Nonresponse Strategies in the European Social Survey: Questions and answers
Document rewritten and edited for the nonresponse workshop, Ineke Stoop, August 2013

Note: the original document was based on recommendations from an expert group (comprising Lars Lyberg and Barry Schouten, CST members and chaired by Frauke Kreuter) and discussions at a Quality Enhancement Meeting which was also attended by around 10 National Coordinators . Based on this document recommendations will be formulated for the Core Scientific Team of the ESS, meeting in September 2013, that will then decide on the implementation of these recommendations.

Q1. The ESS sets a target response rate of 70%. Will there be no bias when response has reached that level?
A1. With a response rate of 70% there still can be substantial nonresponse bias. The higher the nonresponse rate, the smaller the *maximum* nonresponse bias, as the percentage of nonrespondents that can have an impact on nonresponse bias gets smaller. But when differences between respondents and nonrespondents are large, 70% is no guarantee against bias.

Q2. Why do the ESS specifications then mention a target response rate of 70%?
A2. There are several answers to that.

- As mentioned above, the risk of a large nonresponse bias gets smaller.
- In addition, when countries achieve a response rate of around 70% in each round, we assume that nonresponse bias remains stable.
- We also assume that a response rate of 70% in each country will make nonresponse bias comparable. If we lower the target, and keep aiming for a uniform response rate, we would have to tell countries to perform worse. That does not seem a good strategy.
- A response rate of 70% also seems to be a sign of organizational efficiency. Sharp drops in response rates are rarely caused by changes in survey climate, or target persons worrying about confidentiality. They are often caused by complications in fieldwork, e.g. interviewers having to work on another survey or lack of funds.
- And finally, when we don't ask for 70% in the specifications, what do we do? 60%, 50%, no percentage at all? That would make it very difficult to select a survey organisation in a public tender procedure.
- By the way, the US Office for Budget and Management prescribes a response rate of 80% http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/omb/inforeg/statpolicy/standards_stat_surveys.pdf (guideline 1.3). Below this level, in US governmental surveys nonresponse bias analysis has to be conducted.
- Ideally, a nonresponse bias analysis should also be conducted in the ESS, but preferably in all countries and not only when response rates are low (see also Q9).
- So at present the target of 70% remains.

Q3. But so many ESS countries will never make the 70% target response rate. Indeed, few of them do now. Shouldn't the specs take national context and limitations into account?
A3. Some countries have spectacularly improved their response rates over time, whereas the rates in other countries have gone down. It seems that improvements are possible in many countries. That is why the CST intends to focus more on continuous improvement than on a target that might be unattainable for some. Achieving a response rate below 70% - when a different target has been agreed upon in advance – will no longer be recorded as a deviation, although the achieved response rate will be one of the quality indicators. But, in practice, NCs won't have to tell survey agencies that they have to achieve 70% when this seems blatantly unachievable, given response rates in previous waves and in other national surveys. The approved national response rate will be considered as a quality indicator in the final quality assessment. A high response rate will remain a target, and the Fieldwork Questionnaire Team will discuss the national target with the NC before the fieldwork tendering process starts and also discuss ways to improve on the previous round.

Q4. How can we increase response rates?
A4. There is a lot of literature on this, and many good examples.
The Polish NCs give a very nice example of their response enhancing methods, indicating that well trained and highly motivated interviewers are crucial. To motivate interviewers external incentives (bonuses) are useful, but more so when combined with internal incentives (sense of a shared aim, motivation).
Individual sampling frames – if possible – are also a great asset in striving for minimising nonresponse bias, if only because they reduce the chance of undocumented substitution (see Q8). This might result in a lower, but more reliable response rate.
Interviewer training in recruiting respondents is very important. Training protocols should help interviewers how to react in different circumstances.
Much of the nonresponse literature focuses on *tailoring and maintaining interaction*. That means that interviewers have to adapt their approaches to the characteristics and reactions of prospective respondents, and that the more interaction they have with prospective respondents the better the chances of cooperation.
Another important concept in the literature is leverage-saliency. This means that there are pros and cons in participating in a survey. Good interviewers manage to make salient those aspects that have a positive leverage for a respondent, and downplay other aspects with a negative leverage.
There is a lot of literature on respondent *incentives* and *advance letters*. As there are differences between prospective respondents within a country, there are also differences between countries. That means that advance letters might have to be phrased differently in different countries (e.g. mention explicitly or do not mention at all that the ESS is a *European* Survey). Some countries will have to use substantial respondent incentives, other countries will not be able to afford this, and others won't need it. The CST will conduct a small review on the use of advance letters and incentives in the different countries and the different rounds and will discuss 'tailored' approaches with individual countries.
One of the most important issues in enhancing response rates is making sure there is sufficient time for fieldwork, individual interviewers start early and have time to process their assignment, and there is close monitoring (ideally on a daily basis) of interviewer progress. The Contact Forms could be an aid in this.
So whilst there are practices that are generally considered to be good practice, national approaches will differ. ESS CST nonresponse researchers will be keen to discuss tailored response enhancement approaches with national teams before the start of fieldwork.
The CST will also provide a recommended reading list for NCs and field directors.

