‘Doubt Comes After Belief’
Survey Incentives and Recent Advances in Trust Theory

Abstract

Trust plays a crucial role in survey participation, among other factors. Acting upon Eleanor Singer’s calling for more theory, our proposal for workshop discussion is the applicability of recent advances in trust theory to survey incentive usage. Current approaches are mainly based on Social Exchange Theory, and its obscure trust notion emerging out of reciprocal relationships. Trust is assumed to be learnt in the course of recurring cost-benefit calculations in social exchange situations. However, the cognitive approach of trust conceptualisation to which this concept belongs to has been since proven to describe a calculative, strategic, interest-driven, shrewd, and/or manipulative frame of mind – the direct opposite of trust. Designing incentive strategies on such bases may well result in (unintended) manipulation. Any perception of manipulative intent can lead to reactance, alienation, and the feeling of exploitation, inducing subjective isolation from the perceived manipulator. Even the subliminal ‘nudges’ of behavioural economic choice architectures are manipulative, for they are to reduce subjective relevance of objective alternatives, thus also harming the autonomy of prospective respondents.

Instead of counting on ill-assumed learnt trust mechanisms, incentive design could be based on the concept of ‘built-in’ basic trust described by the non-cognitive approaches. Just like doubt, distrust is learnt rather than trust. It may keep innate human trusting in latency, therefore incentive usage should be shifted from ‘trust-triggering/provoking’ design to engender the irrelevance of distrust regarding the response situation. The situation remains non-intrusive, even trust-assuming if the institute demonstrates trust, thus empowers the respondent and facilitates her relaxing into trust. In contrast with attempting to (gently) force out reciprocity, respondent autonomy is left unharmed. A properly tailored leverage-saliency design may be adequate for this purpose, but the appropriate form of incentives is yet to be found. Our early-stage research focuses on the development and testing of this approach.

Keywords: survey incentives, trust, social exchange theory, manipulation, autonomy.

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1. Introduction

As one of the greatest experts on survey incentives, the late Eleanor Singer (2018) concluded in a posthumously published chapter on survey incentives, we need '*more theory* instead of basing practice on *past practice.* (…) Because otherwise you are sort of flying by the seat of your pants. (…) [W]e can't rely on hunches anymore.' (Singer 2018:412. Italics added). After this, she lamented on the generally declining survey response rates and the public's willingness to cooperate, surmising that this resistance to surveys should be related to the long-term effects of incentives used in such careless manner. These brutally honest comments are by all means true, even though the use of survey incentives has at least *some* theory behind it, to be correct. Current theoretical foundations are, however, far from being up to date – quite the contrary. They were already outdated at the time of their first introduction, at least regarding the concept of a central notion: trust. Therefore, Singer's calling for more theoretical work gets ever more pressing by each passing day. The aim of the present paper is to support and demonstrate the message of Don Dillman's keynote speech to be held at this workshop (2020 Nonresponse Workshop), that is, 'How Out-of-Date Theories are Constraining our Efforts to Reduce Survey Non-Response', focusing on trust, a factor of ultimate importance in survey response.

2. Trust in the survey (non)response literature

This section gives a brief outline of the how the topic of trust appears in the survey (non)response literature. Trust is known to be an elusive concept surrounded by a permanent 'conceptual confusion' (Lewis & Weigert 1985, Misztal 1996). However, theorists of survey incentive usage seem to be ignorant of the serious problems and contradictions within the literature attempting to define interpersonal and social trust. They either use the somewhat underdeveloped trust concept of the Social Exchange Theory (see in the next paragraphs below), such as Dillman (1978, 2007, Dillman et al. 2014) himself, or they do not define trust at all, such as Groves and Couper (1998) in their social isolation hypothesis. The latter was designed to explain the problem of social isolates, who are disengaged of social exchange relations and the norm of reciprocity. Therefore, it is also based on the Social Exchange Theory, so its trust notion should not be too far from Dillman's. Lack of trust in the government or in the survey institution is a key factor of alienation of certain subgroups from the larger society in this hypothesis, which leads to uncooperative attitude. Even though it is not explicitly stated by Groves and Couper (1998), this entails that trust must be a key factor of survey participation in this theoretical approach as well. Others, such as Saßenroth (2013) – who attempted to fix some issues of the social isolation hypothesis by introducing the subjective isolation aspect – make it explicit, following Dillman's obscure definition of trust taken from the Social Exchange Theory.

