilised. Respondents in 1998 commented on

questions, the survey in general, explaining their answers, criticising questions or answer options – as well as on a variety of topics which came to mind in the course of completing the questionnaire. The comments collected from the 1998 module were assigned to one or more of the following broad categories:<sup>1</sup>

- Comments to explain answers
- Comments on questionnaire formulation and design (sub-categories: the question parts and the response categories /closed format parts)
- Comments on the content of specific questions or the content of the questionnaire as an instrument
- General comments on the survey (sub-categories: on topic; on purpose/value of survey; praise or criticism of survey; missing topics)
- Autobiographical information. This cannot always be easily related directly to the questionnaire. However, it frequently introduces topics respondents say they miss in the module or subjects suggested to them by topics in the module and/or subjects respondents consider relevant to their life situation.
- Comments to say a respondent has no comment to make
- Requests for information
- Comments on data protection
- Interviewer-related comments (sub-categories: comments by interviewers; comments about interviewer). These comments are a particular feature of the 1998 module and related we suggest to the implementation process. We do not go into this further here.

### **Interpreting comments**

Before discussing what comments may tell us, a few remarks are needed on how people process and interpret comments. First, we need to distinguish between what respondents write and what gets recorded as what they have written. All transcription is interpretation. Simple examples are deciphering handwriting, deciding which of two possible words is meant, or deciding whether a written utterance is meant as a statement or as a question. Second, even if comments can be seen as basically respondent-initiated and respondent-determined, there are factors which affect how comments are perceived and what is said or not. If a second person is present – such as the interviewer in the 1998 module – this person may influence how respondents understand what comments are ‘for’ and how they perceive any obligation to provide comments or not. The textual prominence of the comment box may also make respondents feel they have some social contract to respond .

Third, the number of respondents who do not make comments is far higher than those who do make comments. In deciding what these comments ‘tell’ us, therefore, what degree of significance can we give the comments we receive? To what extent are respondents who comment the tip of an iceberg? Are comments a verbalised expression of reaction tendencies among a greater number of respondents? Alternatively, are people who comment simply eccentrics or do they have a strong need to impress? At present, we have few conclusive answers to these questions. Looking at the demographics of those who provide answers in the 1998 study, and indeed looking at the answers they give, we seen no evidence of these respondents being greatly different from those who do not make comments (cf. weak differences in de Leeuw, 1992, and widely divergent groups sharing commenting behaviour in Deutscher, 1956). More research is needed here. We intend at a later date to compare respondents across all the studies in Table 1 (see Appendix C).

Lastly, what comments ‘tell’ us in part depends how we read them and the context in which we read them. We linked comments respondents made to their answers in the data set. This way we were able to establish sex, age, education, and other demographic information about

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<sup>1</sup> It is not always possible to assign one comment – even if brief and ostensibly clear in content – to only one category. Several categories may apply for different sections of a comment or simultaneously to one and the same utterance. *These are really terrible* (or ‘embarrassing’) *questions*. A considerable number of the comments on individual items were interwoven with auto-biographical details at best subjectively related to the items. Sometime, too, it is not clear what motivated the comments or to what, if anything, a comment refers in the questionnaire. This again makes assigning categories difficult. *Positive thinking is important in life* (= entire comment).

the people who made specific comments. We could also compare those who made comments with those who did not and to look for patterns in substantive responses. In this way, the comments could be read in context – comments about pressing socio-economic problems, for example, in the context of higher unemployment, a more depressed economy, and greater secularisation in the eastern states of Germany.

### **What comments indicate**

As mentioned earlier, comments indicate that respondents expect the survey communication to make sense and to be of practical use (in their terms). Comments which complain about ‘stupid’ or ‘poor’ questions or describe the survey as useless reflect this just as much as do comments which explain answers, express concern about data protection, or ask for results from the survey. The commitment inherent in the often considerable autobiographical self-disclosure is, as we see it, another reflection that respondents expect such interactions to be meaningful. The fact that more comments are negative than positive is not surprising – if we accept that one of the main motivations for respondents’ comments is to increase their satisfaction with the communicative situation.

