

# **(Not) Answering Survey Questions: A Cross Cultural Insight**

Andrej Kveder

*Institute of medical Sciences, SRC at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts*

*Novi trg 5*

*SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia*

[andrejk@zrc-sazu.si](mailto:andrejk@zrc-sazu.si)

## **1. Item nonresponse**

The need to assess data quality derives from the accuracy requirements of an inference-oriented study. In order to make some large-scale conclusions the necessary data accuracy must be granted. Therefore the analysis of the item nonresponse and especially the identification of the nonrespondents is extremely important.

The majority of the research on this topic has been concentrated on explaining why the incomplete answers occur and what type of respondents are the most likely not to respond to a certain survey question. Some of the reasons can be attributed to the nature of the topic and thus focusing on the salience, recall difficulties and sensitivity issues. All those factors can of course be combined with the respondent characteristics and questionnaire design.

More recent research uses cognitive theories to explain the phenomenon of the item nonresponse (Beatty and Herrmann, 2000). In light of those new approaches respondent has to follow an action pathway starting with question understanding and interpretation, retrieving relevant information, through formation of the final response to the decision of answer disclosure. It has been shown that survey participants differ on all those accounts across cultures (Johnson et al., 1997). Social context and normative structure of a culture predetermine some of the factors that influence respondents' decisions to answer specific survey questions.

## **2. Cross cultural comparison**

The data analysis is based on the international Family and Fertility Survey (FFS). In total 116.897 persons were interviewed in 18 countries. Different countries used a variety of sampling and interviewing methods. All refusals as well as "no answer" and "don't know" answers were considered to be no-answers by the means of not giving the requested information. Linear multiple regression analysis was run across different countries in order to assess the differences among explanation models among them (Table 1).

The majority of predictors examined in the present analysis can be considered as similar in all the countries. Marital status is consistently statistically significant, while age, gender, household size and employment status are not. Age shows the most variability across different cultures. Norway shows the most deviant picture of all. In Norway smaller households, with lower education are better respondents and irrespective of the employment status, while in the majority of other countries these effects show the opposite influence. Portugal and Spain show that men are better respondents than women. The influence of gender was expected to be the opposite, since women

tend to be more motivated to talk about fertility and family than do men.

**Table 1 – The comparison of models across the countries**

	<i>Household size</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Employed</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>Housewife</i>	<i>Student</i>
Austria	+++		---		---	+++	+		++	
Belgium	+++	---	---		---	+++	++			
Czech		---	+++	+++	---	+++	++	+++	++	
France	+++	---	++	+++	---	++	+++	+++	+++	
Italy	+++	---	---	+++	---				+	--
Canada 90	---		---	+++	---	+++	+++		+++	--
Canada 95	---	---	---	+++	---	+++	+++		+++	---
Latvia	+++	---	+++		---	+++	+		+	--
Lithuania	+++	---	---	+++	---	+++	+++	+++	+++	
Hungary	+++	---	---	+++	---	+++	+++	+++	--	
Germany	+++	---	+++	+++	---		++	+		
Norway	---	---	---	---	---	+++				
Poland	+++	---	+++	+++	---	++	++			++
Portugal	+++	+++	+++	+++	---	++	+++	+++	+++	+++
Slovenia		---		+++		+++	+++	++		
Spain	+++	+++	---		---	+++	+		++	
Switzerland	+++		---	+++		+++				

**Legend:** + = positive dependency (+++ =  $p < 0,01$ ; ++ =  $0,01 < p < 0,05$ ; + =  $0,05 < p < 0,10$ )

- = negative dependency (--- =  $p < 0,01$ ; -- =  $0,01 < p < 0,05$ ; - =  $0,05 < p < 0,10$ ).

Different cultural settings therefore influence the inference process for the item nonresponse. The present analysis supports the findings of other authors (Johnson et al., 1997) and emphasizes the importance of the social and cultural context variables. The results presented in this paper are far from fully conclusive but they do offer leverage in further investigation of the phenomenon.

## REFERENCES

Beatty, P., Herrmann, D., (2000). To Answer or Not to Answer: Decision Processes Related to Survey Item Nonresponse. In *R.M. Groves et al. (eds.) Survey Nonresponse*. John Wiley & Sons. In print.

Johnson, T., O' Rourke, D., Chavez, N., Sudman, S., Warncke, R., Lacey, L., Horm, J. (1997). Social Cognition and Responses to Survey Questions Among Culturally Diverse Populations. In *L. Lyberg et al. (eds.) Survey Measurement and Process Quality*. John Wiley & Sons.

## RESUME

La nécessité de la précision dans les enquêtes exige une analyse de la non-réponse par question et en particulier l'identification des non-répondants. Cet article présente les raisons pour la non-réponse par question qui peuvent être attribuées à la différenciation culturelle.