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The effect of incentives on response quality in surveys

Electronic dissertation

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Summary:

In Social Sciences standardized surveys are an approved and frequently used elicitation method to get insight into attitudes of population groups. In the last decades however there has been a notable decline in the willingness to participate in a survey. To get higher response rates it is recommended to use monetary incentives, whereas these could be handed out at the beginning or at the end of a survey.

It is not clear whether and how an incentive has an impact on response quality during the survey.

For most studies there is no clear definition of response quality and indicators are therefore selected to test the correlations without deducting theoretical reference. Furthermore in the field of study empirical secured theories are missing to explain the effect of incentives on response quality in surveys.

A theoretical validation seems to be of great importance since negative effects of incentives on response quality have been reported in recent studies (cf. Barge & Gehlbach (2012)).

The objective of this study is, based on theoretical concepts and using an incentive-experiment, to answer the question whether and how incentives systematically affect response quality.

For this purpose a definition of response quality out of the Total Survey Error Concept (cf. Biemer & Lyberg (2003); Weisberg (2005)), the Satisficing-Concept of Krosnick (1991) and the Mikrozensusgesetz (2005) was developed. Four facets of response quality have been worked out on which the following analysis was then based on.

Subsequently the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci & Ryan (1985)) and the hypothesis of reciprocity were introduced (Gouldner (1960)). Out of these theoretical approaches hypothesis were derived, which always postulated a positive effect of incentives on response quality.

In the next step the design of the study was described (= three experimental groups with different incentivations: 0 Euro, 5 Euro, 20 Euro; student sample) and the self-developed questionnaire was introduced to test the hypothesis.

The central conclusion of this study is that incentives have heterogeneous effects on the four facets of response quality. The extent of an incentive has an impact on intensity and direction of the effect.

Moreover an incentive of the amount of €5 has mostly positive effects on response quality whereas an incentive of the amount of €20 has mostly negative effects.

Furthermore negative effects on the four facets of response quality could be found in the group with no incentive. These negative effects can be explained by the definition of the situation. It is supposed that the respondents would like to help the scientists with their studies but because of misinterpretations of the aims and expectations of the scientist they have a tendency to an undesired response behaviour. Based on this explanation, the assumption is formed that with increased intrinsic motivation or rather reciprocity not the response quality is increasing but at most the wish of the respondents to increase response quality.