Q5. What is the role of interviewers in enhancing response rates?
A5. The role of interviewers is crucial. They are the ones who visit the respondents, try to persuade them to cooperate, report how their efforts are working out on the contact forms and conduct the interviews. Good interviewers can be a major asset in both recruiting respondents and conducting the interviews. Not so good interviewers can cause nonresponse, may deviate from the rules for respondent selection and may have a large impact on the answers of the respondents. Interviewer training and briefing is therefore extremely important, as is a remuneration that is sufficient for interviewers to make their time spent on the ESS worthwhile. It is a problem in the ESS and other surveys that interviewers may easily drop-out or are insufficiently paid.

The ESS should collect information on how interviewers are recruited and trained nationally. The ESS should also evaluate and improve interviewer training and briefing (also on completing the CFs) in different countries, learning from the excellent examples that are already and acknowledging the different role, position, remuneration and experience in the different countries. In addition, NCs should share information on their current briefing and training practices. Based on the literature, central documentation and national experiences the ESS should provide a training manual also covering non-interview activities.

It would be good to set up surveys among interviewers to learn about their ideas and practices, either in the form of a standardized survey or in the form of (video) focus group discussions.
How interviewers are paid can have large effects on the outcomes of fieldwork. If there is a very high pressure on achieving (individual) response rates, this is an incentive to perform undocumented substitution. If there is no payment for a nonresponse, spending time on completing the CFs and recording all the unsuccessful visits is hardly rewarding.

Q6. How much effort should be spent on enhancing response rates by a few percentage points?
A6. That depends. If single men are underrepresented and married men seriously overrepresented, bringing in some additional married men is unlikely to decrease nonresponse bias. If, however, the additional respondents are single men, this might result in a more balanced sample composition and hence possibly in smaller nonresponse bias. As Bob Groves said: *Blind pursuit of high response rates in probability samples is unwise; informed pursuit of high response rates is wise.*
Extending fieldwork by weeks or months to increase response rates by a few percentage points also has serious drawbacks (and additional costs). On the other hand, in some countries refusal conversion substantially increases response rates, and focused response enhancement activities can bring in seriously underrepresented groups.
Towards the end of fieldwork, the potential gains of prolonging fieldwork to get a higher response rate should be discussed with the CST.

Q7. How can we pursue a more balanced sample composition?
A7. That is not easy. Let's first define what we mean by 'balanced'. This means that men and women in the sample, the elderly and the young people, the rural and the urban, the rich and the poor, the unemployed and the employed, academics and basic level of education only, interested and not interested in politics, the wary and the trustful, those in favour of and those against immigration (for example) have an equal probability of participating in a survey. If this is so, there is likely to be no nonresponse bias.
If auxiliary variables on these issues are available for respondents and nonrespondents, you can easily assess whether your sample is balanced or not. In the very best case, you will only have information on background variables such as age, sex, education, urbanicity, type of dwelling, employment etc. If these characteristics are related to core variables such as political and social trust, balancing will be useful. If not, the effects of balancing do not solve the nonresponse bias problem.
If you know in advance that some groups in your country are always underrepresented in the ESS, you can develop some *tailored design* for these groups. If people living in apartments, members of ethnic minority groups, single men, elderly with a low education, etc. are usually underrepresented, you can take advance measures such as approach these people early in the process, use the best interviewers, give additional incentives, etc. For this you will of course need information from the sampling frame, or detailed information on neighbourhood composition.
You can also try to develop some kind of *responsive design*. This means that you will have to monitor closely – preferable on a daily basis – how fieldwork is going, who responds and who does not respond. For this you will need the contact form data to be available during data collection, ideally at a daily base. You will also need auxiliary information on the entire sample to be able to monitor who has participated and who hasn't (yet). During data collection you can then adapt fieldwork strategies and again focus on the underrepresented groups. In some surveys other survey modes will be used to include these groups (telephone, web). In the ESS this is not (yet) possible (although people may be recruited by telephone in some countries (and in all countries in later stages)).

The responsive design requires contact data to be available electronically, with concurrent and useful auxiliary variables. In some countries this may be problematic. In these cases, a two-stage fieldwork design could be established. Mid-fieldwork, all

sampling units are reviewed and re-assigned based on the output of phase 1. In phase 2 tailored strategies can be used (e.g., when some regions are underrepresented, apartment dwellers, etc.). Again, the CST or the FWQ group will try to help individual countries in implementing this approach. An important first step towards balanced response rates is to make an inventory of auxiliary variables available in the ESS countries.
An easy way to achieve a balance response rate is to obtain a low response rates among all subgroups. This is not recommended. A balanced response rate can have advantages when the final response efforts are directed at difficult rather than easy groups. In this situation a small decrease in the final, total response rate might be acceptable.

