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Field Procedures in the European Social Survey Round 9: Guidelines for Enhancing Response Rates and Minimising Nonresponse Bias

Field Procedures in the European Social Survey Round 9:
Guidelines for Enhancing Response Rates and Minimising Nonresponse Bias[1]

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Earlier versions of this document relating to previous rounds of fieldwork are available at www.europeansocialsurvey.org

1 Introduction

High response rates are often considered to be the outstanding quality feature of surveys. According to Biemer and Lyberg (2003), nonresponse is a quality feature that many survey users and sponsors have heard of, and the response rate is often seen as indicative of the competence of a survey organisation. One of the distinguishing features of the European Social Survey (ESS) is its high methodological standards aiming at optimal comparability in the data collected across all the participating countries. Amongst these standards, one essential element is the need to achieve high response rates in all countries.

This document outlines how fieldwork procedures may enhance response rates in the countries fielding the ESS in Round 9. Some procedures form part of the *Round 9 Survey Specification for ESS ERIC Member, Observer and Guest countries* (European Social Survey, 2017) *(for short **Specification,*** see 7.1.1*)* and, as such, should be adopted in each country. In addition to presenting the required procedures this paper provides recommendations and suggestions. The actual implementation will depend on the national survey design and the national context. Wherever possible, countries should take into account experiences from previous rounds of the ESS to improve fieldwork and response rates in the present round.

In the *Specification*, **a minimum target response rate of 70 per cent** in each country has been outlined: "*… a minimum target response rate … has been set at 70%. Ideally, all countries should aim for this 70%. Acknowledging – based on previous experiences in the ESS – that reaching this 70% target response rate is very challenging in many countries, all countries are expected to plan and budget fieldwork in order to reach a response rate higher than in the previous round.*" (see 7.1.1, p. 30).

High response rates are not an aim in itself, though. First, high nonresponse rates can be achieved by **cutting corners**, e.g., by substituting a refusing sample unit by a friendly neighbour. These strategies are not allowed in the ESS as they affect the quality of data collected. Second, nonresponse **bias** is the real concern. Bias can be seen as being caused by respondents differing from nonrespondents, or by survey participation being correlated to survey variables (Bethlehem, 2002; Groves, 2006). The larger the nonresponse rate, the larger the effect of this difference.

Before addressing response enhancement itself, Section 3 of this paper provides a general framework, linking survey response to nonresponse bias and adherence to the ESS Specifications (see Section 7.1.1) . Section 0 discusses the role of interviewers in obtaining response, and Section 4, 0, and 6 discuss the three causes of nonresponse (noncontact, refusal and not able/other). The final section gives an overview of the literature. Section 7.1 lists official ESS documents that outline procedures that have to be followed, or guidelines in particular areas. These documents are indicated by number: e.g., **Round 9 Survey Specification for ESS ERIC Member, Observer and Guest Countries is henceforth referred to as 7.1.1**. Section 0 lists the references to (un)published papers mentioned in the text. Section 7.3 provides background literature on different aspects of response enhancement, mainly focused on face-to-face surveys. Where possible, a link to the literature is provided.

2 Survey response, nonresponse bias and fieldwork rules

2.1 Survey response

In a face-to-face survey such as the ESS interviewers play a crucial role. Before conducting the interview they have to assess whether the address exists and eligible respondents live there, establish contact with the sample units, select target respondents within multi-person households (when non-individual sampling frames are used), persuade people to participate and record information on all calls on the so-called contact forms. Based on this information different types of respondents and non-respondents can be distinguished (see figure 1).

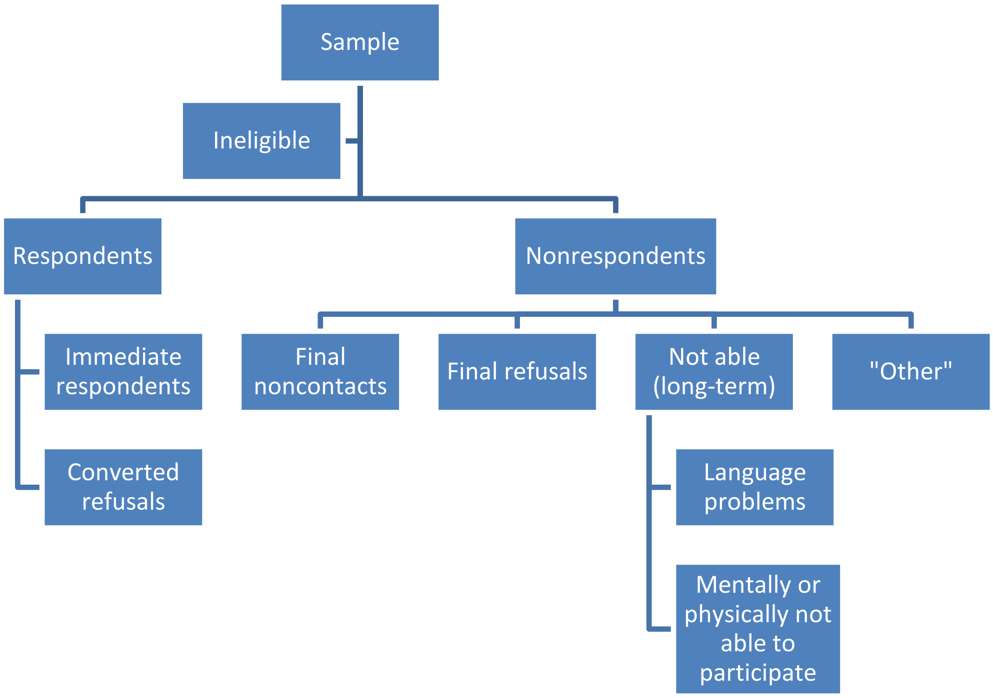

Figure 1. Types of respondents and nonrespondents

When trying to enhance response rates, efforts should be made to contact all sample units (see section 4), to minimise refusals or try to convert initial refusers (section 0), to properly assess whether people are really not able to participate (section 6.1) and to minimise the “other” reasons for nonresponse (section 6.2).

