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As short as possible, as long as necessary. Determining and computing interview durations for individual target groups in a multi-actor and nested survey design

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Internet: www.pedocs.de

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Survey Report 3

Anja Linberg, Janine Bernhardt, Andreas Herz, Claudia Recksiedler, Inga Simm, Susanne Kuger

As short as possible, as long as necessary

Determining and computing interview durations for individual target groups in a multi-actor and nested survey design

Forschung zu Kindern, Jugendlichen und Familien an der Schnittstelle von Wissenschaft, Politik und Fachpraxis

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Deutsches Jugendinstitut
Außenstelle Halle
Franckeplatz 1, Haus 12/13
06110 Halle

Ansprechpartnerin:
Dr. Anja Linberg
Telefon +49 89 62306-597
E-Mail aida@dji.de

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Abstract

Survey research faces the challenge of determining the ideal interview duration that allows rich data collection, but does not overburden respondents at the same time. While methodology literature demonstrates the link between interview duration, survey participation, and data quality, which indicates that surveys should be as short as possible, there are few practical guidelines for determining interview durations before developing questionnaire instruments, especially in large-scale studies. Multi-actor studies, where participants provide information about themselves, but also serve as proxies for others, face the additional challenge of taking these complex nested survey structures into account when calculating interview durations for different respondent groups at the planning stages of a study.

The Growing up in Germany Study (AID:A) exemplifies a multi-actor approach, collecting data from target persons aged 0 to 32 and parents of (potentially multiple) target persons. This report highlights the AID:A 2021 web-based survey to demonstrate how survey teams can effectively plan interview durations in complex designs. We introduce a planning tool that calculates item load and interview duration for nested respondent groups during the study planning phase, ensuring efficient survey management.

Keywords: Interview duration, planning tool, multi-actor study, Growing up in Germany

Zusammenfassung

Surveyforschung steht vor der Herausforderung, die ideale Interviewdauer zu ermitteln, die eine umfassende Datenerhebung ermöglicht, ohne die Befragten dabei zu überfordern. Während die methodologische Literatur den Zusammenhang zwischen Interviewdauer, Teilnahme an Umfragen und Datenqualität aufzeigt – was darauf hindeutet, dass Umfragen so kurz wie möglich sein sollten – gibt es nur wenige praktische Leitlinien für die Bestimmung von Interviewdauern vor der Entwicklung von Befragungsinstrumenten, insbesondere bei groß angelegten Studien. Multi-Actor-Studien, bei denen die Teilnehmer Informationen über sich selbst liefern, aber auch als Auskunftsperson für andere fungieren, stehen vor der zusätzlichen Herausforderung, diese komplexen, verschachtelten Erhebungsstrukturen bei der Berechnung der Interviewdauer für verschiedene Befragtengruppen bereits in der Planungsphase einer Studie zu berücksichtigen.

Die Studie „Aufwachsen in Deutschland: Alltagswelten“ (AID:A) ist ein Beispiel für einen Multi-Actor-Ansatz, bei dem Daten von Zielpersonen im Alter von 0 bis 32 Jahren sowie von Eltern (oft mehrerer) Zielpersonen erhoben werden. Dieser Bericht beleuchtet die webbasierte AID:A-Umfrage 2021, um zu veranschaulichen, wie die Interviewdauer in komplexen Designs effektiv geplant werden kann. Wir stellen ein Planungstool vor, das die Item-Belastung und die Interviewdauer für verschachtelte Befragtengruppen bereits in der Planungsphase der Studie berechnet und so ein effizientes Umfragemanagement gewährleistet.

Schlagwörter: Interviewdauer, Planungs-Tool, Multi-actor Studie, Aufwachsen in Deutschland: Alltagswelten

1 Background

The ideal length of surveys and how items should be distributed across respondent groups are key concerns in survey research, spanning from fieldwork to data management and quality. This is relevant for both small-scale research projects targeting specific groups and large-scale surveys with broader programs. Determining interview duration is important for several reasons. First, it affects survey participation and data quality (Kleinert/Christoph/Ruland 2021; Rolstad/Adler/Rydén 2011). Second, it forms the basis for estimating survey costs, particularly when communicating with contractors. Third, interview duration impacts the internal organization of surveys, as durations are defined for specific topics or question blocks.

