Initial contact phase and reissuing of 'initial nonresponse' in ESS Round 7 in Belgium: an evaluation

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1. Introduction

For the European Social Survey, two main goals are set concerning fieldwork performance: the noncontact rate may not exceed 3% of the total sample, and the minimum target response rate must be 70%. The former of these goals is regularly achieved in most participating countries. As for the second goal, such a high a response rate is becoming increasingly difficult to attain and is rather exceptional. Certain societal evolutions such as new technologies, increasingly diverse family composition or survey fatigue may have eroded the favorable climate in which surveys could successfully recruit cases (Beullens, Loosveldt, & Vandenplas, 2017). The ESS suggests a number of measures that can be taken in order to attain a higher response rate, such as training interviewers in obtaining cooperation, sufficient remuneration of the interviewers, advance letters and incentives for the sampled persons, allowing time for multiple visits at different times of the day and in different days of the week, and close fieldwork monitoring (Stoop, Koch, Halbherr, Loosveldt, & Fitzgerald, 2016). Another measure which has garnered a lot of support is reissuing some or all of the initial cases that did not complete an interview.

Reissuing describes a process to re-attempt a sample unit that initially did not take part in a survey for some reason (refusal, non-contact, ….). Instead of accepting this outcome however, the survey organization may choose to make further attempts to convert this sample unit into an interview. These additional attempts may be from the same interviewer, or another interviewer may contact them (Burton, Laurie, & Lynn, 2006; Tarnai & Moore, 2008). It is important to keep in mind that while reissuing may result in a higher response rate, there is no general consensus that it also reduces bias in the data (Beullens & Loosveldt, 2012; Schouten, Cobben, & Bethlehem, 2009).

For the assessment of the effect of the reissue procedure, it is important to define this procedure exactly. For this paper, the reissues will start when a new interviewer is assigned to a case after the first interviewer has completed all contact attempts in the initial contact phase and has not managed to complete an interview (Gideon, 2012). This means that the outcome of the initial contacts is not taken into account.

Survey organizations may select the follow-up interviewer based on any number of characteristics. Sometimes better trained, more experienced interviewers with a high response rate in the first part of the fieldwork or in previous surveys are utilized (Stoop, Koch, Halbherr, Fitzgerald, & Widdop, 2014). In other cases they are chosen based on their gender, age or ethnic background in order to maximize the probability of converting cases in the reissue phase (Gideon, 2012). Previous studies concerning the impact of interviewer characteristics on the conversion rate have delivered results suggesting this may have a real impact on response rates (Beullens, Billiet, & Loosveldt, 2009; Blom, Leeuw, & Hox, 2010; Vercruyssen, Wuyts, & Loosveldt, 2017). For ESS Round 3, the interviewer impact on conversion success is considerable. When high-quality interviewers from the initial phase are deployed in reissues, conversion rates are significantly affected in a positive way. It should also be noted that

refusals that take place with those high-quality interviewers in the initial phase are unlikely to be converted afterwards (Beullens et al., 2009).

With both the declining response rates in general and the increasingly important part of the reissues in mind, certainly for the ESS, one of the goals of this paper will be to find potential ways of optimizing the initial contact and reissue procedure for future rounds of the European Social Survey. In particular, we aim to focus on the interviewer response rates and their potential effect on the probability of conversion in reissues. As we touched upon in the previous paragraph, literature has indicated that refusals with a high-quality interviewer in the initial phase are unlikely to be converted. This evidence, which dates from round 3 of the ESS, is one of the central hypotheses around which we will work here. We will attempt to confirm this finding for round 7 in Belgium, as well as outline a more detailed analysis of how these interviewer response rates affect the conversion probability.

2. Impact of reissues on final response outcome of the ESS Round 7 in Belgium

Fieldwork for Round 7 of the ESS in Belgium started on September 15th 2014 and ended on February 1st 2015. The fieldwork activities were closely monitored by the Belgian ESS-team via fieldwork reports, based on contact forms filled out by the interviewers. The participating interviewers were assigned cases in sets of nine (one cluster) or eighteen (two clusters), depending on the regional availability of the interviewers. Additional sets were assigned only after completion of previous clusters and after a positive evaluation of the interviewer performance by the ESS team (Barbier, Wuyts, Italiano, & Loosveldt, 2016). The 151 interviewers that began fieldwork completed a total of 1506 interviews and received 965 refusals at the end of the first contact phase. The response rate was 47% at this point. This was far below the general ESS target of 70%, but also about 10% below the realized response rates in the previous rounds. 30% of cases refused to participate in the survey in this initial phase.

