

What about incentives? A Swiss perspective

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Paper for the nonresponse workshop, Ottawa, September 2012
First draft, do not quote

Introduction

At first glance, incentives are today well known in their effects and there is not so many reasons to come back and look closely to this field. However, at least considering handbooks and manuals, all the details are not precised and some questions are still open to discussion, even more when considering face to face surveys rather than mail or internet. Furthermore, four other reasons, at least, justify in our opinion to give more attention to the incentives.

1. Is there national or cultural variations? And in case of, which are the consequences in a comparative designs? In other words, to have the same incentives can mean different consequences according the context (Survey Research Center 2010).¹ For example also, a study comparing the strategy in the ISSP countries show that the countries with the lower response rate was the one using more incentives (T. W. Smith 2007)
2. How far the practices are varying according, among other, the public/private status of the organizer of the survey and the impact of reactions to the incentives schemes? For example, as recalled by Dillman (Dillman, Smyth, et Leah 2009) p. 437, government agencies are sometimes reluctant to use incentives.
3. More complex designs: with panel studies or mixed mode strategies, the choices and impact of incentives can be complicated as one decision at one step has consequences on the other ones. This is perhaps the result of more attention devoted to total design methods and the interaction between the different elements of a survey.
4. And finally incentives are to be thought among the reasons for the respondents to accept such a survey solicitation. That means that we need to develop theories in this direction² but also to think more on the place of the surveys in our societies and their importance for the potential respondents.

We will try to discuss all that in the light of Swiss experiences, mainly around ESS and ISSP in Switzerland but let begin with the recommendation of the litterature.

1 But there is no entry on this in the index of Survey Methods in Multinational, Multiregional and Multicultural Contexts (Harkness et al. 2010).

2 See for example (Singer 2011) but this must not exclude thinking on social values and “climate”.

Recommendation from handbooks and manuals

The literature about incentives is very rich. However, in order to see the actual debate, particularly seen from the perspective of a beginner, we can have a look to manuals and handbooks.

1. The Survey Research Handbook (Alreck et Settle 2003) has no entry in the index about incentives. It is the same in the Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research (Donsbach et Traugott 2007) : neither dedicated chapter, neither entry in the index.
2. The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods (Alasuutari, Bickman, et Brannen 2008) (p. 105 et sq.) speaks about incentives in a chapter about ethics, insisting more about fairness than efficacy. This is the same line in the Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement (Miller et Salkind 2002) where we have mainly a recall of the ethical guidelines and (p. 307) a very short recall of the main results, referring mostly to mail surveys.
3. In Survey Methodology (Groves et al. 2011) Groves et al. mention that offering incentives can reduce cost. Most of the discussion about incentives is nevertheless at the end of the book, with questions of ethic and fairness. This last part was an addition in the second edition, by comparison to the first one (Groves et al. 2004).
4. The International Handbook of Survey Methodology (Leeuw, Dillman, et Hox 2007) has no dedicated chapter but 16 pages referring to incentives in the index. The main argument is in line with the “cooperation model” and the references are more oriented to mail and internet surveys rather than face to face. The details are not discussed in this handbook, except perhaps the problematic side of large monetary incentives (p. 88).
5. The Sage Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods (Rog et Bickman 2008) has no dedicated chapter neither but three pages in the context of mail survey, insisting on the value of prepaid monetary incentives and mentioning that the efficacy is not fully linked to the value.
6. In the Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods (Fielding, Lee, et Blank 2008), 11 pages contain the word “incentive”. The chapter of Vehovar and Manfreda discuss mostly the question in a perspective of cost-efficacy of internet surveys. Of course the discussion is here limited to this mode of survey.
7. The Handbook of Survey Research (Marsden et Wright 2010) has no dedicated chapter but 15 entries in the index. In the introduction, they insist on the use of clever incentive scheme to be developed. They discuss also (p. 73) the idea to link the incentive to the income of the people. If there is a very good discussion about the complexity of the issue by Dixon (p. 615), most of the other references to incentives are in the context of mail and internet surveys.
8. The Hanbook of Nonresponse in Household Surveys (Bethlehem, Cobben, et Schouten 2011) has a paragraph on incentives, rather general but defending the idea of the link between incentives and survey quality.
9. In the Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods (Lavrakas 2008) we have a full entry, doing an overview of the main result of the literature, even if it is more articles from the nineties than more recent ones. Once again, the link between incentives and survey quality is underlined.
10. One of the most comprehensive treatment is perhaps in the Internet, Mail and Mixed-mode Surveys (Dillman et al. 2009) but of course more in the context of mail or internet surveys!