Among the many, indisputably valuable and robust theses, there are but two limitations of the accounts of Dillman and his followers that have to be addressed. First, Dillman was most probably unaware of Luhmann's (1979) ground-breaking work on trust, which in itself – despite its own issues and controversies – made Blau's (1964) underdeveloped concept obsolete by clarifying that calculation and self-interest cannot be the bases for genuine trust. This is quite understandable, for Luhmann's theory was only published in English in 1979 (a year after the first edition of Dillman's book), even though its first version was already out for more than a decade in German. The other shortcoming provides the rationale for the present paper, that is,

neither Dillman, nor his followers since reflect at all on the advances of trust theory in the decades passed since the first edition of Dillman's (1978) seminal work. The outdated trust concept of the 'quite simple' (Dillman et al. 2014:24) Social Exchange Theory is still central in each later edition as well as in the works of other important theorists of survey (non)response who found inspiration in Dillman's books. Dillman (1978, 2007, Dillman et al. 2014) adopted – and has not abandoned yet – a social exchange approach to survey response and to predicting the respondent's action. He defined three elements as critical in a rejective or cooperative decision: costs, rewards, and trust. Apart from the fact that his trust notion is also a derivate of costs and rewards, therefore redundant in the 'equation', the problem of the entire concept is rooted in his understanding of the phenomenon of trust. Trust is, according to him (Dillman 2007:14), 'the expectation that in the long run the rewards of doing something will outweigh the costs'. It might have been more or less up to date at the time of the first edition, but such calculative approaches have since been proven to be quite simplifying views of trust.

We have to give credit to the Social Exchange Theory as well as to Dillman though for this trust concept is much more sensitive to the fundamentally social nature of trust by design than the dull accounts of Economic Exchange and Rational Choice Theories[1]. But other than that, it has the same limitations as the others. In my paper on the metaphoric 'roots' of trust (Mújdricza 2019), I demonstrated its inability to grasp the essence of trusting, along with all the definitions created on the basis of the so-called cognitive branch of trust theories to which it belongs to. Trust bound to risk-taking in social exchange relationships and defined obscurely as something that would emerge gradually out of pure self-interest in the course of recurring cost–benefit calculations (Blau 1964) is only different from a by-product of mere economic exchange in that prices and rewards cannot be *exactly* measured in social exchange relations. The human of the Social Exchange Theory is not *less* calculative and interest-driven than that of the opportunity cost hypothesis, quite the contrary: they are calculative in other, less palpable ways *in addition to* mere economic calculations.[2]

3. Recent advances in Trust Theory

Without delving deeper into the vast literature, a draft summary of the two major branches of trust theories has to be given here. For further details, see my recent paper on the subject (Mújdricza 2019). The better-known branch is the cognitive approach, which includes many different schools that sometimes criticise and refute each other, but have some common characteristics. According to this approach, trust is assumed to be a knowledge-, information, and experience-based, learnt capacity in the state of uncertainty and perception of risks. This three-place, purposive (*A* trusts *B* to do *X*) trust is extremely fragile: hard to build but easy to destroy (Uslaner 2002). The simplest ('hardcore') cognitive theories treat trust as a purely rational decision, an assessment of costs and gains (Dasgupta 1988, Good 1988; Coleman 1990;

[1] The latter two inspired the opportunity cost hypothesis in the survey (non)response literature (Groves & Couper 1998, Dillman et al. 2002, Saßenroth 2013 etc.).

[2] It has to be noted, that another early social exchange theorist, Homans (1961) described trust as a 'true belief' that prevents the betrayal of others for short-term gains, at least sometimes. Homans' trust is supported by a 'moral code', a specific form of social capital. Although it foreshadows some of the more elaborate non-cognitive accounts of trust conceptualisation (e.g. Fukuyama 1995, Uslaner 2002), survey (non)response theory does not refer to it.

