FREE-LISTING TASK: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT'S FOR AND HOW TO USE IT

ПРОЦЕДУРА ФРІ-ЛІСТИНГУ: ЩО ЦЕ, ДЛЯ ЧОГО ВІН І ЯК ЙОГО ВИКОРИСТОВУВАТИ

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Studying culture is among the more complex and challenging tasks making the measurement of cultural phenomena far from unproblematic. Designing effective, culturally-sensitive measurement procedures is a central challenge across many social sciences interested in collecting reliable data about intangible things such as individual mental states or collective beliefs. The accuracy of data and the credibility of researcher's conclusions hinge on the robustness and sensitivity of the developed metrics and the precisions of the measurement process. Regardless disciplinary distinction, measurement also holds particular importance when studying social environments that are affected by cultural characteristics. Ethnographers often begin their studies by trying to identify and describe the cultural domains that are used by the people they are studying. One of the means to do that is by generating lists of items that the locals associate with the domain, which is called free-listing – a procedure developed by cognitive anthropologists. Recognition of free-listing as a productive tool in cultural research is increasing. A free-list is a free-association task that prompts a mental inventory of items an individual intuitively assigns to a given category. Free-listing is a simple and quick elicitation procedure based on collecting frequency counts and order of recall, computed from a pool of items obtained from multiple informants without the assumption of them being cultural experts. During this procedure the participants are asked to list features of the domain that come to mind, while the resulting lists allow insights into the local knowledge about the domain and its internal structure and variation. As an elicitation method free-listing is most useful as it requires minimal local knowledge on the researcher's part and therefore can be employed from the outset of the project. Free-listing can also be conceived as an alternative validity testing tool with respect to scale development procedure. The goal of this publication is to elucidate the purpose and function of the free-listing procedure, detail its steps and critically assess its practical applications and natural limitations.
Key words: *free-listing, cultural domain, culture, ethnography, emic approach, methodological training, cross-cultural research.*

Вивчення культури є одним з найскладніших і найвибагливіших завдань, що робить вимірювання культурних явищ доволі проблемним. Розроблення ефективних, культурно чутливих процедур вимірювання є центральним завданням у багатьох соціальних науках, що зацікавлені у зборі достовірних даних про нематеріальні речі, такі як індивідуальні психічні стани чи колективні уявлення. Точність даних та достовірність висновків дослідника залежать від надійності та чутливості розроблених метрик і точності процесу вимірювання. Незалежно від дисциплінарних відмінностей, вимірювання також має особливе значення під час вивчення соціального середовища, на яке впливають культурні характеристики. Етнографи часто починають свої дослідження, намагаючись визначити та описати культурні домени, якими користуються люди, яких вони вивчають. Один зі способів зробити це – створити списки атрибутів, які члени досліджуваної спільноти асоціюють з цією сферою, що називається «фрі-листінг», – процедура, розроблена когнітивними антропологами. Визнання фрі-листінгу продуктивним інструментом у культурних дослідженнях зростає. Фрі-листінг – це завдання на вільні асоціації, яке спонукає людину до уявного переліку елементів, які вона інтуїтивно відносить до певної категорії. Фрі-листінг – це проста та швидка процедура збору даних, що базується на зборі показників частоти та порядку згадування лексем, обчислених з пулу елементів, отриманих від кількох інформантів, без припущення, що вони є культурними експертами. Під час цієї процедури учасників просять перерахувати особливості домену, які спадають їм на думку, а отримані списки дають змогу отримати уявлення про місцеві знання про предметну галузь, її внутрішню структуру та варіативність. Як метод екстракції фрі-листінг є найбільш корисним, оскільки вимагає мінімальних знань локального контексту від дослідника, тому може бути застосований від самого початку проєкту. Фрі-листінг також можна розглядати як альтернативний інструмент перевірки валідності щодо процедури розроблення багатопозиційних шкал. Метою цієї публікації є роз'яснення призначення та функції процедури фрі-листінгу, деталізований опис її кроків і критичне оцінювання її практичного застосування та обмежень.
Ключові слова: *фрі-листинг, культурний домен, культура, етнографія, емічний підхід, викладання дослідницьких методів, крос-культурні дослідження.*

Relevance and research problem. Cultural notions do not exist in isolation in individual minds. Cultural ideas are embedded into a network of interrelated thoughts and concepts. These networks are organized in ways that link them to other ideas within cultural schemas of varying complexity. The connections and overlaps between these schemas give rise to larger agglomerations of culturally organized shared knowledge that guide the sense-making process typical for the cultural group's metal landscape. That way, they are instrumental to our ability to interpret our daily experiences, see meaning and valence in events, and establish the relations of cause and effect in the social world we inhabit. Explaining the logic of these connections is both the challenge for ethnographers and the task for methodologists [21; 27].

