Developing self-completion instruments for the European Social Survey

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Topics covered in presentation

- Introduction to ESS and response to the pandemic

- Developing a self-completion approach for ESS

- Summary of findings from piloting and user testing

- Conclusions and next steps

Introduction to ESS and response to the pandemic

Brief introduction to the European Social Survey (ESS)

- Cross-national survey measuring attitudes and behaviour across Europe

- Conducted every two years since 2002; nine rounds of fieldwork to date

- 38 countries have participated in total; more than 30 expected at Round 10

- Fully face-to-face approach across all participating countries; random probability sampling

- Interview length c. 1 hour

ESS Round 10 and COVID-19

- Fieldwork for Round 10 of ESS was originally due to run from September 2020 to January 2021 using the usual face-to-face approach in all countries

- But major concerns about feasibility of face-to-face fieldwork due to the pandemic, so adopted contingency plans:

    - Extended deadline for Round 10 fieldwork (initially to December 2021)

    - Adapting Round 10 specification but retaining face-to-face approach (our preferred approach)

    - Planned alternative data collection approach (self-completion – web and paper) – to be adopted by any countries unable to deliver the round face-to-face
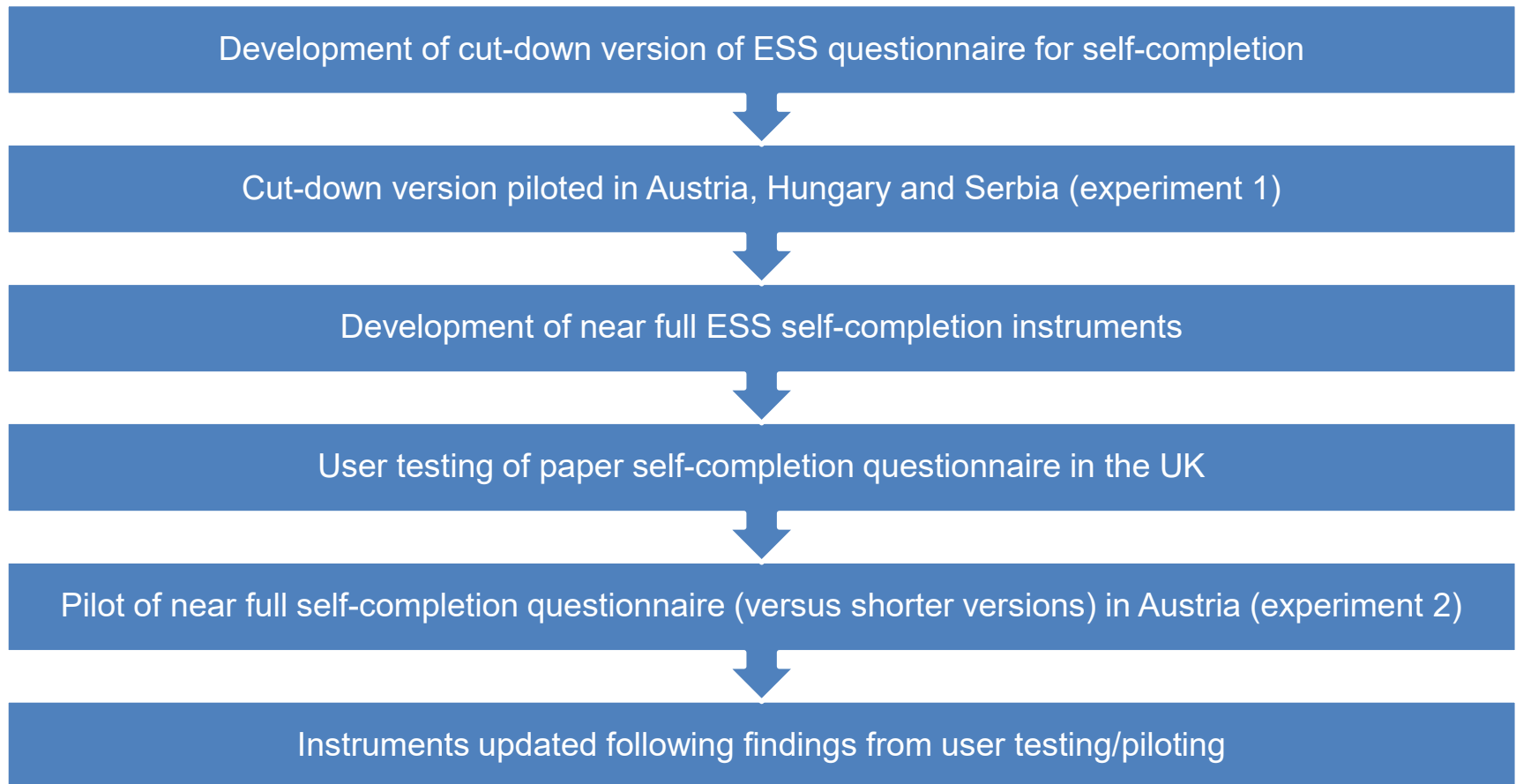
Developing a self-completion approach for ESS

Key challenges of a developing a self-completion approach for ESS

- Internet penetration not high/consistent enough to support a web-only approach – paper option would also be needed (limitations/design considerations)

- Length of ESS questionnaire – would people complete an hour-long survey without an interviewer?

- How to keep the paper questionnaire as short as possible (in terms of pages)

- Complexity of routing in some parts of the questionnaire – would respondents be able to follow this on paper?

- Detailed questions on education and employment – would respondents answer these (to sufficient detail) without an interviewer present?

- No time for extensive adaptation of the questionnaire for self-completion – could the approach work without this?