Offe 1999, Marková 2004), or a sort of gambling, placing a bet (Coleman 1990, Sztompka 1999). The critique of the simple Rational Choice Theory-based trust definitions lead to an even greater misunderstanding of the phenomenon, namely to Hardin's (1993, 2006) 'encapsulated interest' theory, which mistakes trust for a cunning, shrewd, shady, manipulative, beguiling, overly selfish relationship of interest (Pettit 1995, Lagerspetz 2015). It assumes that trusting would be a rational expectation of the trustor, who believes that the trusted person's interest is to be trustworthy in the relevant time and in the relevant way. According to Lagerspetz (2015:39), it describes 'a mutually distrustful cooperation' at best. The authors I call 'softcore cognitivists' (e.g. Luhmann 1979, 1988, Putnam, 1992, 2000, Giddens 1990, Sztompka 1999, Möllering 2006, etc.) take a more or less different approach. Putnam (1993, 2000) adopts a stance resembling of the Social Exchange Theory, building his concept on the idea of Gouldner's (1960) generalised reciprocity. According to the relevant critiques (Baier 1986, Becker 1996, Hertzberg 2010, Lagerspetz 2015), all of these rationalising, interest-based, calculative, cognitive / strategic concepts on trust do not speak about trust but of *reliance*. *Any* reason for trusting falls short of a justification of trust, because if trust was a kind of risk-taking agency in the state of uncertainty, it would either be redundant (if we have assurance on the situation) or ill-advised (if we are uncertain). The attempt to find reason for trusting itself 'assures that my attitude can at most amount to reliance' (Lagerspetz 2015:134).

Giddens (1990) and Sztompka (1999) seem to follow Friedman (1953) in developing a trust notion in which trust would 'bracket', suspend risks, and trustors do not *count* with them, but act *as if* they did not exist at all. As Friedman's solution failed (Berg & Gigerenzer 2010), so did Giddens' and Sztompka's: they did not describe trust, only a *mimesis* (imitation) of it, or, at the very best, something entirely different: naïveté. Möllering (2006) elaborated the *as if*-approach the furthest, assuming that this suspension would be a 'leap of faith' in the Kierkegaardian sense. This is, however, a 'black box': inputs of information, experiences, and perceived risks magically transmute into trust by the unknown process of the 'leap of faith' of trust. As I have argued (Mújdricza 2019), if we cut it out with Occam's razor, we find only a refined definition of reliance, if we leave it in place, it amounts to ignorance or negligence, that are characteristics of naïveté. Basing trust on faith is also suspiciously circular (Duncan 2019), furthermore, it is incorrect to assume that it could complement insufficient knowledge (Tillich 2009). To sum up: cognitive, rational accounts of trust (Social Exchange Theory included) mistake trust either for mere reliance, interest-based strategic/manipulative agency, or for an imitation of trust, i.e. naïveté.

The non-cognitive concepts (Baier 1986, Govier 1993, Becker 1996, Jones 1996, Hertzberg 2010 Bernstein 2011, Lagerspetz 1998; 2015 etc.) take a completely different approach. They assume a certain optimistic expectation of benevolence, goodwill in trusting, which is characterised by an affective warmth. This is not a purposive relationship, and, at least in case of Uslaner's (2002) moralistic trust notion, it is an overall attitude towards the world that does not even require an object: a one-place relationship, formalised as '*A* trusts' (Uslaner 2002:21. Italics in the original). Hertzberg (2010) and Lagerspetz (2015) go beyond emotional characterisation, not limiting it to feelings, and arguing for the omnipresence of trust: 'a pattern in the weave of life' (Lagerspetz 2015:95), which Luhmann (1979) himself suspected as well,

assuming that without trust, we could not even get out of our bed in the morning. We would fall prey to all-encompassing terrors and anxieties instead. Non-cognitive trust concepts agree that trust is a generally irreflective, unconscious disposition, of which the trustor gets aware only when it is already damaged or lost. This trust, however, is highly robust and resistant to external influence of conflicting information, for it acts as an interpretive filter: trusting disposition tends to distort our interpretation of experiences on the trusted. Moreover, as Lagerspetz (2015) concludes: it is the very *background* for any interpretation. Using Wittgenstein's (1969, §160. Italics in the original) note on childhood learning: 'Doubt comes *after* belief', Lagerspetz (2015) shows that trusting is a prerequisite for learning, therefore trust cannot be a learnt capacity. Rather, our possibility to trust is an innate, *a priori* built-in faculty, which hypothesis is supported by the latest results of life sciences, particularly neurobiology, of which I have recently given a thorough analysis (Mújdricza 2019). The non-cognitive concepts are generally much more convincing and have a great deal more explanatory power than the cognitive concepts. However, they are not without flaws, either. The two biggest are their inability to sufficiently explain *conscious* trust, and the missing differentiation of naïveté and trust.

