

STATSAMERICA

User Guides

Social Context

Overview

The Social Context data set is a collection of indicators of psychosocial characteristics and culture curated from nationwide surveys that have been disaggregated to the county level. There's no shortage of economic and demographic data that can be used to gauge a region's capacity for entrepreneurship and development, but behavioral economists, sociologists and other social scientists have demonstrated that culture and values represent a vital set of factors with direct impact on economic development and entrepreneurship. However, these kinds of measures are not represented in federal data sets, rendering them unavailable to regional scientists, economic development practitioners and policymakers. Though this data set is by no means exhaustive of all facets of the culture and values of a region, it represents the most diverse and easily accessible exploratory curation of leading psychosocial variables to date.

The data set is a unique collection of psychosocial variables constructed from data available in two nationwide surveys. The first is the Gosling-Potter Internet Project (Gozlab) from the University of Texas, from which we gathered data on the Big 5 personality traits. The second is the General Social Surveys (GSS) from the University of Chicago, from which we constructed two other sets of variables around beliefs (worldview items) and social dynamics (unique cultural characteristics). We used participant responses for individuals that disclosed the geographic location of their residence so we could aggregate the responses to the county level.

Specifically, with respect to social context, we are mapping the regional dispersion of the following independent variables:

- **The "Big 5" Personality Traits:** These have been influential in the work of social psychologists and include items such as the amount of extroversion, agreeableness and openness among a local population.
- **Beliefs:** These variables, collected from the GSS, include items like belief in science, levels of religiosity and views on gender equity.
- **Social Dynamics:** Also from the GSS, these variables include items like work ethic, risk tolerance and conflict awareness.
- **The Moral Foundations:** This set of variables have recently become prominent in moral psychology, and include items like views on fairness, loyalty and authority.

Additionally, we wish to explore the impact these measures of culture and values have on four different economic indicators—dependent variables. These are:

- **Income and Employment:** These are obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau at the county level.
- **Income Mobility:** This is obtained from the [Equality of Opportunity Project](#). This variable is measured as the percentage increase in income at age 26 as a result of spending one additional year of childhood in a particular county.
- **Entrepreneurship:** This is computed from U.S. Census Bureau data, specifically, it is the ratio of establishment births (i.e., startups) to the number of total establishments in a year in a particular county.

How to use the data

There are a variety of applications of the data set. The most accessible application is in the E-primed Entrepreneurial Readiness Index. Users can view the E-primed to get a headline view of their region's entrepreneurial capacity. A few variables from the Social Context data set are part of the component measuring a region's personality and attitude in the context of its capacity for entrepreneurship and innovation.

For those who want to dig further into the data, we provide downloads of all the variables. The economic development community, government officials, business and nonprofit leaders, and the general public can use the data for many applications.

Suppose that a nonprofit wants to open a new branch of their organization and doesn't know where to set up shop. Recognizing the importance of organizations to locate in areas whose residents have values that align with those of the organization, the owner or board may use our data to find a region that scores highly on certain characteristics. A social service organization whose mission is to alleviate poverty may look for areas that score highly on traits like selflessness, agreeableness, collectivism and empathy. A religious organization may want to find an area that scores highly on religiosity. An arts and culture organization may look for areas that score highly on openness. An LGBTQ+ organization may want an area that scores highly on tolerance, gender equity, empathy and openness. The data set has wide coverage across many different facets of culture and psychosocial characteristics, so virtually any kind of organization can use it to find areas that score highly for a variety of desired traits. Similarly, entrepreneurs can use the data to find areas that score highly on traits they deem important for the success of their business, like work importance, risk taking, conscientiousness or others.

Government officials can use these data to get an idea of what kinds of projects are politically feasible in their community without having to commission expensive public opinion surveys. For example, if school officials determine that a property tax increase is necessary for capital upgrades or teacher salary increases, they can use these data to decide the best strategies to use for public outreach. If the county scores highly on collectivism, empathy and selflessness, they can frame the proposed tax levy increase in terms of providing a public benefit to vulnerable populations, such as students from low-income families. Conversely, if a county scores low on these measures, they can frame the tax increase as a way to raise funds to increase opportunities for students to get ahead.

Construction of the variables

To aggregate the survey responses to the county level and enhance their practicality to users, we had to take several steps. First, we scaled groups of individual survey variables from Gozlab (across all available years) in similar order and calculated their means to compute agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness. Similarly, we scaled individual survey variables from the GSS

(across all available years), then calculated their means to compute belief in science, collectivism, conflict awareness, empathy, gender equality, hopefulness, religiosity, risk-taking, selflessness, tolerance and work ethic. For ease of interpretation, all independent variables were then put on a 100-point scale where 100 is the highest-scoring county for each variable. For each of the four dependent variables, we had to use an algorithm called Brieman's Random Forest to impute values for counties without data.

