

# Survey Climate or the integration of a multilevel perspective in non-response studies?\*

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## 1 Introduction

Survey climate is a notion used now from more than 25 years and still being discussed and developed.<sup>1</sup> In order to continue the discussion, we have to consider 2 points:

- When discussing the reasons to answer, and to not answer, to a survey we have mainly theories insisting on the individual level. How far is it interesting to consider the respondents (and non-respondents) in a multilevel frame, going further than an inter-individual relation between interviewer and interviewee? And how far the concept of "Survey climate" is a step in this direction? And do we need an elaborated model of survey answer playing with different contextual levels?
- Many studies about the reasons to answer have been done... using surveys, that means being affected either by a non-response problem, either by the context of the enquiry. One of the question is also, *in fine*, the consequences of these choices as well as the alternatives in order to have a better knowledge of the process and impact of non-response.

But in a first step, let's go back to some theories about the response to a survey request.

## 2 Reasons to answer

In survey methodology, in the last century, at least two models have been put forward for explaining cooperation in surveys. Without developing too many details, we can mention at least 2 approaches that have had a great impact

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Geert Loosveldt & Dominique Joye, Defining and Assessing Survey Climate in Wolf et al., *The SAGE Handbook of Survey Methodology*, Sage, 2016

- In 1978, Dillman<sup>2</sup> developed the idea of "Social exchange" as the theoretical basis of the Total Design Method. Even if by some aspect referring to a rational discussion of costs and benefits of the decision to participate, the elements mentioned are before all "social" by nature, to begin by communication "appreciation" (p. 13).<sup>3</sup> In the same line, trust is mentioned as a central parameter (p. 16), as well as the legitimacy of the organisation asking for information. In other words, Dillman is given here some hints in order to escape from a pure interpersonal discussion and to consider surveys in a general sociological perspective.
- In 1998, Groves and Couper<sup>4</sup> developed a "conceptual framework for survey cooperation".<sup>5</sup> In short, they insist that the to be a non-respondent is not an intrinsic property but is also function of the context. In other words, there is a probability to answer for each sampled individual that can be modified according circumstances. They mention also that the history of the contacts has an importance and that the decision to participate is not only decided at one time but is the result of a long process.<sup>6</sup> In short, decision to answer is placed in a context defined by time and space and this is one the basis of the so-called "leverage theory" when considering it's different facets.

Some later works have discussed different theory that can explain the decision to cooperate. For example Stoop (2012) discusses the following categories: 1) The heuristic of social exchange, 2) Psychological concepts and 3) Tailoring and maintaining interaction, Leverage-Saliency and Benefit-Costs.<sup>7</sup> In the same volume, Alabum & Smith (2012) mentions as underlying theories 1) Social exchange, 2) Cognitive Dissonance, 3) Self Perception, 4) Commitment/Involvement, 5) Reciprocity and 6) Leverage-Saliency.<sup>8</sup> In the same line, the AAPOR report of 2014 on refusal mention the same models: 1) Leverage Saliency, 2) Economic Exchange, 3) Social Exchange and 4) Cognitive Dissonance. In all these developments the inter-individual dimension is more developed than the sociological level.

The question with these approaches, although very useful, is the difficulty to escape of a perspective insisting on the interactions between individuals: the social value of the exchange is not fully conceptualised at levels like norms of the group or more general social norms. The same lack of conceptualisation of the contextual level is probably true when Groves & Couper speak of the "Survey taking climate" as situated, in the figure at least, between the "economic conditions" and the "neighbourhood characteristics": economic conditions refers

<sup>2</sup>Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys, The total design Methods*, Wiley, 1978

<sup>3</sup>It could be interesting to discuss how far such a notion of "appreciation" could be linked to the idea of "Recognition" developed by people like Axel Honneth in *The struggle for Recognition*, MIT Press, 1995

<sup>4</sup>R.M. Groves & M. P. Couper, *Nonresponse in Household Interview Surveys*, Wiley, 1998

<sup>5</sup>Groves & Couper introduce the distinction between the left column, outside of survey methodologists control, and the right one, that can be influenced.

