



Field Procedures in the European Social Survey Round 8: Guidelines for Enhancing Response Rates and Minimising Nonresponse Bias

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1	Introduction	3
2	Interviewers	3
2.1	The importance of experience	3
2.2	Briefing interviewers about all aspects of the study	4
2.3	Interviewer assignment sizes and overall workload	5
2.4	Payment of interviewers	5
2.5	Monitoring interviewers' progress	6
3	Reducing the number of noncontacts.....	6
3.1	Number and timing of calls	7
3.2	Length and timing of fieldwork period	7
4	Minimising the number of refusals	8
4.1	Advance letters.....	8
4.2	Recruitment mode.....	9
4.3	Respondent incentives	9
4.4	Doorstep interaction	10
4.5	Converting people who initially 'refuse' participation	11
5	Not able and other reasons for nonresponse	13
6	Enhancing response rates and minimising nonresponse bias	13
7	References to ESS documents and literature.....	15
7.1	Specification, guidelines and related documents	15
7.2	References.....	15
7.3	Background literature.....	16
7.3.1	General literature on nonresponse and nonresponse bias	16
7.3.2	Interviewer characteristics and nonresponse.....	16
7.3.3	Interviewer training.....	16
7.3.4	Establishing contact	16
7.3.5	Minimising refusal.....	17
7.3.6	Respondent incentives.....	17
7.3.7	Nonresponse bias.....	17

1 Introduction

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, and to ensure that the people interviewed in each country closely represent the country's total population. Nonresponse bias is one impediment to national and cross-national representativeness. The Core Scientific Team (CST), which includes the ESS ERIC Headquarters (based at City University), National Coordinators (NCs) and survey agencies work closely together to pursue representativeness and optimal comparability, enhance response rates and minimise nonresponse bias. The **CST Fieldwork Team** supports the NC team in preparing for fieldwork. The fieldwork team invites the NC to complete the Fieldwork Questionnaire after which the results of the questionnaire will be discussed with the NC.

This document outlines how fieldwork procedures may enhance response rates in the countries fielding the ESS in Round 8. Some procedures form part of the *Round 8 Survey Specification for ESS ERIC Member, Observer and Guest countries* (European Social Survey, 2015) (*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 also 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: "... the minimum target response rate ... should be 70%. All countries are expected to aim for the 70% response rate or – where this is considered highly unlikely – plan for a higher response rate than in the previous round." (7.1.1, p. 29).

Section 2 of this paper covers interviewers issues related to nonresponse, and Section 0, 4, and 5 three causes of nonresponse (noncontact, refusal and not able/other). Section 6 gives a short summary and highlights the importance of minimising nonresponse bias. The final section comprises three sets of references. 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 8 Survey Specification for ESS ERIC Member, Observer and Guest Countries is henceforth referred to 7.1.1 – which indicates that the reader should refer to Section 7.1 of this paper and locate document number 1 on the list. Section 7.2 lists the references to (un)published papers mentioned in the text below. 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 Interviewers

2.1 The importance of experience

There is a considerable body of evidence that shows that different interviewers achieve different response rates (see 7.3.2). Socio-demographic characteristics of interviewers, like age and sex, do not seem to play a major role in achieving response rates. On the other hand, 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.

Recommendations:

- *Attempt to enhance response rates by selecting experienced and well-trained interviewers. 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, and (if necessary) the use of CAPI software.*
- *Even experienced interviewers should receive regular training.*

2.2 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 8 and before carrying out their assignment” (7.1.1, p. 32).

ESS interviewers are expected to have received *training* in and to have experience of conducting face-to-face surveys among random samples. To prepare them for ESS Round 8 they should receive a specific in-person *briefing*. It should be noted that interviewer *training* is different from a *briefing*, in which specific instructions for a particular survey research project, such as description of the project, questionnaire and rules, are presented. 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.

The briefings should also enable interviewers to practise asking questions from the survey, facilitated by guidance provided by the CST. Care should be taken to ensure that less experienced interviewers also receive training on general interviewing and contacting techniques. The CST has prepared guidelines regarding in-person briefings, instructions for interviewers and scripted ESS practice interviews (see 7.1.5).

