

Re-interviewing former respondents of 'final refusal households'. Summary.

Objective and Design of the survey

As part of the SOEP innovations projects and on behalf of the German Economic Research Institute (DIW) in December 2006 TNS Infratest Sozialforschung conducted a postal survey among former SOEP panel members from households which had been classified as final refusals in 2001-2004. A PAPI questionnaire was posted to the addresses of 4992 former interviewees for those the most recent individual interview had been conducted in either the year 2000 (wave 17), 2001 (wave 18), 2002 (wave 19) or 2003 (wave 20) and who lived in households which in the following years, despite several attempts of refusal conversion, had not been willing to provide an interview and which therefore had been classified as definite, final refusals by the TNS Infratest Sozialforschung panel management staff.

With a response rate of 18.2 per cent (923 questionnaires were returned), the survey of the four SOEP "attrition cohorts" turned out to be more successful than skeptical estimates had predicted at the time of setting up the survey – when no empirical evidence from other large scale household surveys could have been used to define critical benchmarks to estimate likely response rates.

The set up and design of the refusal survey was framed by three major objectives.

The first aim was to get quantitative information about how many previous SOEP interviewees who lived in households which had been classified as permanent refusals several years ago could be re-gained to participate in a postal survey based on a very

short questionnaire, comprising only nine questions and being no longer than two pages.

The SOEP panel maintenance and refusal conversion concept is based on various techniques and successive measures which are not identical but in many respects fairly similar to those deployed in other large household panels such as, for example, the BHPS. The guidelines which frame the SOEP panel maintenance practice state that a household is classified as a permanent loss only on a case-by-case basis and if the bulk of evidence suggests that further contacts do not increase the probability of further cooperation. In year one of non-cooperation the majority of households is classified as a 'temporary refusal', a status (or rather (a transitional category) which is usually preserved for at least one further wave before – given that further measures of refusal conversion have not been successful – a household may be categorised as a final refusal. A minority of non-cooperative households is already classified as final refusals in year 1 of non-cooperation. This is for example the case if a household contact person (usually the so called head of household) expresses very clearly that the household members do no longer want to be contacted by the survey institute, for example by threatening to undertake legal action if contacted again.

Although rather unlikely in the latter case, it is still possible that former respondents may change their minds over time and may be willing to cooperate again a few years after they had stopped cooperation with the field work staff. Further, as it may be possible that only the head of household as the primary contact person for interviewers and other staff involved in refusal conversion has a fixed preference for non-cooperation, it may still be the case that other household members might cooperate. Hence the survey was targeted at individual household members: every person of the four attrition cohorts who had ever given one personal interview received a questionnaire, which was not only seen as a more personal direct approach to increase the chances of cooperation but also to avoid that one decisive "veto player" would decide against cooperation on a smaller scale for the whole household.

Another critical decision to be made for the purpose of that kind of survey, is the minimum and maximum time interval between the last realised personal interview and another trial of re-contacting eligible household members. A minimum of three years was defined as the lower boundary for the 2006 innovation survey to make sure that former respondents were not contacted again only one year after the last household contact had taken place and based on the assumption that in light of the objectives of the survey one whole calendar year with no household contact at all would probably rather increase the probability of a move back towards cooperation rather than decrease it. On the other hand, a maximum length of time distance had to be defined due to organisational and practical reasons: the availability of the addresses (storage of address files for three years after last SOEP interview) and the up-to-dateness of

existing household addresses were the two key parameters defining the upper boundary of the time interval.

A second major point of interest of the survey was to gather information on potentially relevant factors which may have critically contributed to the decision of interviewees to stop their cooperation with the field work institute. One potential gain of the refusal survey was to identify potentially significant variables which could add explanatory power to models estimating the impact size of the major predictors of panel attrition. If statistically significant predictors of panel attrition were to be identified as a result of the information gathered by the survey, these models could be improved and, as a consequence, the (longitudinal) design weights of the SOEP revised and become more efficient. If, on the other hand, the responses of former interviewees did not reveal any new factors crucially contributing to the interviewees' decision to stop cooperation, this would be an important finding of the innovation survey as well – and, of course, be 'good news': one then could conclude that no important (and measurable) predictors of panel attrition were missing in the existing models the DIW has developed for the different SOEP sub-samples, at least no factors which former interviewees were aware and able to articulate in a standardised questionnaire format.

Third and at least partly related to the previous point, one potentially interesting dimension of re-interviewing former SOEP panel members was to get information about changes in the living conditions and life circumstances of former panel members and to compare them with the changes and continuity in the life circumstances members of SOEP panel members. Are significant differences between former and current panel members to be observed within a 3-5 year interval?

