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

Lensvelt-Mulders, Hox, van der Heijden, & Maas (2005); Van Meter (2000); Lee & Lee (2012)
Conceptualizing Sensitivity

**Question Sensitive**

- Intrusiveness
  - Independent of respondent’s answer
  - i.e. income

**Answer Sensitive**

- Threat of disclosure
  - Concerns about repercussions
  - i.e. illegal behavior

- Social desirability
  - Violation of social norms
  - i.e. racist attitudes

Nonresponse and /or social desirability responding

Tourangeau & Yan, 2007  Lee, 1993
# Social Desirability Responding Cross-Culturally

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-deceptive enhancement</th>
<th>Impression Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualist</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivist</strong></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Horizontal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualism</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivism</strong></td>
<td>No correlation</td>
<td>High</td>
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- Uncertainty avoidance (Bernardi, 2006)
- Wealth / status (van Hemert et al., 2002)

Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006
2. COGNITIVE PRETESTING OF SENSITIVE QUESTIONS
Cross-Cultural Cognitive Pretesting (CCCP)

CCCP
- Ensure cross-cultural equivalence
  - Translation
  - Cultural adaptation
  - Generic questionnaire design

Cognitive Pretesting
- Detect problems during the cognitive process
  - Comprehension
  - Information Retrieval
  - Judgment
  - Response

Collins, 2015; Willis, 2015; Willis & Miller, 2011; Willis & Zahnd, 2007
Pretesting Mode, Survey Mode & Sensitivity

**Interviewer-administered survey**
- Face-to-face cognitive interviewing
- Pretest

**Self-administered survey**
- Online probing
- Survey
# Approaches to Cognitive Pretesting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Response Process</th>
<th>Question Appraisal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewpoint</td>
<td>Respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical background</td>
<td>Cognitive process of survey response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Tourangeau et al., 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic components</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recall</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Judgment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(motivation, sensitivity)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
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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?

Willis, 2005
3. Cross-Cultural Cognitive Pretesting of Sensitive Questions – Methods and Challenges
Cross-Cultural Cognitive Pretesting of Sensitive Questions

Based on Johnson & van der Vijver, 2003; Krumpal, 2013; Mneimneh et al., 2015
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

Sensitive question?

Sensitive answer?

Social desirability?

Threat of repercussion?

Sensitive wording?

General level of sensitivity, and does it vary across:
- individuals,
- culture (taboo),
- social status,
- etc.

Values behind social desirability: determined by culture?

Differences in:
- mode
- setting
- survey organization
- data protection
- sanctions?

Issue of source questionnaire

Issue of translation

Based on Willis, 2005, 2015; Willis & Zahnd, 2007
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!
References

References