2.2 Nonresponse bias

Nonresponse bias occurs when respondents differ from nonrespondents. The lower the response rate, the more impact this difference will have on the bias. The simplest case of nonresponse bias happens when socio-demographic groups are unequally represented among the respondents, e.g., when women participate more than men (Koch, 2016) or participation is lower in urban than in rural areas. In principle, this can be adjusted for by weighting. The post-stratification weights in the ESS have been developed for this purpose.

The situation is more complicated when nonresponse is related to items in the ESS questionnaire. When people who don’t trust (local) governments refuse to participate in the ESS, the survey out-comes will be biased. If trust is related to socio-demographic characteristics such as level of education, weighting can (partly) correct for bias, but this is not always possible (see for instance Vandenplas et al., 2015).

What can be done is making survey participation attractive to many different types of people, and try **to bring response rates to a consistent level across subgroups, if possible** (see for instance Schouten, Shlomo & Singer, 2011: Laganà et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2014; Koch, 2016). Some might cooperate because of the scientific approach of a survey, some might appreciate an incentive, some might be interested in the topic and some might like a conversation with a helpful trustworthy interviewer. This means that different response enhancing measures could be used to secure the cooperation of the young and the old, the poor and the rich, people with lower and higher educations and people living in rural and urban areas. Response enhancing efforts should ideally target groups who are disproportionately underrepresented in surveys in your country, and people who differ from the more “easy” respondents. When reissuing refusals in order to convert them into productive interviews, one might, for example, consider trying to convert some of those who appear to be more reluctant, since less reluctant people often tend to be more similar to those who have already agreed to be respondents.

2.3 Survey quality

The response rate is a common indicator of survey quality, but artificially boosting response rates to achieve a higher number is not a proper way to achieve higher survey quality. The ESS aims to represent the population. Interviewing a willing family member who is at home instead of a potentially less willing target person who is at work or school when the interviewer calls, will not make the data more representative as these approaches only bring in particular types of respondents. Interviewing the friendly neighbour of a refusing householder is likely to increase non-response bias. These types of **substitution** are therefore not allowed in the ESS: household members in non-individual samples must be selected according to the pre-specified rules. Oversampling in low response (urban) areas is also not allowed for the same reason: this might bring in more willing respondents but not those who differ on key estimates from the respondents.

In addition, response rates should not be enhanced at all costs. For example, persuading people to participate whose knowledge of the survey language is clearly insufficient will increase response rates but also – seriously – increase measurement error. Neither proxy interviews (interviewing someone else on behalf of the target respondent) nor translation on the fly will solve this issue, and hence these practices are also not allowed in the ESS. The only option here is to use a translated questionnaire for minority groups (see 6.1).

To pursue high survey quality interviewers should be trained in recruiting respondents (and if necessary select them within households) and be aware of the value of random sampling. This also means that they should be paid for conducting interviews, but also for travels to addresses where they didn’t find someone at home, and for efforts to convert initial refusals (see 3.4).

3 Interviewers

Interviewers play a key role in obtaining response. For the ESS ideally the most successful interviewers should be selected, with experience and a good track record in random sample CAPI surveys (see 3.1). All of them should be well trained in obtaining cooperation and conducting an interview, and be briefed about all aspects of the ESS (see 3.2). If necessary this briefing should comprise additional training. The interviewer workload should be neither too high nor too small (see 3.4), and they should be paid for all aspects of their work (see 3.4).
During fieldwork it is essential to closely monitor interviewer progress among the entire sample and, if possible, among some important subgroups (see 3.5). This will provide an early warning of any response rate difficulties and might enable timely remedial action.

3.1 Interviewer characteristics

There is a considerable body of evidence that shows that different interviewers achieve different response rates (see7.3.2). Socio-demographic characteristics of interviewers, like age and sex, do not seem to play a major role (Schaeffer, Dykema & Maynard, 2010). Some differences between interviewers may be explained by area effects (for instance, interviewers working in inner city areas normally face bigger challenges in obtaining good response rates compared to interviewers working in more rural areas). It has also been shown that interviewers differ in recruiting different types of respondents. Some interviewers might have more success with older persons, and some with higher educated people.

Interviewer experience may be a help in achieving higher response rates, possibly also because successful interviewers stay longer in the workforce and thus build up larger experience. It is therefore recommended to select interviewers for ESS fieldwork who are **well-trained** and achieved high response rates in similar assignments. Experience includes experience of conducting random sample surveys, selection of respondents within households (if necessary), and having been trained in persuasion, refusal avoidance and refusal conversion strategies, tailoring and maintaining interaction with target respondent, and the use of CAPI software. Even experienced interviewers should receive regular training.

3.2 Briefing interviewers about all aspects of the study

"All interviewers must be personally briefed by the NC or Survey Agency upon being hired for ESS Round 9 and before carrying out their assignment. " (7.1.1, p. 28).
The CST will provide a template PowerPoint presentation for interviewer briefings (as part of 7.1.5), which can be easily adapted for use in different countries.

In addition to being well-trained, ESS interviewers –to prepare them for ESS Round 9 - should receive a specific in-person *briefing*. ESS briefings should cover in detail respondent selection procedures, if applicable, and recording of the contact process using the model contact forms, including the coding of interviewer observation data[2]. In practice, briefings may also comprise some elements of training on general interviewing and contacting techniques, especially for less experienced interviewers or in countries with high levels of refusal.

