

# Avoiding Pitfalls in Comparative Survey Research: The Case of Gender Roles

By Michael Braun

Although attitudes about the roles men and women should play in society have been measured regularly for several decades, they are difficult to gauge particularly in international comparisons. The American General Social Survey (GSS) has used the same four-item battery of questions to measure such attitudes since 1977; other general social surveys, such as the German ALLBUS, adopted the GSS battery in the 1980s. Further, the GSS measures were the basis for constructing a gender-role battery in 1988 and 1994 studies conducted by the International Social Survey Program. Other large-scale projects like the World Value Survey also have similar gender-role items or have used variants of the ISSP measures.

However, as we shall see, the ISSP measures on gender roles have shortcomings. This is not to criticize the ISSP researchers, of whom I am one. International comparisons are especially difficult when questions do not reflect the social or economic reality of a country and, therefore, are incongruent with respondents' experiences. Respondents, then, may misunderstand what the questions are asking. Additional complications arise when the questionnaires are translated for intercultural research. Even a "perfect" translation cannot handle

a mismatch between social reality in a country and elements in an item. It is essential to understand some potential pitfalls in analyzing gender-role attitudes across countries. Here I focus on three items of the ISSP gender-role battery (see Table 1).

## Cognitive Aspects of Gender-Role Measures

The suitability of the items measuring gender-role attitudes were evaluated using a statistical technique called multi-dimensional scaling (MDS). MDS allows one to determine how closely related one survey question is to another for items categorized under a particular concept or across concepts.

At first sight every researcher would be delighted by the way gender-role attitudes in Japan cluster into the three corresponding theoretical dimensions identified in Table 1. However, there are two outliers which likely result from the difficulties of matching Japanese language with Western concepts. In the "Men Work Too Much" item "because" was replaced by "if." And the item, "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay," was translated to, "The following two are equally fulfilling: being a housewife and working for pay." In both cases, Japanese respondents were not answering the intended question.

For respondents in the US we found that Americans did not make any principal distinction between the three theoretical dimensions. Instead, Americans highly differentiate between the survey items which constitute each dimension.

There are two peculiarities in the US data deserving attention. First, "Men Work Too Much," which was conceptualized under Consequences for the Family, is not closely related to the other items in that subset. This tendency was observed in many Western countries, including West Germany and Italy.

Second, "Housework Is Fulfilling" which was conceptualized under Gender-Role Ideology, associates with items in that subset and with items in Economic Consequences. This finding applies to most Anglo-Saxon countries, while in other countries this item is exclusively related to Gender-Role Ideology items.

While the "Men Home Not Good" understanding for respondents in the US and West Germany classifies this variable correctly in the Gender-Role Ideology subset, this is not the case for East Germany and Italy. In each case it does not relate closely to items in Gender Ideology, but the reasons for this are different for each country. While the Italian deviation is simply due to omitting the term "not" in the Italian

**Table 1: ISSP 1994 Gender-Role Items**

### *1. Consequences for the Family*

**Warm Relations:** A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.

**Child Suffers:** A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.

**Family Suffers:** All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job.

**Men Work Too Much:** Family life often suffers because men concentrate too much on their work.

### *2. Gender-Role Ideology*

**Children Better:** A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children.

**Housework Is Fulfilling:** Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.

**Housework Is Women's Job:** A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family.

**Men Home Not Good:** It is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work.

### *3. Economic Consequences*

**Independence:** Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person.

**Support:** Most women have to work these days to support their families.

**Double Income:** Both the man and woman should contribute to the household income.



rendering, East German thinking is consistent with many former socialist countries, including Russia. In that country "if the man stays at home" was considered to indicate a lazy man devoted to heavy drinking.

Why is it that in some countries the item "Housework Is Fulfilling" is strongly related to Economic Consequences, while it has its natural home in Gender-Role Ideology in others? And why does "Men Home Not Good" work well as an aspect of Gender-Role Ideology in traditional capitalist countries but not in former socialist countries, while the reverse is true for "Men Work Too Much"? I will tackle these questions in turn.

