

FAQ 38: How do I compare data from parents and children?

What's the issue?

Many studies have shown that there is not always coherence in answers from parents and children when asked about the same issues. For example, parents might say that they monitor closely what their children do online, while the children might say that their parents do not closely monitor them. In the case of internet-related practices, the social desirability bias might manifest itself in the form of parents trying to depict themselves as “good parents” and children trying to pose as “cool kids.”

Common practice

To collect data from both parents (and adults, such as teachers) and children is not uncommon in studies where the focus is on children's behaviour. It is possible to combine information from parents and children in various ways, but these might be seen as the main alternatives:

- Parent as only informant (proxy)
- Parent as main informant and child as supplementary informant
- Parent as main informant and child as main informant
- Child as main informant and parent as supplementary informant
- Child as only informant

All these approaches have their advantages as well as shortcomings. There is a twofold advantage of comparing data from parents and children. First, it enables cross-validation of information on children's behaviour as adults are often more precise when it comes to measuring time use (especially for younger children). Second, the difference in answers from parents and children is an interesting concept of study in itself.

Questions to consider

Ideally, data from parents and children should be linked at the individual level. This, however, complicates the research design and (depending on the countries) calls for informed consent to be obtained from both the parents and the children, which in turn is likely to lower the response rate considerably. As a general rule the younger the children the more common it is to rely on parents or other adults as informants. This calls, of course, for some considerations on the validity and reliability of the information obtained. As a rule of thumb it is easier to obtain accurate information on behaviour (if children use the internet, for example, and for how long), but attitudes are more difficult to assess.

When children are asked to give information on their parents it is sometimes possible to cross-validate their information with comparison to other studies. An example of this is parent's occupation or educational level or parent's use of the internet.

Data collected from both parents and children can in itself be a source of rich qualitative analysis on semantic differences in “perceptions of reality”. Rather than focusing on similarities, the discrepancies between children and parents might uncover an underlying cognitive gap, especially when dealing with practices related to new media and newly emerging technologies.

Another issue related to comparing data from parents and children is connected to the changing/different cultural climates the two had grown up in. For example, parents in post-communist countries (labelled as “new use-new risk”) might be inclined to trivialize the gravity of internet risks, an attitude which stems from a “culture of violence” (Galtung, 1990), where ignoring their child being bothered by something online is marked by positions such as “kids are kids”, “they need to learn to fight back and stand up for themselves”, while children slowly learn that it's not okay to be bothered by something online.

Pitfalls to avoid

There are some issues linked to this kind of data. The comparison between the groups can, of course, be made on the aggregate level (looking at children as a group and the parents as a group). It is, however, not safe to assume directly that differences or similarities on the aggregate level hold true on the individual level. If, for example, a study reveals that a certain proportion of children do certain things on the internet and at the same time a considerably lower proportion of parents think that their children do these particular things, this does not allow us to assume that parents do not know what their children do on the internet.

An example of the difficulty in generalizing from the aggregate level to the individual level is that if a proportion of teenagers in 34 countries who have had sexual intercourse is compared to the proportion of teenagers who have been drunk at least twice, a very weak relationship is found between the use of alcohol and the likelihood of having had sexual intercourse. In line with that, Icelandic children hold the sixth place for likelihood of having had sexual intercourse and 22nd place for the proportion of 15-year-olds who have been drunk at least twice. When the same question is analysed on the individual level, however, for children in Iceland, 14% of teenagers who have never been drunk have had sexual intercourse compared to 83% of those who have been drunk 20 times or more.

Example of good practice

Examples of comparison on the aggregate level are some of the studies conducted as part of the SAFT project. In these studies, parents as a group and children as a group were surveyed separately. An example of a study where comparison is made on the individual level is UK Children go Online (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), which, for example, examined parental regulation of children and teenagers' online activities with answers matched at the individual level.

A researcher's experience

The EU Kids Online II data for Romania revealed significant differences between children and parents' accounts of children experiencing certain internet-related risks, this difference being the biggest amongst European countries for both children's general and specific experiences (e.g. children being bothered by something on the internet or children being bullied online). Previous experience with Romanian parents reporting on their children has revealed their tendency of presenting their children as 'good kids.' Therefore, the low parental reporting of their children encountering online risks might be ascribed to both social desirability and lack of awareness. Corroboration with data from other sources (quantitative and qualitative research, internet safety reports) confirm the lack of or insufficient parental awareness of internet risks, as well as their low digital skills, which further perpetuate lack of awareness related to what children are really facing online. (Monica Barbovschi, Romania)

References and further resources

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291–305.

Livingstone, S. & Helsper, E. J. (2008). Parental mediation of children's internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 52(4), 581–599.

The SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project (2006) *Parent and Children survey. 2004–06. Norwegian action plan for children, youth and the internet* and the European Commission Safer Internet Action Plan: Norwegian Media Authority.

UK Children Go Online Project. UK Children Go Online: Emerging opportunities and dangers. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at www.children-goonline.net