It is important that the in-person briefings – and accompanying written instructions – do not only focus on the content of the questionnaire and the conduct of the actual interview. It will be essential to **brief interviewers in detail on the respondent selection procedures (if applicable), the contacting procedure and the registration of the calling process using the standard contact forms**. Interviewers must be very familiar with the content and structure of the contact forms and the process by which these are to be completed, for example if details are to be entered in the CAPI admin block or using a designated application. The importance of submitting up to date information on the current status of each sample unit in a timely fashion should be stressed. Interviewers should also be **briefed on a broad repertoire of approaches to enhance their response rates**, in a way that allows them to tailor their approach to the specific situation. In countries with high levels of refusals, briefings should cover additional **training on refusal avoidance and refusal conversion techniques (see 5.4 and 5.5)**. If the contact procedures being used on the ESS differ from those usually employed by the survey organisation extra time needs to be reserved during the briefing to inform interviewers about the ESS contact procedures. All interviewers will also need to be briefed on the coding of observable data (7.1.5).

In addition to disseminating information, an equally important aim of the in-person briefings is to **motivate the interviewers** working on the ESS. This might be achieved by conveying the importance of such a large cross-national survey to them, for example by providing some background to the survey, by presenting response rates from previous rounds in their and other countries, and by

[2] The briefings should also enable interviewers to practise asking ESS questions, facilitated by guidance provided by the CST. The CST has prepared guidelines regarding in-person briefings, instructions for interviewers and scripted ESS practice interviews (see 8.1.5).

presenting some key findings from earlier rounds. Interviewers might also find this information useful when 'selling' the survey to target respondents. It is **important that interviewers feel that their role in the ESS process is essential and that their skills and efforts are being acknowledged**. There is evidence that interviewers who are confident about their ability to elicit cooperation tend to achieve higher response rates. Note that sufficient remuneration for all interviewer tasks is also a strong motivating factor (see3.4).

Recommendations:

- *One day or half day briefing sessions for all interviewers by the survey agency and the NC, covering all aspects of the field procedures and the interview (essential for complying with the Specifications). The interviewer should be briefed in-person.*
- *The size of the interviewer group attending a briefing should not be too large in order to allow room and time for practicing the questionnaire and refusal avoidance and conversion techniques.*
- *NC should discuss the specified ESS contact procedures with the survey agency. In case these procedures differ from the usual procedures of the survey agency, special attention needs to be given to this topic in the interviewer briefing.*
- *Interviewers should be asked to make dummy contact attempts during the briefing and have the opportunity to fill in contact records according to the procedures that will be used during field-work.*
- *Include a session on doorstep interaction and discussions on encouraging participation.*
- *Provide interviewers with information on how the survey data is being used.*
- *Motivate interviewers to deliver good work, convey the importance of the survey, and boost their confidence about their ability to elicit cooperation from target persons.*
- *Use the guidance documents and template PowerPoint presentation for interviewer briefings produced by the CST to plan and deliver the briefing sessions. These documents will be available from the ESS9 intranet in May 2018.*

3.3 Interviewer assignment sizes and overall workload

"In each country, a sufficient number of interviewers should be engaged to conduct the ESS interviews. Ideally, all ESS interviewers conduct multiple interviews to make briefing cost effective. However, even well trained interviewers can influence the quality of the collected data, and research has shown that higher workloads are positively related to larger interviewer effects. Therefore the workload per interviewer will be limited to a maximum of 48 sample units (i.e., respondents and non-respondents) throughout fieldwork." (see Section 7.1.1, p. 28).

A first prerequisite for successful fieldwork is that sufficient interviewer capacity is available during the fieldwork period. **The amount of work allocated to each interviewer can affect the response rate.** The assignment size will affect the amount of effort an interviewer can apply when attempting contact and securing cooperation. For instance if an interviewer's workload is large, relative to the length of the fieldwork period, it can place limits on the possible number of calls and their spread in terms of days and times of the day. In addition, from a methodological point of view one should keep the average workload of the interviewers low in order to reduce the possibility of interviewer effects on the interview and survey estimates. See for instance Beullens & Loosveldt (2016) and Vandenplas & Loosveldt (2017) on the large effect of interviewers on interview duration.

On the other hand, it is advisable to assign a certain minimum number of sample units to each interviewer, to build up experience and to minimize the costs of the briefing. It may be advisable to have interviewers work exclusively for the ESS for a certain period of time.

Beyond the assignment sizes on the ESS, it is recommended **that interviewers are not overloaded with work from other surveys**. Not only would this have the potential to depress response rates generally (for the reasons above), it may lead to interviewers having to prioritise one survey over another, in terms of completing work on time or putting in the effort to maximise their response rates. Controlling interviewer workload may of course be difficult if interviewers are working for more than one organisation or more than one study during the fieldwork period.

Recommendations:

- *Discuss the workload of interviewers with the survey agency, to avoid conflicts of interest.*
- Interviewers should upload/update fieldwork progress info as often/soon as possible?
- *In addition to the overall ESS deadlines, set internal deadlines for when interviewers have to complete their assignment by. Leave sufficient time for reissues of noncontacts and refusal conversion.*

3.4 Payment of interviewers

Levels of interviewer pay and the pay structure may affect interviewers' incentive to work hard and their willingness to enhance their response rates. In addition, insufficient payment, or not being paid for parts of the job, may induce interviewers to cut corners. The pay rate for the ESS should be set in relation to the length and complexity of the interview, the expected difficulties of obtaining cooperation, and the amount of record keeping demanded of the interviewer (including the selection of respondents in household/dwelling samples, the completion of Contact Forms and the collection of observable data). Of course, an attractive pay rate relative to the pay on other studies is always advantageous.

