



Field Procedures in the European Social Survey: Enhancing Response Rates

I Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of the ESS is its objective to achieve high methodological standards, thereby striving for 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 participating countries, in order to ensure that the people interviewed in each country closely represent the country's total population.

As a result, **an effective response rate of 70 per cent** in each country has been specified -

"...The minimum target response rate - after discounting ineligible (...) - should be 70%. As seen in Round 1, this figure is likely to be exceeded in certain countries. Countries that participated in Round 1 and achieved lower response rates will nevertheless be expected to aim for the same 70% target in Round 2. Survey organisations should thus cost their surveys with this response rate in mind and consider what steps may be required to achieve it. ... All potential survey organisations must be invited to suggest a range of techniques that they believe would enhance the final response rate. Such techniques may include advance letters, toll-free telephone numbers for potential respondents to contact, extra training of interviewers in response-maximisation techniques and doorstep interactions, implementing refusal avoidance and conversion techniques, re-issuing of 'soft' refusals and 'indecisive' non-contacts, and many others. ... Response enhancement techniques employed should be documented in the national technical reports." [ESS Specifications for participating countries, Round 2]

This paper outlines how certain fieldwork procedures may enhance response rates. Some procedures form part of the Specification for participating countries and, as such, should be adopted by each country. However, other issues discussed in this paper are recommendations or suggestions. We are aware that the procedures covered here are not new; many of the National Co-ordinators (and the survey organisations) will be familiar with them. The paper should thus be seen simply as a summary and reminder of issues which should be considered in targeting maximally good response rates.

The effectiveness of different approaches may well vary between different countries, with different norms, cultural settings, geography, and so forth. The CCT is therefore very happy to discuss or advise on fieldwork procedures to be adopted within particular countries. **Wherever possible, the countries should take into account the experiences made in ESS Round 1 to improve fieldwork and response rates in the present round.**

Before going through some of the more detailed issues, it is worth noting the following general points:

1. One of the main difficulties with non-response is the difference in characteristics between respondents and non-respondents. Data quality and comparability are compromised by the extent to which those interviewed differ from those not interviewed. In attempts to enhance response rates, **you should be mindful of the need to boost levels of response amongst all groups of the population and to bring response rates to a more consistent level across subgroups, if possible.** This is, for instance, why the ESS allows no substitution of addresses or individuals.
2. **Close monitoring of response rates** – among the entire sample and, if possible, among some important subgroups – during fieldwork will provide an early warning of any response rate difficulties. Detailed guidance is given on the design and content of forms for interviewers to record all contacting details (see: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/fieldwork/contact_form_address_round_2.doc). The information collected with the contact forms aids the identification of such response rate difficulties, which will thus allow decisions to be made on remedial action.
3. **Certain elements of the survey design may differentially affect the likelihood of participation among different groups of the population.** For instance, a monetary incentive may be more likely to encourage the participation of people with low incomes rather than those with high incomes. Measures to reduce non-response should take account of such issues, targeting groups who are disproportionately underrepresented as a result of design issues.
4. There are **three basic types of non-responders** –
 - *Non-contacts* - those who cannot be contacted during the fieldwork period;
 - *Refusals* - those who are contacted, but refuse to participate;
 - *Other non-responders* - those who are contacted and might be willing to participate, but cannot do so, for example because of illness or language problems.As the last group is usually much smaller than the other two, this paper concentrates on minimising the non-contacts and refusals. Obviously, different measures are required to deal with each of these two groups. After discussing broader issues of interviewer selection, training, workload, monitoring and payment (Section II), the paper focuses separately on possible ways of minimising non-contacts (Section III) and refusals (Section IV).
5. Interviewing and field procedures must be closely monitored via **quality control back-checks**. It is specified that these back-checks (in person, by telephone or by post) must be carried out and documented on at least 5 per cent of respondents, 10 per cent of refusals and 10 per cent of non-contacts.

II How might the selection, organisation and training of interviewers help to enhance response rates?

a) Selecting interviewers to work on the study

There is a considerable body of evidence to show that different interviewers achieve substantially different response rates. Although it is often difficult to distinguish between interviewer and area effects - (for instance, interviewers working in inner city areas normally face bigger challenges in obtaining good response rates than interviewers working in more rural areas) - there is evidence that **more experienced interviewers tend to achieve higher response rates** than those with less experience. Furthermore, there is some evidence that **interviewers who are confident about their ability to elicit co-operation tend to achieve the higher response rates**. On the other hand, once other variables have been controlled, socio-demographic characteristics of interviewers - like age and gender - do not seem to play a major role in affecting response rates.

Recommendations:

Attempt to enhance response rates by -

- *The selection of experienced interviewers wherever possible;*
- *Boosting interviewers confidence about their ability to 'sell' the survey (see below).*

b) Briefing interviewers about all aspects of the study

Personal briefing of all interviewers working on the study has been specified -

"All interviewers will be personally briefed by the National Co-ordinator or members of the research team from the survey organisation before carrying out an assignment, drawing on detailed interviewer instructions prepared by the CCT."