Although these questions raise interesting issues per se, one should bear in mind that in general the whole process of refusal conversion attempts is an area with obvious ethical issues where a conflict between ambitious survey goals and ethical principles is possible. This potential conflict becomes even more concrete and delicate, if, after several years, former interviewees who had clearly articulated their interest (and right) to opt out of the annual interviewing process, are re-contacted and asked to take part in yet another survey which is related to the same project title: LIVING IN GERMANY. To avoid potential conflicts with the German Data Protection Act and the codified ethical and quality principles of the German Working Group of Market and Social Research Institutes (Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute, ADM), the refusal survey had to be designed very cautiously. The introductory contact letter posted together with the questionnaire made it clear that the postal survey was a new project which was related to LIVING IN GERMANY but which did not try to 'recapture' former interviewees who had clearly expressed their preference to opt out of the survey. It was explained why scientists analysing the SOEP data were interested in the (changes of) life circumstances of former SOEP interviewees who had not been will-

ing to provide interviews any longer. It was also stressed that comparisons of changes in the life circumstances between current and former participants were of huge interest for the scientific community analysing social change and who were therefore relying on drawing a representative picture of change which they only could do if information on both, the former and the current sample members, were available.

Second, it was emphasised that the questionnaire would provide the opportunity to name potential factors, which may have critically contributed to the decision to stop participating in the survey. These factors included negative experience with the f2f interviewing or other field work staff of the survey institute, or the potential overburdening by a lengthy and over-demanding interviewing process.

Although the response rates were higher than expected before the kick off time of the survey, when analysing the results of the refusal survey 2006 it is still to be borne in mind that for more than 80 per cent of the attrition cohorts 2001-2004 the survey did not produce any updated household or individual information as no questionnaires were returned. Regular means of increasing response rates in postal surveys such as one or more follow-up letters were not used due to delicate questions concerning ethical and data protection standards if former respondents who had clearly expressed their wish not be contacted again in the context of LIVING IN GERMANY were to re-contacted again in the context of an obviously closely related project. Hence the following summary results, although providing interesting features, should be interpreted carefully and under the premise that simple frequencies or any other statistical information based on the analysis of the survey are based on information of a minority of re-contacted former SOEP panel members only.

Response rate and age

The response rate is significantly higher among older than younger respondents (except the age group of persons 80 years and older): the response rate was only 14.3 for all former respondents 49 years and younger at the time of surveying, but 25.2 per cent in the age group 50-79. If one takes into account higher mortality in the older age group – probably a major variable responsible for the rather low response rate of only 14.8 per cent among former respondents 80 years and older – this difference is even more impressive and may be interpreted as delivering evidence of what is discussed further below: namely that former respondents may not have primarily stopped cooperation because in general they were unwilling to take part in LIVING IN GERMANY but that the amount of time and energy they had to invest to prepare for interviews (for example sorting out documentation concerning various income sources to be able to report different types of income) and for the interview process itself may be a critical factor for older interviewees in particular.

Response rate and citizenship

The response rate was considerably lower among former SOEP respondents who did not have German citizenship at the time of their last interview. For only 8.2% of former non-German respondents (n= 548) a questionnaire was sent back. It is at least plausible to argue that a critical mass of interviewees who live in Germany but do not obtain German citizenship tend to return to their home country, for example after retiring.

Specified reasons for exit

In 291 of the 923 returned questionnaires interviewees used to take the opportunity to name (in an open text box) critical events or experiences who may have decisively contributed to the decision not to provide Infratest Sozialforschung with a further interview. *Table 1* provides an overview on the issues which have been mentioned by the respondents.

Table 1: Specified statements concerning reasons for exit

	frequency	per cent of all question- naires (n=4992)	per cent of all questionnaires with open statements (n=291)
questionnaire too demanding, complicated, difficult	125	13.5	43.0
lack of time, no longer interested	49	5.3	16.8
reasons of age or health	35	3.8	12.0
death of a family/household member/other critical family event	22	2.4	7.6
was not contacted any longer	19	2.1	6.5
comments on interviewer behaviour	16	1.7	5.5
worries concerning data protection	10	1.1	3.4
all other statements	15	1.6	5.2
total number of questionnaires with specifica- tion of exit reason	291	31.5	100.0
questionnaire with no specified statements	632	68.5	
total	923	100.0	

- Only a minority of the former SOEP respondents has named reasons for their survey exit which are somehow related to the fieldwork practice for which the field work institute is responsible for.

Potential for a second wave of the innovation survey

The last question of the survey asked about consent to be re-contacted again one year later with a similar short postal survey questionnaire. A majority of participants (715) expressed their consent. This does, of course, not indicate that these persons could be ever gained for a much more demanding regular SOEP interview, i.e. that this persons would be integrated into the panel again. Rather it may be taken as evidence that at least a minority of former panel interviewees may be willing to take part in a short survey format providing the opportunity to develop a standard format for a "post exit" questionnaire concept.

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