There are several ways of providing interviewers with **bonus payments**. Firstly, bonus payments for achieved interviews above a certain response rate target may have a positive effect. The areas in which interviewers work can vary considerably (and often in an unknown way) in the challenges they pose to the interviewers and this could be taken into account. Secondly, interviewer bonuses for timely work on the ESS assignment could be considered. Some ESS countries, for example, have had positive experiences with a bonus system that takes into account when interviewers start contacting their sample units, when they return their first interviews and by when they complete their assignment. Finally, interviewers who are issued difficult cases in the refusal conversion phase might also receive some additional payment. However, any bonus system must be perceived as being fair otherwise it can lead to resentment, which may lead to demotivated interviewers working on the ESS.

Survey agencies usually have standard pay arrangements, which they are unlikely to amend for a particular study (see for an overview of national payment arrangements 7.1.7, table 11). Two standard policies are to pay interviewers an **hourly rate** or **per completed interview**. The former may make fieldwork costs very hard to control (and make them more expensive as a result), whereas the latter may provide less incentive for interviewers to enhance their response rates amongst individuals who are hard to reach, or hard to persuade to participate. On the other hand, payment per completed interview only might be an incentive for undocumented substitution, cutting corners and a disincentive to complete contact forms and observe neighbourhood characteristics for non-responding individuals. **Paying for completed interviews only is therefore not recommended.** There should at least be some additional payment for unsuccessful visits and for completing the contact forms.

Recommendations:

- *Discuss the interviewer pay arrangement with the survey agency and consider a minimum fee. The pay rates for the ESS should be attractive for interviewers, both with respect to the study design and difficulty and with respect to the pay on other studies.*

3.5 Monitoring interviewers' progress

Survey agencies should closely monitor the progress of fieldwork. Fieldwork progress should be monitored against projections agreed before the start of fieldwork.
"Fieldwork projections are forecasts of weekly production/response rates based on experience from previous rounds and current interviewer staffing. NCs are expected to submit fieldwork projections at least two weeks prior to the start of fieldwork to the CST. The fieldwork projections will be based on experiences from previous rounds, the design of the present fieldwork and discussions with the Survey Agency. Where a country participates for the first time it will naturally be more of an estimate." (see Section 7.1.1, p. 34).

Effective fieldwork monitoring requires that interviewers record detailed information about each contact attempt (including the date, time, mode and outcome of each contact attempt) and that this information is made available to the survey agency on a regular basis (ideally daily). **This is so that any problems can be identified early and appropriate remedial action taken whilst fieldwork is still ongoing.** Agencies must make sure that all of the information required by the ESS model Contact Form (7.1.2) is collected. How this is done is at the discretion of the survey agency. However, to facilitate timely sharing of contact information, agencies are strongly recommended to collect contact information electronically.

The primary responsibility for monitoring fieldwork rests with the survey agency. However, **agencies are asked to share key information with NCs and the ESS Fieldwork Team on a regular basis.** This allows these groups to provide additional insights and suggestions for how issues arising during fieldwork might be addressed and ensures consistency in fieldwork monitoring across ESS countries.

*"In Round 9 the following monitoring standards will be in place (*7.1.1, 34-35)*:*
- *Countries to provide weekly fieldwork progress information (independent of the length of field-work);*
- *Fieldwork progress information will need to be provided at a case level rather than at an aggregate level using a pre-specified template;*
- *Fieldwork progress information will need to be provided weekly in the form of a dataset."*

It is anticipated that, for ESS Round 9, countries will be asked to upload the weekly datasets via a data portal that is developed for this purpose. The information provided will be used to generate standardised summary progress reports for each country. Using these reports, it will be possible to monitor progress by interviewer, outcome code, region and (if available) key demographics such as age and sex of the target respondent. Survey agencies may wish to supplement these standard reports with further monitoring outputs provided by their usual in-house monitoring systems.

For further information on the information that countries are required to provide in the weekly case-level progress reports and the summary reports generated, see the Guidelines on Fieldwork Progress Reporting (7.1.4). These guidelines also contain guidance on what NCs should look out for when looking at the data received from survey agencies and what further information they may wish to request from survey agencies. Effective fieldwork monitoring requires close contact between the NC and the survey agency, and between the NC and the ESS Fieldwork Team, throughout fieldwork to ensure that the potential drivers behind the fieldwork figures – and how any shortfalls in progress might be addressed – are fully understood.

If possible, NCs should also try to obtain some interim datasets of achieved interviews *during* the fieldwork period. If such data are available, NCs should monitor the average length of interview for each interviewer and investigate interviewers who are outliers in case this indicates quality problems.

Recommendations:

- *During the fieldwork period, survey agencies should remain in regular contact with their NCs regarding fieldwork progress (and NCs should in turn provide to their ESS Fieldwork Team member).*
- *Survey agencies are encouraged to collect contact data electronically to facilitate the provision of up to date information for the weekly datasets which are to be provided to the NCs and ESS Fieldwork Team.*
- *Checking of interim survey data can help to identify problems during fieldwork.*

4 Reducing the number of noncontacts

"The proportion of noncontacts should not exceed 3 % of all sample units" (7.1.1).
Meeting this target will involve considerable efforts on the part of the interviewers and the survey agency, and the required efforts seem to be increasing. In the ESS Round 7 Quality Matrix (see 7.1.7) an overview is given of efforts to reach target persons in Round 7 (see section 6.4 of this report). It seems that in several countries more efforts could result in a higher contact rate. Below we detail some ways of minimising noncontacts (see also 7.3.4).

4.1 Number and timing of calls

Making several calls at different times of day, on different days of the week, and over an extended period of time will result in lower noncontact rates. In this way, different at home patterns of the target respondents can be accommodated, and people who are away for shorter periods can still be reached.

"The ESS aims for high response rates (target 70%) and low noncontact rates (maximum 3%) in all participating countries. To pursue this interviewers have to make at least four personal visits to each sample unit before it is abandoned as non-productive

- *on different days of the week and times of day,*
- *of which at least one must be at the weekend and one in the evening,*
- *spread over at least two different weeks (14 days).*

Similarly, to allow difficult-to-contact people to be located, the fieldwork period should not be less than 30 days." (7.1.1, p. 32).