### **So what, if anything, do they tell us?**

Mentioning respondent comments to colleagues has, on occasion, prompted spontaneous reactions such as ‘but they do not tell us anything we need to know or can use’ or ‘they do not tell us anything worth knowing or anything we did not know already’.

Implicit in the writing of this paper is the view that respondent comments can indeed be useful for methods research. In particular if a questionnaire is still being refined, respondent comments may very well tell us things we do need to know, which are worth knowing, and which we certainly did not know beforehand.

Obviously, in order to decide whether we need to know something we have been told, we need to decide what has been communicated. One question to be pursued in this context is why respondents introduce topics which at first or even second glance seem unrelated to the topic at hand. Communicative principles provide some of the answer. Consider, for example, various comments we received that the study was irrelevant

What is the sense of such abstract surveys?

What is all this rubbish?

What is this supposed to be good for?

Why so many religious questions?

I think these are stupid questions. What am I supposed to say? / What more is there to say?

At the same time – at greater length, reflecting effort (Groves, 1989) and using emotional language reflecting involvement (Labaw, 1980) – a number also state that other, unmentioned, things are relevant and important.

In communicative or semiotic terms, the existence of the survey asserts that the given questionnaire topic is important, at least important enough to do a survey. Respondent statements that topic ‘X’ or ‘Y’ is important are communicatively relevant in contexts where either a) someone has asked to be told what is important, b) the general topic of ‘important things’ is under discussion or c) the discussion seems to contradict or neglect what a participant considers relevant and important in the ongoing discussion (interaction) and the participant therefore brings it up. In our case, for example, a number of respondents pointed to concrete existential worries:

What does a survey like this have to do with our real life situation in XX? Industry has been completely wiped out where I come from (in my *Heimat*). We are suffering. The government cannot just talk, it has to do something to put an end to this misery.

I don’t think much of these kind of questions, really important topics are not mentioned, for example, jobs, unemployment, state pension regulations. I am totally disinterested in questions about the Church.

Thus when respondents comment that topics are missing or that a topic or survey is irrelevant they indicate a) that they understand that someone – the scientific community, for example – attributes importance to a given topic and also b) that the survey fails to focus on matters they



personally consider relevant in the given frame of reference. Admittedly, we do not have the information necessary to determine the frame of reference used by respondents. Hence what they see as relevant may not be relevant at all within the theoretical framework of a given study. At the same time, reactions of this kind can often be used to identify areas which need to be expanded, added, re-formulated, or, for example, just treated with more sensitivity. Where material should not or cannot be incorporated in a study, it might nevertheless serve as an indicator for possible implementation problems and be of use in developing strategies to encourage sample units to participate. Given the general declining survey climate (de Leeuw and de Heer, *in press*; de Heer, 1999), this should be of burning interest to research. By focusing on material existential problems when confronted with more metaphysical concerns, the respondents point to areas not explored in the questionnaire. The module is not, of course, designed to explore either work or living conditions respondents mention. But it also does not find out what is important for people who do not fit into a traditional conceptual framework:

I do not believe in any absolute truth; I abhor organised religions that take it upon themselves to tell people what is true and what not. What counts for me is humankind's responsibility for humankind and the wonderful diversity of human cultures and human individuals.....(free translation, see Appendix A #1 for full length original comment).

Within the framework of the questions and answers, respondents for the most part can only express that they are not in favour of X or do not believe in Y. We learn little in the form of positive statements (or ticks) about their values, life goals and needs. Implicit messages conveyed by a questionnaire seen as not asking relevant questions are a) that the questionnaire is not about giving them their 'chance to be heard' (a AAPOR conference slogan of the 1990s) and indeed b) that what is important to the respondent is not of interest to the researcher. Coupled with respondents' high involvement in the unmentioned topics, this can lead to negative reactions and emotionally charged comments such as those above.