### Translating "Housework Is Fulfilling"

While Italians show quite traditional gender-role attitudes generally, for "Housework Is Fulfilling" they appear the least traditional nation. Moreover, the same trend is visible inside Italy, with southern Italians appearing to be slightly less traditional than northern Italians. On a number of other similar questions southern Italians do indeed show themselves to be more traditional. Thus, basically (some) Italians may answer a different question and a comparison with the remaining nations should take this into account. In fact, the Italian translation renders "working for pay" into "having a paid job."

In comparisons, Italy and Spain—two Mediterranean "cousins"—do not differ much. Recent developments regarding the family and female labor-force participation have run parallel, both are Catholic, and both experienced industrialization relatively late compared to other Western European countries. Unlike the Italians, the Spanish *do* use an equivalent of "to work" instead of "to have a job." Consequently, "Housework Is Fulfilling" fits in the Gender-Role Ideology subset for Spain. Moreover, when all items constituting the Gender-Ideology dimension are plotted against respondent age groups for Italy and Spain, "Children Better" and "Housework Is Women's Job" comparatively track together much more closely than either of the remaining two aspects of the dimension. For "Men Home Not Good," it is not surprising that the Spanish and Italian results diverge seeing that the Italian rendering omitted the word "not." "Housework Is Fulfilling" scores were much higher in Italy than in Spain and had hardly any association with age. Thus the variable is likely not regarded as an ideological item pitting the voluntary chosen role of homemaker against that of a worker—but, instead, is seen as an economic item, being unemployed against being employed, as the Italian translation suggests.

In Anglo-Saxon countries, however, the interpretation of "Housework Is Fulfilling" might not be related to biases in translation, but to genuine cultural properties which lend this item a partially economic interpretation. While all items designed to measure Gender-Role Ideology behave approximately the same in Germany as in the United States, "Housework Is Fulfilling" seems to tap something different.

### Measuring Male Roles

The intention behind the item, "Men Home Not Good," was to capture a "modern" solution according to which the woman exchanges her traditional role with the man's. The implicit assumption is that one parent should stay at home and care for the children. However, if this assumption is not shared by the respondents there will be problems in answering the question. In fact, a respondent can agree with the item for two opposing reasons: the woman should stay at home or both parents should work. Respondents in former socialist countries have the greatest problems in responding to this item because people in these countries do not see any advantage in the woman changing roles with the man. Both should work and the state should provide child care.

Almost the reverse is occurring with the other ambiguous "male" item, "Men Work Too Much." Agreement might suggest positive attitudes towards a more equal sharing of the household burden by both genders. Alternatively, it could mean that the absence of one parent is seen as detrimental to the child. Both aspects, having egalitarian gender-role attitudes and being pessimistic about the consequences of labor-force participation for the child, are in general negatively correlated and thus have opposite consequences with regard to answering the "Men Work Too Hard" item. It is only in countries where this item is not related to both of these dimensions that it comes close to the Consequences for the Family dimension. This is the case in at least some socialist countries where, again, people think the children will not suffer if the mother works and also do not believe the family suffers when men concentrate intensely on their work. However, people in these countries do not establish a relationship with the Gender-Role Ideology dimension because they believe women's emancipation shouldn't result from men changing their conduct, but instead from the state intervening to reduce the double burden for women who juggle work and family.

The lesson to be learned from this brief overview of selected problems in measuring gender-role attitudes in cross-national research is that the design of adequate measurement instruments needs significant empirical evaluation, using existing data and an incremental process for improving the devices. Until "perfect" measurement devices are developed, the partially defective data should be routinely checked for problems of functional equivalence using a variety of statistical procedures and include continuing evaluations of the translations. Problems of functional equivalence due to reasons other than translation bias are interesting and should be regarded as part of the explanation.



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