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Old Friends and Old Problems: Implementing Frequently-Used Question Types in the Cross-National Context

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Survey researchers know some questions are “bad news” – either difficult for respondents or difficult for the data collectors and analysts. Questions on household composition, income and ethnicity are familiar examples in the US context. Various strategies continue to be investigated to address collecting better and appropriate data on these topics. In the cross-national context these questions often raise comparable problems as well as comparability issue, multiplied by the number of cultures we are trying to accommodate.

However, in cross-national studies we are also often confronted with difficulties we did not expect -- principally because in the source questionnaire context the questions are not a problem. The paper looks at a number of expectable and unexpected problem questions pointing to the issues they raise for preparing cross-national instruments, adapting existing questions and administering instruments across countries. Examples are taken from questions on household composition and alcohol consumption, but also from a mental alertness test used for different purposes including procedures to decide whether to continue an interview.

Issues of address provision, spelling, memorising phrases, and provision of information on geographical and temporal locations are presented and the impact of cultural conventions and frameworks on required task completion discussed. The paper aims to address both micro and macro development and testing issues for extensively used questions.