Out of the 1698 individuals that did not complete an interview for various reasons (refusal, noncontact, ineligibility or other), 1040 were reissued and contacted by a new interviewer. The survey organization selected cases for reissues until they felt they could not increase the response rate much further within a realistic time frame. A second reason for finalizing reissues at 1040 cases lies in the fact that, as we will note later in this paragraph, the response rate that is realized is in line with previous rounds of the ESS in Belgium. 740 out of 1040 cases selected for the reissues (or 71%) had refused to participate in the initial phase. 263 cases were noncontacts, 33 were classified as '*Other*' and 4 were ineligible. As mentioned before, reissues will be defined here as contact attempts made by a second interviewer after the first interviewer did not complete an interview with the case in the initial contact phase. These efforts resulted in a total of 263 additional interviews (64% of which were initial refusals), and 612 refusals (81% of which were initial refusals). We can also observe that most of the noncontacts in reissues were originally classified as noncontacts as well. Also, a majority of the '*Other*'-category in the reissue phase are initial refusals. Note that the response rate in the reissues is a little over half that of the initial phase, whereas the refusal rate nearly doubled. At the end of fieldwork activities, Round 7 of the ESS in Belgium totals 1769 interviews, with 837 final refusals. This corresponds to a total response rate of 55.2%, in line with previous rounds of the ESS in Belgium.

Table 1: Distribution of contact outcomes after initial contact phase and reissue phase, ESS Round 7 Belgium

		Initial contact phase					
		Interview	Non contact	Refusal	Other	Ineligible	Total
Reissue phase	Interview	-	79	168	16	-	263
	Noncontact	-	54	12	3	3	72
	Refusal	-	105	498	9	-	612
	Other	-	15	52	4	-	71
	Ineligible	-	10	10	1	1	22
	Not selected for reissues	1506	100	225	253	80	2164
	Total	1506	363	965	286	84	

2.1. Impact of the interviewers

2.1.1. Successful interviewers

After this general overview of the initial and results and the impact of the reissue procedure, we will look at how successful the interviewers were during the initial contact phase, and to which extent they participate in the reissue phase. We do this because previous literature indicates that interviewers may be selected for reissues based on their initial response rates (Gideon, 2012; Stoop et al., 2016), and we want to confirm whether or not this is the case in Round 7 in Belgium. Table 2 shows that 38 of the 151 interviewers (or 25.2%) can be considered successful, meaning they have a response rate of over 60% in the initial contact phase. 37% of the interviewers realized a response rate between 40% and 60% and the response rates of 30% of interviewers are in the interval 20%-40%. Finally, 7.3% of our interviewers cannot obtain a response rate of at least 20% in the initial contact phase. Of those 38 successful interviewers, 21 (or 55.3%) have been selected to contact reissued cases. An additional 32 interviewers that were selected, managed an initial response rate between 40% and 60%. This leads us to conclude that the majority of interviewers in the reissue phase (53 out of 62 interviewers or 85%) had a fairly respectable to very good response rate in the initial contact phase.

In the reissue phase the response rate is, as expected, much lower overall. We observe only 3 interviewers that can be considered successful, with more than half of the selected interviewers (54.8%) not managing to get a response rate over 20%. The response rate of 66% (or 2/3) of our successful interviewers in the initial phase has dropped below 40% during reissues. For the group with 40%-60% response in the original phase, exactly half of them drop below 40% in reissues. It should be noted that out of the 11 interviewers that still manage a response rate over 40% in the reissue phase, 7 came from our initial group of most successful interviewers. This indicates that, even though it becomes harder to obtain a higher response rate in general, the high-quality interviewers still seem most capable to realize an acceptable response rate. The results also illustrate that for the same sample cases, some interviewers are more successful during the contact phase than others.

Table 2: Distribution of interviewers across initial contact phase and reissue phase by interviewer response rate, ESS Round 7 Belgium

		Initial contact phase				
		< 20%	20%-40%	40%-60%	> 60%	Total
Reissue phase	< 20%	-	7	20	7	34
	20%-40%	1	1	8	7	17
	40%-60%	-	-	2	6	8
	> 60%	-	-	2	1	3
	Not selected for reissues	10	38	24	17	89
	Total	11	46	56	38	

2.1.1. The odds of conversion in reissues

Table 2 indicates that the response rate is a major factor for the survey organization in deciding whether or not an interviewer is selected for reissues. Bearing in mind a central point of this paper, which is confirming the findings of previous literature concerning low conversion probabilities of initial nonresponse with high-quality interviewers in ESS round 3, we will investigate if the odds of obtaining an interview in the reissue phase are influenced by the response rate of the interviewers in the initial phase. We ran a logistic regression on the 1040 cases who were selected for reissues to estimate the odds of obtaining an interview in this phase, taking into account several control variables pertaining to the sample units (age and gender), whether cases are categorized by the interviewer as a hard of soft refusal at the moment of the case's first refusal, as well as our main independents; the response rate in the initial contact phase of interviewer 1 and the response rate in the initial contact phase of interviewer 2 (these being the interviewers which participate in reissues).

