Probing for sensitivity in translated survey questions: Differences in respondent feedback across cognitive probe types

Background and Methods
- Cognitive interviewing is increasingly being used for pretesting survey questionnaires adapted to different populations.
- Cognitive interviewing was carried out to pretest the Arabic version of the World Mental Health survey instrument using different types of cognitive probes:
  1. Proactive direct
  2. Proactive indirect
  3. General probes

Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variation in respondent feedback length</td>
<td>General probe: lengthiest responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct probe: briefest amount of feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation in respondent feedback about the sensitive nature of the survey question</td>
<td>Amount and content of feedback differed by probe type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect probe: more feedback that topic is sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct probe: more feedback that topic is non-sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General probe: highest non-codable feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation in respondent feedback by probe type by survey question type</td>
<td>Most differences for questions about feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as non-sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General probe: highest non-codable feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Phrasing of the direct and the indirect probes varied on two dimensions: directness (self vs. others), and the feeling associated with the topic (difficulty talking about the topic vs. the discomfort talking about the topic).

Most differences for questions about feelings
- Indirect probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as sensitive
- Direct probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as non-sensitive
- General probe: highest non-codable feedback

Differences in feedback between direct and indirect probes are due to both dimensions and directness of the probe.

Variation in respondent feedback length
- General probe: lengthiest responses
- Direct probe: briefest amount of feedback

Variation in respondent feedback about the sensitive nature of the survey question
- General probe: highest non-codable feedback

Variation in respondent feedback by probe type by survey question type
- Indirect probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as sensitive
- Direct probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as non-sensitive
- General probe: highest non-codable feedback

Most differences for questions about feelings
- Indirect probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as sensitive
- Direct probe: most feedback identifying feelings question as non-sensitive
- General probe: highest non-codable feedback

Design changes could be implemented related to question phrasing, respondent instructions, or the mode of administration.

Conclusion
- In cognitive interviewing, when asked directly about the perceived sensitive nature of a survey question, a respondent might deny it so as to avoid any social stigma.
- Need for experiments designed to systematically assess differences in feedback elicited by different probe.

For more information, visit www.healthandstress.org.sa