gesis Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

GESIS Survey Guidelines

Incentives

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Abstract

Incentives are all forms of monetary or non-monetary inducement given to (potential) respondents (Singer, 2002; Singer & Ye, 2013). Non-monetary incentives include vouchers, lottery tickets, donations to charity, postage stamps, and gifts. The monetary value of the incentives employed in studies ranges from tiny amounts to several hundred euros in the case of clinical research studies. Moreover, incentives differ in terms of the way they are given: Prepaid incentives are given in advance, irrespective of participation in the overall gross sample. Conditional incentives are given to respondents after they have participated in the survey.

The present contribution provides an overview of the current status of theories and empirical findings on the impact that giving incentives to respondents has on response rates, retention rates, and sample quality.

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Incentives

Incentives are all forms of monetary and non-monetary inducement given to (potential) respondents (Singer, 2002; Singer & Ye, 2013). Non-monetary incentives include vouchers, lottery tickets, donations to charity, postage stamps, and gifts. The monetary value of the incentives employed in studies ranges from tiny amounts to several hundred euros in the case of clinical research studies. Moreover, incentives differ in the way they are given: Prepaid incentives are given in advance to all those who are contacted, irrespective of whether they participate in the survey. Conditional incentives are given to respondents after participation.

Incentives are used in addition to other measures, such as cover letters, interviewer training, and special standardised contact procedures, to increase response rates (Groves & Couper, 1998, Chapter 10; Groves et al., 2009, Section 6.1; Schoeni, Stafford, Mcgonagle, & Andreski, 2013).

From a theoretical perspective, incentives can increase response rates in two ways. On the one hand, respondents may perceive the incentive as a symbol of appreciation, which increases their general motivation to participate cooperatively in the survey as they wish to reciprocate the appreciation. On the other hand, incentives may generally compensate respondents for the costs that are associated with survey participation, so that incentivisation increases participation (Diekmann & Jann, 2001; Dillman, 1978; Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000; Schnell, 1997, Section 4.2).

Many studies have experimentally investigated the increase in response rates in various survey modes. In a meta-analysis of 38 studies, Church (1993) investigated the impact of incentives on response rates in postal surveys. He found that unconditional monetary incentives increased response rates by an average of 19 percent. By contrast, non-monetary gifts increased response rates by an average of 8 percent. In a similar meta-analysis of over 292 PAPI surveys, Edwards et al. (2002) found that the odds of response were doubled when a monetary incentive was used. Non-monetary incentives increased the odds by 20%. Unconditional incentives increased the odds by 71% compared to conditional incentives. In a meta-analysis of 39 studies, Singer, Van Hoewyk, Gebler, Trivellore, and McGonagle (1999) investigated the impact of incentives on response rates in face-to-face and CATI interviews. They found that response rates increased significantly by 0.2% per dollar of incentive paid. Monetary incentives yielded a 4% higher response rate than non-monetary incentives. Holbrook, Krosnick, and Pfent (2008) compared 114 US CATI surveys in terms of the correlation between various survey characteristics and response rates. They found that incentives significantly increased response rates by 10 percent. Cantor, O'Hare, and O'Connor (2008) systematically reviewed the findings of 32 studies that investigated the effect of incentives on response rates. They found that conditional monetary incentives of between $15 and $35 increased response rates. In two meta-analyses, Göritz (2006) investigated the impact of incentives on response rates in web surveys and found that the odds of response were 20% higher when incentives were offered than in surveys without incentivisation.

In summary, incentives increase response rates in all survey modes, especially in postal surveys. All other conditions being equal, cash incentives and prepaid incentives yield higher response rates than non-monetary and conditional incentives.

