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Incentivizing P/CVE Research, Evaluation, & Program Participants

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[a]The Science of P/CVE

Abstract

Incentivizing research or evaluation participants can be crucial toward reducing data collection timeframes and obtaining sufficient sample sizes (i.e., to reduce the risks of obtaining null or misleading findings). Consequently, participant incentives should not be underestimated with respect to their importance both for obtaining quality P/CVE research or evaluation data, and for improving subsequent managerial/programmatic decision-making: no small matter given the high-stakes fields of P/CVE. This research methods brief discusses participant incentives (including potential pitfalls and means to avoid them), in the context of P/CVE program design and evaluation, including: their relevance to statistical power and reducing sample bias, budgeting for incentives, alternatives to monetary incentives, and considerations for planning to upscale a given P/CVE program.

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Incentivizing P/CVE Research, Evaluation, & Program Participants

Is your P/CVE research or evaluation project intending to obtain insufficient sample sizes, encounter protracted data collection timeframes, and report null or misleading findings? If so, a common and effective way to achieve those, through one simple method, is to neglect to incentivize your research or evaluation participants. Sarcasm aside, note that the last of those objectives—obtaining null or misleading findings—is contrary to the very purpose of research and evaluation. Therefore, participant incentives should not be underestimated with respect to their importance, both for obtaining quality P/CVE research and evaluation data, and for improving subsequent managerial/programmatic decision-making: no small matter given the high-stakes fields of P/CVE.

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Statistical Power and Reducing Sample Bias

Sufficient incentives must be offered to research or evaluation participants (hereafter, "research participants") for at least two methodological reasons. First, incentives of some kind (though not necessarily tangible) are important toward recruiting samples of sufficient size to afford the intended analyses with desirable levels of confidence. Even if a project is able to recruit enough participants to perform a given set of analyses, more research participants equate to greater ability both to detect smaller (or more obfuscated) effects, and to engage in analysis of a greater number of interactions (e.g., comparisons between subgroups). The higher the statistical power of a given analysis, the lower the probability of making a Type II (false negative) error.[2] In other words, the greater the statistical power, the greater the probability of detecting genuine effects. Therefore, even if one's research or evaluations have managed without special attention to incentivizing research participants, would it not always be better to have greater confidence in one's findings? Do not consumers of your research deserve that?

Second, if incentives are insufficient, one unnecessarily risks biasing the sample. For example, without ample incentives a sample can become biased with respect to participants' socioeconomic status (Groves et al., 2009). For example, the sample can become biased toward those who have the luxury of free time to participate (i.e., who can afford to participate for little-to-no compensation), or those who are desperate enough to participate.

Alternatively, the sample can become biased toward those who happen to be inherently interested in the project's research or evaluation topic. Evidence for this has been found in survey research that manipulated whether or not a monetary incentive was offered to participants, to assess its effect on obtained sample characteristics (Groves et al., 2000). The survey was about community members' attitudes toward physician-assisted suicide: a topic currently debated within the community. Among the survey's questions, participants were asked whether they were member of a civic organization, or had attended political events. Note that one would not expect these questions—which are simple yes/no, "matter of fact" demographic questions—to vary according to whether or not survey incentives were provided. However, in the condition that provided an incentive, approximately 70% of

[2] By definition, statistical power is inversely related to the probability of Type II (false negative) error.

respondents reported that they had participated in such an activity. In the condition without an incentive, approximately 80% reported such activity.

In short, levels of community engagement were *overestimated* in the design *without* the incentive (Groves et al., 2000). Without an incentive, the authors explained, the sample was biased in favor of those who were intrinsically interested in the survey's currently-debated topic, and—hence—who also were more likely to have been civically active in general. In other words, with an incentive, it is likely that a sample better reflects the general population (i.e., who might not be especially interested in a given research or evaluation topic; Groves et al., 2009). Conversely, without extrinsic (e.g., monetary) incentives there is a greater tendency for self-selection to occur, which can lead to a nonrepresentative sample (Berlin et al., 1992).

It Is Easier Than Ever

Compensating research participants is not difficult in the 21st century. For example, full-featured online survey platforms (e.g., Qualtrics) can automatically send payments to survey respondents, in the form of electronic gift-cards. Furthermore, safeguards are embedded into the backend of full-featured survey platforms so that only one payment is made per survey completion. For convenience, an entire sample of respondents can be compensated by a single credit card transaction to fund the survey. Additionally, some survey platforms allow participants to be compensated through alternative types of monetary compensation: for example, mobile phone credit (see Marrone et al., 2020).

