

Schäfers, Bernhard

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Implementation of Funding for the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP): A Personal Recollection

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SOEPpapers

on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research

231

Bernhard Schäfers

**Implementation of Funding for the German
Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)—A personal recollection**

Berlin, October 2009

SOEPpapers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research at DIW Berlin

This series presents research findings based either directly on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) or using SOEP data as part of an internationally comparable data set (e.g. CNEF, ECHP, LIS, LWS, CHER/PACO). SOEP is a truly multidisciplinary household panel study covering a wide range of social and behavioral sciences: economics, sociology, psychology, survey methodology, econometrics and applied statistics, educational science, political science, public health, behavioral genetics, demography, geography, and sport science.

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German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP)
DIW Berlin
Mohrenstrasse 58
10117 Berlin, Germany

Contact: Uta Rahmann | urahmann@diw.de

Implementation of Funding for the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)— A personal recollection

By Bernhard Schäfers

Abstract

The SOEP success story was not conceivable at its inception. SOEP's institutionalization is therefore a lesson demonstrating that it is not always possible to say—as is so often required of research proposals today—how a project will develop before it has even begun, and what significance it may one day have. Or, even worse, to show “how a research project will pay off.”

Keywords: SOEP, German Research Foundation (DFG), Microanalytical Foundations of Social Policy

JEL Classification: C89, O39

Between 1977 and 1983, when I taught at Goettingen University and from 1983 when I taught at Karlsruhe University (TH), I was the rapporteur for the German Research Foundation's (DFG) program "Collaborative Research Centers (Sonderforschungsbereiche: SFB)." As successor to Professor Heinz Hartmann of Muenster University who was the first rapporteur for the Social Sciences Collaborative Research Centers after the establishment of this program by DFG at the end of the 1960s, I was elected to this 'office' for two three-year tenures. One can justifiably refer to this position as an 'office' because the number of working days spent was from 32 to 35 per annum.

'Rapporteurs' are members of the Senate of DFG (which is a decision making body) and the Grants Committee for the Collaborative Research Centers and, depending on their discipline, are either specialists in the field or are explicitly from other spheres. Rapporteurs who are not specialists in the field also carry significant weight because, with them, discipline-specific bias or considerations are not an issue. Never in my 36-year career as university lecturer have I participated in such thrilling inter-disciplinary committee work as during this period. The rapporteurs got to know one another enabling 'alliances' to be formed and collegial affinities transcending subject boundaries to emerge. This was not insignificant for the 'panel' or *Panel* as the SOEP was referred to within the DFG at the beginning of the funding process.

In the 1984 "DFG Research Report", under the heading "Sociology", one can find the grant awarded to the SFB 3 at Frankfurt-am-Main and Mannheim Universities: "Microanalytical Foundations of Social Policy". The first SFB in the field of social sciences to receive funding was in 1979 and emanated from the work of the SPES Research Group.¹ The SPES Group had already made a name for itself, across the disciplines as well as in the general public, for its works on macro and microanalytical social analysis; several of its studies on social statistics and indicators of social structure had large circulation and led the way for the 'data reports' which are still published every second year (now by GESIS², WZB³ and the Federal Statistical Agency [Destatis]).

The aforementioned DFG Research Report indicates that the grant awarded to the SFB 3 increased dramatically from 1982 to 1983 from 2.8 to 4.1 million DM. This increase was

¹ For details see Krupp's retrospective article (2008) as well as Hanefeld and Schupp (2008).

² GESIS = Gesellschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen (German Social Science Infrastructure Services Association).

³ WZB = Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (Social Science Research Center Berlin).

solely due to the new Project “B5” in the project area: “Foundations for Simulation”. Within this area the “Panel Project” was funded. This is where one of the problems of the approval procedure lay within DFG: can and should a single project which, furthermore, is seen by many as a methodological and social statistic resource and not as genuine research, cost so much? The Project Director was Professor Hans-Jürgen Krupp, former President of Frankfurt University, co-founder of the SFB 3, and, since 1979, President of the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin). Since one of the conditions of funding approval was that the DFG would only finance “The Panel”—later called SOEP—for a few years, it made sense to acquire the early support (if not financial) of the DIW Berlin as it was a large research institute with long-term funding.

