Preface

The response rate is frequently seen as the most important criterion for assessing the quality of a survey. Every survey methodologist, however, knows that the response rate of a survey tells only part of the story. There is more than meets the eye and both response rates and the composition of survey nonresponse should be evaluated critically. There are multiple reasons for this.

First, response rates can be calculated in numerous ways and a first step in quality assurance is clearly reporting which disposition codes are used in the calculation of the response to a specific survey. The American Association for Public Opinion Research provides a comprehensive report of standard definitions and a response rate calculator on its website (AAPOR 2016). Transparency in nonresponse reporting is extremely important as a response percentage can be easily enhanced artificially, while the representativity of the responding sample is not enhanced at all. A clear example is redefining the target population to those persons, who already have indicated in a previous survey that they would be quite willing to participate in another survey. Fieldwork procedures and traditions also influence response rates. For example, response rates will increase when nonrespondents can be replaced by more available or more cooperative family members or neighbours, or by focusing additional fieldwork efforts on the easiest cases. These strategies can be an official part of the research protocol, but should always be reported. It is also possible to enhance response rates in illegal ways, by not allowed substitutions or plain falsification of interviews.

Second, there is a difference between nonresponse and nonresponse bias. Nonresponse bias is a function of the response rate and the difference between respondents and nonrespondents on the variables of interest. A high response rate reduces the risk of nonresponse bias. However, when respondents differ considerably from nonrespondents with regard to the core variables of the survey, bias due to nonresponse can be considerable even with high response rates. Finally, there are many other factors besides nonresponse that determine the quality of a survey. A poorly designed questionnaire or one with ill translated questions will not provide any useful results, despite a high response rate.

Still, decreasing response rates are a major concern in the survey world, for academic, governmental, and market research surveys. One of the major reasons is nonresponse bias. Other reasons are the perceived legitimacy of surveys associated with response rates and the small number available for analysis when only a minor part of the invited sample persons participate. Finally, increased efforts to maintain acceptable response rates have consequences for survey costs and may cause practical problems in setting up a survey when response rates are expected to be low or unknown.

In the past decades, the nonresponse problem has received wide attention among survey methodologists and statisticians. This was triggered by the founding of the International

Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse and the resulting research. In July 1989, Bob Groves, then at the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, sent a letter to three Swedish statisticians, outlining his ideas for collaborative work on survey nonresponse. In April 1990, they, now joined by Vladimir Andreyenkov from the former USSR, introduced the idea of a Nonresponse Workshop to interested colleagues around the world. The initiative met great approval and the International Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse was founded in 1990 in Stockholm by Bob Groves (USA), Lars Lyberg (Sweden), and Bob Barnes (UK).

From the onset, the aim of the workshop was to bring together scientists from different countries, different disciplines, and different organizations, in order to pool knowledge and to stimulate a coordinated research agenda and international collaboration. The results can be found in numerous publications on nonresponse. Examples are the pioneering work of [Morton-Williams \(1993\)](#), the groundbreaking book of [Groves and Couper \(1998\)](#), three special issues of the *Journal of Official Statistics* ([JOS 15\(2\) 1999](#); [JOS 17\(2\) 2001](#); [JOS 27\(4\) 2011](#)), an edited book on international perspectives of nonresponse ([Laaksonen 1996](#)), a special issue of *ZUMA-Nachrichten* ([Koch and Porst 1998](#)), and a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2013, 645). Other important contributions are a monograph on survey nonresponse edited by [Groves et al. \(2002\)](#), and the *Hunt for the Last Respondent* ([Stoop 2005](#)). In addition, a very large number of articles have been published in major journals, as well as book chapters in monographs and handbooks of survey methodology.

Since its founding in 1990, the Workshop has been hosted by different countries each year. In 1999, the Workshop extended to a large, international conference on nonresponse, which took place in Portland, Oregon, United States. For 2020, the thirtieth meeting was again planned in Sweden, this time at Örebro University. At this moment, we are still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic; many countries are in partial lock-down and at present large scale international travel is not possible. Therefore, we will not be able to meet in person in Örebro, but will meet with the aid of modern technology at a virtual Nonresponse Workshop online. The jubilee meeting of International Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse coincides with another jubilee. This year it is 35 years since the first issue of the *Journal of Official Statistics* (JOS) was published by Statistics Sweden. JOS was founded by Lars Lyberg, who also served as chief editor for the first 25 years. So, it only seems fitting to celebrate both jubilees with a special issue of JOS on nonresponse, and so honour the founding fathers of the international nonresponse workshop: Lars Lyberg, Bob Groves, Vladimir Andreyenkov, and Bob Barnes, and the founder and first editor of JOS: Lars Lyberg.