In order to ensure that the above call schedule is adhered to (because interviewer preferences sometimes do not mirror these patterns) it will be necessary to monitor and check call scheduling during fieldwork (see also Luiten, 2013, chapter 8). The interviewers are required to record the time, day, mode and outcome of all the calls they make during fieldwork.

Analyses of the contact form data from earlier rounds (see Stoop et al., 2010; 7.1.7) show that people are harder to reach in some countries than in other countries. In order to bring down non-contact rates to an acceptable level, countries where this applies should consider raising the minimum number of calls above four. Besides that, the analysis indicates that a number of countries do not even adhere to the minimum required number of four call attempts to noncontacts and/or they do not make the evening and weekend calls required (see 7.1.7). NCs in countries with too high noncontact rates and/or limited contact efforts should discuss this issue with their survey agency, in order to reach compliance in Round 9.

***Recommendations**:*

- *When the progress reports on fieldwork (see Section 3.5) reveal a high noncontact rate, participating countries should check whether the interviewers adhered to the specified call schedule or not.*
- *Based on experiences from previous ESS Rounds, we suggest that some countries consider raising the minimum number of calls and varying the timing of the calls.*

4.2 Length and timing of fieldwork period

"The ESS fieldwork period will last at least one month within a four-month period between 1 September and 31 December 2018" (7.1.1, p. 27).

Short fieldwork periods lead to a higher proportion of noncontacts. The ESS allows a fieldwork period of up to 4 months and a minimum of one month to help counter this problem and increase the chances of achieving a maximum noncontact rate of 3%. Longer fieldwork periods also make it possible to approach people who are away for longer periods (on holiday, abroad, in hospital). Whenever a temporary absence has been recorded by the interviewer, a re-contact should be planned when the sample unit is back home (if this information is available) or after a few weeks. To make this possible **it is important that all sample units are visited as early as possible within the fieldwork period.** Finally, longer fieldwork periods allow for more refusal conversion attempts (see 5.5)

Note that a shared fieldwork period in all ESS countries guarantees that the reference period of the ESS data is kept comparable, which is particularly important for an attitudinal survey like the ESS. It minimises the chance of major events impacting on survey results differentially across countries. In the previous rounds of ESS, the number of countries deviating from the prescribed fieldwork period has increased. This is partly the result of funding decisions being made too late in some countries but may also partly be due to less efficient organisation of fieldwork.

Vandenplas, Loosveldt & Beullens (2017) present a useful analysis of the progress of fieldwork in ESS7 in two countries, and provide suggestions for increasing efficiency.

Recommendations:

- *When deciding on the concrete fieldwork start and end dates in a country try, as far as possible, to take national context into account. Major holiday seasons could be problematic in some countries, although in other countries this might be a good time to find people at home.*
- *Try to minimise interference by other competing large scale surveys conducted by the survey organisation during the same period (see Section 3.3).*
- *Ensure that optimal use is made of the agreed upon fieldwork period. In particular, try to ensure that interviewers will work in all areas from the very beginning of the fieldwork period.*

5 Minimising the number of refusals

In face-to-face surveys, refusals are often the main factor behind nonresponse (Stoop et al., 2010). This is especially worrying when reasons for refusal are related to the topic of the survey (e.g., those not interested in politics more often refuse to cooperate in surveys on political issues). There are many studies on reasons for refusal, and how to minimise refusal and maximise cooperation (see 7.3.5). Here we will focus on five survey design issues: 1) the use of advance letters, 2) recruitment mode, 3) incentives for (potential) respondents, 4) doorstep interaction and 5) refusal conversion. The important issue of interviewer training in persuasion strategies and refusal avoidance has already been discussed in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. The effectiveness of different approaches to enhance response rates may well vary between different countries with different norms, cultural settings, geography, and traditions (see Johnson et al., 2010). The CST is available to discuss or advise on fieldwork procedures to be adopted within particular countries.

5.1 Advance letter and information sheet

A letter sent in advance of an interviewer call can have a positive effect on the response rate. Advance letters provide information about the purpose and importance of the survey, alert target respondents that they will receive a visit from an interviewer, may receive a gift, and promote the legitimacy of the survey.

In addition to "selling" the survey to the target respondents, and thus enhancing response rates, advance letters are a major means of obtaining **informed consent**. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which comes into force in May 2018 (see www.eugdpr.org), includes specific requirements with regard to informed consent. . Transparency is one of the GDPR's key words. An important part of transparency is that the information to the potential respondents and the request for consent must be provided in a concise, intelligible and easily accessible form, using clear and plain language.

This means that for Round 9 all sample units must receive written information about the survey in advance of an interviewer call. ESS ERIC will provide a template **information sheet** well before the start of fieldwork with specific instructions on how this should be used in order to comply with the GDPR. Providing this information sheet to all sample units is a legal requirement. The CST will do everything possible to make sure it is easy to understand and attractive to potential respondents, and inspires trust in the survey and their privacy.

Countries will have to use an ESS information sheet with adaptations only to insert country specific info (e.g., the names of relevant contact people) and to add any national-specific requirements (e.g., re parental consent). Countries may wish to provide additional respondent materials to try and sell the survey, e.g. copies of findings booklets and details of ESS media coverage.

Sample units should be sent the information sheet in advance of the first contact attempt, if possible, and interviewers must have copies of this information sheet with them when they are making contact attempts so that they can share it with potential respondents who may not have received or seen it previously.

Care should be taken to ensure that the time span between the arrival of the advance mailing and the visit or call by the interviewer is not too long. Sometimes the best way to do this is to instruct interviewers to send the letters in a way that matches their planned work pattern (rather than mailing out centrally at the start of the fieldwork period).