There were numerous attempts on the reconciliation and integration of the two major schools. However, these are in most cases theoretically unelaborate 'mixtures' of their most important statements, resulting in even more incoherent 'concepts' than the originals. Two notable examples are Khodyakov's (2007) concept, which mixes together anything he could find in a rather unsystematic fashion, or the attempt of the OECD (2017) which seems to do the same. These concepts do not delve deeper into the phenomenology of trust. This short paper cannot do it either, but it can lay the foundations. As my recent paper (Mújdricza 2019) established, a better trust concept might be built on the basis of investigating the dynamic relationship between trust and existential anxiety. Giddens (1991) drew the attention in a few passages to Paul Tillich's *Courage to Be* (1952), which is among the best philosophical works on the problem of mortality, existential (death) anxiety and how humans can deal with it. My PhD dissertation (currently submitted for the first round of evaluations at Semmelweis University) outlines a novel definition of trust. In short, it defines trust as a fundamentally non-cognitive phenomenon in the presence, but at the same time in spite of the existential threat that the trusted could pose in case of their betrayal. It is an *emanation* of our own courage to be in Tillich's sense towards the world, and the other (the trusted) in it, manifested in a general expectation of good. The self-affirmation of the courage to be is also projected outwards, thus affirming the trusted and supporting them in their own existential struggles, which enables (but does not force) the appearance of their trusting towards us (Mújdricza 2020). This trust can be strengthened or weakened by certain emotions, and supported by reliance, but neither can create it on its own, without the basic (existential) courage. It leaves the autonomy of the trusted unharmed and at the same time, it explains the so far unexplained cumulative nature of trust (Hirschman 1984, Good 1988, Dasgupta 1988, Gambetta 1988, etc.). Further elaboration of this novel concept would exceed far beyond the scope and length of the present paper.

4. Inferences on the use of survey incentives

Theories of survey (non)response, however, seem to pay little attention to the tours and detours in trust literature, and still remain to be based on Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory approach,

which can be taken as a conceptual dead end. What does it entail on the use of survey incentives? In general, incentives are suggested to be used as means to evoke the norm of reciprocity and facilitate, trigger trust and willingness to respond in prospective respondents (Dillman 1978, 2007, Groves & Couper 1998, Saßenroth 2013, Dillman et al. 2014). To this end, they recommend that incentives should not be used as conditional upon response, but unconditionally prepaid in advance, as a symbol, a 'token' of our trust and respect towards them, in order to 'create' trust (Dillman 1978, 2007, Dillman et al. 2014). Incentives should not be communicated as 'rewards' for response. However, in reality they are, and we are counting on them to be taken as such, but in a social exchange sense instead of an economic exchange sense.

Although a huge body of empirical literature[3] supports this practice (see e.g. Armstrong 1975, Church 1993, Goyder 1994, Warriner et al. 1996, Simmons & Wilmot 2004, Laurie & Lynn 2008, Jäckle & Lynn 2008, Gajic et al. 2012, Pforr et al. 2015, Luiten 2019, just to mention a few), there are conflicting evidences in Yu & Cooper's (1983) and Singer et al.'s (1999) meta-analyses that question the hypothesis that unconditional incentives would perform better than conditional ones (which signifies an economic exchange approach) in general. In theory, there are some serious limitations of this practice, as it can be guessed from the serious limitations of the Social Exchange Theory trust concept in general. First, it seems to be a suspiciously manipulative design: we act *as if* we trusted the respondent *in order to* gain their trust, *so as to* get their response. In truth, it is *not* actual trust, rather, a manifestation of *distrust*: we turn to incentives precisely *because* we do not trust the sample members to be responsive, and we try to force out, however gently, their unconscious reciprocal attitude and cooperation. This manipulation may be unintended, but survey designers are certainly not unaware of it. They all know that they give prepaid incentives in order to enhance survey response rates. Therefore, such an incentive is only ostensibly unconditional – in reality, it is to serve a very much different purpose than a mere symbol of appreciation, respect, or trust.