<sup>6</sup>This is one of the strong argument that justify the use of sequence analysis when considering the paradata (Pollien & Joye, *Patterns of Contact Attempts in Surveys*, in P. Blanchard, F.-. Bühlmann & J.A Gauthier, Springer, 2014

<sup>7</sup>I. Stoop, Unit Non-Response Due to Refusal, in L. Gideon, *Handbook of Survey Methodology for the Social Sciences*, Springer, 2012

<sup>8</sup>G. Albaum & S.M. Smith, Why people agree to Participate to Surveys in L. Gideon, *Handbook of Survey Methodology for the Social Sciences*, Springer, 2012

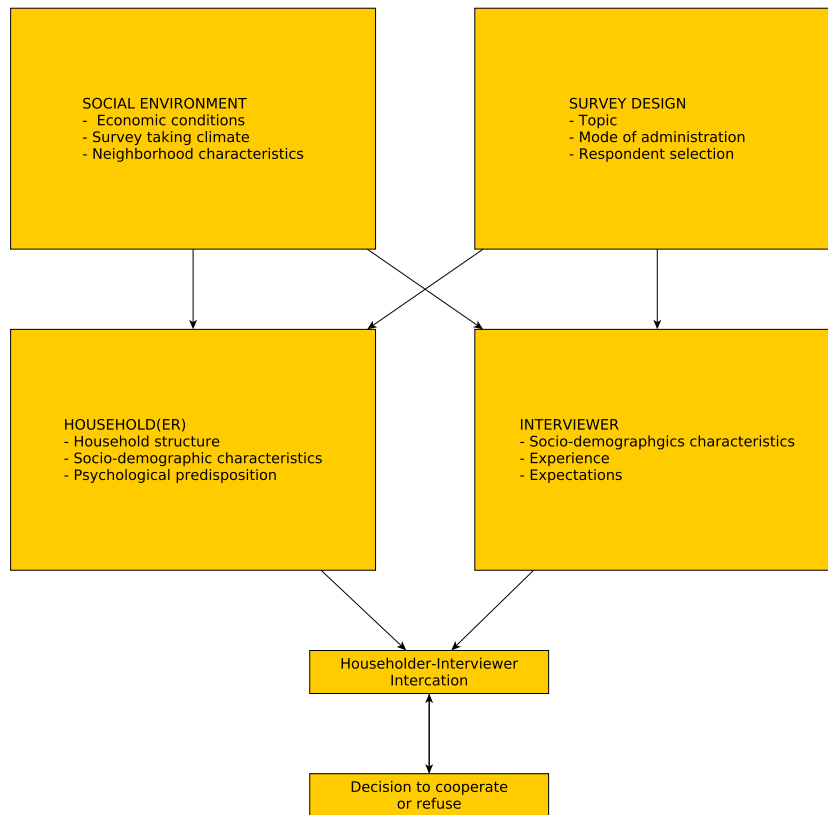


Figure 1: A conceptual framework for survey cooperation according Groves & Couper

probably to the country level when the neighbourhood is of course at a smaller level. Social environment is in fact presented as disconnected of the characteristics of the households even if they are probably deeply embedded. This has of course consequences when trying to integrate the explanatory power of socio-demographics characteristics presented as a long list of variables potentially influencing the output but not integrated in a more general frame.

We will come back in more details later but an important point in our perspective, when speaking of "Survey climate" or "Social exchange", is to introduce other contextual levels than only the interaction between individuals. We have tried to integrate this in the process of survey cooperation that we describe later.<sup>9</sup> This integration of the different dimensions and contextual levels of the survey climate is summarized in the next figure.

Such a model answers to different requirements discussed so far.

- The explicit distinction from the micro (individual characteristics or interaction between respondent and interviewer) to the macro level, the society

<sup>9</sup>By the way, the discussion by Groves & Couper in this figure refer mainly to the cooperation. In our opinion, the possibility to contact the respondent is also part of the process and has also to be considered. We will discuss this aspect later.

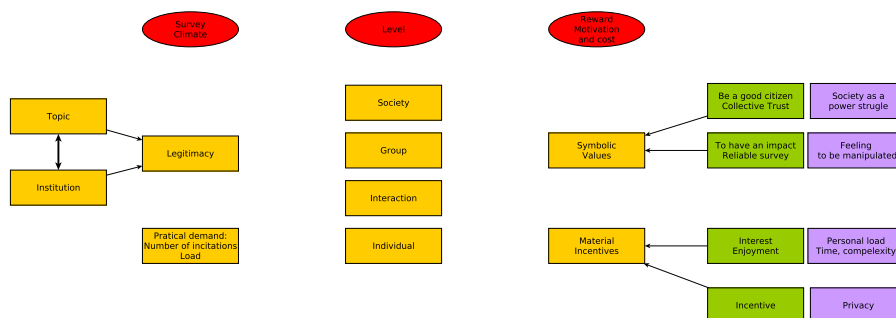


Figure 2: Social levels and answer, a first presentation

as a whole, going through a meso-level such the group or the neighbourhood.

