

Chapter 4

Comparative Survey Research: Goals and Challenges

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This chapter provides a comprehensive and twenty-first century review of critical areas in comparative survey research. Focusing on major and often unresolved challenges, the chapter discusses comparability and equivalence, quality and study specifications, standardization and field implementation, and question design, translation, and instrument adaptation.

The introduction indicates the scope of discussion and explains terminology used in the chapter. The second section considers the growth in cross-cultural, cross-national survey research evident in multiple disciplines and points to methodological challenges faced by researchers involved in this research. The third section considers what the differences between comparative survey research and other survey research are and quality issues comparative research raises, such as in undertaking adequate testing. The fourth section deals with indeterminacy of meaning related to the much used terms of *comparability* and *equivalence*. Section five deals with determining study specifications in comparative contexts; given that locations are different, what requirements must be kept the same across implementations and what requirements cannot. Section six takes a detailed look at instrument design options for comparative survey research, covering *ask-the same question* and *ask-different-question* models. The seventh section turns to issues of translation, explaining the advantages of team approaches to translation and the drawbacks to other procedures, including back-translation. The eighth section presents and explains instruments adaptation; in some senses this is the missing jigsaw piece between design and translation. The last section presents an outlook for comparative survey research in the coming decade and beyond and a few words of summary.

GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

Adaptation. Adapted questions are derived from existing questions by deliberately changing some content or design component to make a question more suitable for a new sociocultural context or for a particular population. Adaptation can be necessary without translation being involved (e.g., adapting a questionnaire for children). However, whenever translation is necessary, some forms of adaptation are also generally required. Adaptations may be substantive, relate to question design, or consist of slight formulation and wording changes. Regardless of the form or the degree of change, it is wise to consider adapted questions as new questions and to test them accordingly.

Ask-Different-Questions Approach (ADQ). In ADQ approaches, researchers collect data across populations/countries using the most salient population-specific questions on a given topic that are felt or demonstrated to tap a construct that is germane or shared across populations.

Ask-the-Same-Question Approach (ASQ). With the exception of *decentring*, researchers adopting ASQ approaches collect data across populations/countries by first deciding on a common source questionnaire in one language and then producing whatever other language versions are needed on the basis of translation. Although *close translation* is often preferred, adaptations of several kinds may nonetheless be necessary.

Back Translation. Back translation is a procedure which can be used for several purposes but in survey research is now most often used to assess translations. The translated questionnaire is translated back into the source questionnaire language. Then these two versions in the source language are compared for difference or similarity. Good similarity between these two is taken to indicate that the translated text, which is not itself examined, is faithful to the original source questionnaire.

Close translation. A variety of terms, including close translation, are sometimes used to express that a translation tries to stay as close as possible to the original text in content, presentation and in the case of surveys, format and design. In practical terms, a close translation policy often stands at odds to an approach embracing *adaptation*.

Decentring. In classical decentring models, two different cultures are asked the same questions but the questions are developed simultaneously in each language. Thus there is no source questionnaire or target language questionnaire. The decentring process removes culture-specific elements from both versions. Decentring can thus be seen to stand between ADQ models and models based on ASQ source questionnaire and translation models.

Etic-Emic. Following distinctions developed by Pike, etic concepts or constructs are universal and therefore shared across multiple cultures, whereas emic concepts or constructs are culture-specific in constellation or significance and cannot be assumed to be shared across populations.

Functional Equivalence. Multiple definitions of functional equivalence exist within and across disciplines. When used in Chapter 4, it refers to the comparability of the function of a question in a specific context with that of another question in a different specific context.

Team translation. A team translation approach as used in Chapter 4 combines translation with translation review. It (a) uses more than one translator (b) involves the translators in the review process and not just for the first stage of draft translation (c) brings other expertise to the review process (e. g., survey design and implementation, substantive) and (d) reiterates translation, review, adjudication, and testing as necessary. Thus a good part of the work is carried out by members of the team working as a group.