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A reflection on past rounds of the European Social Survey: Revisiting non-response from a longitudinal perspective

Hideko Matsuo & Geert Loosveldt

Center for Sociological Research, Leuven University

Parkstraat 45 Bus 3601
3000 Leuven
tel: +32 16 32 31 61
fax: +32 16 32 33 65
email: Hideko.Matsuo@soc.kuleuven.be

Abstract

Response rates for major longitudinal surveys in Europe and elsewhere have decreased and this may increase non-response bias and decrease data quality. This may hamper cross-national research focusing on urgent issues confronting today's society like health, ageing, work and family, immigration, and political participation. Taking the European Social Survey during the past ten years as an example, the average response rate for participating countries for Round 5 (60.1%) is lower than that for the previous round (61.9%) and almost equal to that of Round 1 (60.3%). At the same time, response rates differ substantially particularly between countries in each round. Focusing on those countries that participated in the past five rounds of ESS, this paper first maps overall response and non-response patterns per round. It then reviews country-specific response and non-response trends. Next, it attempts to link these trends to, on the one hand, compliance with survey protocols (regarding, for instance, the implementation of the contact procedure) designed to minimize non-contacts and final refusers, and to, on the other hand, administrative and survey design factors concerning survey instruments, interviewer attributes, and respondent recruitment modes. Through this presentation, we hope to exchange views on and experiences with issues that challenge cross-national surveys today and seek for useful advice and recommendations.

Key words: European social survey; cross-national surveys; response; non-response; non-contact; refusal/refuser; survey design; interviewer attributes; contact procedure

1. Introduction

Increasing non-response rates cause concern in survey research since they are not unlikely to increase non-response bias. Cross-national surveys also experience increasing non-response rates, and the European Social Survey (ESS) is not an exception. This note provides a general overview of outcome (response and non-response) rates for the past five rounds of ESS. It first maps overall and country-specific trends and patterns per round (section 1). It then analyses potential reasons for increasing non-response rates focusing, first, on country compliance with survey protocols designed to minimize the non-contact and final refusal rates (e.g. refusal conversion) (section 2) and, next, on administrative and survey design factors concerning survey instruments, interviewer attributes, and respondent recruitment modes (section 3). This discussion note summarizes working papers, books and chapters produced for the analysis of ESS Rounds 1-5.

The following questions can guide the discussions to be held during the meeting:

1. Can increasing non-response rates be related to decreasing country compliance with survey protocols?

2. Are administrative and survey design factors responsible for increasing non-response rates?

3. What practical measures can be taken to halt increasing non-response rates? How do other cross-national or national surveys deal with this issue? Can surveys be made more attractive to the target population? Do sample sizes need to get smaller, questionnaires shorter (e.g. focusing on key questions, relying on administrative data), interviewer and respondent burdens smaller (e.g. mixed mode designs), etc.?

1. Overall response and non-response rate patterns in past rounds of ESS

Aggregating response and non-response (non-contact and refusal) rates for ESS Rounds 1 to 5, we observe that, after increasing somewhat initially, response rates have declined somewhat over time. Table 1 presents an overview of response and non-response rates based primarily on contact data files (Billiet and Matsuo, 2012; Matsuo & Loosveldt, 2013). Twenty countries participated in ESS Round 1. This grew to thirty countries in Round 4 and 27 countries in Round 5. Starting from 60.3% in Round 1, the mean response rate increased to 62.6% and 62.5% in the second and third rounds, but decreased to 61.9% in Round 4, and decreased again to 60.2% in Round 5. The mean non-contact rate started at 5.4%, decreased to 4.6% by the third round, increased in Round 4 (5.2%), and increased again in Round 5 (5.5%). The mean refusal rate started at 26.2%, decreased to 23.7% by the third round, decreased further in Round 4 (23.0%), and increased again in Round 5 (25.0%).

