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# Methodology

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**Special Issue**

Cognitive Interviewing  
Reporting Framework

**Guest Editors**

Gordon Willis  
Hennie Boeije

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## The Survey Field Needs a Framework for the Systematic Reporting of Questionnaire Development and Pretesting

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Although self-report sample surveys are of vital importance to many federal statistical agencies, social science researchers, and policy planners, these surveys currently seem to be accosted from all sides, and methodologists have identified a multitude of threats to data quality: Researchers bemoan falling response rates to sample surveys, sometimes approaching single digits for opinion polls and web surveys, and worry about bias due to either noncontact or refusal-based nonresponse. Telephone administration has been challenged by the wholesale conversion to use of cell phones among large segments of many general populations, especially among the young, forcing a conversion to list-based mail samples involving paper questionnaires. Meanwhile, a persistent trend toward technological development of communication devices such as smartphones and tablet computers has forced questionnaire designers to increasingly consider how to adapt to these newer modes. Finally, researchers have begun to incorporate multiple modes into their surveys, as it often appears insufficient to continue to rely on any one mode within a single survey.

Standing in the midst of all these challenges, changes, and developments is the questionnaire itself. Whether conveyed by computer or human, or spoken by an interviewer or read silently by the respondent, the questionnaire instrument essentially remains a collection of words used to convey ideas in the form of survey questions. These questions must be clear, understandable to a wide range of respondents, and provide information that will be useful to survey administrators in producing data tabulations and analyses, and then creating conclusions and making decisions. Hence, despite the importance of all the other factors that

we mention above, it remains the case that methods for creating, developing, and assessing survey questions remain as relevant as ever. The methods that have gained traction and become embedded in the survey methods field for testing and assessing questionnaires, and which have stood the test of time, mainly involve the empirical investigation of the manner in which survey questions are mentally processed, and whether these are the right questions to be asking in the first place. These techniques normally feature qualitative forms of interviewing, variably referred to as intensive interviewing, qualitative interviewing, in-depth interviewing, or – most often – as cognitive interviewing procedures.

The cognitive interviewing approach in particular has emerged as a primary means by which questionnaires are evaluated and deemed to be “fit for use” in the field environments for which they are intended. However, although cognitive interviewing, or cognitive testing, has become the usual and customary procedure for assessing questionnaire item function, this in no way guarantees that the method encompasses a set of optimal practices for determining whether survey questions function as intended. It is because cognitive interviewing techniques have been neither widely evaluated, nor practiced in a way that is necessarily consistent across practitioners, that it is vital to pursue the objective of creating a framework for the reporting of cognitive testing procedures and results. It is only through the systematic reporting of procedures, reminiscent of the increasingly careful description of laboratory procedures carried out through the development of the physical and medical sciences, that it will become clear whether particular practices are either especially useful (by analogy,

the development of hygienic practices to avoid bacterial contamination) or even harmful (i.e., the equivalent of bloodletting to treat disease).

This Special Issue of *Methodology* is devoted to the introduction and preliminary evaluation of the Cognitive Interviewing Reporting Format (CIRF), intended to serve as a checklist device to facilitate the harmonization of cognitive testing reports, and to induce report-writers to provide comprehensive information concerning the methods, assumptions, results, limitations, and implications of their research. We include an introductory manuscript by Boeije and Willis, which introduces and describes the CIRF reporting framework. Following this are three case study examples in which researchers made use of the CIRF in preparing reports of cognitive testing projects. First, Bode and Jansen apply the CIRF to organize their report of a project incorporating the Three-Step-Test-Interview (TSTI). Second, Vis-Visschers and Meertens reformat an already-composed cognitive testing report so that it matches the CIRF format. Third, Padilla, Benítez, and Castillo apply the CIRF to a mixed-method project that incorporates both

cognitive interviewing and psychometric analysis. Each group of authors considers both the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing the CIRF. In the final article within this Special Issue, Willis and Boeije summarize the results of the case studies, especially concerning the utility and usability of the CIRF, and close with some suggestions regarding the future use of this reporting framework in survey research that makes use of empirical pretesting techniques.

Gordon Willis

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