Q8. So what will be the rules for balancing in the ESS in future rounds?
A8. We cannot say that now, and it is clear that strategies will have to differ across countries, if only because sampling frames are so much richer in some countries than in others. What we would like to do is make an inventory of efforts to balance response rates that are already used in the ESS, such as using incentives in big cities only.
One additional issue is that there are some indications that the final respondents are more 'unbalanced' on fairly straightforward characteristics as sex in countries where no individual sampling frame is available and interviewers have to select the respondent within the household. Further analysis suggests undocumented substitution: interviewers ignore the rules for respondent selection and conduct the interview with the person with whom they have contact and who is willing to be interviewed at that time.
Strictly adhering to the rules of probability sampling is likely to result in a more balanced response composition.

Q9. The ESS Contact Forms are not used to monitor the response process in many countries. Some countries use their own forms to monitor the process. Others clean and edit the ESS forms long after fieldwork and send the file to the ESS Data Archive. Many countries feel the CF are a great burden and are not convinced of the usefulness of all elements. How can we improve the (use of the) contact forms?
A9. The ESS Contact Forms were developed several years ago, based on an inventory of contact forms used by major survey agencies in Europe and the US. At that time standard CFs that were coded and keyed were rare.
The CFs have evolved over time in response to problems noted by NCs. The present forms have six major aims:

1. For the CST to check whether fieldwork has been carried out according to the rules (number and timing of calls, allowed mode of call, etc.). This has provided evidence of undocumented substitution as mentioned above.
2. To calculate the response rate in a standardized way. At present there are differences between nationally calculated response rates (also: noncontact rates, refusal rates) and the centrally calculated ones. A clear syntax has been provided to calculate the proper rates nationally but there are still some dark spots. In addition, it should be checked how the ESS response rates relate to the AAPOR response rates.
3. For the CST to give feedback on fieldwork for the next round. In practice, the results of the CST's analysis of CF data are only made available when countries are well into the preparation of fieldwork. In future rounds this should be improved so that countries can make use of the analysis for the next round of fieldwork.
4. To analyse nonresponse bias using paradata (call records, etc.) and observational data. Studies on this have been published by the CST, by NCs in individual countries and by external nonresponse researchers. These should be better publicized to NCs and field directors. It should be shown which CF data can be used in nonresponse analysis (e.g. type of dwelling, presence of litter and graffiti). The CST should provide training and support to NCs to analyse nonresponse bias and make an inventory of national analyses (webinars).
5. For the national teams to monitor fieldwork and take action when fieldwork does not go according to plans

6. For the national teams to balance response rates during fieldwork when possible and where necessary.

These different goals should be acknowledged before adapting or simplifying the contact forms. It should be noted that a fundamental change to the current content is not foreseen, and a fundamental change to the current format is not foreseen for R7.
What should be done is

- liaise with the CST members involved in the DASISH.eu initiative, use the information on national practices collected there and on possibilities of electronic CFs
- make an inventory of electronic CFs in ESS countries and other surveys, explore whether standardized electronic CFs can be developed (also look at what Blaise provides),
- find out if standardized CFs can represent what is happening in individual countries,
- review the structure/layout of the paper contact forms (moving back and forth between pages),
- check which observational variables are useful for nonresponse bias analysis,
- identify if and how the standardized ESS CFs are used to monitor fieldwork in each country, and provide guidance how they can best be used to monitor fieldwork,
- identify which countries use CF data, whether concurrent or for the next round, and look at what these countries are doing in terms of improving data collections, training interviewers, monitoring fieldwork,
- identify possibilities for training of NCs and survey agency representatives in response enhancement, the use of CFs and nonresponse bias analysis (webinars)
- Again, always acknowledging the vast differences between countries.

The CST should also provide clear (and convincing) examples of the use of CF data for NCs, survey agencies, fieldwork managers and interviewers. This way we will gain the support and also achieve a better understanding of the detailed CF.

Q10. This seems like an awful lot of work. When should we do what, and who is going to pay for the additional work?
A10. The ESS is a flagship survey. The whole world is looking at it for methodological rigour and methodological innovations. That does not mean we should not try to improve. Firstly, we now know so much more than when we started, so we can improve. Secondly, the outside world is changing and we have to change to maintain quality.

There are a lot of things we can do to improve but we should also keep in mind that innovation should not only improve quality, but also (ideally) make life simpler, be affordable and feasible for busy NCs with limited budgets. It also will be impossible to do everything at the same time. For the ESS-ERIC we will have to develop a research agenda or a roadmap towards optimizing fieldwork and minimizing nonresponse bias. So there are different things we can do at different stages. E.g., with respect to the CFs, the CST will review them, taking into account the multiple purposes, the comments from NCs and the national use of CFs to monitor fieldwork. The CST can also provide more guidance on interviewer briefing and interviewer training for the next round, partly based on an inventory of national good practices and acknowledging the different national contexts. Also, opportunities for site visits should be explored.
What is important to do at short notice is to provide a platform for NCs and CST to share good practices (response enhancement, interviewer training) and to discuss problems. NCs liaising with their colleague NCs could be very effective, both for new and old NCs. Issues could be interviewer training, communication with participants, we could have an ESS blog with recent experiences, provide links to useful material/articles, and it would also be great if we could make more site visits and/or organize field directors meetings. Organizing small workshops at NC meetings could also be a good way to share information and experiences. What could also help if national innovative approaches could be published in research journals, such as the new GESIS-FORS journal Insights from the field.