

GESIS Survey Guidelines

Face-to-Face Surveys

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Abstract

This contribution explains what is meant by face-to-face surveys and outlines the advantages and disadvantages of this survey mode. Moreover, it addresses certain aspects of the implementation of face-to-face surveys.

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1. Face-to-Face Surveys

Face-to-face surveys are characterised by the fact that an interviewer calls on, or meets with, the respondent and conducts the interview. The interviewer reads out the questions and records the respondent's answers. This can be done either in the form of a paper-and-pencil interview (PAPI) or a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI). In the latter case, the questions have been recorded in a CAPI software programme; the interviewer reads them out from a computer screen and enters the respondent's answers directly into the computer – usually, a laptop. This enables automatic filtering. In other words, contingent upon certain answers given in earlier parts of the questionnaire, questions that do not apply to the respondent are automatically skipped (Groves et al., 2009; Loosveldt, 2008).

1.1 Strengths of Face-to-Face Surveys

Face-to-face surveys also allow comparatively complex issues to be surveyed. On the one hand, the interview can be supplemented with visual displays such as response lists, calendar displays, and images. On the other hand, the interviewer can explain questions and tasks in a much more comprehensive way than would be possible in the case of self-administered questionnaires. If respondents are uncertain about something, interviewers can explain it in more detail; they can probe if the respondent's answer does not match the question; and they can motivate the respondent to answer all the questions (Groves et al., 2009; Loosveldt, 2008; Schnell, 2012; Fowler, 2014).

The administration of tests – for example grip strength tests (as in the case of SOEP and SHARE) and competency tests (as in the case of PIAAC) – is also possible in the context of face-to-face surveys. Hair samples or blood samples (as in the case of SHARE) can also be collected comparatively easily. Moreover, the interview data can be enriched with the interviewer's assessments of the respondent or his or her home environment (Groves et al., 2009).

A further strength of face-to-face surveys is that longer interviews can be conducted than in the case of the other survey modes (De Leeuw, 2008; Fowler, 2014; Schnell, 2012). Indeed, face-to-face interviews often last one hour (e.g., ALLBUS, ESS, pairfam).

In the survey literature, face-to-face interviews are considered to be the method with which the highest response rates can be achieved. International research shows that, when the response rates achieved with different survey modes are compared, face-to-face interviewing tends to come out best. However, it remains unclear whether the cause really is the survey mode itself and the work the interviewers do or whether the cause is the way surveys are typically implemented in the different survey modes (e.g., in terms of contact numbers and incentives). The extent to which the bias associated with nonresponse differs across the individual survey modes because of different nonresponse processes also remains unclear (De Leeuw, 2008; Groves et al., 2009; Schaeffer, Dykema, & Maynard, 2010).

1.2 Challenges and Disadvantages of Face-to-Face Surveys

While the physical presence of an interviewer during the interview has its advantages with regard to data quality, it also carries the risk that the interviewer will influence the respondent's response behaviour. For example, greater distortions through socially desirable response behaviour are to be expected in the case of face-to-face interviews than in self-administered questionnaires. Such uniform and systematic interviewer effects on response behaviour that lead to a bias of the survey estimate are

known as interviewer bias. Interviewer bias can also arise when the response behaviour of certain groups of respondents depends on specific characteristics of the interviewer, for example that person's sex. However, interviewers may also influence response behaviour without this giving rise to bias – namely, when the individual interviewers have a systematic effect on the respondents, but the direction of this effect differs among interviewers. In this case, no bias occurs, but the variance of the responses increases. Differences between the interviewers, or between the way in which they conduct the interviews, may cause this so-called interviewer variance. For example, if the respondent asks whether the kitchen and the bathroom should be included when reporting the number of rooms, and one interviewer says yes and another interviewer says no, this increases the variance of the variable. The variance of the estimators for the mean and other statistical values also increases. To ensure high data quality, it is therefore necessary to take steps to keep interviewer variance and interviewer bias as low as possible (see Section 1.4.2 below). The deployment of interviewers also carries the risk that interviews will be completely or partially falsified. Here too, preventive measures must be taken (Fowler, & Mangione, 1990; Groves et al., 2009; Loosveldt, 2008).

When deciding for or against face-to-face surveys, cost is usually a very important aspect. As a rule, face-to-face surveys are considerably more expensive than the other survey modes. The high costs are due mainly to the interviewer costs, which are significantly higher than in the case of telephone interviews because of the travelling times involved. However, other costs also occur, for example the costs of the laptops that must be made available to every interviewer in CAPI surveys. In addition to the higher costs, a longer field period is to be expected, compared to the other modes. This is especially disadvantageous when the aim is to conduct surveys on a current topic, for example a pre- and post-election survey (Groves et al. 2009, Schnell 2012).

1.3 Current Response Rates in Germany

The response rates of face-to-face surveys based on random samples have decreased significantly in recent years. At present, response rates of around 30% are achieved in the case of population surveys in Germany (see Table 1). The response rate of PIAAC shows that higher response rates can be achieved when the resource input is very high and conditions with regard to other factors (e.g., the topic) are good.