Ethnographers often begin their studies by trying to identify and describe the cultural domains that are used by the people they are studying [2, p. 81; 7]. One method known for its effectiveness in this task is free-listing. A free-list is a free-association task that prompts a mental inventory of items an individual intuitively assigns to a given category [4; 8; 11; 15; 19–21]. Recognition of free-listing as a productive tool in cultural research is increasing [10–13; 23]. As an elicitation method free-listing is most useful as it requires minimal local knowledge on the researcher's part and therefore can be employed from the outset of the project. Free-listing can also be conceived as an alternative validity testing tool with respect to scale development procedure [1]. Social scientists, most especially cognitive anthropologists, often emphasize the importance of testing construct validity and providing evidence of cross-task validity, yet it is rarely done in ethnography, even when multi-item scales are involved [1, p. 2].

While free-listing technique is widely and consistently used, the dynamic of its use reflects some debates and tensions underlying them. Some of the contentious issues include how to interpret salience, how to account for inter-informant variation within generated free-lists, and how to ensure cultural sensitivity while creating prompts for free-listing and interpreting its results, as well as the question of general depth of the interpretation allowed for by free-listing results.

Review of current research and publications. Free-listing has evolved from a niche tool for ethnographic field inquiry into a widely adopted, versatile method for different disciplines [4]. With its origins in cognitive anthropology, it was first designed to uncover cultural patterns expressed in cultural domain structure by capturing how individuals spontaneously list items related to a concept. Over time, researchers have recognized the breadth of analytic powers offered by free-listing – including introducing salience metrics, combining it with other techniques (such as pile sorting) or using it for scale development, – as well as its adaptability to diverse social contexts. During several decades, the frequency of each item and the order of citation were used as separate measures of salience [2; 27], but they were later combined into one Salience Index [4]. Computing the Salience Index is relatively simple, and while specialized software can be used [4], it can also be done manually in Excel (PivotTables).

Free-listing was initially developed by cognitive anthropologists in the early 1980s as a qualitative technique for exploration of cultural domains and was mainly used to explore how people in different cultural groups conceive of various categories such as kinship, food, diseases etc. To administer free-listing, an informant is usually asked to name all items that come to mind in response to a given stimulus *("What kinds of X do you know?"*). The resulting lists are then analyzed for salience and frequency counts across the informants to identify shared beliefs or collectively prioritized ideas [14; 24; 25].

Since its inception this technique has left the anthropological terrain and has been widely used to collect information in public health, ethnobotany, consumer behavior and marketing, as well as education and sociolinguistics [5; 8; 9; 17–20]. The technique has gained traction and is valued for its speed, relative simplicity and ability to uncover emic categories that are otherwise implicit.

Free-listing is usually employed as part of cultural domain analysis, item salience estimation, interview design and multi-item scale development. While its application is quite versatile, it is useful to review what free-listing procedure can be used for, what it can offer and what some of its shortcomings are. **This publication aims to** elucidate the purpose and function of the free-listing procedure, detail its steps and critically assess its practical applications and natural limitations.

Applications and limitations of free-listing technique

Free-listing is a simple and quick elicitation procedure based on collecting frequency counts and order of recall, computed from a pool of items obtained from multiple informants without the assumption of them being cultural experts.

Free-listing task: purpose and function

The purpose of free-listing is to uncover how individuals or groups mentally organize and prioritize concepts within a specific cultural domain. During this procedure the participants are asked to list features of the domain that come to mind, while the resulting lists allow insights into the local knowledge about the domain and its internal structure and variation. Free-listing is usually introduced at the initial stage of a project to help the investigator outline the salient features of the domain presumably unknown to them and to ensure the emic nature of the categories obtained in observations. It can also help obtain evidence of cultural sharing with respect to knowledge, based on similarities, inter-informant overlap and frequency of listed items. While free-listing collects qualitative information (e.g., words), it introduces the elements of quantification and is easily quantifiable [8; 11].

Free-listing task: how it works

Free-listing is an established, effective procedure that rests on three assumptions [12]. First, when participants engage in free-listing task, the order of items on the produced list reflects the degree of their familiarity. Things on top of the list can be assumed to be more focal and central with respect to other elements of the domain and are more available in recall, which means that they are likely to appear first. Second, individuals who know more about the domain would list more terms than novices who know less about the domain and whose lists will be shorter. Third, items mentioned most frequently tend to reflect local preference [12].