In the methodological literature, survey length is recognized as a major factor of respondent burden (Kleinert/Christoph/Ruland 2021; Rolstad/Adler/Rydén 2011), which, alongside incentives, survey mode, cover letters, and interest in the topic, can influence participation rates and data quality. For example, Galesic and Bosnjak (2009) and Gummer and Daikeler (2020) found that the anticipated length of a survey affected whether respondents began a questionnaire. Meta-analyses also show a significant link between response rates and questionnaire length (Rolstad/Adler/Rydén 2011), though other studies found no such association (Kleinert/Christoph/Ruland 2021).

Longer surveys not only affect (re-)participation but also data quality. Some studies indicate that a portion of drop-outs during a survey can be attributed to length (Hoerger 2010), with drop-outs increasing linearly or at critical points (e.g., loops; Emery u.a. 2023). Additionally, data quality tends to decline as interview duration increases, due to fatigue and careless responses (Eisele u.a. 2022).

While interview duration is just one factor affecting participation and data quality, there is no consensus on the ideal duration. Respondents generally see 10 to 20 minutes as optimal for maintaining interest and trust (Revilla/Ochoa 2017), especially in web surveys compared to face-to-face interviews.

However, these ideal durations are not reflected in large-scale studies, where average survey lengths range from 25 to 47 (if further assessments are included up to 67 minutes) (e.g., Steinwede u.a. 2023; Schiel u.a. 2021; Aust/Kersting 2014). Duration varies by study type, with panel studies often being longer than cross-sectional or first-time respondent studies. Data briefs or methodological reports rarely explain how interview durations were determined, making it difficult to understand the rationale for survey length and respondent burden across different groups.

This report aims to address this by showing which tools and rules of thumb can best guide the decisions necessary to balance out maximum questionnaire material particularly in large-scale, multi-actor surveys with nested designs. We (1) describe the settings used to define interview durations, using the Growing up in Germany panel study (German title: Aufwachsen in Deutschland: Alltagswelten; AID:A) from 2021 as an example, and (2) provide a planning tool for calculating item load and interview duration for individual respondent groups in study planning.

2 AID:A as a multi-actor, multi-informant study

AID:A is a multi-actor study that collects data on the upbringing of children and adolescents, as well as on the living conditions of adults and families in Germany (Kuger/Walper/Rauchenbach 2021). The current longitudinal panel study started in 2019, with individual participants aged 0-32, so called target persons (German: Zielpersonen; ZP), and their household members being surveyed every two years. For the second wave, AID:A 2021, all participants with panel consent from AID:A 2019 were contacted again for a computer-assisted web survey (Bernhardt u.a. 2025). Children, adolescents and young adults aged 10-34 were invited to a self-administered interview (ZP), while parents answered questions about themselves (parent) and as proxies (German: Auskunftsperson; AP) for each of their children aged 2-19. If parents were also within the target age (up to 34 years), they were also interviewed as target persons. This creates a nested structure with multiple informants per household, complicating the calculation of survey durations. Parents of minors provide information about themselves in their parental role and about their children; in addition, if they are target respondents, they also answer as individuals. In addition to the challenge of the (1) nested (2) multi-actor approach in which survey content can be combined for individuals, (3) a further challenge is that AID:A does not survey specific cohorts but various actors of different age groups ranging from 0-32 years, who receive different survey content adapted to their age group and life situation.

3 Setting Guidelines for the AID:A Survey

We were guided by the following considerations when determining interview durations: If we only considered the durations of individual parts in AID:A (e.g. for AID:A 2021: ZP: 16 min; Parent: 24 min; Proxy: 12 min), we would be below the times previously mentioned. However, due to the nested structure, parents report on themselves and each of their children. If they are also target respondents, the program expands further, increasing interview duration. We had to balance the two goals of collecting rich data without overburdening groups. Based on evidence from previous studies and a consensus within the AID:A survey team regarding the longitudinal program to be implemented in this wave, two survey design targets were established: First, the majority of respondents should have a survey duration of less than 45 minutes. Second, a high-burden group with survey durations exceeding 45 minutes should represent only a small proportion of the sample. We decided for a 15% threshold as a guiding benchmark, which should be understood as a heuristic reference point rather than a strict criterion. Based on these decisions, we identified the 15% of respondents with the highest survey burden and then ensured that the remaining 85% had survey durations below 45 minutes. To illustrate how these design targets translated into actual survey duration, we examined their manifestation in the AID:A 2021 survey. Specifically, we first identified the 15% of respondents with the highest survey burden and then assessed whether interview durations for the remaining 85% of respondents remained below 45 minutes.