Table 1: Response rates of face-to-face population surveys in Germany

	Year	Response rate (%)
ALLBUS	2010	33.1
GIP	2012	42.9
NEPS	2011/12	33.1
pairfam	2008/09	34.3
PASS ^a	2011	28.2
PIAAC	2011/12	53.3
SOEP	2011 ^b	33.1

Note: The response rates are calculated as RR1 rates following the definitions of AAPOR (2011);

^aOnly refreshment sample in wave 4 of PASS;

^bWave 1 of the refreshment sample J (Siegel, Huber, & Bohlender 2012).

Source: Pforr et al. (2015)

It should be noted that in the case of random-walk-based samples the response rate can be calculated according to the AAPOR standard definition (AAPOR, 2011) without any problem. However, in the case of samples drawn from the population register – which are common in Germany – the coding scheme

must be adapted because, for example, there are no codes for “target person has moved away”. The adaptation proposed by Lynn, Beerten, Laiho, and Martin (2001) can be used as a starting point in this regard.

1.4 Aspects of the Implementation of Face-To-Face Surveys

1.4.1 Sampling

If a Germany-wide or regionally limited face-to-face survey is to be conducted among the general population, the sample is drawn either on the basis of the ADM Sampling System for Face-to-Face Surveys or from the population register. For details of sampling in face-to-face population surveys, see the *GESIS Survey Guidelines* contributions “Sampling in Theory” (Gabler & Häder, 2016) and “Sampling in Practice” (Häder, 2016).

1.4.2 Minimising Interviewer Effects and Interviewer Falsifications

To minimise interviewer effects, it is important to standardise the interview situation as much as possible. For example, questions should be formulated in such a way that the interviewer immediately obtains an answer from the respondent that fits the response format. On the one hand, therefore, the respondent should not have to ask for an explanation of the question before he or she answers it. And on the other hand, the interviewer should not have to probe because the respondent’s answer does not fit any of the response categories. Interviewer training is of great importance when it comes to avoiding interviewer effects. This is because it contributes to standardising as far as possible the behaviour of the interviewers when conducting the interviews (see the *GESIS Survey Guidelines* contribution “Interviewer Skills and Training,” Stiegler & Biedinger, 2016; see also Groves et al., 2009; Kreuter, 2008; Loosveldt, 2008). Moreover, to keep interviewer effects on the estimates from the data analysis to a minimum, the individual interviewers should not conduct too many interviews. Schnell (2012) mentioned 15 interviews per interviewer as a frequently used threshold value; Loosveldt (2008) recommended between 10 and 50 interviews, depending on the experience and training of the interviewer and the quality of his or her work in previous surveys.

To reduce the effects of social desirability, it may be useful in the case of sensitive questions to supplement face-to-face interviews with self-administered questionnaires. In this case, for certain parts of the survey, the respondents complete a paper questionnaire themselves. Alternatively, the interviewer passes the laptop to the respondent, who reads the questions from the computer screen and enters the responses him- or herself (computer-assisted self-interviewing, CASI). Another way of surveying sensitive issues is to use randomised response techniques (Groves et al., 2009; Schnell, 2012; Lensvelt-Mulders, 2008).

The falsification or partial falsification of interviews can be tackled with various measures. To detect falsifications, interviews can be verified by recontacting the respondents. The survey data can also be analysed with a view to detecting striking patterns. In the case of CAPI interviews, the automatically recorded interview times for individual sections of the interview can also be controlled. Another possible measure – albeit one that has not been common practice in Germany up to now – is to record the interview in full or in part (Fowler & Mangione, 1990; Groves et al.; 2009, Schnell, 2012, Winker, Menold, & Porst, 2013).

1.4.3 In-House Implementation Versus Outsourcing to an Institute

There are two ways of implementing face-to-face surveys. The entire survey – that is, sample selection, recruitment and training of the interviewers, questionnaire programming (if necessary), and management of the field period – can either be implemented in-house or outsourced to a survey institute. As a rule, in-house implementation is possible only when the survey population is limited to a particular region or when the number of cases is relatively small. For a single study, it is not feasible to build up and manage the countrywide pool of interviewers that would be needed for a Germany-wide population survey, for example. Hence, the only option in this case is to outsource the implementation of the survey to a survey institute that can draw on a countrywide pool of interviewers. Overall, face-to-face interviews are an expensive survey method. In the case of local surveys, in-house implementation is possibly less costly than outsourcing to a survey institute. However, the effort involved in in-house implementation and the know-how that is required should not be underestimated.

1.4.4 Designing the Contract with the Survey Institute

To avoid misunderstandings and discrepancies, it is useful to specify as precisely as possible in the invitation to tender for the implementation of the survey, and in the contract concluded with the successful tenderer, the services that the survey institute must perform. For example, the minimum number of contacts should be stipulated because higher contact numbers, which have a positive effect on response rates, call for greater effort and expense on the part of the survey institute. An overview of the important aspects that should be covered can be found in Schnell (2012).

1.4.5 Literature

Especially in the case of in-house survey implementation, it is essential to study the relevant literature on face-to-face surveys. By way of introduction to the topic, two books – Groves et al. (2009) and Schnell (2012) – can be recommended. It is also helpful to take a look at the documentation (methods report, covering letter, showcards, contact protocol, etc.) of representative population surveys that have been conducted in Germany.

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