

Discussion

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The article by Michael Brick about unit nonresponse and weighting adjustments presents an excellent overview of the concepts, trends, and strategies in unit nonresponse research. This overview clearly demonstrates that the conceptual and analytical framework of nonresponse research is highly evolved and has been much improved. The author mentions that we have a better understanding of the correlates of nonresponse and the methods to reduce nonresponse due to noncontact. However, as the title suggests, it is a critical review. Perhaps as a result, the general undertone is rather pessimistic. According to the author, response rates are falling in most countries and most procedures to reduce nonresponse are not effective. As a consequence, weighting adjustment procedures are important, but the author states that we do not have a sufficiently thorough understanding of the impact of these procedures on the reduction of nonresponse bias. In the discussion Brick concludes that “even after decades of research on nonresponse we remain woefully ignorant of the causes of nonresponse at a profound level” and “Perhaps the time is ripe for new approaches to the vexing and important questions of why people do and do not respond to surveys.” As always, a discussion involving statements such as these is an invitation to formulate some related considerations, comments, and suggestions. The starting point is a few observations about the trend in nonresponse rates in the European Social Survey (ESS).

The ESS is a biennial, face-to-face survey organized in as many European countries as possible and concerns changes in attitudes across Europe (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). The first round of the survey was organized in 2002. [Figure 1a](#) presents the response rates in the ESS Rounds 1–4, and [Figure 1b](#) illustrates the refusal rates ([Matsuo et al. 2010](#); similar results concerning Round 1–3 are presented in [Stoop et al. 2010](#)).

The results in [Figure 1a](#) clearly illustrate that there are differences between countries in terms of response rates. In Poland and Portugal, for example, the response rate is always near the target of 70 percent, whereas in France and Switzerland the response rate in each Round (1–4) is below 50 percent. In addition, for the refusal rates (the largest category of nonresponse in most countries) we observe clear differences (e.g., low refusal rates in Greece and high refusal rates in France and Switzerland, [Figure 1b](#)). There are also differences within countries. In some countries there is a systematic increase or decrease in the refusal rate across the ESS rounds (e.g., an increase in the Netherlands and a decrease in Spain). In a few countries there is an increase in response rates: the Czech Republic, Spain, France, and Portugal.

The observed differences between countries and differences within countries put the overall trend of increasing refusal rates and decreasing response rates, and the related pessimistic opinion of the author about survey participation, into perspective.

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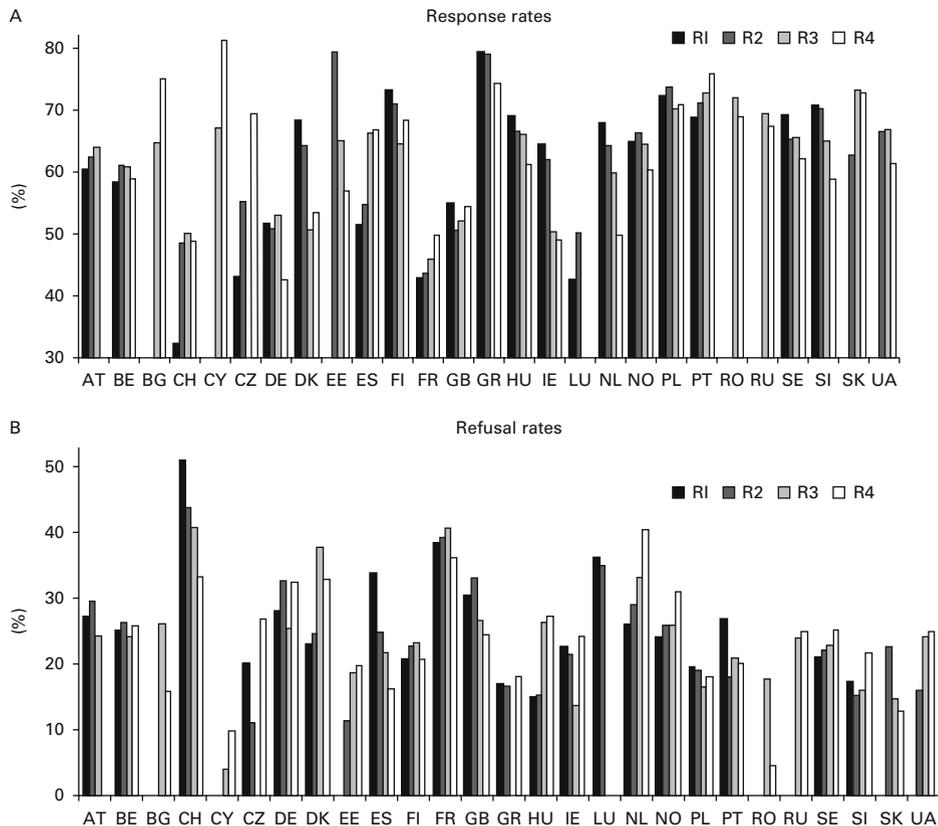