3.1 Determining 15% of our sample with highest survey burden

In the first step, to evaluate the proportion of different survey groups in our sample, we analyzed respondent groups in the AID:A 2021 data (Kuger u.a. 2022). Because AID:A surveys target persons (ZP) up to the age of at least 32 years (34 years in the 2021 survey), parents in their role as parents and as proxies (AP) for each of their children, parenting target persons with several children receive the most questions and therefore have the longest survey durations. In addition, even non-ZP parents with more than two children tend to have longer interview durations than the average respondent.

Table 1 shows proportions for target persons without children (column 2), parents without target-person status (column 3), and parenting target persons (column 4), expressed as percentages of the total sample (N=15,457) differentiated by the number of children. The group of target-person parents—the group with the longest expected interview durations—is a relatively small group that accounts for only 5.62% of the sample in AID:A 2021 (see last column in Table 1). The group of parents, not target persons with more than two children—the group with the second longest expected interview durations—is somewhat larger (12,65% of the sample; see 3rd column highlighted in bold in Table 1).

These two groups with the highest expected survey burden—parenting target persons and parents, not target person with more than two children—together account for 18.27% of the sample, which is slightly above the targeted proportion of 15%. However, because the 15% threshold served merely as a guiding benchmark for exempting a limited proportion of respondents from the upper target interview duration of 45 minutes, we decided to apply the exemption rule to both groups.

Tab. 1: Percentages of different survey groups in AID:A 2021, by the number of children

Number of children	Target person (ZP), not parent Col% (N)	Parent, not target person (Non-ZP) Col% (N)	Parenting target person (ZP) Col% (N)
0 children	50.31% (7,776)	-	-
1 child	-	8.80% (1,360)	2.65% (409)
2 children	-	22.63% (3,498)	2.10% (324)
3 children	-	9.64% (1,490)	0.58% (89)
4 children	-	2.25% (348)	0.10% (16)
5 children	-	0.58% (89)	0.03% (5)
6 children	-	0.12% (19)	0.01% (2)
7 children	-	0.03% (4)	0.01% (1)
8 children	-	0.02% (3)	0.01% (2)
9 children	-	0.01% (2)	0.13% (20)
Total	50.31% (7,776)	44,08 (6,813)	5,62% (868)

Source: Own calculations, based on AID:A 2021.

Notes: Percentages refer to the total sample (N = 15,457); The survey groups that together account for 15% of the survey group with the highest burden are highlighted in bold.

3.2 Interview durations for the remaining 85% of respondent groups in the nested multiple-actor structure

In the second step, it was determined that for the remaining 85% of the sample—excluding the 15% most burdened survey group—the average interview duration must not exceed 45 minutes. To evaluate the extent to which this upper limit was reached in practice, we analyzed interview durations from the AID:A 2021 method

data. Table 2 shows average durations of individual parts of the questionnaire and of the interview in total for different respondent groups.

Table 2 differentiates between the following parts of the questionnaire (see also Bernhardt u.a. 2025): (1) an initial introductory greeting, during which respondent identity was validated through a series of panel-verification questions; (2) socio-demographic and socio-economic background characteristics; (3) AID:A Core questions; (4) a media add-on for parents about their and their children's media use.

Our analysis of interview durations revealed that the goal of keeping the average interview duration at a maximum of 45 minutes for 85% of the sample was achieved in AID:A 2021: Almost all of the 85% of the respondent groups remained far below the 45-minutes threshold, with about 15 minutes for childless target persons and about 24 minutes for non-ZP parents. Even for the group of non-ZP parents with two children—the group with the most questions among the 85% range—the average interview duration of 47.84 minutes (highlighted in bold in Table 2)—was only slightly above the target of 45 minutes.

Tab. 2: Mean interview duration (minutes) for the remaining 85% by respondent group and survey segment

Respondent group	Specification of survey segment	Additional survey segment	Intro	Socio-demographics	AID:A Core	Total AID:A	Media-Add-on	Total
Proxy (AP)	0-11 years	-	0.47	-	5.80	6.27	4.24	10.51
Proxy (AP)	11-17 years	-	0.49	-	7.89	8.38	4.56	12.94
Target person (ZP)	11-17 years	-	0.68	0.65	14.47	15.80	-	15.80
Target person (ZP)	18+ years	Non-Parent	0.64	1.47	13.37	15.48	-	15.48
Parent	-	Non-ZP	0.74	2.88	17.26	20.88	3.51	24.39
Target person (ZP)	18+ years	+ Parent	0.78	2.82	25.06	28.66	3.19	31.85
Parent	Non-ZP	1 Child	1.21	2.88	23.06	27.15	7.75	34.90
Parent	Non-ZP	2 Children	1.7	2.88	30.95	35.53	12.31	47.84

Source: Method data AID:A 2021; own calculations.

