6.1 Introduction

CATI has been widely used in Italian surveys since the 1980s. As a matter of fact telephone interviewing, compared to traditional face-to-face data collection methods, allows to save time and money. It also offers further advantages: better control over the quality of the interview through a centralized facility, continuous monitoring and supervision, and the opportunity to include experiment-like variables in the survey (Groves et al. 1988, Piazza and Sniderman 1998). Institutional data producers, academic researchers and companies in the market research and polls industries have been taking advantage of all these opportunities.

Sampling designs adopted in phone surveys and polls range from non-probabilistic quota sampling to more valuable probabilistic sampling approaches, similarly to what happens in face-to-face surveys.

Voting lists and population registers represent the typical frames for face-to-face surveys. The former are publicly available and cover all Italian citizens having political rights while institutional data collectors may use the latter in order to cover foreign residents, too. Public phone directories have traditionally been used for the same purpose in landline phone surveys on the general population. In this last case, once a household owning a sampled telephone number has been contacted, through randomization techniques such as the nearest birthday method or the Kish grid, a single individual may be selected for interview within the household.

Dedicated phone directories – clients’ records, for instance – may be used for specific sub-populations as in the case of customer surveys, instead of the white pages. To the best of our knowledge, the former also represent the only adopted sampling frame for mobile phone surveys and polls. The setting up of a comprehensive phone directory (for which the Italian acronym is DBU) – listing both landline and mobile phones, irrespective of the different operators – has been promoted by the Authority for Communications in 2002. Various types of printed
and electronic phone directories are produced and distributed on the basis of available DBU data. For privacy reasons, citizens may choose to register or not in the DBU. In practice, almost all private mobile phones are unlisted in phone directories.

In both landline and mobile phone surveys in Italy RDD is rarely used as a technique to select the sample units. It is considered inefficient and expensive. Landline phone directories have been favored as a sampling frame, given their reasonable coverage. During the 1990s households with no landline phone at home were about the 9.5 % of all households (Callegaro and Poggio 2004: 485). They were also a rather homogeneous group: mainly elderly families, with a low level of education, residing in rural areas. Public phone directories used to be rather comprehensive at that time. Having one’s number not listed was only an issue for VIPs or people with serious security problems. Only 6 % of landline phones were not listed in the white pages in 2001 (Callegaro and Poggio 2004: 503). However, this relatively favorable context has rapidly worsened during the last decade (see section 6.3).

6.2 The Reality of Phone Surveys in Italy

How are phone surveys used by the different organizations in the field?

The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) is the main institutional data producer in the country. It still collects most of its survey data via personal interviews, either PAPI or CAPI. This is especially the case when all household members have to be interviewed, when major measurement issues are involved or – in any case – when the questionnaire is particularly time-demanding.

However, there are some exceptions where phone surveys are used instead of personal interviews. All the three studies surveying employment outcomes after the completion of – respectively – secondary schools, higher education, and doctoral studies are carried out through phone surveys. The availability of dedicated alumni’s phone directories, as a sampling frame, is probably a big reason for this choice.

Another example of ISTAT taking advantage of phone surveys is when individuals are re-interviewed. The Labor force survey design implies four subsequent interviews to the same individual within the same year. The first one is carried out with CAPI techniques, on a sample obtained from population registers, while CATI is used for further interviews. The same approach is used in a few dedicated phone surveys whose sample is extracted from respondents to a larger previous survey conducted through personal interviews.

Finally, phone surveys have also been used by ISTAT in another few surveys: the Women’s Safety Survey, the Citizens’ Safety Survey, the Business Trips and Holidays Survey and the Birth Survey. A phone survey has been preferred for the former two studies because of measurement considerations, given that some of the questions were particularly sensitive. Phone directories represent the sampling frame for these two surveys and for the third study. The Birth Survey is an interesting methodological experiment: the households sample is obtained from the population registers. It is then possible to link parents’ full names to public