

The Impact of Comparative European Social Survey Data on Teaching Social Science Courses

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Abstract

Bulgaria has rejoined its membership in the European Social Survey longitudinal project and in the International Social Survey Program in 2019. The 6 years absence of data in the survey rounds has caused problems for Bulgarian social scientists to analyze the dynamics of the European and global social climate in a cross-national context without being able to organize the knowledge in relation of ourselves to others. Reestablishing the opportunity to participate in international social projects stimulated the use of comparative analyses on the grounds of variety. The determinants of the country differences in the assessment of personal satisfaction, happiness, feelings of optimism, etc., began to be seen on the level of social identification and the process of differential socialization instead of on the rank level of social development. This led to remodeling the course syllabus in Sociology for undergraduates at the University of National and World Economy by presenting core themes in a cyclical way following ESS rotating themes. As an illustration of the way the sociological syllabus might be adapted to ESS topics, we demonstrate revision of the core curricula with emphasis on the themes - Justice and Fairness and Timing of Life, representative of ESS Round 9.

Keywords: *Social Survey Data; Social Science Courses; Curricula.*

Teaching courses in social sciences have a twofold aim - to help students develop understanding of people and values in different times, places and conditions and on the other hand to make them able to perceive their own environment and its process of advancement in comparative mode. In practice, course syllabi in undergraduate courses of sociology taught as mandatory courses for students from different economic specialties often set aside the questions dealing with diversity, subjective well-being and own differences. To expand the learning experience of students with global knowledge, while maintaining a focal point on the social changes that have shaped their own country requires innovative rethinking of the basic elements of the course syllabi development and ability to provide new interpretations for the conflicts and interests, the human and ecological survival issues, the social knowledge production development.

Let's give a short explanation of how teaching social sciences in Bulgaria changed after the introduction of political and economic changes in the late 1980s. First, there was a switch in the content to Western European and USA history of social science themes. Second, there was a renouncement in introducing the focal social developments of the country after the Second World War till the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Third, the practice of comparing the social and economic attitudes of the European people was marked with the sign of "inability" of Eastern European people to catch up the developed countries' population. While analyses of the national features were left temporary aside or treated as irregularities or even anomalies illustrating the postponed process in social development, educators in non-Western countries were demonstrating the benefits of multiple intelligence (Mathumita, 2016). Forth, In the quest for similarity and legitimization of uniformity and homogeneity with Western European attitudes and the desire to unify the existing problems with those of the developed countries, undergraduate course syllabi in main social sciences often set aside the questions dealing with diversity and own differences, i.e. the equivalence view was dominating. Therefore, it became crucial to participate in international social projects and stress the cross-contextual comparison. When focusing on cross-national research, it becomes plausible to see the nation as an object of study, context of study, unit of analysis, and transnationally (Piovani, 2017). Although the use of comparative analyses on the grounds of variety, may introduce problems from methodological point of view, i.e. conceptual (communality in the meaning of the units of analyses) and operative (the relevance of the indicators and the overall data analyses), it nevertheless has very rich interpretative potential. Finally, when the research question justifies the need for comparison, comparative research expands the learning experience of students with global knowledge, while maintaining a focal point on the subjective well-being and the social changes that are shaping their own country (Tong et al, 2018).



Membership in the European Social Survey (ESS) and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), the two research project of the European Commission (EC) which every second year monitor sustainability and changes in the European social climate seemed to be the best decision to ensure cross-national comparative analyzes in time, but because of financial problems Bulgaria was left out of membership in the last decade. It rejoined membership in the ESS and ISSP in 2018. The years of absence of data from Bulgaria in the survey rounds has caused problems for Bulgarian social scientists when analyzing the dynamics of the European and global social climate in a cross-national context not to be able to organize the knowledge in relation of ourselves to others.

In my Sociology syllabus for 2019/2020 academic year the basic elements of the course and the themes are introduced so as to follow the logic of the Survey Specifications and the Survey Questionnaire of ESS. The idea being actualization of the syllabi after each ESS round. On the one hand, this could be seen as a form of change in the content of education because it affirms the relationship between social economic change and curriculum change. On the other hand, it shifts the role of empirical knowledge from illustrational to basic for the development of theoretical constructs. Furthermore, it determines a long-term evolutionary change in the syllabus making it recurring, but planned accumulative.