The self-completion mode exacerbates the problem. In interviews, interviewers can partly disguise the fact that a given person is filtered past most of a questionnaire because questions do not apply. Self-completion formats are supposed to be as simple as possible in formulation and to avoid complicated filters. Given that a questionnaire avoids filters and asks everyone most of the questions, as in the 1998 module, we automatically place a burden on, say, non-religious respondents who then have to tick the box for 'No', 'No', or 'Not applicable' and 'I do not believe in X' at one question after another. In terms of layout and effort, they also only find the 'off scale' box after going through all the others. One alternative, practised in various ISSP modules to differing degrees, is to have a number of questions apply only to certain respondents. The rest complete a shorter version, since they are filtered past questions. Apart from technical issues, the potential let down of 'finishing early' as a non-relevant unit can be managed diplomatically by an interviewer. CASI applications also have different alternatives. In the case in paper and pencil self-completion, one message may be all too clear: the researcher is interested in the group who does not get filtered past the questions.

A number of general issues for national implementations of questionnaires designed for international research are, as we see it, related to this. Only one is mentioned here. Cross-national questionnaires based on an 'ask-the-same-questions' model cannot deal with country-specific topics or dimensions. A number of ISSP countries ask county-specific questions related to the ISSP module before or after the module. One of the benefits of this is that it increases the detail of information available on particular national features of relevance. However, respondents may also indirectly benefit through being asked questions which they see as more closely related to their own situation and to which they can perhaps provide more differentiated answers (cf. Labaw, (1980) on related issues for mono-cultural research). A number of such topics were mentioned by respondents, such as the role of the Church in the DDR, the relationship between Church and government, the wealth and income of the (tax supported) Church, as well as the focus on topical socio-economic issues such as unemployment and how pensions are to be organised in future.

The other view, that comments do not tell us anything 'new', is obviously not referring to autobiographical details respondents provide. What is meant is that comments mention things researchers are already aware of. Complaints about undifferentiated questions, for example, or unsuitable answer categories are, in that sense, nothing new.

The questions are sometimes too general

In part I find the questions conflict with one another in the sense of what topics are brought together - politics and somebody dying

Some questions are very much context and situation specific and can only be answered precisely by people who have experienced such situations

The questions were in part so undifferentiated that it was difficult to answer them. In other words I would have liked to state my view more concretely and often had the impression that the answer is taken quite out of context and thus becomes very unclear

I would like to see the questions re-worked. The way questions are asked, for example, the role of men and women, and the moralising in the questions! (Longer comments along these lines are appended in Appendix A as #3.)

Some such respondent comments help identify less suitable response categories or, by adding in categories, point to categories which are missing (cf. Deutscher, 1956) and point to other problems between items and response categories. Information from spontaneous written comments can, moreover, be probed in cognitive interviews with the same respondents or with others. Comments on a question and answer scale replicated in the 1998 study illustrate both 'nothing new' and 'something new'. Problems with the response categories teamed up with this item were already documented (Harkness, 1998). However, pressures to replicate a 'tried and tested' question, plus, perhaps, the fact that the 'schlimm' response categories are used for a whole series of ISSP questions in the module and also in other German surveys with other items have meant that the question has been used several times.

ENGLISH Q 6: *Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for a woman to have an abortion (then follow a number of different contexts for abortion)*

*Response scale: always wrong/almost always wrong/wrong only sometimes/not wrong at all/can't choose*

GERMAN Q 6: *Halten Sie persönlich es für schlimm oder nicht schlimm, wenn eine Frau einen Schwangerschaftsabbruch vornehmen lässt, wenn (then follow a number of different contexts)*

*Response scale: immer schlimm/fast immer schlimm/nur manchmal schlimm/nie schlimm/kann ich nicht sagen*

This scale, used in four questions in sequence, prompted a comment which suggests irritation with the scale or the word *schlimm*:

The questions are pretty stupidly formulated: who thinks about whether everything is terrible (*schlimm*) or not?

A second comment documents that the question is ambiguous on the basis of how the word 'schlimm' can be understood:

In part the questions are not formulated clearly enough. For example in question 6 – for the woman it is always terrible (*schlimm*) to have an abortion but I do not think it is terrible (*schlimm*) that some abortions are performed.....

A third distinguishes between 'good / bad' and 'terrible':

Note: Question 6: It is good (gut) that abortions are available as the exception for extreme cases. However, for a woman it will always be terrible (*schlimm*).