Notes: excl. interview break-offs and missing modules; for ZP & parents calculated from total time - add-on, intro, sociodemographics; The table shows the mean value of the interview durations; a determination based on the median was also considered, but the two measures differed only slightly in the sample.

4 Planning Guidelines for the AID:A Survey: Construct list as a practical application

The analysis of interview durations, as presented in Section 3, was conducted *ex post*, i.e. after data collection. In particular, when preparing a survey with nested respondent groups and estimating costs, precise planning prior to data collection is required. Based on the mean interview durations for the different groups of respondents determined in the last section, we developed a planning tool that enables us to calculate the expected mean response durations for each respondent group (*ex ante*) for planning subsequent AID:A waves. This planning tool contains a detailed overview over constructs of the AID:A survey program and weighted item load for the different groups of respondents. In the following, we will present this tool in more detail and display some selected sections of this tool graphically. A template of this tool can be downloaded in the Supplementary Material.

For illustrative purposes, Figure 3 presents a strongly simplified version of the planning tool. The tool has four main areas: Survey content (highlighted in blue), number of items to be gathered about different target groups (yellow), estimated proportion of respondents who will be eligible to respond to a given question (orange), and item load per construct and respondent (green). It is important to note that the last two areas differentiate between target-person (ZP) information and proxy information. This is due to the integrated nature of the AID:A survey, which gathers information about children up to 11 years mainly from parents, whereas information about target persons aged 12 years or older mainly stems from self-reports. In our simplified planning tool, we therefore differentiate between three main groups according to their age or status: **0-11**, meaning children aged 0-11 years, **12-32** meaning adolescents and young adults from 12 to 32 years, and **parents**.

Figure 3 displays some characteristic AID:A constructs, which are suitable to exemplify the planning functions of the tool. The first construct, **Activity status**, consists of one item, which is gathered about target persons from age 12 onwards and parents (see numbers below yellow area). This item is presented to all respondents in these two groups, resulting in a proportion of 1 (see numbers below the orange area). The last columns (below the green area) display the simple multiplication of these two values for the respective groups: The multiplied item load for **Activity status** is one each for the groups of **12-32** and **Parents**, whereas it is zero in the group **0-11** because this group is not eligible for this construct.

Another example in Figure 3 is **Family climate**, which consists of five items that are gathered in all three groups of **0-11**, **12-32**, and **Parents**. Because the minimum age for this construct is 9 years, approximately 25 percent of respondents in the group of **0-11** are eligible, and all respondents in the groups of **12-32** and **Parents** (proportion of 1). This construct is designated for self-report only, resulting in the value of zero in the column **Proxy For 0-11**. The last columns show weighted item loads of 1.25 (5×0.25) for **0-11** and 5 for **12-32** and **Parents**, respectively.

The other construct examples in Figure 3 address specific groups: **Conflict about smartphone/internet use** is a one-item construct, which runs only in the proxy interview for children below 12 years (value of 1 in the **Proxy** columns). **Political interest** is also a one-item construct, which addresses only target persons from 12 to 32 years of age (value of 1 in the **12-32** columns). **Work-family conflict** also consists of one item presented only to parents. In addition, this construct addresses only parents in employment (about 80 percent of the parent sample in AID:A), resulting in a proportion of 0.8 eligible for this construct.

The last two rows in Figure 3 contain the total number of items and the total estimated interview duration, respectively. The total number of items results from the sum of values in each column. For the calculation of interview durations in minutes, we have to make an assumption about the average number of items that respondents can respond to in a certain amount of time. Based on interview durations in previous AID:A surveys, the average number of items per minute in web-based surveys was six. Therefore, interview durations in the last line result from dividing the total number of items by six.

Survey content	Number of items to be gathered (information about)			Estimated proportion of respondents eligible for construct				Load (information from)			
Construct	0-11	12-32	Parent	ZP			Proxy	ZP			Proxy
				0-11	12-32	Parent	For 0-11	0-11	12-32	Parent	For 0-11
Activity status	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Family climate	5	5	5	0.25	1	1	0	1.25	5	5	0
Conflict about smartphone/internet use	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Political interest	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Work-family conflict	0	0	1	0	0	0.8	0	0	0	0.8	0
Total (items)	6	7	7	0.25	3	2.8	1	1.25	7	6.8	1
Total estimated interview duration (minutes)								0.21	1.17	1.13	0.17

Fig. 1: Planning tool in AID:A surveys (simplified example)

Source: authors' illustration.