The independent variables we used are below in bold, and they were constructed by aggregating and rescaling responses to the statements or questions below each independent variable. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with each statement, how frequently they engage in the action in the statement, the importance of each statement to them, or the likelihood that each statement is true on a five-point Likert scale. Then, points were assigned based on the veracity of the response, ranging from 0 to 100.

Big Five Personality Traits

Agreeableness

- (1) I am helpful and unselfish with others.
- (2) I tend to find fault with others.
- (3) I tend to start quarrels with others.
- (4) I have a forgiving nature.
- (5) I am generally trusting.
- (6) I can be cold and isolated.
- (7) I am considerate and kind to almost everyone.
- (8) I am sometimes rude to others.
- (9) I like to cooperate with others.

Conscientiousness

- (1) I can be somewhat careless.
- (2) I carry out my job thoroughly.
- (3) I am a reliable worker.
- (4) I tend to be disorganized.
- (5) I tend to be lazy.
- (6) I persevere until the task is finished.
- (7) I do things efficiently.
- (8) I make plans and follow through with them.
- (9) I am easily distracted.

Extraversion

- (1) I see myself as someone who is reserved.
- (2) I am talkative.
- (3) I am full of energy.
- (4) I am passionate and spirited.
- (5) I tend to be quiet.
- (6) I have an assertive personality.
- (7) I am sometimes shy and inhibited.
- (8) I am outgoing and sociable.

Neuroticism

- (1) I am relaxed and can handle stress well.
- (2) I am depressed and blue.
- (3) I can be tense.
- (4) I worry a lot.
- (5) I am emotionally stable and not easily upset.
- (6) I can be moody.
- (7) I remain calm in tense situations.
- (8) I get nervous easily.

Openness

- (1) I am curious about many things.
- (2) I always come up with new ideas.
- (3) I am creative and a deep thinker.
- (4) I have an active imagination.
- (5) I am inventive.
- (6) I value artistic experiences.
- (7) I prefer work that is routine.
- (8) I like to reflect and play with ideas.
- (9) I have few artistic interests
- (10) I am advanced in art, music or literature.

Beliefs

Belief in Science

- (1) Even if it brings no immediate benefits, scientific research that advances the frontiers of knowledge is necessary and should be supported by the federal government.
- (2) Science and technology are making our lives, healthier, easier and more comfortable.
- (3) We believe too often in science, and not enough in feelings and faith.

Gender Equity

- (1) A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family.
- (2) All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job.
- (3) Both the husband and the wife should contribute to the household income.
- (4) How important is the women's rights issue to you?
- (5) It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself.
- (6) It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.
- (7) It is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work.

Hopefulness

- (1) I can think of many ways to reach my current goals.
- (2) I hardly ever expect things to go my way.
- (3) If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.
- (4) If something can go wrong for me, it will.
- (5) I'm always optimistic about my future.

(6) There are lots of ways around any problem that I am facing now.

Religiosity

- (1) I ask for God's help in the midst of daily activities.
- (2) I desire to be closer to God or in union with Him.
- (3) To me, life is meaningful only because God exists.
- (4) Would you describe yourself as religious?
- (5) About how often do you pray?
- (6) It is important to obey church teachings even if I don't understand them.
- (7) I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.

Selflessness

- (1) Are you a selfish person?
- (2) I am usually willing to sacrifice my own wishes to let the one I love achieve his/hers.
- (3) I cannot be happy unless I place the one I love's happiness before my own.
- (4) I would endure all things for the sake of the one I love.
- (5) I would rather suffer myself than let the one I love suffer.
- (6) Personally assisting people in trouble is very important to me.

Tolerance

- (1) All religious groups in America should have equal rights.
- (2) I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.
- (3) Would you accept a person from a different religion or with a very different religious view from yours who is a candidate of the political party you prefer?

Social Dynamics

Collectivism

- (1) Adult children have a duty to look after their elderly parents.
- (2) People who are better off should help friends who are less well off.
- (3) Those in need have to learn to take care of themselves and not depend on others.
- (4) When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along.

Conflict Awareness

In all countries, there are differences or conflicts between different social groups. In your opinion, in America, how much conflict is there between...

- (1) Poor people and rich people?
- (2) People at the top of society and people at the bottom?
- (3) Young people and older people?
- (4) Management and workers?
- (5) The working class and the middle class?

Empathy

- (1) I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
- (2) Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
- (3) When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.
- (4) When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.

Risk Taking

- (1) In order to avoid unemployment, I would be willing to accept a job that requires new skills.
- (2) In order to get a job, I would be willing to move to a different country.

Work Importance

- (1) Work is a person's most important activity.
- (2) How hard do you work?
- (3) A job is just a way of earning money—no more.
- (4) Work is important and gives a feeling of accomplishment.