The respondents point to language issues and to problems which arise through the overlap of meaning components of 'wrong' with 'false' and 'bad' in translating into German (*falsch*, and *schlecht*). Material like this can signal that a given wording is not a 'slight' problem to be ignored. Here it suggests that either the translation or indeed the item in English needs to be changed and that the data should be treated with some caution.

Moreover, while many comments are related to things survey researchers already know, this does not mean they are not of use. The detail some comments provide – or repeated mention of problems with certain features in the questionnaire even without detail – can be used to improve the questionnaire. Here, for example, is the whole of the comment above on 'schlimm':

In part the questions are not formulated clearly enough. For example, in question 6 – for the woman it is always terrible (*schlimm*) to have an abortion but I do not think it is terrible (*schlimm*) that some abortions are performed; for example in question 11, it makes a difference whether this is private or not. In question 38a, it depends how 'death' is defined.

and the following:

Our answers to the questions are supposed to be complete -- the questions on beliefs cannot be answered with just a tick..... (full original in Appendix A, #2).

The respondent then comments on many different kinds of 'heaven' not just one, about ideas related to reincarnation and spiritual development in the course of many lives, and the purpose of life on earth in terms of these ideas.

However, the general questions which comments raise are also not issues we can simply ignore. For example, if we do indeed expect secularised societies to be less interested in a questionnaire on religion, on what basis do we expect people to participate? What effects do we expect on data quality (cf., for example, Couper, (1997) on disinterest and item (non) response). What effect does disinterested participation have on their views on survey research and on future participation? What do they take away from the interaction if the questionnaire is seen by them to ignore matters they associate with it and consider important? Does a module have anything which helps to cater for what we expect of a 'well brought-up and well-behaved' questionnaire (cf. Noelle-Neumann and Petersen, 1996)?

In terms of the content of comments and to what they refer, the issues are more complex. At the same time, open questions can be challenging too. The growing body of research on how to code and analyse material collected in open questions has much to offer for the analysis of respondent comments, especially if we make sure we get more comments. At a very basic level, we must at least consider that strong negative reactions in comments are indicators of emotional involvement. They may implicitly be telling us that we are somehow missing the point.

### **A 'moderate proposal' for utilising comments for cross-national module development**

The upshot of arguments made here is a recommendation to use comments as a relatively cheap source of information on survey topics, questions, and questionnaires. In particular, we suggest that comments pay their way if they are used to improve questionnaires. Deciding to use comments systematically also means we should collect as many as possible.

Using a comments box at the end of a questionnaire and taking the proper steps to insure respondents notice this box is one way of collecting comments. It may not be the best way to go about this, further research is needed to know. We might get more comments if we make it easy (but voluntary) for respondents to annotate questions as they process them. Comments collected voluntarily are likely to differ in a variety of ways from those collected in interviewer-respondent interaction. Issues of self-disclosure and social desirability, spontaneous input versus responses to probes, and effects related to an oral versus a written mode are only some of the factors which could affect output. Electronic questionnaires have, of course, at least no layout problems in providing comment boxes at every question. For paper and pencil versions, the space would have to be found within actual pages. This might not always be easy, but is unlikely to prove impossible; we hope to work on developing alternatives in future research.

The effects of respondents adding comments as they go through the questionnaire are, to our knowledge, currently uncertain. An increase in this kind of input might increase respondent satisfaction with their role in the communication and make answering questions simpler. Respondent views and opinions as they progress through the questionnaire might also be affected by their own input, in a parallel if different fashion from the effects on respondent cognitive processing noted in probe interviews.

Finally, we suggest that comments could be used to improve pre-testing in cross-national projects. Our suggestions on pre-testing outlined below, based on a decade of experience in pre-testing ISSP questionnaires in a variety of ways, go beyond including comments but see comments as an essential and economic feature. They were prompted in part by existing ISSP procedures and realities but are intended as suggestions which we think could work for any cross-national survey project on a tight budget, with little money to spare for pre-testing.