It is well known that the ESS questionnaire consists of two main parts of questions – those that are considered core, ('core module') similar in each round (*i.e. media and social trust, politics, subjective well-being, gender, household, socio demographics, human values*) and those, considered rotating ('rotating module') specific for each round. (*i.e. immigration, citizen involvement, health and care, economic morality, family, work and well-being, timing of life, personal and social well-being, welfare attitudes, ageism, trust in justice, democracy, health inequalities, climate change and energy use*). The rotating module for round 9/2018 is Justice and Fairness and Timing of Life (Hulle, 2018). Thus, the theme of Justice and Fairnes became the central focus of interest in the Sociological syllabus around which all other general themes were situated. The four configurations of justice, namely distributive justice, procedural justice, scope of justice, cost-beneficial societal outcome of redistributive justice became the core themes in the syllabus and the respondent's attitudes directed the sub-themes of social groups and organizations, social control and deviance, acceptance of institution, social change and social movements. Similarly, Timing of Life becomes central theme and covers the people's experience of life course events and the segmentation of the life sub-themes course into stages of life (Billari, 2007). It focuses on the social normative and personal attitudinal behavior concerning life course events and life planning (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1. Regular list of topics for the undergraduate course "Sociology"

<p>Principles of Sociology <i>Subtopics:</i> Sociological Perspective And Social Sciences Sociology - Subject Matter; Foundations Of Society</p>	<p>Organization of Social Life <i>Subtopics:</i> Social Concepts: Sociological Economical and Cultural; Key Sociological Theorists. Social Stratification: Main principles; Open and close systems; Class system; Caste system, Comparing stratification systems.</p>
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<p>Research methods <i>Subtopics:</i> Cross-Sectional Vs Longitudinal Design; Types Of Studies; Case Studies; Field Studies; Survey Studies; Experiment; Quasi-Experimental Studies.</p>	<p>Social Groups and Organizations <i>Subtopics:</i> Primary Groups; Secondary Groups; Reference Groups. Global Inequalities: Racial, Ethnic, Gender, Age Inequalities and Differences: Prejudices; Discrimination; Attitudinal Change; The Contact Idea. Deviance and Social Control: Diversity In Society; Biological Theories; Social Explanations; Durkheim's Social Theory; Merton's Strain Theory; Labeling Theory.</p>
<p>Social Institutions <i>Subtopics:</i> Economic Institutions: Network and Work. The Family as an Institution: Nuclear; Extended, Kin; Patrilocality; Matrilocality; The European Family In Modern Society; Education and Religion Denominations; Churches And Sects; Social Theories Of Religious Behavior; Political Institutions: Migration; Urbanization; "Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft".</p>	<p>Social Change <i>Subtopics:</i> Urbanization and Demographic Changes; Theories of individual social development Organizational Age and Social Movements</p>



Table 2. Revised list of topics for the undergraduate course “Sociology”

<p>Principles of Sociology <i>Subtopics:</i> <i>Sociological concepts vs. Economic and Cultural.</i> <i>Sociological Perspective on Social Problems:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● major socioeconomic structural changes ● trust in justice, ● welfare attitudes, ● economic inequality attitudes ● gender, age, health inequalities, ● economic morality, labor flexibility ● timing of life, ● personal and social well-being, ● work attitudes and skill-biased technological changes ● family, health and care representations, ● democracy and citizen involvement, ● immigration, ● climate change and energy use. 	<p>Research methods <i>Subtopics:</i> <i>Case Studies, Field Studies, Experiment.</i> <i>Survey Studies: ESS 9 “Justice and Fairness” (empirical justice research and comparative survey methods):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduction and use of EduNet ● Objective indicators on social inequality. ● Legitimation of inequality over the life span. ● Order-related justice attitudes - equality, need, equity, and entitlement. ● Subjective indicators - person’s perceptions and evaluations of inequalities. ● Social and individual normative orientations. ● Example of applied instruments - the Basic Social Justice Orientations (BSJO) scale.
<p>Organization of Social Life <i>Subtopics:</i> Stratification and Comparative stratification systems. Global Inequalities. Increase of social inequalities in the European societies - work with ESS data (2008-2019):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Justice: distributive, procedural, scope of justice conditional beneficial. ● Normative and personal perceptions on where and how the societal allocation of income, wealth, and educational degrees takes place. ● Levels of solidarity measuring the scope of justice and the costs and benefits of redistribution to have impact on society. 	<p>Personality, Groups and Organizations <i>Subtopics:</i> Personality and Diversity In Society. Experience of life course events. Understanding life stages-as part of Timing Life. Comparative data from ESS round 9 Deviance and Social Control. Comparing human values, perceptions, normative expectations, and evaluations.</p> <p>Conformity, interpersonal influence, group polarization, group think, intergroup favoritism/derogation.</p>



<p>Social Institutions <i>Subtopics:</i> Acceptance of political and societal institution. Evaluation of their capacity for innovation. Normative conceptions for justification the distribution of goods and burdens in society - family, economic institutions, political institutions, education, religion Intra-Institutional strategies for resolving distributional conflicts</p>	<p>Social Change <i>Subtopics:</i> Theories of individual social development Timing of Life and the focus on change of social normative and personal attitudinal behavior. Life course planning in consideration with the social, political and economic changes in Europe Urbanization, Demographic Changes, Organizational Age changes, Social Movements</p>
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The proposed way to address changes in a core syllabus in Sociology for undergraduate students in UNWE - Bulgaria, satisfies the following conditions: it exposes diversity and organizes the knowledge in relation of ourselves to others; it presents convincing evidence and examples of today's headlines; it makes possible to reconsider conclusions from data outcomes; it makes possible to relate relevant topics and look for explanations in other social disciplines; it questions policy and theory with empirical data.

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