Requirement

- *Make sure the potential respondents receive an advance letter and a standard information sheet about the survey and the request for participation. This will give them the opportunity to give an informed consent to participate. ESS ERIC will provide detailed information about the requirements by May 2018.*

Recommendations:

- *Instruct interviewers to organise posting advance letters and information sheets a few days before they intend to contact the address.*

- *Make sure the interviewer has spare copies of this brochure to hand out to selected sample persons, especially when the interviewer is involved in selecting persons within households.*
- *If an attempt is being made to contact a household a long time after the initial letter was sent (for example with a reissue) then consideration should be given to sending a second letter.*

5.2 Recruitment mode

Evidence has shown that survey response is highest when potential respondents are requested to participate in a face-to-face contact (see for instance Blohm, Hox & Koch, 2007).

*"The first contact with potential respondents, following a possible advance letter and brochure, will be **face-to-face**. Once contact with a household has been established, or after four unsuccessful personal visits, interviewers may make (or change) appointments by telephone.*
*The **one exception** to this is for countries with sample frames of named individuals with telephone numbers. Here the first contact may be made by telephone, in order to make appointments to visit the respondent. However, the country has to provide acceptable evidence to the CST that the response rate will not be damaged. Sampled individuals without a listed phone number must be contacted face-to-face. Where those with telephone numbers cannot be contacted by phone the same number of in person visits is still required (4 before it is considered a permanent non-contact). At least one in person visit to each sample unit is always required in order to collect information on the dwelling and neighbourhood (e.g., even in the event of a telephone hard refusal)."* (7.1.1, p. 29).

Although respondents may be recruited by telephone, **interviews may not, under any circumstances, be conducted over the telephone, or by self-completion methods whether on paper or online**. Survey research has shown that survey modes can affect answer patterns. Substantial differences can be expected between administration of a questionnaire by telephone and in a face-to-face situation. For that reason interviews may under no circumstances be conducted over the telephone."

5.3 Respondent incentives

There are numerous examples of studies that show that – even modest – **'rewards' help to improve the response rate** (see 7.3.6). Evidence exists that incentives in particular help to motivate target persons who are not interested in the survey topic. If an incentive is to be used in a country, there is a decision to make whether to give the incentive *unconditionally* to all sampled individuals prior to them agreeing or not to take part in the survey, or to make the incentive *conditional* on them agreeing to participate in the survey.

According to the existing literature, though mostly based on self-administered questionnaires, **unconditional prepaid incentives seem to be more effective than conditional incentives paid upon completion of the interview**. Thus, eliciting feelings of obligation from the unconditional incentive is more effective than rewarding participation. Also, cash incentives appear to work better than non-monetary incentives.

It may be necessary to monitor the extent to which monetary incentives disproportionately encourage the participation of people with low incomes compared to those with high incomes and thereby have an effect on the composition of the sample. If poorer people are usually under-represented in the achieved sample, monetary incentives might reduce nonresponse bias. If poorer people are already overrepresented, however, incentives might even increase the potential for non-response bias on survey estimates. This can be easily checked by an inspection of the univariate income distributions in previous rounds. Less than 10% in the lowest income category is an indication of underrepresentation.

Offering a choice of different types of incentives might attract people from a more diverse background. This might help to reduce an existing nonresponse bias and counteract the potentially selective effect of offering one specific incentive.

In some cases it may be sensible to restrict incentives to areas where response tends to be low, e.g. big cities, in order to increase response in these difficult areas. In other cases, the use of incentives might be restricted to individuals who initially refuse to participate.[3]

To come to a decision on whether or not to use an incentive the relative time and cost advantages of using an incentive versus not should be taken into account. Incentives may mean less interviewer time in persuading target respondents to participate or less time in refusal conversions. The reduction in interviewer time – and thus costs – must be weighed against the cost of providing incentives.

Recommendations:

- *Consider using an incentive to raise response rates.*
- *Use incentives in a smart way. It might be advisable to use incentives only for underrepresented groups, and for groups that might be sensitive to incentives.*
- *Be aware that incentives – as other response enhancing measures – might increase nonresponse bias*

5.4 Doorstep interaction[4]

From the moment that a door opens for the interviewer, a scenario will take place that runs approximately as follows: interviewers introduce themselves by stating their name and the fieldwork organization they work for and showing identification that confirms this information. Then they will check whether they are at the right address and talking to the right person. Next, they briefly explain the reason for the visit. If an advance letter was sent, the interviewer can refer to it and repeat the purpose of the interview in a single sentence. This introduction forms the first part of the doorstep interaction with the respondent.

Recommendations:

- *Look at the person who opens the door; be friendly, cheerful, and interested.*
- *Speak clearly and not too quickly (intercom: especially slowly and clearly).*
- *Check whether the person to be interviewed lives at that address. Give the introduction to the person to be interviewed, not to a third person (the 'gate-keeper') who happens to open the door for you.*
- *With an address- or household based sample, try not to explain and apply the method for selecting the respondent at the door but inside, indoors.*
- *However, try to avoid the gate-keeper refusing on the target respondent's behalf!*
- *If you get hold of the right person, introduce yourself, show identification, refer to the advance letter, and briefly state the reason for your visit.*
- *Try and keep the introduction at the door as general and as brief as possible.*
- *Do not use a standard introduction for each respondent. Tailor the introduction to the person and the circumstances.*

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[3] While this procedure is apparently cost-effective, it could raise the concern that initially cooperative respondents would perceive this as unfair.

[4] In a separate document (7.1.5) theoretical and practical aspects of the interaction between interviewer and potential respondent are presented. This section presents a short abstract of these guidelines.

