Survey Incentives and Recent Advances in Trust Theory

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

# Introduction

As the late Eleanor Singer [1] warned us regarding the use of 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.’ Then she lamented on the generally declining survey response rates and the weakening willingness to cooperate, surmising that resistance to surveys should be related to the long-term effects of incentives used in a careless manner. These comments are by all means true – although the use of survey incentives has at least *some* theory behind it, but far from being up to date. Regarding the concept of their central notion: trust, they were already obsolete at the outset. Therefore, Singer’s calling for more theory gets ever more pressing. This study shows the background and consequences of the outdated understanding of trust – a factor of ultimate importance in survey response – in survey nonresponse literature.

# Methods

It is commonplace knowledge that incomplete or incorrect understanding of a phenomenon results in (1) operationalisation issues, (2) invalid data, (3) ineffective practice, and (4) unintended (side-)effects. Appropriate conceptualisation must be the cornerstone of all statistical work. Unlike many other types of error, the lack of proper conceptual foundations cannot be controlled for in later phases. Value of all statistics is constrained by the quality and depth of underlying conceptual understanding. It applies to efforts unto nonresponse reduction as well. Due to the conceptual focus,[[1]](#footnote-1) the present study applies a critical analysis of the relevant literature and pure systematic theoretical argumentation.

# Results

Trust is an elusive concept surrounded by a permanent ‘conceptual confusion’ [2] that theorists of survey incentive use seem to ignore. Some [7] explicitly, others [8] implicitly follow Dillman [4][5][6] in using Blau’s [3] Social Exchange Theory (SET) trust concept: ‘the expectation that in the long run the rewards of doing something will outweigh the costs’ [5]. There are but two limitations of these accounts. First, they seem to be unaware that Luhmann’s [9] ground-breaking work on trust rendered Blau’s [3] concept obsolete by clarifying: calculation and self-interest cannot be the bases for genuine trust. Luhmann’s theory in German was already out for more than a decade when Dillman published his seminal book [4]. Second, neither Dillman, nor his followers have been reflecting at all on the advances in trust theory in the decades passed. The outdated trust concept of the ‘quite simple’ [6] SET is still central in their later works. Dillman’s [4][5][6] three critical elements of rejective or cooperative decision are costs, rewards, and trust. However, he seems to misunderstand the phenomenon of trust. His definition was fairly up to date in 1979, but such calculative approaches have since been proven to be mistaken. The SET is unable to properly define trust, along with the entire branch of ‘cognitive’ trust theories [10]. Trust bound to risk-taking in social exchange relationships and defined as it would emerge gradually out of pure self-interest in the course of recurring cost–benefit calculations [3] is only different from a by-product of mere economic exchange in that prices and rewards cannot be exactly measured in social exchange relations.

A quick glance at the two major branches of trust theories has to be given here. The better-known is the cognitive approach, incorporating many schools with some common basic characteristics. They assume trust 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 [11]. The critique of the simplest views treating trust as a rational decision, an assessment of costs and gains [12][13][14] lead to an even greater misunderstanding of the phenomenon: the ‘encapsulated interest’ theory [15], which mistakes trust for a cunning, shrewd, manipulative, selfish relationship of interest [16]. Others [9][17][18][19] either adopt a stance like the SET [17], or develop a notion in which trust would ‘bracket’ risks, and trustors take a ‘leap of faith’, acting *as if* risks were not present [18][14][19]. The rationalising, interest-based, calculative concepts of trust (SET included) mistake trust for reliance or manipulation [20][21][16], and the others’ unexplained black box of the ‘leap of faith’ describes an *imitation* of trust: naïveté [10]. The non-cognitive concepts [20][21][22][16] take a different approach. They assume an optimistic expectation of benevolence, goodwill in trusting, and some of them an affective warmth as well. It is not a purposive relationship, and may not even require an object, formalised as ‘*A* trusts’[11]. Lagerspetz [16] argues for the omnipresence of trust: ‘a pattern in the weave of life’, which Luhmann [9] assumed as well: without trust, one could not even get out of their bed in the morning due to all-encompassing anxieties. Non-cognitive trust concepts agree that trust is an irreflective, unconscious disposition, which reaches awareness only when already damaged or lost. It is, however, highly robust and resistant to conflicting information, for it acts as an interpretive filter: it distorts our interpretation of experiences on the trusted [22][16]. Using Wittgenstein’s [23] note: ‘Doubt comes *after* belief’, Lagerspetz [16] shows that trusting is a prerequisite for learning, therefore trust cannot be a learnt capacity. Rather, ability to trust is an innate, built-in faculty, which hypothesis is supported by recent life sciences research [10]. Although the non-cognitive concepts are more convincing, they are unable to explain conscious trust, and do not differentiate naïveté and trust.

