

FAQ 30: What are the key issues when collecting data in more than one country?

What's the issue?

Potentially, any and all dimensions of a research project may take on a different meaning when conducted in a different country – including the questions asked, the terms used, the population studied, and the position of the researcher. There is a persistent tension between the attempt to standardize the research conducted in different countries (e.g. using exactly the same sampling technique, questionnaire survey, approach to analysis) and the attempt to recognize and reflect cultural or social differences across research contexts.

Common practice

It is often asserted that the standardization of methodological tools and conceptual frameworks is more easily achieved in quantitative research. Conversely, qualitative methods are arguably better at reflecting and responding to specific cultural contexts.

However, both approaches can be adjusted to comparative research, and both require considerable effort in both research design and data interpretation, so as to understand where the data are, or are not, directly comparable.

While efforts in comparative research are often concentrated on the construction of samples, the recruitment of respondents, the design of survey questionnaires or interview schedules, and so forth, researchers must also attend to the challenges of data interpretation and analysis. Comparing questionnaire responses across countries (and languages) is easier than comparing interview transcripts, but ensuring that the questionnaire means the same thing in different languages is not easy. Ideally, questionnaires and interview schedules should be translated and then back-translated to check it against the original.

Questions to consider

(or 'own rooms') did not fit the reality of children of very low SES [socio-economic status]. Last, the designation of the place where the child lives and play outdoors may also be ambiguous in different cultures. In Portugal, a large amount of children live in flats and don't have access to private gardens. The experience of playing outdoors is mostly associated with public spaces. Houses with private gardens are mostly associated with high SES, and they are called 'vivendas'. However, a child who lives in an illegal house self-made by their parents (in a slum, for instance) may use the word 'vivenda' to describe the place where he/she lives. In a survey that named different kinds of places to live, children's answers showed that their naming of those places is appropriated in their own socio-cultural terms. (José Alberto Simões, Portugal)

References and further resources

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