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# Sociodemographic Questionnaire Modules for Comparative Social Surveys



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# Abbreviations

BVFG	Bundesvertriebenengesetz [the Federal Expellees Act]
CAPI	Computer-assisted personal interview
CASMIN	Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations
CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interview
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program
DREAM	Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act
ECHP	European Community Household Panel
ECHP UDB	European Community Household Panel User Data Base
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EGP	Class scheme developed by Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero
ESS	European Social Survey
EU	European Union
Eurostat	Statistical office of the European Union situated in Luxembourg
EU-SILC	European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
GED	General Educational Development test
GSS	General Social Survey
HBS	Household Budget Survey
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
ISEI	International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
LFS	Labor Force Survey
MISSOC	Mutual Information System on Social Protection
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAPI	Paper-and-pencil interview
PPP	Purchasing power parity
SCP	Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands
SIOPS	Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale



U.S.	United States of America
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNSD	United Nations Statistics Division

# Chapter 1

## Introduction, Problem, and Research Question



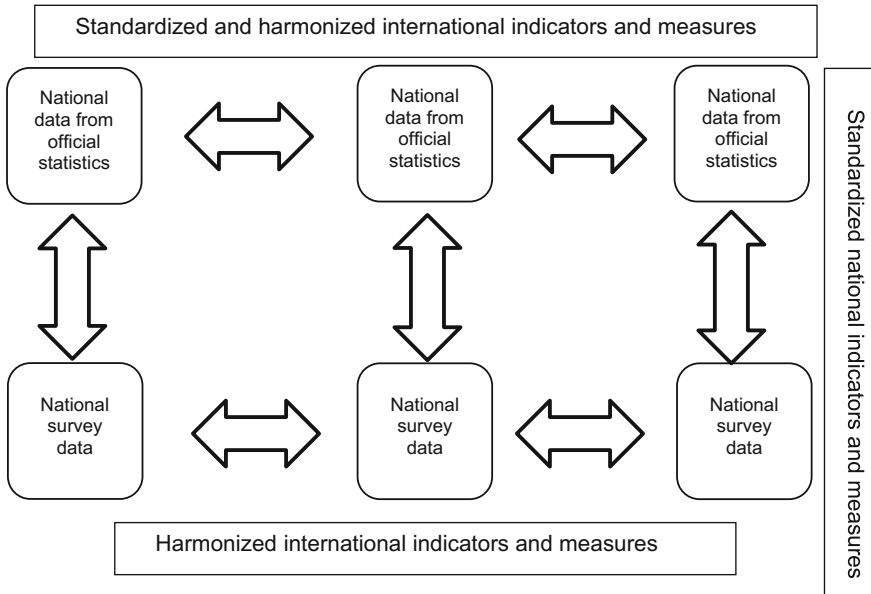
**Abstract** In this chapter, we explain why sociodemographic variables in cross-national comparative surveys cannot simply be translated, but rather must be harmonized. We define the concept of harmonization and outline its theoretical background and its implications for all phases of cross-national comparative survey projects. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contents of the book.

**Keywords** Sociodemographic variables · Harmonization

Surveys and polls are used to measure behaviors, opinions, and attitudes. By means of interviews and questionnaires, they collect data about the social structure of societies and groups of individuals. Demographic and socioeconomic measures serve mainly as independent variables that explain social facts. In order to be able to compare data across surveys, we need standardized demographic and socioeconomic background variables that measure identical facts in the countries compared. This is ensured when these variables are measured with the same fieldwork instruments, the same questionnaire, identical question wording and format, and the same response categories in each survey. Standardized measures allow us to compare different surveys and polls within the same country or culture, provided these surveys and polls used the same method to measure the sociodemographic variables. Standardized measures are often used to compare national population data from official statistics with the outcomes of survey samples and interviews (see Fig. 1.1).

In order to be able to compare survey data across countries and cultures and over time, we must ensure that the instrument applied measures the same social fact in all countries and cultures observed and at all points in time compared. Although the translation of the survey questions into the languages of the participating countries is a must, translation alone is not sufficient to obtain comparative measures across countries or cultures. Therefore, demographic and socioeconomic variables must be harmonized into cross-nationally comparable measurement instruments.

Culture is “the human creation of symbols and artifacts” (Jary and Jary 1995, 101f.). Different cultures produce different social concepts. In turn, these concepts produce historically evolved national structures. Cultural differences between social groups are temporally and regionally determined by commonalities of internalized



**Fig. 1.1** Standardized and harmonized indicators and measures

values and shared meanings. These values and shared meanings shape the institutionalized ways of life of the group members. Countries with different cultural traditions have their own social, political, legal, and economic structures—for example, national education systems, the national organization and legal regulation of labor markets, the implementation of national welfare systems, and national contributions to the social security and the tax systems.

As Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Wolf (2003, 393) noted, “[t]he measurement of demographic and socio-economic variables requires profound knowledge of the different national concepts, the cultural and organisational structure behind the variables, and the national indicators used to measure the variables of interest.” This profound knowledge helps researchers to solve specific problems in comparative surveys. Linguistic differences across countries and cultures are evident in survey research. Structural differences between societies with different forms of political, social, legal, and economic organization influence measures in comparative surveys. Statutory restrictions on surveys, and national survey traditions limit the comparability of the measurements. National cultural differences have an impact on the conceptualization of measurement constructs and the meaning of question items in surveys. Differential survey administration and the organizational and procedural implementation of the fieldwork produce different patterns of survey error. Moreover, the realization of surveys is documented differently across countries. As Smith (2010, 757) noted: “Comparative survey research faces the great challenge that languages, social conventions, cognitive abilities, and response styles vary across societies. . . . Survey-

design variation and measurement error need to be minimized and equalized to obtain valid, reliable, and consistent substantive data.”

These particularities and specific characteristics of surveys across countries and cultures have implications for the development and creation of fieldwork instruments, the selection of comparative measurement concepts, the compilation of harmonized questionnaires, and the realization of the survey interviews.

For the psychology of survey response, Schwarz (2008, 374) postulated that answering a survey question entailed the following tasks:

Respondents' first need is to understand the question posed to determine what information they are asked to provide. If the question is an attitude question, they may either retrieve previously formed judgments from memory or form a judgment on the spot. ... To form a judgment, the respondents need to retrieve the relevant information from memory. Usually they will also need to retrieve or construct some standard against which the attitude object is evaluated. Once a 'private' judgment has been formed in respondents' minds, they have to communicate it to the researcher. Unless the question is asked in an open format, they need to format their judgment to fit the response alternatives. Finally, respondents may wish to edit their response before they communicate it, due to self-presentation and social desirability concerns.

These postulates also claim validity in comparative surveys across countries and cultures. However, in the context of harmonized measures of demographic and socioeconomic variables administered in cross-national and cross-cultural comparative surveys, the following questions must be asked: (a) Do respondents from different countries or cultures understand the question in the same way, so that their determination of the information they are asked to provide is cross-nationally and cross-culturally comparable? (b) Do respondents from different countries and cultures retrieve similar answers, or do they form comparable answers using their national or cultural backgrounds? (c) Do respondents from different countries or different cultural contexts have the information they need to generate an answer to the question asked? Do they use comparable standards when they evaluate their intended response? (d) Are respondents able to fit the response they have generated into the list of response categories provided by the comparative researchers? and (e) Does the degree and content of self-presentation and social desirability concerns differ across countries and cultures and change over time? In the course of presenting our proposed process of harmonizing background variables, we shall answer these questions and endeavor to solve the problems associated with developing valid, reliable, and comparable measures for social surveys across countries and cultures and over time.

In comparative social survey research across countries and cultures and over time, the major problem is that survey respondents from different countries or cultures or from different birth cohorts must understand and interpret the question in the same way. For measurement instruments applied in polls and surveys, it is particularly important to first define the object of the measurement. Then, the question must be rephrased, so that the respondents have no difficulties recognizing and understanding the question stimulus and generating the required response. Respondents need response options that are meaningful in their social, cultural, political, or economic context. Therefore, in the next step, response options must be determined that repre-

sent the same measurement despite national and cultural differences. These processes require more than the translation of a commonly agreed and drafted source questionnaire into the languages of the countries and cultures participating in the survey. They also require close collaboration between research teams from these countries and cultures to develop functionally equivalent measurement instruments that enable meaningful comparison.

Harmonized sociodemographic variables allow us to compare survey data across two or more countries or cultures and over time provided the harmonized measurement instruments are applied during data collection in the countries and cultures under study.

We define harmonization as a scientific, theory-driven process designed to make measures comparable across countries or cultures and over time with the aim of ensuring that the variables measure functionally equivalent social facts in the respective national or cultural contexts. Figure 1.1 gives an overview of how the terms are used here.

The main focus of the present book is twofold: First, we introduce the demographic and socioeconomic background variables of interest and their measurement in comparative surveys. Second, we illustrate how actors participating in international survey research (i.e., the central project coordinators, the national researchers, the national fieldwork agencies and their interviewers, the respondents, and the data processing units) apply the harmonized measures of demographic and socioeconomic background variables, and we identify several sources of error and failure.

Our intention is to reduce obstacles and barriers in comparative survey research by reducing measurement errors across countries and cultures and to increase the comparability of demographic and socioeconomic background measures in comparative surveys.

In the first part of the book, we illustrate five steps toward harmonized demographic and socioeconomic variables. We introduce the main variables of interest and outline the rules for harmonizing survey questions in such a way that comparative measures can be obtained across countries and cultures.

Part II presents a questionnaire for demographic and socioeconomic variables in comparative surveys. The proposed questionnaire modules can be used as a blueprint and must be modified according to the research question. When doing so, researchers must ensure that they maintain the integrity and comparability of the intended measurement.

Part III focuses on the various actors involved in the realization of comparative surveys across countries and cultures: (a) the central project coordinators, (b) the teams of researchers from participating countries or cultures, (c) the fieldwork agencies and their interviewers, (d) the survey respondents, and (e) the team responsible for editing and cleaning the data.

Part IV is an annotated description of web resources for comparative survey research, which we supplement with a brief overview of the main international organizations that provide information on comparative demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. We list web-based tools for the establishment of comparability of these measures and briefly discuss their application in surveys.