As a measure for increasing data quality, incentives are of use only when the increase in the response rate is not accompanied by an increase in the selectivity of unit nonresponse. From a theoretical perspective, incentives can either reduce or increase the selectivity of unit nonresponse. The tendency to reciprocate the appreciation conveyed by the incentive can vary systematically across respondents (see, e.g., Croson & Buchan, 1999). Moreover, the opportunity costs of participating in the survey may systematically vary across respondents (see Narasimhan, 1984). And finally, even without incentives, the

motivation to participate may be very high or very low for certain respondents, so that an additional incentivisation will no longer influence participation in the survey. In their meta-analysis, Singer et al. (1999, p. 244f.) found indications that incentivisation influenced sample composition. In three studies, the response rate of respondent groups who are otherwise under-represented in surveys was increased by the use of incentives. In five studies, no significant effect of incentivisation on sample composition was found. Simmons and Wilmot (2004) reported that – compared to the rest of the population – the use of incentives increased the cooperation of low-education respondents, younger respondents, respondents from minority ethnic groups, respondents from larger households, and respondents from households with children.

Besides the effect on sample composition, incentives may influence the realised sample by selectively changing the response behaviour of certain groups. Incentives may increase the motivation to answer questions attentively, which may reduce item nonresponse. Moreover, incentives may alter the mood of the respondents, which may in turn change response behaviour in the case of mood-dependent indicators. Singer and Ye (2013) summarised findings in this regard by concluding that there were weak indications of a negative effect of incentivisation on item nonresponse. Moreover, there has been sporadic confirmation of the influence of incentives on response behaviour in the case of mood-dependent variables.

The provision of incentives is of particular importance in the case of panel studies (Laurie & Lynn, 2009) because, on the one hand, longitudinal surveys are particularly burdensome for the respondents and, on the other hand, the maintenance of sufficiently high case numbers is more difficult than in the case of repeat cross-sectional surveys. Many findings regarding the effect of incentives in cross-sectional surveys can also be found in panel studies: incentives increase response rates; unconditional, monetary incentives are more effective than other forms; and the effect of incentives increases with their monetary value. Furthermore, there are aspects that are peculiar to panel studies: The effect of incentives on the response rate persists in subsequent waves. By taking account of the data already collected, incentivisation in future waves can be adapted to the respondent. However, there are as yet few findings regarding the effectiveness of differential incentivisation strategies. The problem of the selectivity of unit nonresponse also exists in the case of panel studies. Here, too, there are few findings on the effect of incentives on the longitudinal selectivity of non-response.

Incentives are frequently discussed in connection with survey measures that are differentially tailored to different respondent groups (tailored design; see Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). If it is to be expected that certain, previously identifiable, groups will selectively participate less in a survey, this selective nonresponse can be countered by higher incentives, for example. The problem here is that, as a rule, it is not known exactly how strongly certain groups will react to incentives.

One criticism raised against the regular use of incentives is that their widespread application may change respondents' expectations about the way surveys are conducted and lead them to assume that they will be paid for participating (Singer, Van Hoewyk, & Maher, 1998). As a result, surveys may become more expensive in the long run, although the quality will remain the same. However, the few studies that have been conducted on this topic have found no evidence of such a change in expectations.

A further point of criticism in relation to incentives is their ethical questionableness (Grant, 2011; Singer & Couper, 2008). When incentives are given, survey participation is no longer voluntary but rather a paid or "coerced" activity, which can be deemed to be ethically problematic. The exploitation of an incentive-related predicament may occur especially in highly paid clinical research studies that are very burdensome for respondents. Moreover, it seems problematic when different groups of respondents receive differential incentives – for example, in the case of the above-mentioned tailored design approach – and also when incentivisation is employed only when following up persons who are especially hard to reach. From a research ethics perspective, at least, it appears wise not to use such

differential measures if it is to be expected that differentially incentivised respondents will contact each other.

It is difficult to give a simple practical recommendation for action in relation to the application of incentives because the effects are strongly dependent on the survey mode, on other measures to increase the rate of return of questionnaires, on the target population, and on the topic of the survey. In the case of large-scale face-to-face surveys, a conditional monetary incentive of around €10 is currently offered. In the case of low-budget surveys, low-value incentives are definitely to be recommended because meta-analyses have shown that even incentives that are small in monetary terms increase response rates.

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