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Leibniz Institute
for the Social Sciences



Cognitive pretesting of sensitive questions for cross-cultural surveys

Methods and challenges

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Combining Areas of Research within Survey Methodology

**1. The Concept
of Sensitivity**

**2. Cognitive
Pretesting**

Adding the Cross-Cultural Perspective

1. THE CONCEPT OF SENSITIVITY

Categorizations of Sensitive Questions

Sexual behavior

Drugs and alcohol use

Criminal offenses and fraud

Ethical problems and attitudes involving
abortion, euthanasia and suicide

Charity

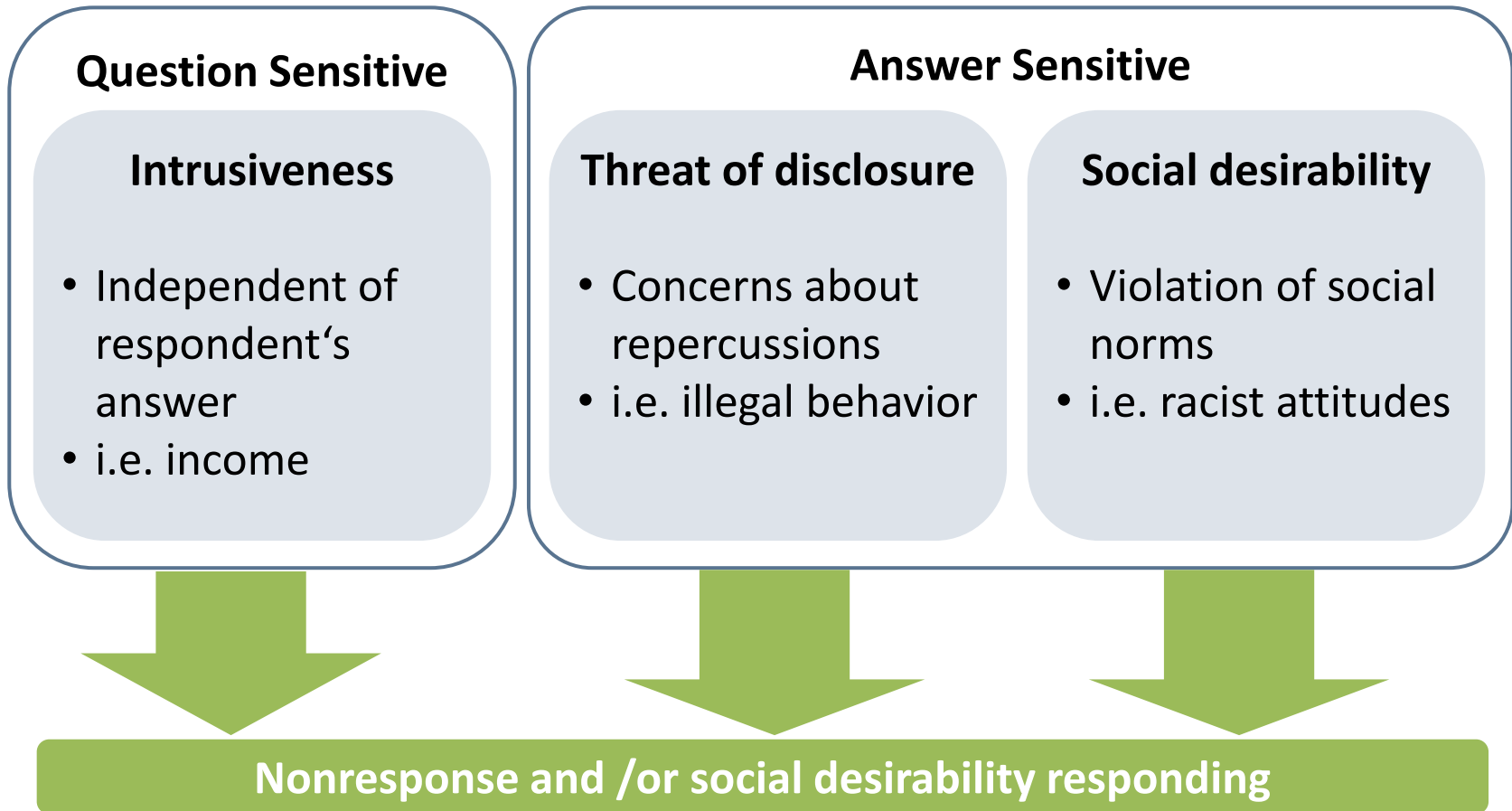
Politics

Medical compliance

Psychological problems

Diverse miscellaneous category

Conceptualizing Sensitivity



Social Desirability Responding Cross-Culturally

	Self-deceptive enhancement	Impression Management
Individualist	High	Low
Collectivist	Low	High
Horizontal Individualism	High	No correlation
Horizontal Collectivism	No correlation	High

Uncertainty avoidance (Bernardi, 2006)

Wealth / status (van Hemert et al., 2002)

...

