



National institute
of **Public Health**



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Face-to-face cognitive interviewing and online probing for sensitive survey questions on drug use

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Introduction

The aim was to test qualitatively and quantitatively the selected questions from the Slovene version of the Survey on Tobacco, Alcohol and Other Drugs:

- Qualitative testing: face-to-face & online probing
- Quantitative testing: pilot survey

Process



Qualitative testing

A two-step implementation:



Reasons for two modes:

- survey design
- sensitive survey topic (social desirability)
- low prevalence of the investigated phenomena

Qualitative testing:

1. Face-to-face cognitive interviews

- 12-22 questions (with filters).
- 12 respondents.
- Interviewer + two/three observers.
- A brief discussion after each interview, and an extensive discussion and analysis of written notes after the completion of all interviews → revision of some questions.

Survey question

Think aloud

A technique used to examine the respondent's thinking flow, whereby all thoughts are verbalised.

Pre-prepared probes

Specific questions used to explore respondents' thought process - developed in advance.

Spontaneous probes

Specific questions used to explore respondents' thought process - developed on the spot in order to follow-up on respondents answers.

Qualitative testing:

2. Online probing

Version 1:

All topics

- 12-20 questions (with filters).
- The link was spread out over the web.
- 34 respondents (24 in total): 17 female, $M_{age} = 36.8$ yrs.

Version 2:

Drug use and
misuse of medicines

- 11 questions (no filters).
- Sent to DrogArt (NGO) users.
- 15 respondents (6 in total): 11 female, $M_{age} = 24.5$ yrs.



Probes on usability of web survey
(1ClickSurvey tool)

Quantitative testing: Pilot survey

Two samples:

- **face-to-face** interviewing (CAPI) with a two stage sample of 600 inhabitants (61 % response rate).
- **web** interviewing (CAWI) with a SRS sample of 600 inhabitants (26 % response rate) divided into two halves → **comparison of the original and revised versions of two questions.**

An example of question development: The case of smoking habits

F2F CI

Do you smoke or have you ever smoked?

1 - I do not smoke and I never smoked.

2 - I do not smoke now, but I smoked in the past.

3 - I smoke now.

ONLINE PROBING

Do you smoke tobacco or have you ever smoked (cigarettes, hand-rolled tobacco, cigars, cigarillos, water pipes)? Please do not take into account electronic cigarettes.

1 - I smoke every day.

2 - I smoke occasionally.

3 - I do not smoke now, but I smoked in the past.

4 - I do not smoke and I never smoked.

FINAL WORDING

Do you smoke or have you ever smoked?

Cigarettes, hand-rolled tobacco, cigars, cigarillos, water pipes are included. Electronic cigarettes and snus are excluded.

1 - I smoke every day.

2 - I smoke occasionally.

3 - I do not smoke now, but I smoked in the past (regularly or occasionally).

4 - I do not smoke, but I tried a few times in my life.

5 - I do not smoke and I never smoked.

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**Initial version of the smoking habits question
– tested via face-to-face CIs**

**PILOT
WEB v1**

Do you smoke or have you ever smoked?

- 1 - I do not smoke and I never smoked. → **55 %**
- 2 - I do not smoke now, but I smoked in the past. → **30 %**
- 3 - I smoke now. → **15 %**

**Second revised version of the smoking
habits question**

**PILOT
WEB v2**

Do you smoke or have you ever smoked?

Cigarettes, hand-rolled tobacco, cigars, cigarillos, water pipes are included. Electronic cigarettes and snus are excluded.

- 1 - I smoke every day. **21 %**
- 2 - I smoke occasionally.
- 3 - I do not smoke now, but I smoked in the past (regularly or occasionally). → **24 %**
- 4 - I do not smoke, but I tried a few times in my life. **55 %**
- 5 - I do not smoke and I never smoked.

An example of question development: The misuse of drugs (F2F CIs)

- Introduction: ‘Medicines’ refer to psychoactive medicines available on prescription only, such as sedatives or tranquilizers (e.g. benzodiazepines or strong pain relievers (e.g. opioids). We are not interested in medicine that can be bought ‘over the counter’. ‘Misuse’ refers, for example, to the use of these medicines without prescription from an appropriate practitioner; on larger doses, for longer period, or for different purposes than prescribed.
- Question: During the last 12 months, have you misused medicines?

New question in Slovenian,
Finnish example in English
available

An example of question development: The misuse of drugs (online probing, DrogArt users)

- Introduction: The following questions refer to the **use** of **sedatives, sleeping pills and strong painkillers**, which are in Slovenia available only on prescription. An **inappropriate use** refers, for example, to the use of these medicines without prescription from an appropriate practitioner; on larger doses, for longer period, or for different purposes than prescribed.
- Question: During the last 12 months, have you **inappropriately used** medicines?


~~misuse
psychoactive substances
tranquilizers
benzodiazepines
opioids~~


An example of question development: The misuse of drugs (pilot & national survey)

- Introduction: The following questions refer to the **inappropriate use** of sedatives, sleeping pills and strong painkillers, which are in Slovenia available only on prescription. An inappropriate use refers, for example, to the use of these medicines without prescription from an appropriate practitioner; on larger doses, for longer period, or for different purposes than prescribed.
- Question: During the last 12 months, have you inappropriately used medicines? **We are only asking about sleeping pills, sedatives and strong painkillers.**


Prevalence (15-64 y, 2018): 2,4 %


Benefits and drawbacks of face-to-face cognitive interviewing

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- Respondents can verbalize their thoughts aloud.
 - Flexible and interactive – spontaneous probing when needed.
 - Controlled environment.
 - Additional techniques can be used.
 - Video/audio recording.

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- Time consuming; higher costs.
 - Respondents are not equally able to verbalize their thoughts.
 - Non-natural, artificial setting.
 - Problems with socially desirable responding.

Benefits and drawbacks of online probing

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- Larger number of respondents.
 - Less time consuming; lower costs.
 - Conducted in a natural setting.
 - Lower probability of socially desirable responding – suitable for sensitive questions.
 - Special groups of respondents can be reached.

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- Only computer users with access to the internet.
 - Does not allow to monitor respondent's thought process.
 - Less flexible.
 - High dropout rate.
 - Limited control of environment, more distractors.

Conclusions

- Qualitative testing: essential in identifying problems regarding understanding and answering survey questions.
- Online probing: particularly useful for testing questions on sensitive topics and for targeting special groups of respondents.
- Quantitative testing: valuable tool for pre-examination and comparison of the original and revised questions.