

NON-RESPONSE TO SENSITIVE QUESTIONS: NATIONALISM IN GERMANY

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2. Sample

1. Background

This non-response study started with the observation of an unexpectedly low exhaustion rate in a mail survey on "national identity". In average, two thirds of the whole sample population refused to answer a questionnaire containing questions on national identity.

In starting the study on national identity, no special attention was given to the problem of sensitive questions with respect to the topic of national identity. From several national surveys it was a well known fact that there are about 10% refusals to items related to nationalism and national pride. Thus, there was no specific expectation of a dramatic refusal rate to questions related to national identity. It was not at all expected that such a spectacular drop out of respondents as faced with an exhaustion of about 30% would happen.

One explanation for the low exhaustion rate can be the generally low level of nationalism and especially national pride in Germany. Compared to other nations, the Germans are far less proud of being Germans than, for example, English or French people are. While national pride is reported in average by 80-90% of respondents of other European nationalities, the Germans report in average 60-70% as the highest level of national pride, that is of "being proud to be a German". This empirical finding together with the low exhaustion rate in a study on national identity lead to the hypothesis that national identity might be a sensitive topic for German respondents.

Special attention must be directed to the problem of self-selection and its consequences for the (demographic) structure of the final sample as well as to the question, to what degree self-selection is related to the dependent variable national identity. These questions are approached by first, comparing the demographic structure of respondents to that of non-respondents, and second, by comparing respondents and non-respondents with respect to their perception of the National Socialist past of Germany.

The national identity study relied on the sample of the Social Science Survey which is a representative national sample drawn from the German speaking population above 18 years of age living in private households. The total sample size was N=4222 from which according to the national sampling design a subsample of N=3097 was drawn for the Western part of the country and a subsample of N=1125 for the Eastern part of the country.

3. Design

At the end of a neutral face to face interview (neutral with respect to the topic of nationalism and national identity), the interviewer asked the respondents if they agreed to participate in another study organised as a mail survey. They handed to the respondents a letter with a short general study description not mentioning the topic of national identity but referring broadly to problems of a bigger post-unification Germany, registered the agreement or disagreement to participate and reported this back to the field institute which then sent - in case of agreement - the questionnaires to the respondents.

This „back-pack“-design seemed to have several advantages. First, the screening of addresses for a mail survey; second, a better exhaustion rate of the mail survey by announcing it in advance personally by an interviewer; and by sending the questionnaires only to those persons who agreed to participate in a further mailed study. As the results in table 1 show, these initial aspirations were not reached by the design. In East and West 46% (52%) of the Social Science Survey respondents agreed to participate in a subsequent mail survey. In the end, however, only about 32% (West) and 33% (East) of the mailed questionnaires were sent back which results in a sample exhaustion of 31%.

Thus, the exhaustion of the national identity study is extremely low. In a mail survey usually not announced in advance by an interviewer and a letter, one can reasonably expect an exhaustion rate of about 50%. With an announcement like that used in the national identity study, the exhaustion rate should be higher.

The fact that it is lower indicates the existence of self-selection mechanisms which might be related to the criterion variable. This suggestion is supported by the exhaustion rate of the Social Science Survey which

was about 73%. Therefore the low exhaustion rate of the national identity study cannot be attributed to a general entremetment of survey participation but seems to be due to other factors.

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents (RESP) and Non-Respondents (NON-RESP) in the Sample

	WEST		EAST	
Total Sample	N = 3097	100.0%	N = 1125	100.0%
Potential RESP Candidates	N = 1833	59.2%	N = 593	52.7%
J. Refused Address Storing	N = 239	7.7%	N = 74	6.6%
Final RESP Candidates	N = 1534	51.5%	N = 519%	46.1%
Realised Interviews (RESP)	N = 987	31.9%	N = 372%	33.1%
Not Realised Interviews (NON-RESP)	N = 2110	68.9%	N = 753%	66.9%

As soon as the low exhaustion rate of the national identity study became apparent a second part of the study was planned in the same way: the screening was again back-packed to the face to face interview of the Social Science Survey. To get at least some information about the attitudinal background of respondents versus non-respondents, two questions dealing with the German past of National Socialism were included in this second part of the national identity study (these questions were not included from the beginning because there was no expectation in the beginning that there would be need for explaining an extremely low exhaustion rate). Again, also in the second part of the study, the exhaustion rate did not exceed the 30% limit.