This raises the need for a novel, integrative trust concept, built on the bases of the dynamic relationship between trust and existential anxiety and Tillich’s [24] concept of the *courage to be* [18]*.* The PhD dissertation of the Author (submitted for defence) outlines such a novel definition, defining trust as a basically non-cognitive phenomenon in the presence but in spite of the threat of the trusted’s possible betrayal. It is an ‘emanation’ of our own courage towards the world, and the other (the trusted) in it, manifested in a general expec-tation of good. The self-affirmation of courage projected outwards affirms the trusted and supports them in their own existential struggles, enabling (but not forcing) the appearance of their trusting towards us. Emotions can strengthen or weaken, and reliance can support trust, but neither constitutes it. This theory also explains the cumulative nature of trust [12].

# Conclusions

To sum up, the SET trust approach of the survey (non)response literature is a conceptual dead end. It suggests that incentives be used to evoke the norm of reciprocity and trigger trust and willingness to respond in prospective respondents [4][5][8][7][6]. To this end, unconditional, prepaid incentives are recommended as ‘tokens’ of trust and respect [4][5][6]. There are serious limitations to this practice. First, it seems to be suspiciously manipulative: we act *as if* we trusted the respondent in order to gain their trust, so as to get their response. Instead, it is a manifestation of *distrust* or the lack of trust in sample members’ responsiveness. The purpose of incentives is to force out reciprocal attitude and cooperation. Therefore, they are not at all symbols of respect, or of trust. Furthermore, it may well lead to a ‘vicious circle’ [17], promoting distrust instead of trust. Although empirical results generally support this practice, there are evidences that incentives can also *decrease* response rates [25]. Such incentive designs can trigger reactance: perceiving the incentive as a threat to the freedom of choice [26]. Perception of manipulative intent can lead to alienation, and the feeling of exploitation as well, resulting in subjective isolation [7] from the manipulator: the survey institution. This applies to behavioural economics practices as well. Subliminal ‘nudges’ are to reduce subjective relevance of objective alternatives, thus harming the prospective respondents’ freedom of choice.

Elaborating on Singer’s [1] suspicion, this decades-long, manipulative incentivisation may well be a significant factor in the general downward trend in survey response. Therefore, instead of counting on ill-assumed social exchange trust-mechanisms, our designs should be based on the ‘built-in’, affirmative trust concept. As distrust can keep trust in latency, survey (incentive) practices should be shifted from manipulative ‘trust-triggering’ designs to fight learnt distrust. Incentives might still have a role in making distrust irrelevant in the response situation. Showing actual trust along with it empowers the respondent, leaves their autonomy unharmed. Thus, instead of forced out ‘reciprocity’, respondents may *relax* into the basic human trusting attitude, affirmed by the trust shown towards them. But there is a catch: if the purpose is to gain trust, it instantly turns into manipulation. Trust must be *truly unconditional*. The distrust survey institutions demonstrate towards respondents through the use of incentives in order to gain cooperation has to be dealt with first. Then come the next steps towards a use of incentives to tear down learnt distrust. A properly tailored and *honest* leverage–saliency design [27] may serve this purpose well, but only as a framework. The contents are 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, the dissemination, and the use of the data and statistics produced thereof.

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1. The structure and format of the template does not fit to the conceptual nature of the study. Following the warning in the instructions, this abstract ‘respects the overall structure’ of the template, although it may be one of the few exceptions that would be more ‘compact and intelligible’ in a less constraining format. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)