In the last three decades much has changed. [Stoop \(2016\)](#) presents an overview of developments in the nonresponse research agenda over the years. Where the first attempts to understand nonresponse focused on studying correlates of nonresponse, later this shifted to attempts to better understand nonresponse ([Groves et al. 1992](#); [Hox et al. 1995](#)) and the development of theories on survey participation (e.g., [Groves et al. 2000](#); [Singer 2011](#); [Dillman et al. 2014](#); [Dillman forthcoming](#)). Likewise, studies into international nonresponse trends ([De Leeuw and De Heer 2002](#); [Beullens et al. 2018](#)) and survey climate ([Loosveldt and Joye 2016](#)), led to the nagging question why response rates vary so much across countries (see also [Stoop et al. 2010](#)). The early collection and analysis of

interviewer observations (e.g., [Campanelli, et al. 1997](#)) has widened into the collection and analysis of paradata ([Kreuter 2013](#)). Surveys of interviewers are still being conducted in special projects shedding some light on the question why some interviewers perform better than others (e.g., [Japac 2008](#); [Blom et al. 2011](#)).

However, it should be noted that in western countries interviewer-mediated surveys are costly and are reserved for official statistics and special projects, such as the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Surveys on Health and Aging across Europe (SHARE). Also, the characteristics and motivation of respondents has been extensively studied; here the focus shifted from studying the difficult to contact and difficult to convince respondents (e.g., [Stoop 2005](#), chap. 7, 8, and 9) to the development of fieldwork adaptations and responsive and adaptive survey design (e.g., [Schouten et al. 2017](#)). For an overview and extensive discussion, see the special issue and special section of JOS on adaptive designs ([JOS 33\(3\) 2017](#); [JOS 34\(3\) 2018](#)). Finally, the attention shifted from studying mere response propensity to the relationship between response propensity and measurement error.

So where are we now? We still wonder why response rates show such a wide variation across countries. We are still concerned that we may not be aware of crucial details in data collection that may enhance or reduce response rates. We know that organizational factors may have a large impact, for example, when funds diminish or fieldwork is stopped because another survey gets priority. We may agree with [Brick \(2013, 346, 347\)](#) that the “. . . central problem, in our opinion, is that even after decades of research on nonresponse we remain woefully ignorant of the causes of nonresponse at a profound level”. We appreciate that research ethics and data protection are becoming increasingly important, although they sometimes may make data collection more complicated. We do agree that it is paramount ([Brick 2013, 346, 347](#)) to advertise the importance of high quality survey data (and the fact that this requires sufficient funding).

The contributions to this special issue of JOS cover a wide area and touch on several of the problems highlighted above.

Changes in response over time and across countries and attempts to understand these are central in three contributions. Luiten, Hox and De Leeuw describe developments in international response trends, and try to explain differences between countries, thus incorporating differences in survey culture. Larsen, Fane Lineback and Reist pay attention to the survey climate, especially economic and political conditions, and the increase in refusals to governmental surveys in the US. Finally, Friedel and Birkenbach study retention rates and R-indicators and focus on changes in the composition of a cross-national longitudinal survey (SHARE).

Three contributions focus on interviewers. Min, Schaeffer, Garbarski and Dykema analyse the action structure of recruitment calls and the impact of interviewers on acceptance of a request for an interview. Wuyts and Loosveldt measure the consequences of interviewer workloads and explore its effects on interviewer performance. Related is the contribution by Peeters, De Coninck, Wuyts, and Loosveldt, who assess interviewer performances in re-approaching reissued initial nonrespondents.

Survey design, the respondent, and adaptive surveys are addressed in two contributions. Van Berkel, Van der Doef, and Schouten describe the implementation of an adaptive survey design in the Dutch Health Survey, using multiple modes. Fowler, Brenner,

Roman, and Hargraves study a mixed mode design and compare telephone and call-in IVR surveys of address-based samples on nonresponse bias.

Finally, response propensity and error are discussed. Bethlehem presents an overview showing how response probabilities can be estimated, even when there is no complete set of auxiliary variables for respondents and nonrespondents. The analyses of Roberts, Vanderplas and Herzing delve into potential limitations of R-indicators and the suitability of auxiliary data used for estimating these, and Andridge and Little introduce a proxy pattern-mixture analysis for the assessment of the impact of nonresponse for binary variables.

This special issue aims to provide some additional evidence why nonresponse is a problem, what could be the causes, and why and how it should be fought. Still, the battle continues and we hope that this special issue stimulates further research that will deepen our understanding of nonresponse, its causes and consequences, and helps us to improve our tools for reducing nonresponse by improved fieldwork designs and for sophisticated statistical adjustment of nonresponse bias.

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