To conclude so far: In mail surveys where questionnaires are just sent by mail without a special introduction by an interviewer one usually can expect about 50% of exhaustion if the topic is not difficult or sensitive. In this study, the mail questionnaire was announced (albeit without mentioning the topic) and did result in an exhaustion rate of only about 30%. Regarding the exhaustion rate, the personal contact with the interviewer as well as the announcement of the mail questionnaire had practically no effect. It is, however, difficult to attribute the low exhaustion rate exclusively to the topic of the national identity study although the response would favor this conclusion. One must certainly take into account the possibility that the exhaustion rate was turned down by the length of the national identity questionnaire (34 pages with difficult questions).

Thus, we can only conclude that we suspect that national identity is a sensitive question but we do not have a real hard proof for that hypothesis.

Nevertheless, a non-response rate of about 69% to questions about national identity is something that has to be observed carefully.

4. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents and Non-Respondents

Table 2 gives the distribution of several demographic characteristics in the different groups of respondents and non-respondents. Comparing across columns one can see that with respect to gender and age there is no difference between respondents and non-respondents. With respect to education, however, there are differences between respondents and non-respondents: higher educated people respond to a higher degree while non-respondents recruit themselves more from the group of lower educated people. The same pattern is observed with self-perceived social status where low-status respondents belong rather to the non-respondents. This could have been expected from the beginning and is not embarrassing because lower educated and lower status people are generally difficult to reach with survey research. Similarly, respondents in pension tend to avoid survey participation which corresponds to a very well known empirical fact in survey research.

For some questions there have been response categories which provided the respondent with the option of avoiding a substantial answer. These alternatives are put together to the category of "refusals". If non-response to the national identity questionnaire is related to a general pattern of non-responding or of not giving a substantial answer, these „refusals“ should appear more frequently in the group of the non-respondents than in the group of the

respondents. As can be seen from the data in table 2, there is in fact a slight tendency for the "refusals" to occur more often in the group of the non-respondents, especially with respect to the question about party vote intention in the next election. Since there is no systematic relationship between non-response and

party preference, this differentiation is not reported here. Altogether, non-responding in the current study is not systematically related to a general attitudinal pattern of refusal. This seems to support the hypothesis that national identity is in itself a difficult if not even sensitive topic at least for the German respondents.

Table 2 Relative Frequencies of Demographic Characteristics in the Groups of Respondents (RESP) and Non-Respondents (NON-RESP)

	WEST		EAST	
	RESP N=987	NON-RESP N=2110	RESP N=372	NON-RESP N=793
Age				
18 - 29	22.2	20.4	14.8	16.2
30 - 44	30.3	28.8	31.2	30.0
45 - 59	23.3	22.7	32.0	28.4
60 +	24.2	28.1	22.0	25.4
Education				
Low	44.5	55.2	29.2	40.2
Middle	28.3	26.8	40.9	45.1
High	27.3	18.0	30.0	14.7
Gender				
Male	44.1	47.9	39.9	46.2
Female	55.9	52.1	60.1	53.8
Status				
Lower Class	1.6	3.3	6.8	11.8
Lower Middle Class	16.8	24.3	37.1	37.5
Middle Class	60.9	55.4	50.3	45.3
Upper Middle Class	19.8	15.3	5.4	5.1
Upper Class	.9	1.8	.3	.3
Status Refusal				
Substantial Answer	91.8	88.3	100.0	100.0
Refused Answer	8.2	11.7		
Voted Last Election				
Yes	90.1	86.1	93.6	93.7
No	9.1	13.9	6.4	6.3
Recall Voting Behavior				
Substantial Answer	99.5	99.5	98.6	98.5
Refused Answer	.5	.5	1.4	1.5
Vote Intention Next Election				
Substantial Answer	73.7	64.8	65.6	62.3
Refused Answer	10.6	14.3	11.0	11.2
Don't Know	15.7	20.9	23.4	26.6

With respect to interviewer variables there is no systematic effect of interviewer gender on the distributions. Length of the face to face interview, however, reduces the willingness to cooperate in another study especially if the face to face interview takes more than 45 minutes. It is generally known in survey research that three quarters of an hour are the tolerance limit for most interviews. For the current context it seems that respondents feel that they have done enough if the interview takes more than this generally tolerated amount of time.