The preparation and convincing presentation of these institutional possibilities at committee meetings was, not least, thanks to the DFG’s Program Officer for the Social Science Division, Ms. Helga Hoppe as well as the Program Officer responsible for the Collaborative Research Centers, Dr. Dieter Funk.

The decisive condition for approval was ultimately the thoughtful and extremely thoroughly prepared application itself which, with its almost 200 pages, (without appendix including the survey calculation) broke the mold. Those responsible for the preparation of the application were the Project Director and his dedicated doctoral student, Ms. Ute Hanefeld, who moved things forward considerably. She organised a colloquium which was also attended by international guests at which it became clear to the evaluators and the rapporteurs (both specialists in the field and representatives of other disciplines) responsible for the SFB 3 how essential the SOEP as a survey tool with bold research potential would be for the Federal Republic of Germany. At this time, only the USA had surveys, the purpose of which corresponded with that of the SOEP; their Scientific Directors, Professors Duncan and Lininger presented on their surveys together with Ms. Hanefeld who learned about the surveys and the institutions behind them whilst visiting the USA.

The need for a representative longitudinal survey tool for welfare and social policy in the Federal Republic of Germany and for a possible comparison with other EU countries were weighty supportive arguments but ultimately not decisive. For the DFG, evidence of the fact

that SOEP was mainly about pure research was important.⁴ In order to make a convincing argument, it was also important that those representatives of the responsible Ministries who had seats and votes on the Grants Committee took part at the scientific colloquium for the preparation of the application.

In the decisive session of the Grants Committee in November 1982, the job of the rapporteurs (both the specialist in the field and the representative of other disciplines), Professor Werner Meissner, was to report on the (positive) vote of the evaluators about the evaluation of SFB 3 and on the new application for its Project B5 (the later “SOEP”). In the long-protracted discussion, new thoughts and objections had to be continually dismantled; including some which had not been reckoned on in the preparations for the session of the Grants Committee. The representative of the Federal Ministry for Research and Technology played an important role in this session because the prospect of special financial support was held out to the DFG for the first phases of the SOEP project, if it were to be approved. I can recall not only the thrilling moments of this session but also that, without the support of colleagues from medicine and other scientific disciplines, the results of the vote would not have been so positive. In December of the same year, with DFG Senate approval, the last hurdle was cleared.

The approval of the “SOEP” had certain conditions attached—among them, the establishment of a Scientific Advisory Board. The DFG requested that I take on the chairmanship of this committee. I recall with gratitude that various local institutions made their premises available for sessions of the Panel Advisory Board which took place in Berlin: the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) under the Presidency of Professor Wolfgang Zapf (founding member of the SPES Research Group⁵ and of the SFB 3), Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg) Berlin under the Rectorship of a Professor of Sociology, Wolf Lepenies, and the Max Planck-Institute for Human Development (MPI für Bildungsforschung) with its Co-Director and member of the SFB 3 Professor Karl Ulrich Mayer. According to the DFG's request, the Advisory Board was to make proposals for the further development of the SOEP. Recommendations from the Board with its top-class members contributed to an improvement in quality standards and the inclusion of new questions and indicators.

⁴ Hanefeld (1987) provides detailed information in German on the development and conception of the SOEP. See also Hanefeld and Schupp (2008).

⁵ On this, see Krupp (2008).

The Institute for Sociology at Karlsruhe University (TH), which I led from 1983 until 2007, was one of the first institutes which had a complete set of SOEP data from the very beginning, which was used by Dr. Gunter E. Zimmermann, *inter alia*, for the analysis of poverty development in Germany (see, on this subject, for example, Zimmermann 2001).

A final recollection for the present and the future: the SOEP success story was not conceivable at its inception. SOEP's institutionalization is therefore a lesson demonstrating that it is not always possible to say—as is so often required of research proposals today—how a project will develop before it has even begun, and what significance it may one day have. Or, even worse, to show “how a research project will pay off.”

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