

Preface

One of the first to acknowledge nonresponse as a potential source of survey error was A.L. Bowley, who in 1912, together with Burnett-Hurst, undertook a famous study of working class conditions in five British cities. In this study, Bowley not only took extreme care in the selection of the sample, he also paid serious attention to the potential for non-response bias through refusals and noncontacts (Moser 1958). Other statisticians and survey methodologists followed his lead. Recently, the American Association for Public Opinion Research published a report on standard definitions of response rates, in which sources of nonresponse are classified and formulas are given for the calculation of various response rates, cooperation rates, refusal rates, and contact rates (AAPOR 1998). These definitions are based on Bowley's distinction between refusals and noncontacts, but much more refined and adapted to today's complex and technologically advanced survey environment.

During the past two decades, nonparticipation in surveys appears to be increasing in Europe and the United States, although the situation differs by country, type of survey and sponsor. This trend has been sufficiently alarming to alert survey researchers all over the world, and in 1990 the first International Workshop on Household Survey Non-response took place in Stockholm. The founding fathers of the workshop were Lars Lyberg from Sweden, Bob Groves from the U.S.A., Bob Barnes from the UK, and Vladimir Adreyenkov from former USSR. Since 1990, the workshop has met yearly, each year in a different country. From the beginning, the aim was to bring together scientists from different countries, disciplines (e.g., survey statisticians, sociologists, and psychologists) and backgrounds (e.g., statistical offices and universities) to stimulate collaboration and to pool knowledge. The work area was deliberately confined to household surveys so that the workshop could be more focussed. In survey nonresponse research, two main approaches can be distinguished: reduction of nonresponse rates during data collection (e.g., through improved data collection methods and fieldwork), and statistical adjustment after the data are collected. Both approaches are important, and should be used to complement each other. At the workshop meetings, experts in both approaches are invited to exchange information, thereby stimulating new research across disciplines.

In the first meetings of the workshop the emphasis was on *description*, and one of the first initiatives was the development of international questionnaires on survey nonresponse at statistical agencies, and on adjustment methods used. In later years, the focus has shifted to the *understanding* of nonresponse, including the development of theories on survey participation, and the search for relationships and causal mechanisms of nonresponse. This has led to a network of related research projects on interviewer behaviour, interviewer-respondent interaction, contents of advance letters, the use of incentives and other factors in survey design and field procedures.

The main goal of the international workshop on household nonresponse is pooling and disseminating knowledge. To stimulate the latter, reports from all workshops, including copies of all papers presented, are gathered at Statistics Sweden under the supervision

of Lilli Japac. Also, several specialized books have been published. The books reflect some of the work discussed at the workshops. We should mention Morton-Williams (1993); Laaksonen (1996); Japac, Ahtiainen, Hörngren, Lindén, Lyberg, and Nilsson (1997); Campanelli, Sturgis, and Purdon (1997); Koch and Porst (1998); Groves and Couper (1998).

In an attempt to take the main ideas and research work of the workshop outside the circle of survey methodology specialists, and share them with the larger community of social science methodologists, a series of sessions were organized at the Fourth International Social Science Methodology Conference in Essex in 1996. This special issue of JOS is a direct result of that effort, although the invitation to submit manuscripts was extended to other researchers as well. I would like to thank all workshop members present in Essex, and especially Lilli Japac, for their efforts making those meetings a success. I also thank all participants of workshop meetings in the past, for sharing their knowledge: “. . . it is on the shoulders of giants we stand . . .”

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the international conference on survey non-response in Portland, Oregon, October 28–31, 1999. This conference, which is initiated by Bob Groves, will broaden the scope to both unit and item nonresponse and include establishment surveys, and aims to review the state of the art in nonresponse reduction, nonresponse adjustment and nonresponse error measurement.

Amsterdam, June 1999

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