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 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 for less experienced or less well-trained interviewers. In countries with high levels of refusals, briefings should cover additional **training on refusal avoidance and refusal conversion techniques (see 4.4 and 4.5)**. 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 (7.1.6).

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 and presenting some key findings from earlier rounds. Interviewers might also find this information useful when ‘selling’ the survey to target persons. 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 (see 2.4). 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.

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 Specification). 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.*
- *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.*
- *Include a session on doorstep introduction 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 ESS8 intranet in May 2016.*

2.3 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. Any proposed deviation in this area must be discussed with the CST in advance” (7.1.1, p. 31).

To be effective and efficient, interviewers should be assigned a certain number of sample units, but too large a workload can stand in the way of a high response rate and finalising a survey within the required 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 Loosveldt and Beullens (2013) on the large effect of interviewers on interview duration.

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. 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.*
- *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.*

2.4 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. The pay rate for the study 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. 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, and a disincentive to complete contact forms and observe neighbourhood characteristics for nonresponding individuals.

Recommendations:

- *Discuss the interviewer pay arrangement with the survey agency. 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.*

2.5 Monitoring interviewers' progress

*"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.*

*Survey agencies should closely monitor the progress of fieldwork and should provide information to the NC to allow reporting to the CST **on at least a weekly base** (fortnightly if fieldwork takes longer than 10 weeks according to the planning) and provide this to the NC. This includes detailed information on fieldwork outcomes, response rates in different regions, among different subgroups (where possible), and by different interviewers." (7.1.1, 33-34).*

Before fieldwork starts survey agencies need to provide projections of how many interviews they expect to be completed each week (6.1(3)). During the fieldwork period, the agencies should provide **fortnightly or – in the case of short fieldwork periods – weekly progress reports to the NC**. These reports should contain as **essential information** firstly an **overall breakdown of the issued sample** and secondly an **appraisal of the overall response rate**. This information can then be compared to the projections to identify possible problems and the need for action by the survey agency. **Important additional information** includes response rates for regions, demographic subgroups or interviewers, and information about reissues.

If possible, NCs should try to obtain some interim datasets of achieved interviews or of contact form data *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. To facilitate these progress updates, interviewers should be encouraged to return all interviews and all records of refusals and other nonresponse promptly to the survey agency.

For detailed recommendations about what is essential or useful to include in these reports, see the 'Guidelines on Fieldwork Progress Reporting (7.1.4). These guidelines also contain guidance on what NCs should look out for when reading the progress reports from survey agencies and what is essential or useful to request from survey agencies. Only when detailed progress reports are available, can problems with obtaining response be identified and resolved.

Recommendations:

- *During the fieldwork period, survey agencies should provide regular feedback to the NCs regarding fieldwork progress (which NCs should in turn provide to their CST Country Contact).*
- *Checking of interim datasets can help to identify problems during fieldwork.*

According to the Specification, during the fieldwork period NCs must provide weekly or fortnightly – in the case fieldwork takes longer than 10 weeks - reports on response progress to their CST contact person (Country Contact).

3 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. Below we detail some ways of minimising noncontacts (see also 7.3.4).

3.1 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 can be accommodated, and people who are away for shorter periods can still be reached.

“The ESS aims for a response rate of 70% and a maximum noncontact rate of 3%. 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. 28).*

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 control 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 in the contact forms. Where the contact forms are not used to monitor fieldwork an alternative system providing this information needs to be in place.

Analyses of the contact forms data from earlier rounds (see Stoop et al., 2010) show that people are harder to reach in some countries than in other countries. In order to bring down noncontact 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 e.g., Matsuo et al., 2010). NCs in countries with too high noncontact rates and/or limited contact efforts should discuss this issue with their survey agency, in order to improve compliance in Round 8.

