

## Survey of International Social Surveys – an introduction

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With the growing number of international surveys, comparative survey research has become a well-developed and growing field involving many researchers and research institutions from all social sciences in several countries (e.g., Harkness et al. 2003, 2010). New datasets are being developed and updated, and advanced statistical methods are increasingly employed in the analysis of such data sets. An organized and systematic presentation of the international social surveys and the data available to researchers seems timely.

The *Survey of International Social Surveys* marks a new initiative by the International Social Science Council after its engagement started in the 1960s in the development of infrastructure services and the setting up of committees for comparative research (Mochmann 2009: 490-491).

The *Survey of International Social Surveys* provides a useful overview of 81 cross-national social surveys. It is a tool for any student and researcher from the whole spectrum of the social sciences looking for an introduction to a vast array of cross-national comparative surveys, or a rapid access to more detailed information. The precise and short overviews combined with links to specialised websites, are a good starting point and a valuable resource to complement advanced research.

### Which types of social survey are included?

All surveys presented are cross-national or international, and can be either interview surveys (Face-to-face and telephone) or self-completion surveys (mail and online).

Although the tool is called “Survey of *International Social Surveys*”, it would probably be better to talk of *cross-national* (or *comparative*) surveys. If some authors use the terms international and cross-national (or comparative) surveys interchangeably, they are not synonymous.

International surveys are surveys led by multiple countries where the target population is the combined population of the countries under study. There are but a few international surveys defined in this way, because sampling frames seldom cover more than one country and because countries remain a more obvious unit of comparison. Therefore, most *international* surveys are actually cross-national surveys: independent samples are drawn in each of the participating country, and the results of the national data files are later combined into a harmonised cross-national data file (Stoop & Harrison 2012: 16). Researchers analysing results at a regional level (for a group of countries) can still account for the variations between national populations by using the international weighting variables provided in many comparative surveys. The national samples in this respect can be considered as disproportional stratified samples where the smaller countries are normally overrepresented in order to achieve a satisfactory sample for the study of this country in comparative designs.

A major division between surveys is related to *cross-sectional*, *repeated cross-sectional* surveys, and *longitudinal panels*:

*Cross-sectional comparative surveys* are surveys that are collected only once. They are classified under “historical” because they are not currently followed up by new rounds.

*Repeated cross-sectional comparative surveys* are surveys that are repeated at fairly regular intervals. These surveys are grouped under the first header (not the “Historical”). However, there might be comparative surveys that have been repeated in the past, but then ceased being conducted. These are also grouped under the “Historical” subcategory.

Important information about repeated cross-sectional comparative surveys is whether a *cumulative file* exists of the various data across time. If, for example, there are waves of data collection within a repeated cross-sectional comparative survey design, the various cross-sectional data files might be merged into a file which then includes data from the different time points for each country. Sometimes such surveys are also called *longitudinal surveys* because they can be used to examine changes over time. But usually the notion “longitudinal survey” is used as a synonym for longitudinal panels.

*Longitudinal panels*: In such surveys the same respondents are approached at regular time intervals. Within the comparative surveys, we find only a few panel surveys.

Surveys from all of these categories are included here, but one needs to remain aware of the differences between them.

### **Resources on international social surveys**

The *Survey of International Social Surveys* is built from various sources, including the seminal works by Kittelson (2007), Mochmann (2009) and Stoop and Harrison (2012). A considerable documentation on many comparative surveys can be found on the website of the well-known German GESIS: Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences, for instance the very comprehensive overview of “Cross-national survey programmes based on population samples.” The current study includes surveys of entire (adult) populations (such as the ones listed in the GESIS overview), as well as others focusing on specific populations (e.g., for specific age categories, elites, pupils and students, etc.).

An important field of research within comparative survey research touches on what is called *equivalence*. The challenges of comparing patterns across nations, cultures and contexts are immense and need to be addressed explicitly in any cross-national and cross-cultural research (van Deth 2009). A growing number of studies now use *measurement equivalence* in order to determine – by means of fairly advanced statistical methods – whether different measurements of value orientations, attitudes and beliefs can be used to measure a same concept (hence are “equivalent”) across countries and cultures. There are several hierarchical levels of measurement equivalence, which also help set limits to what can be compared across countries and cultures (for an overview: Ariely and Davidov 2012)

Another major statistical development highly relevant for comparative survey research is *multilevel modelling* which is frequently used in cross-national survey research. Characteristics of the countries, based on data from sources originally outside the cross-national survey framework, are included in survey data sets, and used to explain individual dependent variables in addition to individual characteristics (see: Hox, Leeuw and Brinkhuis (2010) for an overview of advanced statistical models for analysing comparative survey data, that includes analyses of equivalence and multilevel modelling).

For the first time in 2008, an international conference focused on the methodology of comparative survey research, with the aims of improving multi-population surveys and increasing the level of methodological expertise. The conference on “Survey Methods in Multinational, Multiregional and Multicultural Contexts” resulted in a large and in many ways impressive book (Harkness et al. 2010), covering a large number of important topics.

### **Comparability, overlaps and gaps in comparative surveys**

Some questions, in particular in the surveys on “attitudes, values, beliefs and opinions” (category A), are standardised questions that are asked in the same way across comparative surveys. They represent however only a small portion of the total number of questions. One important exception is the *European Values Study* and the *World Values Survey*, which have stopped using the same framework and organization, and are now conducted at different intervals, even if a number of questions remain identical. One frequently sees that researchers use both of these data sources in scientific contributions.

The *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* is the result of an agreement between researchers responsible for various national election surveys to use the same set of questions. The CSES has improved the quality and quantity of comparative election research.

Many of the comparative social surveys contain data for many countries. It is therefore not necessary to use more than one set of data for a given research question. The researcher who wishes to use different comparative sets of data has first to merge them. This is a complicated task, very seldom undertaken.

Only the most important comparative surveys on “elites” (category E) and on “crime” (category F) are presented here, although others exist. Possibly other comparative social survey have been forgotten. One important field that is not represented at all in this exercise are the comparative surveys of health.

## Literature

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