The ISSP questionnaire design process allows for and encourages considerable multicultural input from researchers over a three-year period of questionnaire development. Like other cross-national projects we know of, the input from respondents in developmental stages is considerably less multicultural. Our own experience in pre-testing ISSP modules leads us to suggest that countries fielding a translated questionnaire which follows an 'ask the same questions' model (e.g., Eurobarometer, European and World Values surveys, ISSP, and many more), should be pre-testing before the final source questionnaire is completed. The rationale is that once a source questionnaire is finalised in the source language, many of the things

learned from pre-testing in another culture and language can only be implemented in part, if at all. Similarly, because it is too late to change anything basic after the source questionnaire has been finalised, countries should be translating questions roughly before they irrevocably become part of a finalised source questionnaire (see 'advance translation' in Harkness and Schoua-Glusberg, 1998).

We are aware that it is far easier to write recommendations like this than to implement them. At the same time, large-scale projects, or indeed any project concerned about quality, do need to evaluate instruments as best they can for the context for which they are intended. The immediate issue then is less how to go about this than how to fund pre-testing. Many cross-national projects are on tight budgets. Some, like the ISSP, are entirely self-funding.

Our suggestion for a situation where not every member of a project can pre-test is to have a small group of countries from the larger project conduct a small number of pre-tests with different forms of enriched input from respondents. The information can then be used to gain some sense of the spread of difficulties in a draft questionnaire across countries or cultures.

Our experience in Germany with the ISSP also suggests that regular fielding pre-tests – trial runs with (hopefully) interviewer de-briefing – are less useful than interviews which include probe questions. Findings from a number of drafting group pre-tests for the ISSP Social Networks module indicate that this, however, may differ across countries. Pre-test findings also depend on the expertise of the interviewers involved. Semi-standardised cognitive pre-test interviews conducted for the German version of the 1998 final source questionnaire (Rexroth, 1998) provided a good body of information about how respondents had understood certain elements of questions probed and spontaneous respondent commentary. Changes which could be incorporated in the 1998 German questionnaire were limited, because the source questionnaire was already finalised. A number of country-specific questions could be changed more radically. Similar semi-standardised cognitive pre-test interviews conducted for a German draft of the 2003 Social Networks draft module provided equally useful information (Prüfer and Oberhaus, 2000). This form of pre-testing certainly provided richer and more pertinent information than the regular fielding pre-tests we had used previously. For our needs it is to be much preferred. The respondent commentary we received via interviewer notes in regular fielding pre-tests was often sparse and could not always be disentangled from interviewer commentary (see, too, material in Prüfer and Rexroth, 1994). To date we have not deliberately encouraged written respondent comments for pre-tests. However, it seems only sensible to add this component. Across countries it could maximise the detail of multicultural input for the pre-test context and would introduce spontaneous material produced in a silent (private) disclosure mode. This remains a task for future research.

In interviewer modes, the interviewer-respondent interaction has to be taped and analysed, a potentially complicated undertaking. Research is progressing rapidly in this area, however. If self-completion modes are involved, the questionnaire should deliberately cater for respondents who wish to make comments. The comments must then be keyed and analysed, less challenging in some respects than taped material but an issue we cannot go into here. In our next investigations of the potential of comments for pre-tests, we intend to explore the potential of questionnaire lay-outs which encourage more feedback from respondents and to compare comments written by respondents to comments collected by interviewers.

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## Appendix A

### Further comments

#1

Ich glaube an keine absolute Wahrheit; ich verabscheue organisierte Religionen, die sich herausnehmen, den Leuten zu sagen, was wahr ist und was nicht. Für mich zählt nur die Selbstverantwortung der Menschen und die wunderbare Vielfalt menschlicher Kultur und menschlicher Individualität. Leider sind viele Menschen zu dumm, bequem und/oder feige, um wirklich gut in Anerkennung der menschlichen Vielfalt und ohne eine von außen verkündete Wahrheit zu leben. Da es keinen Sinn macht, den Menschen zu predigen "Glaubt mir die Wahrheit, daß es keine Wahrheit gibt" oder "Werdet anders, als Ihr jetzt seid, indem Ihr alle Leute so sein laßt, wie sie halt sind", ist dies wohl ein Dilemma, mit dem ich leben muß.