Aggregated response and non-response rates do not, however, allow us to understand what really occurs at country level: these rates not only vary over time, they also vary between countries. The highest and lowest response rate countries are different for every round (except for the lowest response rate country in Rounds 4 and 5, Germany). In Round 1, the highest response rate was observed for Greece (79.5%), the lowest for Switzerland (32.5%). In Round 2, the highest rate was observed for Estonia (79.3%), the lowest for France (43.6%). For Round 3, the countries were, respectively, Slovakia (73.2%) and France (46.0%); for Round 4, Cyprus (81.0%) and Germany (42.7%); and for Round 5, Bulgaria (76.1%) and Germany (29.7%).

For non-contact rates as well, the highest and lowest rate countries are different for every round (except for the lowest rate country in Rounds 1 and 2, Poland). In Round 1, the highest non-contact rate was observed for France (14.7%), the lowest for Poland (0.8%). In Round 2, the highest rate was observed for the Czech Republic (10.9%), the lowest for Poland (0.9%). For Round 3, the countries were, respectively, Estonia (13.1%) and Norway (0.8%); for Round 4, Turkey (14.1%) and the Czech Republic (0%); and for Round 5, Ireland (21.6%) and Bulgaria and the Czech Republic (0%).

As a result, the ranges (differences between maximum and minimum) for response and non-contact rates were large in Round 1 (47 and 13.9 respectively), decreased by Round 3 (27.2; 12.3), and increased again by Rounds 4 (38.3; 14.1) and 5 (46.4; 21.6).

Rather different patterns are observed for refusal rates. The range was large in Round 1 (36.3), remained at almost the same level until Round 4, and decreased in Round 5 (28.5). Switzerland was the highest refusal rate country from Round 1 to Round 3 (51.2%; 44.0%; 40.7%). The lowest refusal rate country was Hungary in Round 1 (14.9%), the Czech Republic in Round 2 (11.0%), and Cyprus in Round 3 (4.1%). In Round 4, the highest refusal rate country was the Netherlands (40.6%), the lowest Romania (4.6%). In Round 5, the highest refusal rate country was Germany (39.6%), the lowest Bulgaria (11.0%).

A country-level analysis shows that non-response rates are increasing. Continuous declining response rates are observed for Hungary (4 rounds) and for Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden (3 rounds). Steadily increasing non-contact rates are observed for Ireland (3 rounds). Continuous increasing refusal rates are observed for Norway and Sweden (4 rounds) and for Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Ukraine (3 rounds).

Particularly problematic are countries that started out with reasonably high response rates (65+%) but experienced dramatic decreases by Round 5: Estonia (23.1 percentage point decline between Rounds 2 (79.3%) and 5 (56.2%)); Finland (13.9 percentage point decline between Rounds 1 (73.3%) and 5 (59.4%)); and Sweden (17.9 percentage point decline between Rounds 1 (69.0%) and 5 (51.8%)). Germany started out with a response rate of 51.7% in Round 1 but experienced a decrease of 22 percentage points after five rounds.

In contrast to this, several countries experience the opposite phenomenon: they started out with relatively low response rates but experienced increases thereafter. These include Switzerland (20.7 percentage point increase between Rounds 1 (32.5%) and (53.2%)); the Czech Republic (26.9 percentage point increase between Rounds 1 (43.3%) and 5 (70.2%)); and Spain (17.1 percentage point increase between Rounds 1 (51.5%) and 5 (68.6%)). One must not forget, however, that there are a few stable response rate countries too (e.g. France and Poland with fluctuations of around 4 percentage points).

2. Country response enhancement modalities: compliance with survey protocol specifications on non-contacts and initial refusers; country fieldwork strategies

The question is whether the aforementioned fluctuations of non-response rates can in any way be related to the extent of efforts made during the contact procedure. This can be analysed through an assessment of country compliance with ESS survey protocol specifications on response enhancement

measures (European Social Survey 2012b). For Rounds 3-5, a similar analysis[1] was carried out and documented. It focused on compliance with the four so-called golden rules[2] for minimizing non-contact, and also studied refusal conversion efforts to minimize final refusers. With respect to the former, aggregate total scores are considered. With respect to the latter, three indicators are considered (coverage of initial refusers, success rates among recontacted cases, proportion of reluctant respondents in relation to total respondents).