- *Do not provoke any negative responses, e.g. do not ask any questions that can easily prompt a negative answer (for example, can you spare a few minutes?)*

After the introduction the decision-making process starts. The interviewer should try to minimize the costs of survey participation and optimize the points in favour of participating. Potential respondents may have various fears:

- *suspicion about a stranger at the door. You are on their territory, so you must respect it.*
- *fear that it may become an unpleasant experience, by becoming boring or too difficult, or by threatening or challenging questions being asked.*
- *fear that they are insufficiently capable of taking part in a scientific survey. They think that they will not know the answer to many of the questions (social cost = loss of face)*
- *fear that they won't get rid of the interviewer, that it will be a sales talk after all or that they won't be able to call a halt to the interview if they feel like it (social cost = loss of time).*

They may also dislike surveys, the topic of the survey or the survey sponsor. And they may also prefer to spend their time on other topics than answering survey questions, or be particularly busy when the interviewer calls. Interviewers should try to identify and address the fears, give the respondent fairly spontaneous information on the relevance of the study and the sections that will be of interest to the respondent, put the respondent at ease and give information, and – when the call is made at an inconvenient moment – withdraw before the respondent can express a definite refusal and be prepared to return at another time.

Alternatively, the interviewer can highlight the benefits of survey participation:

- *One of the main reasons why people wish to take part in a survey is because it is a new experience for them, and they hope that it will be a pleasant experience. People are curious about the course of this type of interview and keen to go through it themselves.*
- *The feeling of being able to do something useful and meaningful. The interviewer must be able to explain the relevance of the study to the target person.*
- *The opportunity to get their opinion heard is a good, persuasive argument.*
- *Breaking the everyday routine can be important, for example, for older people.*
- *Helping someone who is asking them for a favour. People don't like to say 'no' to someone asking them for a favour. In most cases, agreeing to do a favour also gives an increased feeling of self-worth because someone else benefits.*

Interviewer training should comprise scenarios on what to say in which situation. Role playing is a very pleasant way to try and to become familiar with these different scenarios.

The interviewer's starting point is that people will wish to cooperate, not that they will refuse. Some people may be **reluctant**. In that case the interviewer should try to **persuade** them to cooperate. R**eluctant** persons can demonstrate their attitude non-verbally as well as verbally. It is the task of the interviewer to be observant and to immediately spot any signs of reluctance, in order to address them (**'tailoring**'). This is most likely to succeed when the interviewer does not adhere rigidly to an introductory script, because it helps them to stay more alert. That is the reason why an interviewer does best to prepare a brief introduction, based on *a few key words*.

- *Although the best mind set to start with is that people will wish to cooperate, the interviewer must always anticipate reluctance by taking positive actions and definitely no negative ones.*
- *In order to know what is positive and negative in a specific case, the interviewer must take into account the manner in which the respondent is thinking. Use the rules of thumb described in 7.1.5 in order to counter the target respondent's arguments. They will definitely give you more persuasive power.*
  *The interviewer must anticipate the respondent's reaction (= **‘tailoring’**) and keep the interaction going (= **'maintaining interaction’**). The interviewer must definitely not give up too easily, nor*

must they be too pushy. It is better to obtain an appointment than a refusal! An appointment is also a form of maintaining interaction, but at a future point in time.

5.5 Converting people who initially 'refuse' participation[5]

Despite the efforts of the interviewer, a potential respondent may not be willing to participate. It could be that this reluctance is temporary, depending on the particular time of the call, the interaction with the interviewer, or other temporal reasons. In order to maximise response rates, and minimise refusal rates, **all participating countries should consider trying to operate 'refusal conversion' of people who initially refuse to participate in the survey**, by persuading them to reconsider their first reaction and decision.[6] As refusals are often influenced by the circumstances and the mood of the target person at the time of the initial survey request, refusal conversion attempts can often be quite successful. Persuading initial refusals to cooperate not only increases the response rate, it can also lead to smaller nonresponse bias if the converted refusals were more similar to final refusals than those respondents who cooperated without first refusing.

Analyses of previous ESS Rounds reveal differences in refusal conversion efforts and in success rates across countries (Stoop et al., 2010; 7.1.7, figure 14). Thus every country should check its results from previous rounds thoroughly, and discuss with the survey agency ways to improve the effectiveness of the procedures used. In ESS5, for example, more than 10 countries obtained an increase in the response rates of more than 3 percentage points through their refusal conversion efforts. One country even achieved an increase of 15 percentage points (Matsuo & Loosveldt, 2013, 36). However, refusal conversion not necessarily improves the socio-demographic composition of the final sample. This may partly result from the fact that in a lot of ESS countries refusal conversion is mainly directed at 'soft' refusals, for example persons who refused because they were busy at the time, rather than persons who don't like the topic or the survey sponsor. The ideal scenario would be to re-approach all refusals, as far as ethically possible, legally and financially feasible. In practice, however, often only a subsample of refusals can be re-approached. In this situation, countries should carefully consider the way they select this subsample, depending on the aims that are pursued through the refusal conversion efforts.

If the main goal is to increase the response rate, the most promising strategy is to concentrate on 'soft' refusals and to try to convert as many of the 'easy' cases as possible. However, this will typically not help to reduce potential nonresponse bias (it may sometimes even increase bias) (Beullens & Loosveldt, 2012). Another strategy is to re-approach a random subsample of all refusals. By doing this, one will usually end up with a lower response rate than when re-approaching only 'soft' refusals. This approach is better suited, though, if one wants to use the resulting data to investigate whether the sample is affected by a nonresponse bias or not. A different solution would be to find out which groups are underrepresented before refusal conversion (e.g. men, big city dwellers), and specifically aim refusal conversion efforts at the underrepresented groups. This could make the final sample more balanced, and it could also help to improve estimates for other substantive survey variables (see 7.3.7). Further information on overrepresented and underrepresented socio-demographic groups in ESS samples can also be found in Koch (2016) and Koch et al. (2014).