2. COGNITIVE PRETESTING OF SENSITIVE QUESTIONS

Cross-Cultural Cognitive Pretesting (CCCP)

Cognitive Pretesting

Detect problems during the cognitive process

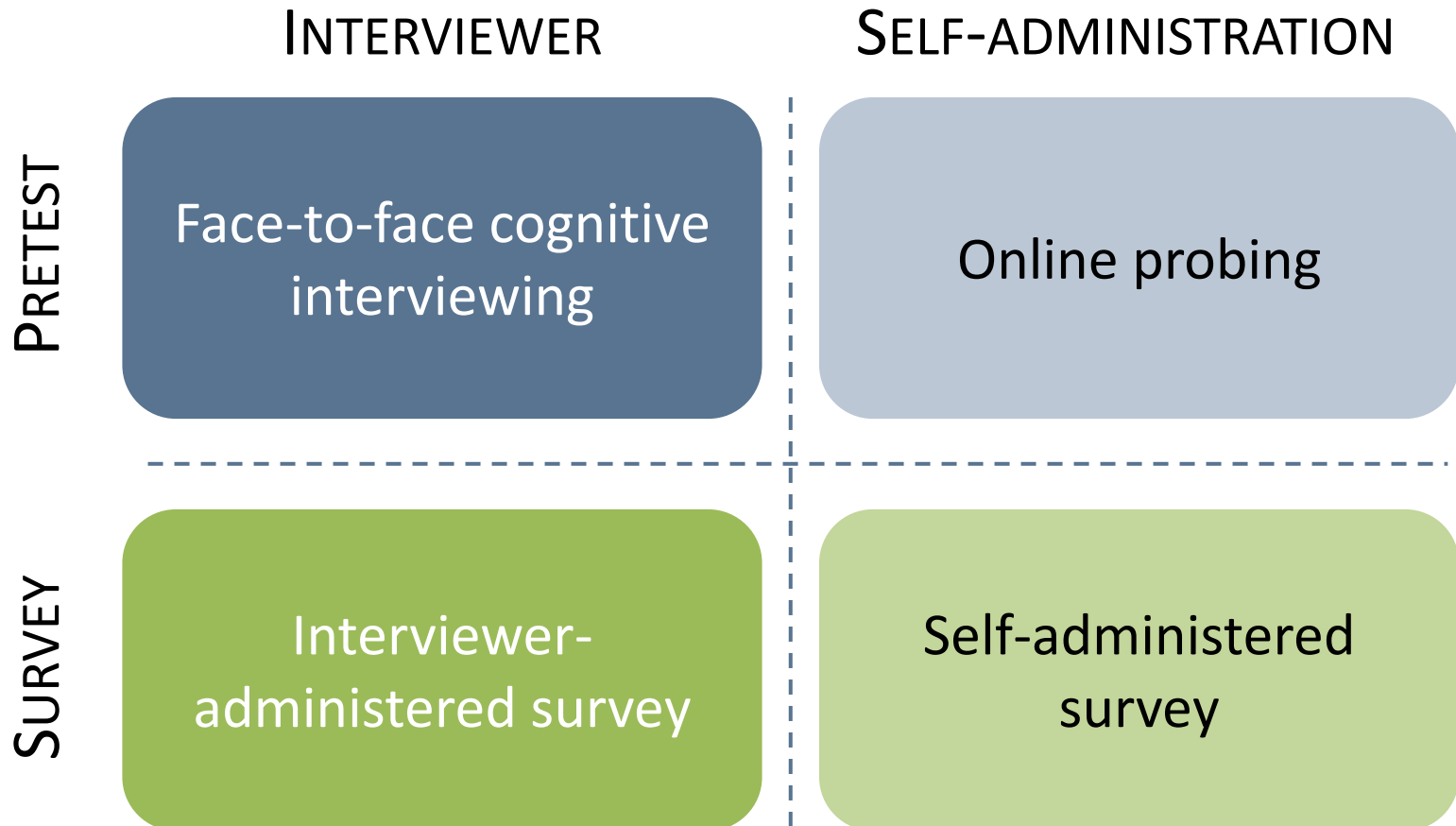
- Comprehension
- Information Retrieval
- Judgment
- Response

CCCP

Ensure cross-cultural equivalence

- Translation
- Cultural adaptation
- Generic questionnaire design

Pretesting Mode, Survey Mode & Sensitivity



Approaches to Cognitive Pretesting

	Cognitive Response Process	Question Appraisal
Viewpoint	Respondent	Evaluated question
Theoretical background	Cognitive process of survey response	Question appraisal systems, i.e. QAS
Source	Tourangeau et al., 2000	Willis & Lessler, 1999
Basic components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Comprehension ➤ Recall ➤ Judgment (motivation, sensitivity) ➤ Response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reading ➤ Instructions ➤ Clarity ➤ Assumptions ➤ Knowledge/memory ➤ Sensitivity/bias ➤ Response categories ➤ Other

Probing Sensitivity

Question Appraisal

**Sensitive question /
Intrusion**

Sensitive Content

- Is this OK to talk about in a survey, or is it uncomfortable?
- In general, how do you feel about this question?

Sensitive Wording

- The question uses the word “xx”. Does that sound OK to you, or would you choose something different?