Budget for Them

Never have the author and colleagues been denied line-item funding to incentivize P/CVE-related research participants: not once. Consider the following thought experiment; imagine a reputable funding agency refusing a reasonable line-item cost for participant incentives: stating, in essence, "No, we think it would be better to jeopardize the quality of the data, to run the risk of obtaining null or misleading findings on key outcomes of interest, and we would like to wait an unnecessarily long time to receive those compromised results." If you

have encountered pushback regarding incentives for research participants, shame on the funder, and/or shame on you for not doing a better job of making the case a) for the need of participant incentives, and/or b) how you will responsibly administrate that compensation. To incentivize research participants, budget for them in the project's proposal, justify the need for them, and explain how you will securely steward them.

It is not expensive. Since 2013, the author and colleagues have budgeted and spent amply on P/CVE-related research participants: for example, paying $2 per online "M-Turk" respondent (a substantial sum, by M-Turk standards), $25 per traditional survey respondent, $50 per focus group participant, and $75 per executive-level focus group participant (e.g., leadership from cooperating NGOs). In absolute sums, to some, our participant cost line items might appear somewhat expensive: ranging from $9,613 - $19,600 USD. However, those sums accounted for a scant 1.78% - 3.73% of their respective budgets (Williams et al., 2016, 2018).

In contrast, null results are very expensive: a waste of 100% of the costs required to produce them. Furthermore, it is unknowable how expensive (perhaps, damaging) misleading findings might be, due to flawed samples, in the high-stakes fields of P/CVE. Would you gamble a project's response rates, or risk unnecessarily biasing the samples—would you gamble the quality of the research that the funder is paying for—by trying to skimp on 1.78% – 3.73% of a project's overall budget?

It can pay for itself. Berlin et al. (1992) discovered that, in cases where data collection staff account for a relatively large proportion of data collection costs, offering participant incentives can reduce total data collection costs. Three randomized conditions promised no incentive, a $20 incentive, or a $35 incentive upon completion of a pretest assessment (for the National Survey of Adult Literacy). In-person interviewers interacted with respondents, first, by asking a set of background questions, then providing respondents with self-assessment materials. The experiment utilized an area probability sample of more than 300 census block segments, covering approximately 2,800 housing units: each segment randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. As shown in Table 1, not surprisingly, the $35 incentive achieved the highest response rates, and the no-incentive condition achieved the lowest. However, the important finding was the cost-effectiveness of the incentives. As displayed in Table 1, the $20 incentive resulted in lower total costs, compared to the no-

incentive condition: requiring fewer interviewer hours per case, owing to fewer callbacks (return visits) of interviewers. This finding highlights the counterintuitive finding that providing monetary incentives to research participants can make a data collection more economical (Groves et al., 2009).

Table 1

Response Rates and Data Collection Costs Per Level of Participant Incentive (Berlin et al., 1992)

	Incentive Level		
	None	$20	$35
Response rate	64%	71%	74%
Average interviewer cost per completed assessment	$130.42	$98.97	94.24
Incentive costs	$0	$20	$35
Total costs	$130.42	$118.97	$129.24

Think Tanks Are Not Exempt

It is not uncommon for think tanks to engage in research by attempting to survey or interview subject matter experts. All too often, such requests to participate do not offer participant compensation. The assumption seems to be that subject matter experts will volunteer their time for "the good of the cause." Given that those making such requests—the personnel at said think tanks—are drawing paychecks while conducting such research, the hypocrisy of asking other professionals to work for free is not only potentially offensive to would-be participants, but embarrassing for the think tank: demonstrating their lack of research acumen, or managerial foresight, if not common courtesy. The point is not that subject matter experts should be paid exorbitantly (i.e., commensurate with their advanced qualifications); the point is that they should be compensated for the same reasons that any research participants should be incentivized: to avoid biasing samples due to selection bias. Although more than six years old, survey research has shown that, for studies with physicians as participants, incentives

ranging from $25 to $100 have been found to be effective (see Dillman et al., 2014). This comports with P/CVE research of the author and colleagues that, as mentioned, has successfully recruited executive-level participants by offering $75 (in the form of Amazon gift cards) for participation in one-hour focus groups (Williams et al., 2016).