It is important that the personal briefings - and accompanying written instructions - do not focus purely 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 should 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. This will be of particular importance where less experienced interviewers are being employed on the study.

The CCT will prepare a paper on issues to include within the personal briefings and written instructions by June 2004.

Recommendations:

- *One day or half day personal briefing sessions of all interviewers by the National Co-ordinator and survey organisation, covering all aspects of the field procedures and the interview.*
- *Include a session on doorstep introduction and discussions on encouraging participation.*

c) Interviewer assignment sizes and overall workload

A maximum assignment size per interviewer has been specified -

“Interviewers’ assignment sizes (workload) should not exceed 24 issued sampling units (i.e. 24 named individuals, households or addresses) and no interviewer should carry out more than two assignments.”

Response rates can be affected by the amount of work allocated to each interviewer. The assignment size will affect the amount of effort an interviewer can apply to attempting contact and securing co-operation from each sampled individual (and household where relevant). 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.

Beyond the assignment sizes on this particular study, you should **make sure 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.

Recommendation:

- *Discuss the workload of interviewers with the survey organisation, to avoid such conflict of interest. (However, deciding on priorities may be more difficult if interviewers are working for more than one organisation during the fieldwork period.)*

d) Monitoring interviewers’ progress

Close monitoring of fieldwork progress will allow for the early identification of difficulties. It has been specified -

“Fieldwork progress must be closely monitored, including producing a fortnightly report on response.”

During the fieldwork period, survey organisations should provide **fortnightly or - even better - weekly progress reports**. These reports should contain as **essential information** an overall breakdown of the issued sample and an appraisal of the overall response rate. **Additional information** might, for example, refer to response rates for demographic subgroups or interviewers, and information about re-issues. If it is possible to obtain interim data sets of achieved interviews or of contact form data during the fieldwork period, this can be extremely valuable. To facilitate these progress updates, interviewers must return all interviews and all records of refusals and other non-response promptly to the survey organisation.

For detailed recommendations about what is essential or useful to include in these reports see: (www.europeansocialsurvey.org/fieldwork/progress_reports_round_2.doc). These guidelines have been revised in the light of experiences in Round 1 of the survey, and requirements have been reduced in some cases. In addition, guidance has been added on what National Coordinators should look out for when reading the progress reports of survey organisations.

Recommendation:

- *During the fieldwork period, survey organisations should provide regular feedback to the National Coordinators regarding fieldwork progress.*

e) Payment of interviewers

Levels of interviewer pay and the pay structure may both affect interviewers' incentive to work hard to enhance their response rates. The pay rate for the study should be set in relation to the length and complexity of the interview, the expected difficulties of obtaining co-operation, and the amount of record keeping demanded of the interviewer. Of course, it is always advantageous if the pay rate is attractive in relation to pay on other studies.

'Bonus' payments for interviews achieved above a certain response rate target may have a positive effect. However, any bonus system must be perceived as being fair. Different areas in which the interviewers work can vary considerably – often in a unknown way – in the challenges they pose to the interviewers.

It is usual for survey organisations to have a standard policy concerning pay arrangements, which they are unlikely to differ for particular studies. The two standard policies are to pay interviewers an **hourly rate** or to pay **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.

Recommendation:

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

III What field procedures might be adopted to enhance response rates by minimising the number of non-contacts?

A maximum non-contact rate of 3 per cent of all sampled units has been specified –
“The proportion of non-contacts should not exceed 3 per cent of all sampled units.”

This will involve considerable efforts on the part of the interviewers, and the specification for participating countries already details some ways of minimising non-contacts.

a) Number, timing and mode of calls

There is a considerable body of evidence to show that surveys which insist on several calls, at different times of day, on different days of the week, and over an extended period of time, have lower non-contact rates.

For the ESS, the following call schedule is specified –

“They include at least four personal visits by interviewers to each sampling unit before it is abandoned as non-productive, including at least one visit in the evening and at least one at the weekend. These visits should be spread over at least two different weeks. ...

The first contact with potential respondents, following a possible advance letter, will be face-to-face. Once in contact with a household, interviewers may make (or change) appointments by telephone.

The one exception to this is where the country’s sample is one of named individuals with telephone numbers. Here the first contact may be made by telephone, in order to make appointments to visit the respondent. (Sampled individuals without a listed phone number should be contacted face-to-face).

Interviews may not, under any circumstances, be conducted over the telephone.”

In order to ensure that the above call schedule is adhered to, (because interviewer preferences sometimes would not mirror these requirements), control and checking of the call scheduling may be necessary. The interviewers are required to record the time, day, mode and outcome of all the calls they make in the contact forms.

Analyses of the contact forms data from ESS Round 1 (see:

www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/nonresponse_fieldwork_efforts.doc), 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, and doing more evening and/or weekend calls.

The preferred mode of first contact in the ESS is face-to-face. Please note, that even in countries with samples of named individuals, all individuals without an available phone number, **plus** all non-contacts and refusals obtained by telephone should still be visited in person.