Recommendations:

- *When the progress reports on fieldwork (see Section 2.5) reveal a high noncontact rate, participating countries should check whether the interviewers adhered to the specified call schedule or not. If the call record information is not available as an interim dataset during fieldwork, this may on occasion require that contact forms be checked on site at the survey agency by the NC team.*
- *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.*

3.2 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 2016” (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 4.5 and Sztabiński et al., 2009).

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.

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 2.3).*
- *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.*

4 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 2.1 and 2.2.

4.1 Advance letters

A letter sent in advance of an interviewer call usually has a positive effect on the response rate, although there can be exceptions (see Luiten, 2011). Advance letters inform respondents about the purpose and importance of the survey, alert respondents that they will receive a visit, and promote the legitimacy of the survey. In many cases the advance letter itself is rather short and mainly highlights the purpose of survey participation. An enclosed leaflet then provides more information on the survey, what to expect, data privacy issues, and the use of the results.

The advance letter (and the leaflet) can thus be used to

- explain the purpose of the survey,
- explain the topic of the questions (possibly taking into account issues that might or might not be nationally attractive),
- identify the sponsor and provide contact information of the survey agency,
- include or announce any gifts or incentives and provide information about them,
- explain why the sample person was selected,
- ensure that data will be protected, and
- alert the sample person, or household, to expect a call from an interviewer.

Interviewers usually value the use of an advance letter (and a leaflet), as it means that their first contact with the sample person or the sample household is not totally unexpected.

If the sample frame is one of named individuals, the advance letter should be addressed personally to the selected individual². If using a sampling frame of addresses or households, an advance letter may be less effective, as the individual to be selected may not receive or read the letter. Still, sending an advance letter is advised.

Care should be taken to ensure that the time span between the arrival of the letter 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 sending the letters centrally at the start of the fieldwork period).

² In many countries, personalising a letter by addressing the recipient with “Dear Mr. Smith” is considered as good practice. However, in former Communist countries such as Poland, this way of addressing a target person might not be the best way to ensure participation.

A guide on how countries might draft an advance letter for respondents will be made available from the ESS intranet. This document also provides some suggestions for countries who intend to use a leaflet in addition to the advance letter. It will always be necessary to adapt the letter and the leaflet to the national situation.

Recommendations:

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

4.2 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 should 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 (four 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. 28).*

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** (with the exception of the supplementary questionnaire). Survey research has shown that survey modes can effect 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.”

4.3 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, **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 underrepresented in the achieved sample, monetary incentives might reduce nonresponse bias. If poorer people are already overrepresented, however, incentives might even increase the potential for nonresponse bias on survey estimates. 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 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 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.*
- *Be aware that incentives – as other response enhancing measures – might have an effect on nonresponse bias, as well as on response rates.*

4.4 Doorstep interaction⁴

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. 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, perhaps showing their identity badge. 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 respondent's behalf!*
- *If you get hold of the right person, introduce yourself (showing your identity badge if the respondent asks for it or is suspicious), refer to the introduction 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 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.

³ While this procedure is apparently cost-effective, it raises 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.

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.

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. A **reluctant respondent** 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 reluctant respondents 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 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.*

4.5 Converting people who initially 'refuse' participation⁵

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.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). Thus every country should check its results 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,

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.

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 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)

If these efforts are really expected to result in a more 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 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 oversampling 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 interviewers, (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"**. 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 interviewer briefings (see also Sections 2.1 and 2.2).

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 possible and financially feasible.*
- *If possible, a different and experienced 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.*

5 *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 (Stoop et al., 2010).

There are several reasons why a person cannot participate in the survey. Firstly, 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. Therefore, a language barrier implies nonresponse.

Secondly, 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 could just mean that the target person is *not able* to answer the survey questions.

There are also “other” reasons for nonresponse. One “other” reason could be that a case is not issued. In other cases the reason is not always clear. To improve fieldwork in future rounds 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 3.1).

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.*

6 *Enhancing response rates and minimising nonresponse bias*

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.