5. Attitudes of Respondents and Non-Respondents

As already mentioned above, two questions related to the topic of National Socialism and the German past were included in the second part of the national identity study in the questionnaire of the face

to face interview to control for a potential self-selection process related to the topic of national identity. The distributions of these attitudes are given in table 3. The first question assesses the respondents' opinion about how to deal with the German past of National Socialism and all its attachments. The response categories provide the alternative of first, no longer to argue about that time, not to touch that topic any longer but leave it as it is (Stop), and second, to keep thinking of that time awake and be constantly aware of it (Continue). The numbers in table 3 indicate a slight tendency for self-selection to follow the partitioning of awareness and suppression of the time of National Socialism: respondents are with a difference of 13% (8%) more convinced than non-respondents that awareness of the historical events should be continued and that discussions and explanations of that time should go on.

Table 3 Attitude Toward Dealing with the National Socialistic Past of Germany and Frequency of Talking about the Past

	WEST		EAST	
	RESP N=432	NON-RESP N=950	RESP N=193	NON-RESP N=293
Dealing With the Past				
Stop	45.0	47.8	25.6	34.0
Continue	55.0	42.2	74.4	66.0
Frequency of Talk				
Often	31.9	22.6	31.4	23.9
Sometimes	32.9	31.3	28.6	34.8
Seldom/Never	35.2	46.1	40.0	41.3

The second question asks how frequently a person has been talking with family members and/or friends about the Hitler regime and the time of National Socialism. Again there are differences between respondents and non-respondents: respondents talk more frequently „often“ and less frequently „seldom/never“ about the Hitler time than non-respondents. The difference is 9.3% in West and 7.5% in East for the „often“ and about 11% (West) for the „seldom“ category. If one takes this last question as an indicator of active digestion of the German history and the endeavour to understand what has been and how things could happen as they did, then there is a relation between the dependent variable of „national identity“ and self-selection: people who are concerned with

German history are more willing to answer questions about national identity.

The attitudinal variables are the strongest predictors for responding resp. non-responding to the national identity questions: a logistic regression model including demographic variables as well as the two attitudinal questions explained 17% of the RESP vs. NON-RESP variance with significant effects only for the attitudinal variables. This is again an indicator that these attitudes controlled the decision to participate in the national identity study. One can conclude that these attitudes influenced the process of self-selection by being related to the dependent variable.

6. Summary and Conclusion

First, even if a process of self-selection took place which is obvious in this study, there are, with respect to demographic characteristics and interviewer variables, no dramatic differences between the groups of respondents and non-respondents. With respect to the distribution of the demographic characteristics the sample structure of those people who have responded to the national identity questionnaire - even if the sample exhaustion is disappointingly low with about 31% - is not distorted.

Second, while the exhaustion rate of the national identity study is extremely low, it is difficult to ascribe this exclusively to the topic of the study. That there is a topic effect is obvious with respect to the attitudinal variables. But responsibility for the low response rate can also be ascribed to the length of the mail questionnaire (34 pages with difficult questions). Since, however, there is no systematic information about the average time respondents needed to complete the questionnaire an interaction between topic and length of the questionnaire resulting in a low response rate cannot be excluded. However, considering studies where questionnaires took extreme

amounts of time to complete (several hours) as is the case in life span studies which had better exhaustion rates than the study reported here, because respondents felt attracted by the topic (i.e. by talking about their lives), one cannot completely reject the hypothesis that it was the difficulty if not the sensitivity of the topic which produced the low response rate.

Finally, the exhaustion rate of about 31% altogether is extremely low. If, however, one changes the perspective in looking to the exhaustion rate from the total (sample size) to the corrected total (sample size) given in table 1 in the category of „final response candidates“ (containing all people who agreed to participate in the announced mail survey), then things look much better: about 68% (West: 64%; East: 72%) of the interviews could be realised under this perspective. This comes quite close to the exhaustion of the Social Science Survey. Nevertheless one has to be aware that the corrected total consists of cooperative people and that those responding in the end by completing the national identity questionnaire are even more cooperative. The conclusion is, that this cooperativeness seems not to be related to demographic characteristics but is related to attitudinal variables as concern with German history.