Our assessment at the aggregate level in general shows that increasing non-response rates do not stem directly from non-compliance with survey protocol specifications. As reflected in aggregate total scores, compliance with the four golden rules generally speaking increases every round, although average non-contact rates also increase every round. In each round, there are also outlier countries (e.g. France, UK) marked by high non-contact rates in spite of high levels of compliance with the four golden rules. As for refusal conversion activities, average coverage and success rates remain more or less stable across rounds. Such stability is also observed at the country level. The coverage rate among initial refusers is high for countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands in every round, while in a number of other countries (e.g. Cyprus, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine), almost no refusal conversion activities take place.

The aforementioned rapidly declining response rate countries (Germany, Estonia, Finland, and Sweden) did not comply with the four golden rules to a large extent though. Germany and Estonia experienced increasing non-contact rates but their efforts to decrease them also remained limited. For Germany, Finland and Sweden, the coverage of initial refusers for refusal conversion was not that low, but both Germany and Sweden experienced decreasing refusal conversion success rates.

The rates for other types of non-response, neither refusal nor non-contact, are also high for these countries (Matsuo, 2012), which also contributes to high non-response rates. Our analysis shows that Estonia and Germany were marked by high proportions of other types of non-response (neither non-contact nor refusal) that could not be remedied through additional contact efforts. The current survey protocol does not contain specifications designed to decrease these sub-groups.[3] A round-specific issue may play a role here: high proportions of “respondent moved to unknown destination” in Estonia for Round 4, and “missing contact form” in Germany for Round 5 are observed.

Exceptions are observed for a few countries, which deserve further attention. Countries like Switzerland and Spain experienced relatively large increases in response rates. This is probably due to the serious efforts made in Spain to decrease non-contact rates, and in Switzerland to convert refusals. Refusal conversion activities are important for some countries as some countries have reasonable proportion of reluctant respondents in relation to total respondents. Countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland marked by a high coverage of refusal conversion activities had a high proportion of reluctant respondents at the end: the average proportion of reluctant respondents in relation to total respondents in Round 3-Round 5 was 13.5% and 6.3% respectively.

[1] Analysis on refusal conversion in Round 2 is studied in Stoop et al 2010.

[2] i. the number of contact attempts must be more than 4; ii. evening contacts; iii. weekend contacts; iv. period of time left between different contact attempts.

[3] Only in Round 6, nonresponse due to physical and mental sickness was recontacted to distinguish between permanent and temporary ones.

3. Survey design and respondent recruitment modes cross-nationally

Table 3 provides an overview of selected administrative and survey design factors that deal with survey instruments, interviewer attributes and respondent recruitment modes (ESS 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2012a).

Studying survey items in an aggregate manner per round, our preliminary assessment shows that most survey design factors are constant, while some other items improve in the direction of decreasing interviewer and respondent burdens. To begin with, , a number of countries make use of individual sampling frames (rather than household- or address-based); respondent recruitment modes involving pre-notification letters and brochures sent in order to initially contact the sample unit; and a timely start of the fieldwork as well as the employment of a manageable number of interviewers (<100). In addition, improvements are observed with respect to the use of CAPI, interviewer remuneration modes (payment scheme has improved, plus, more use of bonus), and respondent recruitment incentives (more use of non-monetary and monetary incentives). Reviewing said items at the country level, most countries sought for improvements in their design. This means most national coordinator and country teams tried to opt for individual sampling frames, CAPI use, and improved interviewer remuneration and respondent recruitment modes.

Current ESS documentation provides evidence that survey design issues are not directly responsible for stagnating response rates. More studies taking a closer look at respondent burdens (Biemer and Lyberg 2003), for instance, can provide support for this observation. Such review means how respondents consider surveys (cross-national surveys), their survey attitudes (e.g. difficult, time-consuming, stressful as well as long interviews, high cognitive burden), as well as their responses to evasive questions in surveys must be investigated well (Biemer and Lyberg, 2003). Such an exercise helps survey researchers and practitioners to reconsider principles and priorities with respect to what surveys can achieve and cannot achieve (or what they can best do) in comparison to the use of other sources of information that become increasingly available with minimum cost to measure attitudes and behavior of the target population.