11. Finally we have to mention the complete chapter for longitudinal surveys (Lynn 2009) which have also a good state of the art of cross-sectional surveys.

In order to have a more precise picture, the interested researcher has probably to go to the specialised literature, to begin with the chapter of Eleanor Singer in the Survey Nonresponse book (Singer 2002), where there is also a careful discussion of intended effect as well as unintended ones.³

In summary, there is a general agreement that incentives are most often useful and beneficial for the quality of data. Most of the authors agree also that the incentive do not represent a payment but are included in a social exchange: this explain also why, in most cases, high value incentive are discouraged. Very often also, the idea of adaptation of incentive to respondents is mentioned but practical details on how to implement this is missing. The growth of web surveys has of course renewed the interest for the question of incentives but it is important to underline that not all modes have received the same attention. In particular, there is far less discussion for the case of face to face surveys and even less these last years. In the same line, the issue of cultural context, complexity and integration into the survey design is still largely unexplored.

In this communication, we will therefore come back to the Swiss case of face to face surveys and discuss if we can define an optimal strategy in such a situation, based on 10 years of face to face surveys and experiments.

Face to face surveys in Switzerland

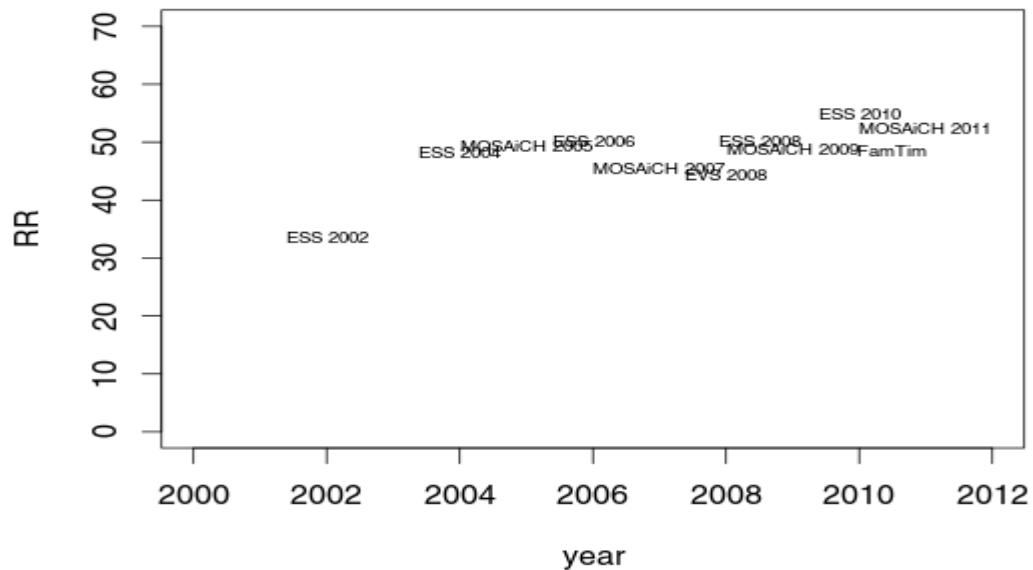
After the first ESS in Switzerland, which obtained a rather low response rate (around 35%) we decided to put in place, after an experiment of the effect of incentives in a particular case (Schoebi et al. 2004) , a design with important incentives:

1. 30.- Sfr. (approximatively 25 Euros based on the fact that the “minimal” wage is around 20.- Sfr. by hour in Switzerland). This does not mean that we were convinced by a logic of economic payment rather than the one of social exchange.
2. Promised because the sample frame was household and not individual based and it seemed too complicated to give unconditional cash without knowing the beneficiary.
3. But incentives presented “as prepaid as possible”: the advanced letter mentioned that the only reason not to give the incentive was the choice offered between cash, charitable payment or gift.

This solution worked relatively well, giving a regular 50% of response rate.

3 But we can also mention resources available on internet as, for example (accessed 10.8.2012) the slide of a PAPOR short course given by P. Lavrakas in December 2009: http://www.papor.org/files/2009/Presentations/Lavrakas_SurveyIncentives.pdf

Swiss Response rates



The advantage of such a strategy is of course to let the people to choose between incentives. Even if the majority choose cash, there was some variations between the proposed incentives: more than 50% choose cash, 25% some form of gift to charity and a little bit more than 10% some voucher, more for cinema than flowers. If we can show that there is a link between the incentive chosen and the characteristics of the respondents, it is of course much more difficult to know if the design of the incentives had changed the structure of the respondents.