#2 A

Die Fragen sollten zum Teil ausführlich beantwortet werden z. B. die Glaubensfragen, da genügt ein Kreuz einfach nicht. Der befragte (sic!) sollte besser dazu Stellung nehmen können. Zum Beispiel die Frage ob es einen Himmel gibt. Es gibt keinen Ort wo alle verstorbenen (Seelen) zur gleichen Stelle kommen, denn jeder Mensch hat eine eigene geistige Entwicklung erreicht, so gibt es verschiedene Sphären, wo die Seele sich dann aufhält, je nach seiner eigenen Entwicklungsstufe. Da wir Menschen ja nicht nur dieses eine Leben haben, sondern uns durch viele unzählige Leben auf der Erde weiter entwickeln müssen, um wieder zum Ursprung zu kommen. So gibt es viele Himmel nicht nur einen, was auch in der Bibel erwähnt wird. Es gibt unzählige Menschen, die drüber berichten, als sie klinisch tot waren, und Menschen die dafür von höheren Geistwesen ausgesucht wurden, darüber zu berichten wie es auf der anderen Seite weitergeht und was das Ziel jeder Seele ist, somit der Sinn auf der Erde.

#2 B

Fragestellung bzw. Antworten zu 36 a ist zu allgemein & ungenau. Zu 18, ich glaube an eine weiterentwickelte Lebensform, die bei heutigem Wissensstand d. Menschheit, noch nicht begreifbar ist. Zu 17-34, trotz daß ich nicht religiös bin, akzeptiere ich den Glauben religiöser Mitmenschen, den wo fängt Religion denn eigendl. an?! Zu 38a, habe aus Erfahrung kein Vertrauen zu Ärzten mehr (reiner Selbsterhaltungstrieb)

#3

Die Möglichkeiten zur Beantwortung der Fragen sind zu ungenau.

zur Frage 1) Beruf + Kinder: ziemlich glücklich, Partnerschaft: unglücklich, 2) Verantwortung ja, aber nicht zu jedem Preis, z.B. nicht wie früher in den "neuen" Bundesländern. 6) Hier kommt es sicher immer auf die Einzelfallsituation an. Man kann schlecht generell urteilen! Sollte sinnvoll zwischen den Partnern geklärt werden. 7) Weder Mann noch Frau können auf Dauer nur von den Erfolgen des anderen leben. Selbstwertgefühl Mann/Frau. Als Mutter/Hausmann bekommt man in dieser Gesellschaft keine Anerkennung, obwohl es viele Berufe gibt, die leichter sind, als Eltern zu sein! - Und die Bezahlung ist schlecht! 9) Grundsätzlich bin ich gegen jede Art von Betrug. Aber durch die Verschiebung der "Werte" ist es doch schon möglich daß der eine oder andere aus finanzieller Not unrichtige Angaben gibt. Bei echter Not sollte man abwägen! Wenn aber Sozialhilfeempfänger "pfiffig" sind, und sich Vorteile durch Falschangaben erheischen, finde ich es ungerecht gegenüber den "Arbeitern". Dann will bald keiner mehr etwas tun! 12) a) neue Leute braucht das Land! Ich denke, die Politiker sind von dem normalen Volk so abgehoben, daß sie unsere Nöte und Wünsche nicht mehr erkennen können. Das Geld allein regiert die Welt. b) Ich hoffe hier auf "Selbstheilungskräfte". c) Die Kirche ist ein reiches Imperium und weiß ihre Macht auszuspielen. Grundstücke auf Erbpacht sind meistens von der Kirche teurer als von Kommunen. Es gibt noch viele Beispiele. Was hat das noch mit Gott zu tun!?? d) Das Recht ist nur so gut, wie es die Richter anwenden. e) Über die jetzige Lehrerknappheit ärgere ich mich. Wie soll aus unseren Kindern "Top Manager" werden, bei 2 Std Unterricht pro Tag. - Und irgendwie leben müssen die arbeitslosen Lehrer auch. Also bezahlen wir sie bis 40/45 (Alter) und alt und verbraucht lassen wir sie arbeiten. Wo ist da der Sinn? Unser Bildungssystem geht den "Bach runter" und wir werden Mühe haben, im EG-

Markt konkurrenzfähig zu bleiben. 37) Meine Kinder haben Neurodermitis! Ich kaufe fast nur Produkte vom örtlichen Bauern bzw. "Bio-Großhandel" (z.B. Nudeln, Reis). Ich möchte weder genverändertes Obst/Gemüse noch Fleisch von Tieren, die mit genverändertem Futter ernährt werden, essen. Wer kann heute schon sagen, welche Auswirkungen es hat. Zu jeder Wirkung gibt es eine Gegenwirkung.