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Can we develop a self-completion version of ESS that includes the majority of content from the face-to-face survey (with limited adaptation) while delivering 'acceptable' response rates, sample composition and data quality?

Development stages for self-completion approach

Development of cut-down version of ESS questionnaire for self-completion

Cut-down version piloted in Austria, Hungary and Serbia (experiment 1)

Development of near full ESS self-completion instruments

User testing of paper self-completion questionnaire in the UK

Pilot of near full self-completion questionnaire (versus shorter versions) in Austria (experiment 2)

Instruments updated following findings from user testing/piloting

Summary of the self-completion approach

- Push-to-web design with postal recruitment

- Sequential approach: web first and paper questionnaire sent to non-responders with second reminder

- Three mailings in total for experiment 1 (invitation and two reminders); additional reminder mailing added for experiment 2

- Source instruments developed centrally – web survey in Qualtrics, paper questionnaire in InDesign

- Approx. 20 minute questionnaire used for experiment 1 (16 pages on paper); experiment 2 compared (near) full version (c. 50 minutes / 36 pages) with two shorter versions

Example web survey screenshots

LIVING IN BRITAIN

We are asking for your help.

Each year a carefully selected sample of households is asked to complete a brief survey about life in Britain. This year we ask for your views on such topics as how the coronavirus may have affected you, how well the government is doing its job and about how you communicate with your family or at work. Most people will not need to answer all the questions in this booklet.

Any Questions?

If you have any questions about this questionnaire, or about the Living in Britain survey, please contact us using the details below.
tel: 0207 549 7198
e-mail: Natasha.Phillips@natcen.ac.uk
or visit www.europeansocialsurvey.org

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We are very grateful that you are taking the time to complete our questionnaire.

Please complete the questionnaire using BLACK or BLUE INK.

If you do not know the answer to a question or would prefer not to give an answer, you may leave the question blank.

If you make a mistake or change your mind, please completely fill the box or circle to show the mistake and then tick the correct answer.

SECTION A - In this first section we will ask you about a variety of different topics starting with pandemics.

A1 Is it more important to prioritise public health or economic activity when fighting a pandemic? Please tick a circle ⊘ from 0 to 10, where 0 means it is much more important to prioritise public health and 10 means it is much more important to prioritise economic activity.

Much more important to prioritise public health ▼ — Much more important to prioritise economic activity ▼

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A2 Is it more important for governments to monitor and track the public or to maintain public privacy when fighting a pandemic?

Much more important to monitor and track the public ▼ — Much more important to maintain public privacy ▼

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A3 Is it more important for you personally to follow government rules or to make your own decisions when fighting a pandemic?

Much more important to follow government rules ▼ — Much more important to make your own decisions ▼

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A4 How important is it for the UK to close its borders when fighting a pandemic?

Not at all important ▼ — Extremely important ▼

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A5 How important is it to restrict people's movement between different parts of the UK when fighting a pandemic?

Not at all important ▼ — Extremely important ▼

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A6 On a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs? Please give your answer in hours and minutes.

HOURS ☐☐ MINUTES ☐☐

A7 People can use the Internet on different devices such as computers, tablets and smartphones. How often do you use the Internet on these or any other devices, whether for work or personal use? Please tick one box.

1 ☐ Never
2 ☐ Only occasionally → Skip to A9 on page 3
3 ☐ A few times a week
4 ☐ Most days → Continue to A8 below
5 ☐ Every day

A8 On a typical day, about how much time do you spend using the Internet on a computer, tablet, smartphone or other device, whether for work or personal use?

HOURS ☐☐ MINUTES ☐☐

2

Summary of findings from piloting and user testing

Most findings positive – though challenges with certain questions

- Response rates quite good – around mid 30% range for both experiments (not much drop-off with near-full questionnaire); around three quarters completed online

- Break-off rate not seen as overly high (13%), though was higher among those completing on smartphones (no guidance on which device to use)

- Sample profile generally okay – sex, age, and years of education generally in line with Round 9 face-to-face survey (paper important at bringing in older people)

- Positive findings for most data quality indicators – but very high levels of non-response for some questions (especially on paper) – most common for 'write-in' questions, those with complex routing instructions, and where knowledge may be lower

- User testing findings also quite positive – main issues were lack of clarity in routing instructions in some places and some problems with answering the highest level of education question

Conclusions and next steps

Conclusions

Can we develop a self-completion version of ESS that includes the majority of content from the face-to-face survey (with limited adaptation) while delivering 'acceptable' response rates, sample composition and data quality?

- General conclusion from our testing/piloting is 'yes' – but with some caveats

- Positive findings for response rates (though still likely to be lower than face-to-face in most countries), sample composition and some data quality indicators

- But concerns about levels of item non-response for some items and especially whether we can collect data on education and employment to a standard close to that achieved for the face-to-face survey

- Particular issues/limitations with a paper questionnaire

Next steps – ESS Round 10

- Self-completion instruments updated following piloting/testing and source versions released to countries using the self-completion approach

- Expect that 8 countries will employ self-completion approach for Round 10; 4 have already started data collection (and early response rates promising)

- Data from self-completion will be released in a separate file from the face-to-face data

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Next steps – beyond ESS Round 10

- Plan to return to a fully face-to-face approach for ESS Round 11 (in 2023); however, options for future data collection approaches (incl. part of full switch to self-completion) being considered

- Need to learn more about measurement differences between face-to-face and self-completion and implications for ESS time series – further testing being carried out (parallel runs)

- Open question of whether we would need to (or should) more drastically redesign the ESS questionnaire for future self-completion – experiments have shown that reasonable outcomes can be achieved without this, though need to consider the more problematic areas of the questionnaire + respondent experience

- Limitations of paper questionnaire – development of electronic questionnaire device?

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Thank you

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