Alternative (or Additional) Incentives

Although offering extrinsic incentives for participation tends to increase participation rates (see Singer & Kulka, 2002), and cash incentives tend to be more effective than in-kind incentives of similar value (ibid.), such incentives are not always permissible. For example, some people are prohibited from accepting monetary compensation due to conditions of their employment (e.g., police officers). In other contexts (e.g., prisons) monetary incentives are considered unduly coercive toward prompting participation, because—in such contexts—money is so scare as to be inordinately attractive to prospective participants, thereby compromising their freewill (Health and Human Services, 2018). In such cases, nonmonetary, or intangible incentives should be offered. Recall that individuals who are interested in a given topic are more likely to participate in research about that topic (Groves et al., 2000). Therefore, an intangible way to make research participation more potentially rewarding for research participants is to make the project's topic more salient to prospective participants: for example, by sending advance information to prospective participants regarding the aims of the project (see Dillman et al., 2014; see Groves et al., 2009; Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978). Although this technique could potentially bias a sample toward those who are relatively interested in the given topic, the intent here is to make the project appealing to a broader, more diverse sample of participants than those who already possess sufficient knowledge and/or inherent interest in the topic: who, hence, may be predisposed to participate in the project. Other means of offering non-monetary incentives are to appeal to participants' sense of purpose (e.g., emphasizing the importance of their unique viewpoint: that their views are valuable, that they matter), and/or to personalize the invitation to participants by addressing them by name (see Cook et al., 2000; see Dillman et al., 2014).

Likewise, another intangible incentive that can be offered to prospective research participants is the intrinsic reward that comes from contributing to something that one

believes is important (see Burke et al., 2010; Dillman et al., 2014). There are several ways to improve that sense of intrinsic reward for prospective research participants. For example, as mentioned, with respect to survey research, informational materials can be sent to prospective participants in advance of sending the survey itself (Dillman et al., 2014). Likewise, another intangible incentive could be that participants will be sent the results of the research or evaluation, or that they will be provided with a summary of their own responses (ibid.). Additionally, surveys can be accompanied by cover letters on official letterhead, and/or that feature official logos: design features intended to enhance the project's credibility (ibid.). Furthermore, the research or evaluation project can be framed as a way for participants to have their voices heard (ibid.).

Planning to Scale Up a P/CVE Program

Research participants are not the only participants to consider with respect to P/CVE; participants in P/CVE programs, per se, also should be sufficiently incentivized to participate in the program (hereafter "program participants"). It is not uncommon to speak of P/CVE program participants as "beneficiaries" (Boucek, 2009; DuBois & Alem, 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2015). Implicit in such language is that participation in P/CVE programs is intended to be inherently rewarding to program participants. Therefore, perhaps, no additional incentives (i.e., beyond the benefits inherently offered through participation in a given P/CVE program, e.g., psycho-social support, skills development, etc.) may need to be offered to P/CVE participants to prompt, or maintain, their participation. In planning for the development of a P/CVE program—specifically, planning to scale up a program—it is important to consider whether/how those incentives can be offered at a larger scale.

Should a P/CVE Program be Scaled Up? From a capitalist perspective, the answer might seem obvious; of course, we would want to grow the enterprise. From a humanitarian perspective, the answer also might seem to be a foregone conclusion; of course, we would want to help more people. However, before committing to plans to scale up a P/CVE program, consider the intangible incentives that participants might derive from a program, by virtue of its relatively small scale. For example, at a small scale, participants might enjoy frequent or close one-on-one, in-person contact with frontline practitioners of the program

and/or fellow participants. For example, consider P/CVE mentorship programs, whereby former members of extremist groups have been known to travel, on short notice—even at their own expense—to begin mentoring individuals who are considering separating from extremist groups (Picciolini, 2017). If such a program was scaled up by, for example, conducting all communications by phone or videoconference, it is not hard to imagine that participants' sense of the radical amount of care demonstrated by in-person mentors—who might have gone to great lengths, at great personal expense, to meet in-person with participants—could be diminished. In short, pay close attention to participant incentives, and bear in mind that such incentives might be partially (or wholly) intangible. If a P/CVE program cannot replicate such incentives, or sufficiently compensate for them at a larger scale, then scaling up a program might be counterproductive.

Conclusion

Those who are engaged in writing a given research or evaluation proposal, it is incumbent upon you to incorporate participant incentives into the proposal. Whether you are a researcher, evaluator, or member of an NGO planning to engage in P/CVE research or evaluations, extrinsically incentivizing participants begins by budgeting for them in a project's proposal.

If you are a member of a funding organization that commission P/CVE-related research or evaluations, expect budget line-item for participant incentives in the project proposals that your organization receives. Ideally, participant incentives should be explicitly required, or otherwise encouraged, in requests for proposals. Indeed, funding organizations should be suspicious of any research budgets that do not include line items for participant incentives; it might signal that the proposal is otherwise lacking in methodological rigor or managerial foresight.

As mentioned, the high stakes associated with P/CVE warrant data of the highest quality that we, as a field of funders, researchers, evaluators, and practitioners can collect. Incentivizing research participants is an inexpensive, easy to implement, immediate, cost-effective means of improving both the quality of our data and the subsequent quality of research and evaluations that may be used to inform decision-making related to P/CVE.

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