## Appendix B

### The German 1998 study description lodged with the archive

#### ISSP Study Description Form: GERMANY 1998

Study Title:	ISSP 1998 German <i>Religion II</i> , Western and Eastern Germany	
Fieldwork Dates:	July 7 <sup>th</sup> – September 24 <sup>th</sup>	
Principle Investigator:	Dr. Janet Harkness, Prof. Dr. Peter Ph. Mohler	
Sample Type:	ADM (Working Group of German Market Researchers) ‘Master Sample’ (the German so-called ‘random route ADM’), multi-stage (3 stages).	
Fieldwork Methods:	Self-completion questionnaire distributed by interviewer, background variables were asked face-to-face.	
Context of ISSP Questionnaire:	Self-completion questionnaire following on from a five minute face-to-face interview and followed by other questions and the background variables, all paper and pencil, face-to-face. The ISSP was the main topic of a ZUMA SOWI-BUS, as in Religion 1991.	
Sample Size:	3216 (West: 1680; East: 1536)	
Response Rates:	Real numbers	
	N=3216 (West: 1680; East: 1536)	A - Total issued (total sample)
	N=29 (West: 17; East: 12)	B - Ineligible (address vacant, wrong ages...)
	N=3188 (West: 1663; East: 1525)	C - (= A-B) Total eligible
	N=2006 (West: 1000; East: 1006)	D - Total ISSP questionnaires received
	N=1181 (West: 663; East: 518)	E - (= C-D) Total non-response
	N=577 (West: 303; East: 274) Household N= 434 (West: 231; East: 203) Sample members N= 143 (West: 72; East: 71)	F - Refusals
	N=581 (West: 342; East: 239) Household N=266 (West: 148; East: 118) Sample members N= 111 (West: 54; East: 29) addresses not covered N= 204 (West: 121; East: 83)	G - Non-contact (never contacted)
	Break off N= 23 (West: 18; East:5) Ill, incapable, No-German N= 28 (West: 19; East: 9)	H - Other reactions

Language:	German
Weighted (yes/no):	No
Weighting Procedure:	Sample for Eastern Germany deliberately over-samples the five new federal states. If analysis is made for all of Germany rather than eastern and western, weighting is necessary.
Known Systematic Properties in Sample:	None
Deviations from ISSP Questionnaire:	None, background variables documented in attached commentary. A few additional German questions on topical debates, available from ZA.

**Appendix C: Table 1**

ISSP Study	Topic	Mode	Mention and space for comments	Issued sample	Realised	Comments
1995	National Identity	Mail	No mention up front. <b>Thanks</b> Mailing instructions/request _ page at end (12 lines). Header 'Space for comments' ,Platz für Anmerkungen'.	3582	1894	224
1996 <sup>1</sup>	Role of Government	Self-complete, Interviewer presented Background variables face-to-face	Invitation to make comments up front No space provided. <b>Thanks and Please give back to Interviewer.'</b>	7185	3470	12
1996 <sup>2</sup>	Role of Government	Mail	No mention up front _ page at end, boxed in space. Header: '... welcome to make comments on the survey' Hier können Sie gerne noch Anmerkungen zu der Umfrage machen'. <b>Thanks and mailing request/instructions,</b>	1296	384 1705 (Lottery)	76
1997	Work Orientations	Mail	No mention, No space <b>Thanks and mailing instructions/request</b>	3711	1747	NONE
1998	Religion	Self-complete with interviewer present, Background variables face-to-face	Space mentioned in instructions. One page at end (lined, 16 lines) Header: 'additional comments' Hier finden Sie Platz für zusätzliche Anmerkungen'. <b>Thanks and Please give back to Interviewer.'</b>	3216	2006	162