The results of the logistic regression indicate that the gender of the reissued cases seems to have a significant impact on the odds of an interview in reissues. Age, which is not significant, is found to have a very small negative effect, and women seem to have significantly lower odds of being interviewed in reissues than men. Whilst being categorized as a soft refusal has no significant impact on the odds of an interview in the reissue phase, the effect that presents itself is very large and positive. A possible reason for the magnitude of this effect may be found in the small group size of the soft refusals (n = 6). Hard refusals, on the other hand, are found to have significantly lower odds of being interviewed in reissues.

Table 3: Odds ratios of an interview in reissues after controlling for age, gender, hard/soft refusal, response rate of interviewer 1 in initial contact phase and response rate of interviewer 2 in initial contact phase, ESS Round 7 Belgium, logistic regression

	Interview in reissues
	Odds Ratio
Constant	0.22***
Age	0.99
Gender	
Female	0.71*
Refusals	
Soft refusals	2.06
Hard refusals	0.54***
Initial response rates interviewers	
Initial response rate interviewer 1	0.98**
Initial response rate interviewer 2	1.03***

Note: *: p < 0.05; **: p < 0.01; ***: p < 0.001

Reference categories: Male (for gender) and No refusal (for type of refusal).

Our main independent variables deal with the response rates of both groups of interviewers in the initial contact phase. We observe that the response rate of interviewer 1 in the initial contact phase (the original interviewer) has a significant negative impact on the odds of an interview for the 1040 cases in the reissue phase. This means that if a case was interviewed by a successful interviewer in the initial phase, their odds of conversion will be lower than if the case was initially interviewed by a less successful interviewer. This seems to indicate that the so-called high-hanging fruit (nonresponse of successful interviewers) are harder to convert than the low-hanging fruit (nonresponse of unsuccessful interviewers). These results were within our expectations, since analysis on round 3 of the ESS presented similar results (Beullens et al., 2009). For the response rates of interviewer 2 in the initial phase, the odds of conversion are positive and significant. This is no surprise either, since this group mainly consists of interviewers with a high response rate in the initial phase. As we saw in the previous table, even though successful interviewers from the initial phase cannot repeat their high response rate in reissues, they still seem more capable to convert cases than the (slightly) less successful interviewers selected.

3. Conclusion & points of discussion

This evaluation of the initial contact phase and the reissue phase of the ESS Round 7 in Belgium is aiming to contribute to the discussion concerning response rate maximization. Since we wanted to investigate if there were ways through we could optimize the initial contact and reissue procedure for the ESS, these findings may prove useful to answer that question. As mentioned in the introduction, reissuing cases is a popular method to increase the response rate, which the ESS encourages. However, the reduction of bias is an equally (or even more) important issue for these samples. With that in mind, we wish to focus on the analysis of the odds of an interview amongst the reissues. To recapitulate, the higher the response rate of the interviewer in the initial contact phase, the lower the odds of an interview in reissues for those 1040 cases selected. This is interesting since it indicates that cases that get contacted by high-quality interviewers in the initial contact phase, but do not get interviewed, are harder to convert than cases contacted by lower-quality interviewers. This confirms the earlier findings by Beullens et al. (2009), performed on data of the ESS round 3. In order to maximize the response rate, it would be advisable to take the route of least resistance and focus on cases initially contacted by low-quality interviewers (Stoop et al., 2014). But will this have any sort of impact on the bias in our sample? Striving for the maximization of response rates has long been paired with the belief that this would decrease bias, but recent studies have shown that this is not necessarily the case (Beullens & Loosveldt, 2012; Schouten et al., 2009; Stoop et al., 2014). We are inclined to believe that it would be more beneficial to reissue those cases contacted by the high-quality interviewers in the initial contact phase. Whilst it may be more difficult to convert them, and would likely result in a lower response rate than if the focus would be on the cases from low-quality interviewers, the reduction of bias in our data may make up for this loss. Ideally, of course, we would re-contact all cases that did not participate initially, but due to financial and time constraints, this is not a realistic possibility.

4. References

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