4. Summary of discussion

Survey response rates are declining but our assessment shows that more extensive contact efforts and a better survey design do not necessarily result into higher survey cooperation of sample units. This note aimed to reflect on European Social Survey response outcome results over the past 10 years and to propose a discussion on how to stop the increase in survey non-response rates in many countries. As this note illustrates, response and non-response rates vary by time and by countries. The current exercise aims to stimulate a discussion involving national teams as well as survey organizations in different countries to discuss their local survey practices (both advantages and constraints). In the past, under Quality Enhancement Meetings (QEMs), staffs of fieldwork organization were invited to serve for this purpose, and such an endeavor extending this organization with other cross-national surveys will benefit us all.

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Appendix

Table 1: ESS Round 1 (2002) – Round 5 (2010): Level of outcome rates and its characteristics at country level

Statistics	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3**	Round 4	Round 5
(Response rate)					
Mean response rate %	60.3	62.6	62.5	61.9	60.2
Lowest response rate %	32.5	43.6	46.0	42.7	29.7
Highest response rate %	79.5	79.3	73.2	81.0	76.1
Range	47	35.7	27.2	38.3	46.4
SD	12.6	9.6	7.9	10.1	10.7
(Non-contact rate)					
Mean non-contact rate%	5.4	5.4	4.6	5.2	5.5
Lowest non-contact rate%	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.0	0.0
Highest non-contact rate%	14.7	10.9	13.1	14.1	21.6
Range	13.9	10.0	12.3	14.1	21.6
SD	3.52	3.01	3.11	4.10	4.8
(Refusal rate)					
Mean refusal rate%	26.2	24.2	23.7	23.0	25.0
Lowest refusal rate%	14.9	11.1	4.1	4.6	11.0
Highest refusal rate%	51.2	44.0	40.7	40.6	39.6
Range	36.3	32.9	36.6	35.9	28.5
SD	8.7	8.7	8.5	8.9	8.2
(Summary)					
N 70%+ response	4	6	4	7	5
N <3% non-contact	5	7	11	13	11

N (countries)	20	23	24	30	27

* Figures based on the analysis of the call record data and/or ESS documentation report (2012).

** Country with largest response rates is missing in round 3.

Source: Matsuo, H. & G. Loosveldt (2013) Report on quality assessment of contact data files in Round 5: Final report 27 countries. Working paper Centre for Sociological Research (CeSO) Survey Methodology, CeSO/SM/2013-3, p.52.

Table 2 Compliances related to non-contact rates and refusal conversion activities: Round 3-5