Such manipulative incentive strategies may have potential drawbacks that might explain Church's (1993) finding: in 10 percent of the experiments he studied, incentives yielded *decrease* in response rates. The most salient drawback might be the appearance of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) in the respondent. It can be reduced by sending back the incentive, or by responding the survey. However, it can also trigger reactance due to perceiving the incentive as a threat to the freedom of choice. Restoring the threatened freedom is possible by rejecting the cooperation (Biner & Barton 1990). It can even create a negative general disposition towards surveys. A perception of manipulative intent can thus lead to reactance, alienation, and the feeling of exploitation. It may well result in subjective isolation from the perceived manipulator, that is, the surveying organisation or institution. The detrimental effects of subjective isolation on cooperative behaviour are thoroughly discussed by Saßenroth (2013). Before proceeding, the choice architectures and subliminal 'nudges' of behavioural economics should also be discussed briefly, for they are getting more and more attention from survey designers all around the world. Thaler and Sunstein's (2008) idea of 'libertarian paternalism' remains an oxymoron, despite their efforts to defend it. Despite their statements, choice architectures are *not* designed to leave the

[3] A recent summary of the survey incentives literature is Kastberg and Lloyd's (2018) exceptionally thorough paper.

freedom of choice intact – quite the opposite. The argument that the 'alternative options' are left open, and that there are no negative consequences on the individual is a weak one, for it does not change the manipulative, potentially exploitative nature of choice architectures. This manipulation is designed to decrease the relevance of the *subjective* relevance of *objective* alternatives (even if they are objectively present) in favour of the desired (i.e. desired by the designer) alternative. Thus it is actually based on an utter *disrespect* of the freedom of choice, and it harms the autonomy of the individuals even though in a gentle, smooth, non-obtrusive and non-compelling way. These latter characteristics make it all the more disturbing and dangerous, for nudges and choice architectures are designed to be subliminal, hiding in the background, lurking in the shadows of consciousness. For further critiques on libertarian paternalism and behavioural economics practices, see Gill and Gill's (2012) summarising study. For this paper, the main point is that no mastery of manipulation can lead to genuine trust, either, only to weak, unstable reliance or to pathological naïveté, if the critiques of the cognitive trust theories are taken into account.

5. Final remarks and future directions

What are we to do then, if we cannot use incentives or nudges to 'gently' compel (manipulate) our respondents into responding? This is my major question for the discussion on the workshop. To give a few fundamental aspects, let me set the basics. Instead of counting on ill-assumed learnt, reciprocal trust-mechanisms, our designs (incentive, communication as well as general survey designs) should be based on the 'built-in', affirmative trust concept. In line with the aforementioned theoretical bases, distrust is a product of learning processes rather than trust, but it cannot entirely extinguish our trusting potential. It can, of course, keep trust in latency, as it were, therefore survey incentive and communication practices should be shifted from the manipulative, and thus mistaken 'trust-triggering / -provoking' designs to fight this learnt distrust. Engendering the feeling of irrelevance of distrust regarding the response situation may be one possible way to do that. Demonstration of *actual* trust along with it empowers the respondent, leaves their autonomy unharmed, and the situation remains unobtrusive, even trust-assuming. Instead of a forced out reciprocity, respondents my relax into the basic human trusting attitude, affirmed by the trust shown towards them by the survey institution. However, there is a catch: we cannot succeed if we do this with the purpose of gaining trust, for then it instantly turns into manipulation. Trust should be *truly* unconditional, or at least not conditional upon anything external. The basic distrust survey institutions show towards their respondents through the use of incentives in order to gain cooperation has to be dealt with first, and then they can take the next steps towards a use of incentives not to 'trigger trust', but to tear down learnt distrust. A properly tailored, and above all: *honest* leverage–saliency design (Groves et al. 2000) may serve this purpose well, but it can only provide the framework. The content are defined by the attitude *and* actions of the survey institute throughout the entire lifetime of a survey, from the earliest design phase through data collection to the processing, dissemination, and use of the data and the statistical products made of them.

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