Once responses (i.e. lists of items) are collected and entered, the analysis begins with data cleaning.

The first step is checking for typos, unifying spelling, identifying and grouping synonyms. At this point the researcher has to decide[1] whether closely semantically related items should be treated as distinct concepts or collapsed as synonyms. Then based on the resulting lists item frequency is examined identifying which items appear most often across participants and which are unique[2] to each specific participant. Then, to assess the relative importance or prominence of items, salience scores can be calculated, which combine information on how frequently an item is mentioned, how early it appears in each list, and the length of the list itself. Items that are mentioned often and early tend to be more culturally salient. Further analysis comparing free-listing results from different social or age groups could be useful, as it can reveal potential insights or informative patterns in similarities, contrasts, omissions, and emphases embedded into free-listed items.

Free-listing task: what it can and cannot do

Free-listing can be administered for a wide array of spheres [5; 9; 17; 18; 22; 26] and in various formats – including walking [13] – and offers invaluable insights, most notably to prevent an inadvertent imposition of researcher's own categories. In various combinations of groups of free-listing informants, it can generate rich and nuanced information that provides a practical foundation for forthcoming interviews or scale development. It does not require large samples to work, can be administered to several individuals simultaneously, and offers substantial understanding about the features of the domain without demanding extensive local knowledge from the researcher.

While a useful and practical elicitation tool, free-listing procedure has its limitations [4; 13]. One of the difficulties deals with recall bias, as an individual can forget items or only list the most obvious or trivial ones that lack nuance and elaboration. Another aspect of recall deals with effects of order, namely that the items that appear at the top of the list may just be easier to recall. Depending on the domain and historical context, items can be reduced to the list of things that are most frequently displayed in the media or on social network websites, or are salient due to the circumstances rather than their inherent salience to the group (for example, as in case of an impending final exam, a physical injury, a scheduled surgery or an ongoing war).

Another aspect of limitations associated with free-listing has to do with the fact that this procedure elicits words. In this case the length and contents of the generated inventory would depend on the extensiveness of one's lexicon. While the role of cultural capital and social background is rarely discussed in the context of free-listing, these factors do influence the word use (metaphors, irony etc.), size of vocabulary and linguistic style.

Another limitation of free-listing is that while the items provide structure and offer a tentative outline of the domain, they do not reveal the relationships among themselves (thus falling short of uncovering inter-item correlations) or support exploration of logical networks linking them. We also do not gain an understanding as to why the item was chosen, so the rationale behind the item selection remains unclear.

Conclusions. Cultural knowledge is not perfectly homogenous but accommodating a number of variants circulating within a group. Some individuals are more knowledgeable about a cultural domain, others less so. One likely source of the existing intra-cultural variation in knowledge is simply the amount of knowledge one possesses about the domain (i.e. "expertise" or "competence"). Yet to understand how cultural knowledge is socially distributed, it is important to consider not only the distinctions in how much information one has, but also variations in its content and structure. Differences in shared knowledge within a group are also shaped by various social factors such as age, education, gender etc. Different social groups can hold quite distinct worldviews shaped by the underlying foundational cultural assumptions that they uphold or contest. These assumptions guide individual's behavior in the society, mold their mental habits, and affect life outcomes. Devising instruments to measure cultural knowledge is therefore a task of practical importance.

Designing effective, culturally-sensitive measurement procedures is a central challenge across many social sciences interested in collecting reliable data about intangible things such as individual mental states or collective beliefs [1; 16]. The accuracy of data and the credibility of researcher's conclusions hinge on the robustness of the developed metrics and the precisions of the measurement process. Regardless disciplinary distinction, measurement remains a vital element of scientific inquiry. It also plays a crucial role in all scholarly endeavors and holds particular importance when studying social environments [3; 6; 28]. Rigorous measurement serves as the primary link between the researchers and the real-world phenomena they seek to understand and explain – a particularly critical function when the object of study is affected by cultural factors [28]. Free-listing is a valuable methodological tool that bridges the emic perspective with the potential for developing rigorous measurement. Ethnographic techniques such as free-listing can be used to further refine the operationalization of research constructs. As a data extraction method, it enables to capture cultural nuance and supports procedures that allow for direct validity testing (i.e. multi-item scale development) thus strengthening the overall measurement network.

[1] At this juncture some subjectivity enters the analysis, as the resulting salience scores are dependent on the perception and similarity judgment of the researcher.

[2] However, frequency alone does not offer an exhaustive explanation, and often quite many of the listed items are unique (appearing only once). This proportion depends on the domain in question.

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