Comparing Cognitive Interviewing and Online Probing for Cross-cultural Survey Design

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Introduction
- Large scale international survey programs are invaluable for comparative research
- Measurement equivalence (ME) as an important precondition: Cross-cultural comparisons are only meaningful if items measure the same construct across cultures and languages
- Context of this study: Development of new items on justice attitudes for round 9 of the European Social Survey (ESS)
- Justice attitudes are likely to be universally important, but may vary due to cultural context

Cross-cultural Cognitive Interviewing (CCCI):
- Commonly used, semi-structured method to identify threats to ME
- Verbal information is collected in face to face settings to shed light on the cognitive processes involved in answering draft questions
- Follow-up questions – probes – identify cultural and language specific connotations
- Interactive process, allowing complex techniques such as thinking out loud and emergent probing
- Logistical challenges: training of interviewers in all target languages, lack of experienced interviewers

Online Probing (OP):
- Recent technique of applying probing to web surveys
- Purpose: combining the added value of CCCI with a greater sample size and higher degree of standardization
- No need for interviewers, lowering logistical costs
- Less interactive, restricted to anticipated probes
- Can identify threats to ME in cross-cultural settings
- Lower response quality is compensated by the larger sample size
- Logistical challenge: back-translation of responses

Research Questions
Empirical test whether OP can be an efficient alternative to CCCI in developing cross-cultural questionnaires:
1. Does response quality differ between OP and CCCI?
2. Do both methods identify the same threats to ME?

Method and Study Design
- Existing items on justice attitudes from cross-cultural surveys are tested in CCCI and OP
- Convenience sample of international and bilingual university students; focusing on German, English and Russian
- Survey items on ideas of a just society, income inequality and fair treatment assumed to elicit country specific connotations
- Items are followed by comprehension as well as category-selection probes; CCCI allows for additional emergent probing
- All probes are asked in either English or German; no need for costly and time consuming translations
- Coding of open responses; development of separate coding schemes for each method drawing on existing coding schemes that assess the functioning of cross-cultural questionnaires

(1) Comparison I (response quality): Non-response rates, response lengths, degree of detail in open responses
(2) Comparison II (content): Threats to ME identified in open responses

Preliminary Results
- Analysis of a pilot focus group suggests that the basic normative principles equity, equality, need, and entitlement are relevant over-codes
- Preliminary CIs suggest that social justice is an important topic in all countries covered, with corresponding terms in their languages
- Common theme: relationship between justice and the rule of law
- Expectations regarding Comparison I and II: Response quality is assumed to be lower in OP, but compensated by larger N. We assume for OP and CCCI to generally identify the same threats to ME with CCCI providing more detailed results

Discussion
- OP should prove a useful addition in the development of cross-cultural questionnaires
- Recruitment and translation costs lowered by tapping into bilinguals’ expertise in two languages and cultures
- Bilinguals are atypical survey participants; questionnaires must perform well with monolinguals
- Efficiency of probing might vary across cultural groups obscuring threats to ME
- Open question: Does asking probes in a language other than the original stimulus hinder the identification of threats to ME? Effects of acculturation and language proficiency will be assessed

Figure 1: Examples of online probes related to items on justice attitudes.

Figure 2: Study Design, adapted from Willis & Zahnd (2007).

References