Recommendation:

- *In particular, when the progress reports on fieldwork (see Section II) reveal a high non-contact rate, participating countries should check whether the interviewers adhered to the specified call schedule or not. This may require that contact forms are checked on site at the survey organisation. Based on experiences from ESS Round 1, we suggest that some countries should consider raising the minimum number of calls and changing the timing of the calls.*

b) Length of fieldwork period

A minimum and maximum fieldwork period has been specified -

“ The main fieldwork period will last for at least one month within a four-month period between 1 September and end December 2004. Only in special circumstances within a particular country would deviations from this timetable be allowed (in agreement with the CCT). ... To allow difficult-to-contact people to be located, the fieldwork period should not be less than 30 days.”

Truncated fieldwork periods lead to a higher proportion of non-contacts. Thus, the ESS is allowing a fieldwork period of up to 4 months in order to counter this potential problem, and achieve a maximum non-contact rate of 3 per cent. The length of the fieldwork period also allows for more conversion attempts on refusals (see Section IV).

Recommendation:

- *Ensure that optimal use is made of the stipulated fieldwork period. In particular, try to ensure that interviewers will work on all PSUs (Primary Sampling Units) from the very beginning of the fieldwork period.*

IV What field procedures might be adopted to enhance response rates by minimising the number of refusals?

a) *Advance letters*

A letter sent in advance of an interviewer call usually has a positive effect on the response rate. It can serve several purposes, addressing a variety of issues known to affect survey participation. The advance letter can be used to –

- Explain the purpose of the survey,
- Identify the sponsor and the survey organisation,
- Include any gifts or incentives, or information about them,
- Alert the respondent, or household, to expect a call from an interviewer.

In most cases, interviewers value the use of an advance letter, as their first contact with the sample person or the sample household is then not totally “cold”.

If the sample frame is one of named individuals, the advance letter can be addressed personally to the selected individual. If using a sampling frame of addresses or households, the effect of an advance letter may be diluted, as the individual to be selected may not receive or read the letter.

Consideration should be given to ensure that the time span between the arrival of the letter and the call of 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 send the letters centrally at the start of the fieldwork period).

A guide on how countries might draft an advance letter for respondents is available at: www.europeansocialsurvey.org/fieldwork/advance_letter_round_2.doc. This document also provides some suggestions for countries who intend to use a leaflet in addition to the advance letter.

Recommendation:

- *Use an advance letter, personalised with the individual name if possible, or the address. Include the letters in interviewer workpacks, and instruct them to organise posting them a few days before they intend to call at the address.*

b) *Respondent incentives*

There are numerous examples of studies that show that – even modest – ‘rewards’ help to improve the response rate. If deciding to go down this route, there is a decision to make whether

- to give the incentive 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, 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.

Sometimes, the use of incentives is restricted to individuals who initially refuse to participate. While this procedure is apparently cost-effective, it raises the concern that initially co-operative respondents would perceive this as unfair.

Recommendation:

- *Consider using an incentive to raise response rates. To come to a decision, you have to judge the relative time and cost advantages of using an incentive versus not. Incentives may mean less interviewer time in persuading respondents to participate, less time in refusal conversions. The reduction in interviewer time – and thus costs – must be weighed against the cost of providing incentives.*

c) Converting people who initially 'refuse' participation¹

In order to maximise response rates, and minimise refusal rates, probably **all participating countries should consider to try to 'convert' people who initially refuse to participate in the survey**, by persuading them to reconsider.²

When (non-decisive) refusal conversion efforts are to be made, a decision has to be taken as to who makes the conversion attempt. In general, it is recommended that conversion cases should be reissued to another, more senior interviewer. However, this requires that experienced interviewers ("refusal converters") are indeed available, and that the transfer of all the process information collected by the first interviewer to the second interviewer is organised in an efficient manner.

When reassigning a case to a different interviewer, it might be worth considering gender or age matching between converter and refuser. Besides changing interviewers, (personalised) persuasion letters or incentives for refusal conversion (see above) can be helpful.

As refusals are often influenced by the circumstances and the mood of the potential respondent at the time of the initial survey request, refusal conversion attempts can be quite successful. Analyses of the ESS Round 1 data reveal differences in refusal conversion efforts and in success rates across countries (see:

www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/monitoring_evaluating_non_response.doc.)

Thus every country should check its results in Round 1 thoroughly, and liaise with the

¹ 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".

² In some countries, such conversion attempts are restricted by data protection laws.

Another issue where the legal situation in the country has to be considered is interviewing minors (such as the younger people in the ESS frames). In some countries, in this instance, not only the targeted respondent but also his/her parents have to consent to the survey request.

survey organisation about ways to improve the effectivity of the procedures used. 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"**. Inexperienced interviewers in particular often prompt many "soft refusals" by pressing the respondents to make a decision too quickly. Specific techniques how to avoid refusals should be part of interviewer briefings.

Recommendation:

- Interviewers should be familiar with effective techniques to avoid refusals. In particular, countries with low (interim) response rates should try to attempt to convert as many refusals as feasible to an interview. If possible, experienced interviewers should carry out the conversion attempts.

Literature:

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