Do these results mean that we have found an ideal solution and we do not need any changes? Even when we know that we have from 2010 access to an individual frame rather than an household based one? Some experiences, varying the amount as well as the promised/prepaid character, can help us to go a little bit further.

Variations on the value: 20.- or 30.- Sfr., promised.

In the spring 2007, we realised a CATI version of the ESS in the framework of an experimentation. Three conditions was foreseen: A: 60 minutes, B: 45 minutes and C 30 minutes (with the possibility to continue for another 30 minutes in addition). These 3 groups where each divide in 2 conditions, with respectively 20.- and 30.- Sfr. incentives.

	20.- Sfr. Incentive	30.- Sfr. Incentive
A 60 minutes	34.7% (75/215)	37.6% (80/214)
B 45 minutes	33.6% (36/107)	44.4% (48/108)
C 30 minutes	44.4% (48/108)	53.3% (57/107)

The response rate is of course function of the length, with a clear difference between C, half an hour, and more. The difference between 45 and 60 minutes is less obvious.

But, in all cases, the response rate is higher with the 30.- Swiss francs incentive. This could mean that promised incentives perhaps have to be important in order to become "real" and therefore efficient, even more in the context of Switzerland with a high living standard and a task relatively long. In any case, this first result seems to justify the choices made in most of these surveys since 2004.

Variation between promised or prepaid

As we have, since 2010, access to the register of the Swiss Statistical Office for sampling, the basis is no more the the household but the individual. Consequently, it appears to be less problematic to use unconditional prepaid incentives.⁴

	Unconditional (20% of addresses)	Prepaid (80% of addresses)	Conditional, Promised (80% of addresses)
Response rate ⁵	58%		51.6%

The consequences of the incentive scheme is complex. For example, we can mention that the success of a refusal conversion is much lower for the people that have received an un-

⁴ NB To mentions somewhere that this is sometime seen as strong: for example around 15% send the money back in the case of the NR surveys.

⁵ The response rate is the one mentioned in the technical report of the field institute. It can differ a little bit of the one used by the ESS but the figures are coherent in this text.

conditional incentive (15 vs 27%).⁶ This could be considered when discussing the general cost-benefit feature of such a design.

Variations on the value: 10 or 20 Sfr, prepaid

In another survey of general population in Switzerland, mixing calendar data and information about personal networks for two cohorts, individual sample produced by the Swiss Statistical Office, we decided to use cash prepaid incentive, 10 Sfr for half of the sample, 20 Sfr for the other half.

	10 Sfr. (50% of the addresses)	20 Sfr. (50% of the addresses)
Response rate	49.7%	47.7%

In this case, it is interesting to observe that there seem to be no real differences between the two conditions in terms of response rate. But some minor points are also worth mentioning. For example, in 95 cases, incentives were sent back, a little bit less than 6% of the 1652 addresses used: 1 was an acceptance and 94 were refusals but on these 94, 60 had received a 20.- Sfr incentive and only 34 a 10.- Sfr one. In other words, the return of incentive is more often the case if the incentive is bigger.

A solution for the next surveys?

Following these results, we can probably argue in the following direction: due to the fact that prepaid are effectively more efficient than promised and that, in such a case, there is no differences in response rate between 10 Sfr.- and more, the solution of 10 Sfr. prepaid is the best by looking to a cost-benefit perspective and a strong emphasis on response rate. However, independently of an eventual selection linked to the design used, we have to mention two points:

1. Sometimes, we have complemented the main survey with a non-respondent survey based on a 2 pages questionnaire send to every non-respondent (non contact and refusal). Given with an unconditional prepaid incentive of 10.- Sfr., it was possible by this to have information on more than half of the non-respondents. It is probably not so easy to use an unconditional prepaid incentive **once more** if we have already used such a strategy for the main survey.
2. If prepaid unconditional incentives are efficient, they are also seen as intrusive:⁷ many people react saying that they do not want to answer at any cost! Furthermore, for some people, to receive like this money from a survey realised by an University and founded by the Swiss National Science Foundation is seen as waste of public money and the Swiss NSF is sometime worried by the protestation coming about this.

These results show clearly that there is still some development that can be done in the discussion about incentives and, in our opinion, that we have to link more these discus-

⁶ MIS is also mentioning an “accelerator effect” at the time of the contact: many people contacting the interviewer by themselves.

⁷ See for example in this line (Singer et Bossarte 2006)

sions to the general design of the survey and the local conditions in which the survey is realised. This is one more challenge for a comparative perspective.

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