If these efforts are really expected to result in a more socio-demographically balanced sample and a better representation of the population, this could compensate a slightly lower response rate than would have been feasible by targeting the less 'difficult' cases (in our example: women and rural

[5] We use the term "refusal conversion" because it is widely used in the methodological literature. This is not intended in a legal sense of "refusal". It could perhaps be more appropriate to talk about "repeated attempts to persuade initially reluctant persons to reconsider the survey request".
[6] In some countries, such conversion attempts are restricted by data protection laws.

area dwellers). Given the complexity of the issue, the CST and the ESS Fieldwork Team can discuss alternative approaches with countries during the fieldwork planning process. **Please note that over-sampling to compensate for expected low response rates is not allowed.**

When refusal conversion efforts are to be made, a decision has to be taken as to who makes the conversion attempt. Analysis of ESS contact form data confirms that conversion cases should be reissued to another, experienced interviewer. This requires that experienced interviewers ("refusal converters") are available and that a system is in place to allow the transfer of the contact form information collected by the first interviewer to the second interviewer. The analysis of ESS data also indicates that the chances of success are higher, if one waits two or three weeks before re-approaching an initial refusal (see Beullens et al., 2009; Stoop et al., 2010). Besides changing inter-viewers, (personalised) persuasion letters and/or incentives for refusal conversion (see above) can also be helpful.

As a general rule, we should keep in mind that **"refusal conversion" is only the second best way to deal with refusals: the better route is "refusal avoidance"**. A good strategy is to use interviewers with high response rates in the ESS or similar surveys. Inexperienced interviewers in particular often prompt many "soft refusals" by pressing target persons to make a decision too quickly. Training should help interviewers to identify situations when a refusal is likely and provide them with exit strategies ("Sorry, I see this is not a good time. I will come back when it is more convenient.") before a refusal is explicitly given. Interviewers can then return at a more convenient time when they are more likely to get cooperation. Specific techniques on how to avoid refusals should be part of inter-viewer briefings (see also Sections 3.1 and 3.2).

Recommendations:
- *Interviewers should be familiar with effective techniques to avoid refusals, and/or this should be included in the interviewer training.*
- *In particular, countries with low (interim) response rates should try to attempt to convert as many refusals as feasible into an interview. The ideal would be to re-approach all refusals, as far as ethically and legally possible and financially feasible.*
- *If possible, a different and generally successful interviewer (maybe an interviewer of different sex or age group) should carry out the conversion attempt.*
- *Discuss re-issuing strategies with the ESS Fieldwork Team.*

6 Handling not able and other reasons for nonresponse

While it is generally assumed that noncontact and refusal are the main reasons of nonresponse, ESS results show that quite a number of target persons do not participate because they are not able or for other reasons (ESS7 Quality matrix 7.1.7, p. 69).

6.1 Not able to participate

There are several reasons why a person cannot participate in the survey. First, a language barrier may stand in the way of an interview. Although in the ESS translations are required for each language used as a first language by 5% or more of the population, speakers of other languages may not be able to answer the survey questions. Note that in these cases the ESS does not allow the minority language speaker to be substituted by a household member who does speak the survey language, nor does it allow proxy interviews (where someone answers the questions on behalf of the target person) to be conducted. In addition, the ESS does not allow the interviewer or another household member to translate the questions 'on the fly'. It is felt that the loss in terms of representativeness and measurement error – were these procedures allowed – outweighs the loss in terms of nonresponse error.

Second, the target person is mentally or physically unable to participate, or ill or sick when the interviewer visits. In these cases too, substitution and proxy interviews are not allowed. If the inability to participate is a temporary condition the interviewer should come back after a certain period (a few days or weeks) and find out if the target person can be interviewed at that time. Note that a mental or physical inability, illness or sickness does not mean that a sample unit is ineligible. It just means that the target person is *not able* to answer the survey questions.

6.2 The "other" reasons for nonresponse

There are also "other" reasons for nonresponse. One "other" reason could be that a case is not issued. Broken appointments, or the target person not being available are also "other reasons". As long as the number of people in this "other" category is not negligible, and differs substantially across countries, as shown in the Quality Matrix (see 7.1.7, figure 15), this is a worrying result. To improve fieldwork and to assess the impact of nonresponse, it is recommended to keep these "other" reasons to a minimum, and clearly specify why this target person does not participate. If a person is not available during the fieldwork period, this would be classed as 'noncontact', rather than 'other'. If it is not possible to arrange an appointment during telephone recruitment (even when no explicit reason is given) this is a refusal rather than "other" as would be the case in a face-to-face approach. In this case the sample units should be visited face-to-face and asked for cooperation (see Section 4.1).

Recommendations:

- *If the target person is temporarily unwell, the interviewer should come back after a few days or weeks.*
- *If no appointment can be set up over the telephone, the interviewer should make a face-to-face visit.*
- *The survey agency must issue all cases to interviewers.*

7 References to ESS documents and literature

7.1 Specification, guidelines and related documents

The following documents will be available in March 2018 at www.europeansocialsurvey.org/intranet/nc

7.1.1 Survey specifications

Round 9 Survey Specification for ESS ERIC Member, Observer and Guest Countries. London: ESS ERIC Headquarters www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round9/methods/ESS-ERIC-Specifications-Round-9.pdf

7.1.2 ESS Contact form

Available on request from ess@city.ac.uk

7.1.3 ESS Projections template
7.1.4 ESS Guidelines on Fieldwork Progress Reporting
7.1.5 ESS Round 9 NC Manual (including interviewer briefings)
7.1.6 Quality report for the European Social Survey, Round 6
www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round6/methods/ESS6_quality_report.pdf
7.1.7 ESS Round 7 Quality matrix for the Europeans Social Survey (Koen Beullens, Geert Loosveldt, Katrijn Denies & Caroline Vandenplas)
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