Nonresponse, the opposite of response, has different causes and different measures can be taken to enhance the response rate. To minimise the potential for nonresponse *bias* the following issues should be taken into account:

a) Response enhancing measures can affect subgroups differentially

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 nonresponse should take account of such issues. Response enhancing efforts should therefore target groups who are disproportionately underrepresented as a result of design issues.** When reissuing refusals in order to convert them into productive interviews, you 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.

b) Enhance response across subgroups

One of the main difficulties with nonresponse is the difference in characteristics between respondents and nonrespondents. Accuracy 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 enhance levels of response amongst all groups of the population and to bring response rates to a consistent level across subgroups, if possible** (see for instance Laganà et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2014). This is also why the CST does not allow substitution of addresses or individuals, nor is it in favour of oversampling in areas where response rates are expected to be lower.

c) Close monitoring of response rates is necessary

During fieldwork it is essential to closely monitor response among the entire sample and, if possible, among some important subgroups. This will provide an early warning of any response rate difficulties and might enable timely remedial action. Using the ESS contact forms for the monitoring should provide you with the necessary information, though some survey agencies use their own monitoring system (7.1.2). In the latter case, **care should be taken that the monitoring system allows for sufficient detail to detect problems during fieldwork in time**. This means, for instance, that causes of nonresponse should be available (noncontact, refusal, not able), regional details, and key demographics of respondents,

d) Distinguish between types of nonrespondents

There are three basic types of nonrespondents:

- **Noncontacts:** those who cannot be contacted during the fieldwork period;
- **Refusals:** those who are contacted, but refuse to participate;
- **Not able/others:** those who are contacted and might be willing to participate, but cannot do so, for example because of illness or language problems.

Obviously, different measures are required to deal with each of these groups of nonrespondents. After discussing broader issues of interviewer selection, training, workload, monitoring and payment (Section 2), this document focuses separately on possible ways to minimise noncontacts (Section 3), refusals (Section 4) and nonresponse due to other reasons (Section 5).

e) Carry out quality control back-checks

In order to assure high data quality, interviewing and field procedures must be closely monitored via quality control back-checks. It is specified for the ESS that these back-checks must be carried out and documented on at least 10 % of respondents, 5 % of refusals and 5 % of cases where no contact with the sampled person was made (noncontacts and ineligibles) (7.1.1).

f) Response rates, nonresponse bias and survey quality

Enhancing response rates presumably results in smaller nonresponse bias and higher accuracy. This isn't necessarily always the case, however (Groves and Peytcheva, 2008). Firstly, nonresponse bias is likely to be smaller when higher response rates are achieved among all subgroups in the population, and not in specific subgroups only. Secondly, probability sampling rules must be adhered to when trying to increase participation. This means that replacing a refusing household member by a more willing one, is not a good procedure to enhance response rates. Substitution will not reduce bias and is not allowed in the ESS. Finally, 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 nor translation on the fly will solve this issue, and hence these are not allowed in the ESS (see also 7.3.7).

Reports on fieldwork processes and response rates in previous rounds can be found in 7.1(7 and 8).

7 References to ESS documents and literature

7.1 Specification, guidelines and related documents

The following documents will be available at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/intranet/nc/>

- 7.1.1 Round 8 Survey Specification for ESS ERIC Member, Observer and Guest Countries. London: ESS ERIC Headquarters
- 7.1.2 ESS Contact form: available on request from ess@city.ac.uk
- 7.1.3 ESS Round 8 Fieldwork Progress Reporting Guidance and ESS Round 8 Fieldwork Projections Template (to be used to submit fieldwork projections)
- 7.1.4 Guidelines on Fieldwork Progress Reporting
- 7.1.5 ESS Round 8 Interviewer Briefing Materials, including scripted ESS practice interviews
- 7.1.6 ESS Round 8 Guidelines on Completing ESS Contact Forms and ESS Round 8 Guidelines on Collecting Observable Data
- 7.1.7 Quality report for the European Social Survey, Round 6
www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round6/methods/ESS6_quality_report.pdf
- 7.1.8 ESS Round 7 Quality matrix for the Europeans Social Survey (available in Spring 2016)

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