	Compliances to non-contact rates						Compliances and consequences of refusal conversion activities								
	Round 3		Round 4		Round 5		Round 3			Round 4			Round 5		
	Non-contact rates	4 rules efforts	Non-contact rates	4 rules efforts	Non-contact rates	4 rules efforts	% repproached	Success rate on reapproached	Dif. response rates %	% reapproached	Success rate on reapproahced	Dif. response rates %	% reapproached	Success rate on reapproached	Dif. response rates %
AT	9.23	0.05					6.24	0.02	0.03						
BE	2.88	0.75	2.25	0.99	1.30	0.83	68.59	0.24	4.75	67.30	0.12	2.35	41.89	0.18	2.73
BG	2.68	0.0	4.98	0.26	0.0		0.00	0.00		4.46	0.77	0.57	25.33	0.85	3.03
CH	2.22	0.78	8.67	0.13	7.30	0.35	71.97	0.15	4.83	86.51	0.22	7.81	80.40	0.22	6.30
CY	2.16	0.03	1.20	0.83	7.00	0.18	0.00	0.00		4.64	0.29	0.13	2.91	0.60	0.20
CZ			0.00	N.A.	0.0	N.A.				2.44	0.00	0.00	3.14	0.00	0.00
DE	5.01	0.05	6.39	0.11	7.40	0.23	51.21	0.55	9.93	55.85	0.40	9.48	36.72	0.12	1.78
DK	3.34	0.22	0.30		3.70	0.49	0.62	0.29	0.07	0.61	0.83	0.17	9.21	0.05	0.14
EE			6.55	0.23	10.0	0.21							19.61	0.25	0.88
ES	3.28	0.89	2.57	0.80	1.6	1.00	59.82	0.34	5.44	58.17	0.42	5.13	51.59	0.41	4.11
FI	2.68	0.11	2.65	0.16	1.70	0.07	29.73	0.14	1.02	59.60	0.18	2.49	59.31	0.17	3.10
FR	6.62	0.79	7.75	0.90	9.30	0.89	58.00	0.15	3.77	56.75	0.12	2.55	70.88	0.07	1.96
GB	7.16	0.71	7.88	0.50	5.90	0.91	70.91	0.13	2.77	58.24	0.21	3.39	58.40	0.27	5.48
GR			6.09	0.00	2.60	0.11				0.20	1.00	0.04	12.29	0.33	1.09
HR			1.05	0.00	6.90	0.40				41.10	0.44	5.26	32.45	0.25	2.97
HU	2.92	0.51	2.54	0.52	2.60	0.80	40.80	0.26	3.13	50.66	0.17	2.66	49.44	0.10	1.40
IE	9.08	0.12	9.14	0.30	21.60	0.08	45.04	0.34	2.48	41.43	0.23	2.59	100.00	0.13	0.00
IL			0.62	0.05	13.10	0.07				34.52	0.28	0.83	34.56	0.62	3.31
LT			2.85	0.00	11.30	0.12				0.00	0.00	0.00	18.16	0.16	0.92
LV			13.59	0.01						1.97	0.50	0.11			
NL	2.56	0.53	2.97	0.58	2.70	0.79	86.50	0.33	13.14	91.23	0.25	12.19	83.72	0.38	15.09
NO	0.77	0.10	0.90	0.13	1.40	0.08	47.02	0.27	3.79	54.60	0.21	3.94	75.08	0.18	4.81
PL	1.26	0.52	1.58	0.58	1.10	0.39	38.63	0.30	2.16	56.78	0.25	3.03	47.15	0.33	3.49
PT	3.77	0.16	3.04	0.26	3.20	0.14	9.76	0.25	0.52	0.00	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.		0.00
RO	9.98	0.0	13.14	0.00			0.00	0.00		1.39	0.00	0.00			
RU	4.96	0.07	5.07	0.35	7.80	0.07	24.86	0.18	1.14	36.00	0.15	1.42	21.14	0.24	1.26
SE	2.04	0.52	3.91	0.00	0.70	0.05	76.17	0.35	8.37	46.35	0.21	2.69	72.04	0.14	3.94
SI	2.86	0.32	4.72	0.37	3.40	0.32	49.12	0.41	4.00	37.25	0.37	3.53	29.95	0.46	3.63
SK	3.85	0.34	8.59	0.08	6.20	0.27	34.75	0.46	2.78	57.59	0.58	6.46	13.80	0.36	0.88
TR			14.09	0.01						19.33	0.09	0.34			
UA	5.28	0.0	10.51	0.02	7.40	0.14	4.78	0.06	0.07	3.59	0.30	0.27	6.70	0.14	0.23

average	4.6	0.33	5.2	0.34	5.5	0.39	38.02	0.23	3,37	37.31	0.32	2.74	35.65	0.26	2.91

Source: Matsuo et al 2009; Matsuo et al 2010; Matsuo & Loosveldt 2013.

Table 3 Selected items on survey design factors in longitudinal perspective: sample design; interviewer attributes, respondent recruitment modes

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3**	Round 4	Round 5
N individual sampling frame	9	11	9	11	11
N CAPI countries	9	11	11	13	14
N timely start of fieldwork[4]	16	18	23	22	18
N Interviewer N <100	6	8	6	11	9
N More than freelanced based (ex. employee)	N.A.	N.A.	9	9	8
N more than per interview based	2	5	9	10	11
N bonus given	5	9	13	14	10
N respondent incentives provided	9	13	15	17	15
N provision of pre-notificiation letter	18	19	19	22	22
N provision of brochure	11	13	15	16	13
N countries participated	**20**	**23**	**24**	**30**	**27**

[4] Fieldwork period that started between September – December of the corresponding year.