Fig. 1A. Response rates (%) in the ESS Rounds 1–4. (1B) Refusal rates (%) in the ESS Rounds 1–4

The differences also make it clear that a general theory about unit nonresponse must not only focus on the question of why people participate in a survey, but must also be able to identify the differences between and within countries. To understand the differences between countries and the deviations from the trend, characteristics at three different hierarchical levels seem to be relevant: the macro or country level, the intermediate or organizational level, and the micro or individual level. The authors’ question of why people do not participate in surveys, and the discussed weighting adjustment procedures, are situated at the individual level. It is mainly a respondent-oriented approach that does not take into account the relevance of the other levels. I will argue that this restricted approach could be enriched by using information at the country level and organizational level that is relevant in explaining differences between and within countries. This additional information partially explains why people participate in surveys and is probably useful in optimizing weighting procedures.

The survey climate can be considered a relevant societal characteristic in explaining differences between countries. It relates to the public’s willingness to cooperate and the extent to which people consider survey research, and thus survey interviews, to be useful and legitimate (Loosveldt and Storms 2008). The number of surveys in a society and the discussions in the media about the accuracy and utility of the results of various polls and

surveys all contribute to this climate. One can assume that a more positive survey climate stimulates individual participation. The individual subjective experience of the survey climate mediates the general survey climate (country level) and a respondent's decision to participate (individual level). This subjective experience manifests itself in an individual's opinions about different aspects of a survey (value, cost, enjoyment, reliability, and privacy). To answer the question of why people participate in surveys and to detect effective weighting variables, it is important to obtain information about the sample unit's opinion about surveys and the sample unit's characteristics that correlate with this opinion. In this context, the reasons for nonparticipation or refusals observed during the doorstep interaction with the sample unit can be informative. The doorstep interaction can also be used to ask respondents and nonrespondents a few basic questions about their opinions concerning surveys. This is a suggestion for comparative analysis as mentioned by the author in the discussion. It should be noted that fieldwork organizations such as National Statistical Institutes are partially responsible for the survey climate and can take initiatives to monitor and improve it (Lorenc et al. 2013). In this regard, unit nonresponse is not only the respondents' responsibility, as strongly suggested by the author's approach. To summarize the reflection on the survey climate, the survey climate can have an impact on the nonresponse rate and can be translated into characteristics at the individual level, which are correlated with substantial variables and discriminate between the group of respondents and that of nonrespondents.

The intermediate or organizational level refers to the capacity of the fieldwork organization and the way they organize and implement the survey. This level can be used to explain differences within countries with the same survey climate. The differences within countries illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b clearly demonstrate that the nonresponse profile within a country is not a fixed property. Characteristics of the survey design (e.g., use of incentives, selection and training of interviewers, quality and remuneration of interviewers) and paradata about the implementation of fieldwork procedures (e.g., efforts to contact respondents, refusal conversion procedure) is typical information at the organizational level that can be used to explain fluctuations in response rates within countries. As mentioned by Brick, paradata can be used to calculate response propensities based on the survey conditions. This refined definition of response propensity stresses the idea that it is not a fixed property of respondents. Paradata is available for all sample units and sometimes is the only information available with which to calculate response propensities. This is probably the reason why paradata is becoming popular. This kind of data meets the need of researchers to have information about both respondents and nonrespondents. However, available data is not always relevant data, and at the organizational level it is necessary to assess the relevance and meaning of data with regard to the respondent's decision to participate or not. Here also, it is necessary to translate the information at organizational level into relevant sample unit characteristics (e.g., number of contacts and ability to contact them) in order to answer the question of why respondents participate in or refuse an interview. These sample unit characteristics stem from the way in which the fieldwork is implemented and these kinds of characteristics are useful to calculate response propensities with as much exploratory power as possible. Similar comments can be formulated concerning register or sampling frame data and observational data. The latter is data about the sample unit's (respondents and nonrespondents) type

of dwelling and neighborhood characteristics such as litter and graffiti. This type of individual-level data is mostly collected by interviewers and can be used as proxy for socioeconomic status to calculate response propensities.

The current use of paradata, register or sampling frame data, and observable data to calculate response propensities illustrates the core problem of unit nonresponse analysis and weighting adjustment procedures: the need for sufficient and relevant information about nonrespondents. All the types of secondary data can only partially answer the question of why people refuse to participate in a survey. However, it is clear that this information deficit cannot be resolved by means of survey research. Therefore, it seems better not only to focus on the particular respondent participation question, but also to concentrate on what kind of information at each level can be used to decrease the nonresponse rate and to understand the differences between the group of respondents and of nonrespondents. The ultimate objective is to reduce bias and to improve survey estimates.

References

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