Notes: Strongly simplified version; interested readers can download a comprehensive template of the planning tool in the Supplementary Material. An accessible version of the table can be found in Tab 4-6 in the Supplementary Material.

The full template of the planning tool contains the same main areas shown in Figure 3 and includes information on the same constructs (see Supplementary Material). Because AID:A surveys differentiate fine-grained age groups of target persons to take into account age-specific interview lengths, the template in the Supplementary Material contains more columns to be able to estimate the interview load more precisely for more differentiated age groups.

5 Conclusion

Setting benchmarks for interview durations in the planning stages of surveys is critical as it can affect initial participation rates, data quality, and re-participation of respondents (e.g., Galesic/Bosnjak 2009; Gummer/Daikeler 2020). While durations should minimize respondent burden (Kleinert/Christoph/Ruland 2021; Rolstad/Adler/Rydén 2011), item load is often distributed unevenly across subgroups, especially in complex designs like multi-actor surveys with nested approaches, where all household members are interviewed and some of those also serve as proxy informants for minors.

The German panel study AID:A is one example of a complex multi-actor survey that gathers information from target persons aged 0 to 32 and parents of minors, who bear a higher burden by providing both proxy and personal information.

Our study used the AID:A 2021 data to show how survey teams can differentiate interview durations in complex surveys. First, we examined how two survey-burden decisions were implemented in the AID:A 2021 survey: for the large majority of 85% of the respondents, the mean interview duration was intended not to exceed 45 minutes, while the proportion of respondents assigned a longer interview was limited to 15% of the sample. Second, we presented a planning tool that we developed for the calculation of mean interview durations for different subgroups in complex survey designs. We illustrated its utility by showcasing calculations for different groups of respondents and interview types (e.g., by age groups, and proxy interviews vs. self-report).

However, the considerations and the tool must be viewed against the background of existing limitations: First, estimating and setting benchmarks for average and maximum interview durations in theory is no guarantee that those benchmarks will not be exceeded during fieldwork. Factors such as the literacy of certain target populations or different durations depending on question formats (e.g., open-ended questions) can shape interview durations, which is not reflected in our planning tool (but implemented for later AID:A waves). Second, mean interview durations may not be as informative compared to other metrics (e.g., median or 75% percentile), which should be evaluated as well. Lastly, excluding 15% of the sample from the rule of a maximum average interview duration of 45 minutes was a pragmatic and arbitrary choice based on practices in other surveys and survey-team decisions about the minimum survey program. Setting maximum interview durations in web surveys and exemption rules for certain subgroups with expectedly higher survey burden is still an open research question. Our report provided practical guidelines for determining planned and realized interview durations in complex survey designs, addressing critical and subgroup-specific information-burden trade-offs during the planning stages of such research projects.

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Tab. 3: Planning tool in AID:A surveys (simplified example; barrier-free version): Number of items to be gathered (information about)

Survey content Construct	0-11	12-32	Parent
Activity status	0	1	1
Family climate	5	5	5
Conflict about smartphone/internet use	1	0	0
Political interest	0	1	0
Work-family conflict	0	0	1
Total (items)	6	7	7
Total estimated inter- view duration (minutes)	-	-	-

Source: authors' illustration.

Tab. 4: Planning tool in AID:A surveys (simplified example; barrier-free version): Estimated proportion of respondents eligible for construct

Survey content Construct	ZP 0-11	ZP 12-32	Parent	For 0-11 (Proxy)
Activity status	0	1	1	0
Family climate	0.25	1	1	0
Conflict about smartphone/internet use	0	0	0	1
Political interest	0	1	0	0
Work-family conflict	0	0	0.8	0
Total (items)	0.25	3	2.8	1
Total estimated inter- view duration (minutes)	-	-	-	-

Source: authors' illustration.

Tab. 5: Planning tool in AID:A surveys (simplified example; barrier-free version): Load (information from)

Survey content Construct	ZP 0-11	ZP 12-32	Parent	For 0-11 (Proxy)
Activity status	0	1	1	0
Family climate	1.25	5	5	0
Conflict about smartphone/internet use	0	0	0	1
Political interest	0	1	0	0
Work-family conflict	0	0	0.8	0
Total (items)	1.25	7	6.8	1
Total estimated inter- view duration (minutes)	0.21	1.17	1.13	0.17

Source: authors' illustration.

[Comprehensive template of the planning tool \(online supplemental material\)](#)