**Sensitive answer /
Social desirability**

Socially Acceptable Response

- How did you come up with that answer?
- Do all possible answers here seem OK, or did it seem like there’s one that’s supposed to be the right answer?

**Sensitive answer /
Threat of disclosure**

- Under which circumstances would it be OK or not OK to give this answer?

3. CROSS-CULTURAL COGNITIVE PRETESTING OF SENSITIVE QUESTIONS – METHODS AND CHALLENGES

Cross-Cultural Cognitive Pretesting of Sensitive Questions

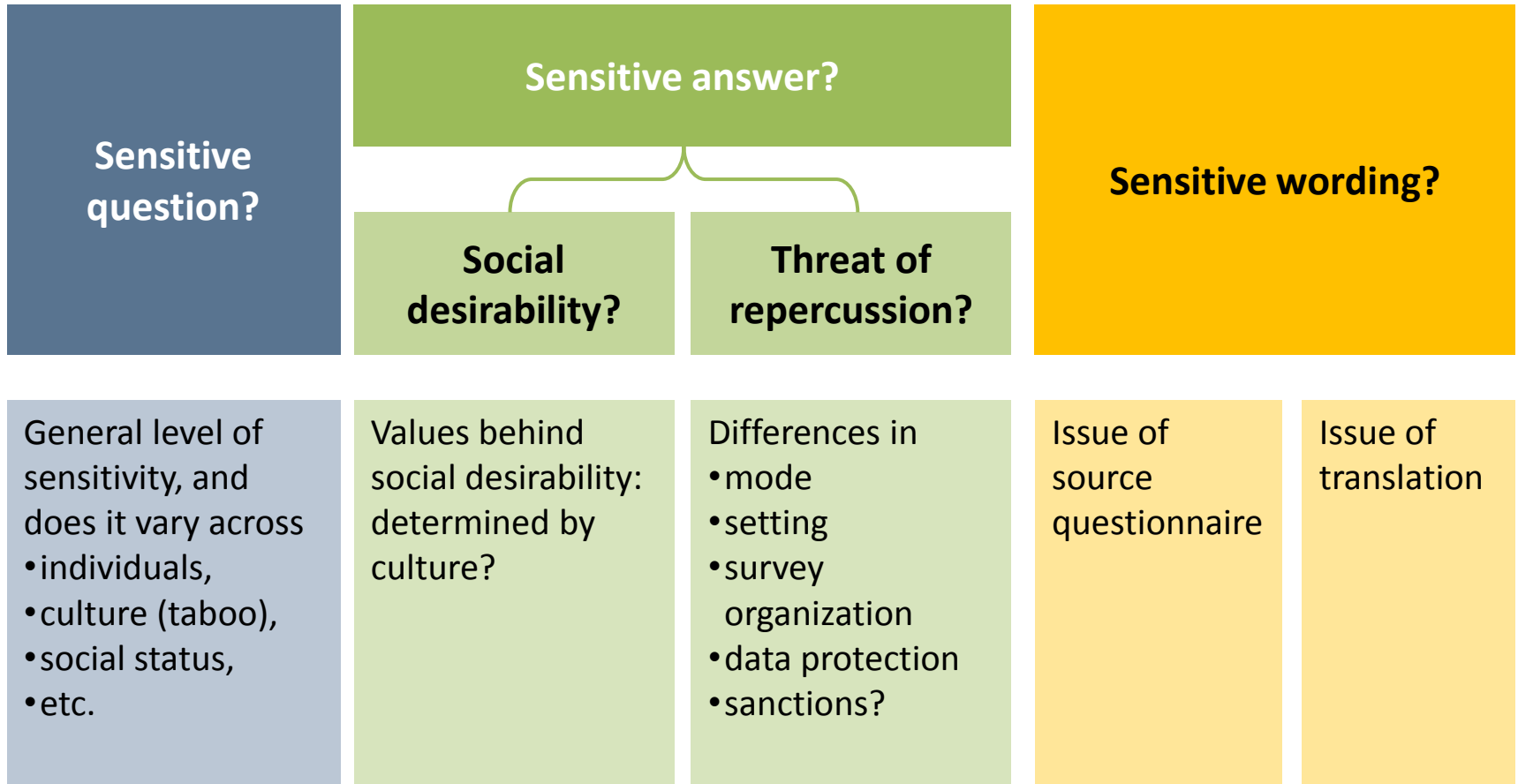


What can we realistically achieve with CCCP of sensitive questions?

Goal: cross-cultural equivalence of survey questions

- Do differences in response behavior depict differences in sensitivity across cultures?
- Do dimensions of sensitivity differ cross-culturally?
- Do issues of translation account for differences in perceived sensitivity?

Coding of Sensitivity for CCCP



What research is needed to advance CCCP methodology?

Pretesting mode

- Face-to-face cognitive interviewing vs online probing

Probing techniques

- comprehension vs category selection probes
- cognitive vs sensitivity probes

Evaluating pretesting methods

- Level of disclosure (indirect probing)
- Length of answers
- Number of themes

Thank you for your attention!

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