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Diversity in Survey Questions on the Same Topic

Techniques for Improving Comparability

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Preface

Today, we are investing more in scientific research than ever before in human history, and a search in Google Scholar suggests that in 2015 some eight million scientific publications were produced. All this research is assumed to result in the ‘accumulation of knowledge’, thought to take place through an exchange of information in this ‘academic forum’. Reality is more complicated than this. There is not one academic forum, but rather many different market places, and exchange of knowledge in these bazaars is considerably hindered by the different languages and currencies used. As a result, much of the gathered information gets lost in the dust of libraries. Obstacles to accumulation of knowledge differ across academic settings. In this book, we address one particular problem in one particular research field.

This book is about a problem in survey research: in this case, large-scale questionnaire studies among samples of the general population in countries. We focus on ‘social surveys’ that are about the quality of life in nations. Most modern countries conduct such surveys periodically, for example, the ‘Understanding Society’ study in the UK, the Level of Living survey in Sweden and the Public Opinion Survey on the Life of the Nation in Japan. Then, there are international survey programs, such as the Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey, the Gallup World Poll and the World Values Survey. Worldwide, some million people take part in such surveys every year.

Social surveys address similar themes, such as social position and opinions. Many of the topics are identical; all the surveys have questions about age, sex and education, and most also ask about income and ethnicity. Yet, the questions asked on these matters are often formulated differently, for example, questions about the education level of the respondent sometimes ask the respondent to give a number for years of education, while in other surveys, a list of education types is given, from which the respondent must select the final type achieved. In this case, many different classifications of school level can be used which vary within and between countries. In this mixture of ways of asking the same question of education levels

across nations and time, typically less than half of the available survey data can be used for such purpose.

One of the common topics in social surveys is ‘happiness’, that is, the satisfaction with one’s life as a whole. This matter is typically measured using single direct questions, such as: ‘Taking all together, how happy would you say you are these days? Would you say you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy?’ To date (2016), such questions have figured in some 10,000 survey studies and have been answered by some 200,000 respondents. The observed distributions of these responses are gathered in the collection ‘Happiness in Nations’ in the World Database of Happiness (WDH) (Veenhoven 2016). Viewing this collection of data, we can see that differently formulated questions have been used and that there are also many differences in the response options presented to respondents. Again, this means that only part of the data is available for comparing happiness across nations and time. These problems are not confined to comparing levels of education and happiness across populations and nations. They are found for many other topics in survey research, such as health care or customer satisfaction,

In this book, we present methods for dealing with this diversity in survey questions on the same subject; we review existing methods used to homogenize data and propose new ones. The book is a spin-off from the World Database of Happiness, the main aim of which is to collate and make available research findings on the subjective enjoyment of life and to prepare these data for research synthesis. The first methods we discuss were proposed in the book *Happiness in Nations* (Veenhoven 1993, Chap. 7 ‘How the Data Are Homogenized’) which were used at the inception of the World Database of Happiness. Some 10 years later, a new method was introduced: the International Happiness Scale Interval Study (HSIS) (Veenhoven 2008). Taking the HSIS as a basis, Wim Kalmijn (2010) developed the Continuum Approach. Then, building on Kalmijn’s work, Tineke DeJonge (2015) developed the Reference Distribution Method.

In this book, we describe the evolution of these innovations and provide a view of where we stand now. We go on to suggest ways to evolve this line of research. The book is based on the doctoral dissertation of Tineke DeJonge (2015); most chapters are based on articles authored in most cases by the three of us and Lidia Arends of the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Wim Kalmijn passed away in November 2015 aged 81; he contributed much to the preparation of this book. We thank Willem Saris of the University Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona for his comments on the draft version and Miranda Aldham-Breary, senior volunteer of the WDH, for improving the English.

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Abbreviations

BRFSS	Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
CAPI	Computer-assisted personal interviewing
CBS	Statistics Netherlands
DHS	Dutch Household Survey
EAVS	East Asia Value Survey
EB	Eurobarometer
EDAC	European Data Center for Work and Welfare
EQLS	European Quality of Life Survey
ESS	European Social Survey
FLS	Future Life Survey
HSIS	Happiness Scale Interval Study
ISSP	International Periodical Social Survey Program
LAPOP	Latin American Public Opinion Project
LDC	Leisure Development Centre
LIN	Life-in-Nation Survey
LPS	Lifestyle Preference Survey
NIPO	Dutch Institute for Public Opinion
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
%SM	Percentage of scale maximum
SCP	The Netherlands Institute for Social Research
SWB	Subjective well-being
TRAPD	Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pretesting and Documentation
VAS	Visual analogue scale
WDH	World Database of Happiness
WVS	World Values Survey