- The distinction between the general load of surveys in a given country and the legitimacy of the survey, considered as well in term of institution than topic.<sup>10</sup>
- The reason to participate, or to not participate, that could be as well material or symbolic, positive (benefits, in green) or negative (costs, in purple in the figure).

It is also important to take into account a "power dimension": Statistics is not independent of the regulation of a society as done by a government. Authors like Desrosières for example have explicitly recall this, as well as the etymology of statistics as referring to the "State".<sup>11</sup> In the same line, a sociologist like Bourdieu has also discussed the probability to have an opinion and the legitimacy to express it according the social position.<sup>12</sup> In other words, a survey is not only the expression of the answers of equal citizens but has to be interpreted taking into account social hierarchies. This is one more argument to consider positive and negative side of the surveys, cost and benefits, for different social groups.

Some data from Switzerland will allow us to discuss the different facets of the Survey Climate.

### 3 Survey climate in Switzerland

In this section, we will not give final figures but mainly give some arguments about the importance of different aspects and a way to measure them.

<sup>10</sup>And their interaction of course: not all institutions have the same legitimacy to survey different topics.

<sup>11</sup>See for example A. Desrosières, *The Policy of Large Numbers*, Harvard University Press

<sup>12</sup>See in particular « L'opinion publique n'existe pas » par Pierre Bourdieu, Exposé fait à Noroît (Arras) en janvier 1972 et paru dans *Les temps modernes*, 318, janvier 1973, pp. 1292-1309. Reprinted in *Questions de sociologie*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984, pp. 222-235

### 3.1 Survey load

The survey load is difficult to measure as it would have needed information on surveys by mode as well as data on "false surveys" trying to sell something under the pretext of a survey. And to take my own example, at home, on the fixed line, most of the calls are now some forms of unwanted solicitation, even having ask to avoid such calls! We have nevertheless 2 figures that could give an estimate.

- According the organisation of Survey Institute in Switzerland, around 4 millions interviews are realised each year, that means half the figure of the total Swiss population.<sup>13</sup>
- According our surveys, in particular MOSAiCH 2009,<sup>14</sup> these figure seem roughly correct with more than 50% of our respondents mentioning to have been surveyed more than 3 times in the last 2 years.

### 3.2 Interest to participate

The measure of the interest of the survey is sometime very difficult to evaluate, also because many people cannot accept to say that a survey for which they have given time was really uninteresting and... a waste of time.. In this case, we have used a non-respondent survey for people with whom we have not had contact, had refused and had answered. For each of these groups, we have asked the value that the give to the surveys.

The result is very clear: among people who have refused, less than half agree with a positive appreciation of surveys while this is more than 3 on 4 for the respondents. in other words, the interest given to the surveys in general, and the topic in particular, is strongly correlated to the probability to answer.

### 3.3 Legitimacy

According a Swiss survey (MOSAiCH 2009), the hypothesis of variable acceptance according the sponsor and the topic is confirmed. However, it was in a survey organised by the University of Lausanne! Even if it was in a paper drop-off given at the end of the survey, this setting could have influenced the answers. By the way, this could also be linked to the mode. In this case, a paper survey, paper was the mode of choice while telephone obtained the lowest support. These results show clearly the importance of the legitimacy of the

A survey about... from...	Living conditions	Pol. behaviour and opinions	Public transport	Bio- technologies
University	54.5	45.8	57.8	40.4
National Statistical Office	41.4	40.0	52.4	35.9
Weekly Newspaper	12.7	13.4	18.8	12.8

Table 1: Acceptance according subject and sponsor(%)

<sup>13</sup>See [http://www.vsms-asms.ch/files/7313/7182/4848/vsms\\_JB\\_2013\\_p1-126.pdf](http://www.vsms-asms.ch/files/7313/7182/4848/vsms_JB_2013_p1-126.pdf), p. 11, viewed 11th of August 2016

<sup>14</sup>MOSAiCH is the support of the ISSP in Switzerland and is ditributed via the Nesstar server of FORS

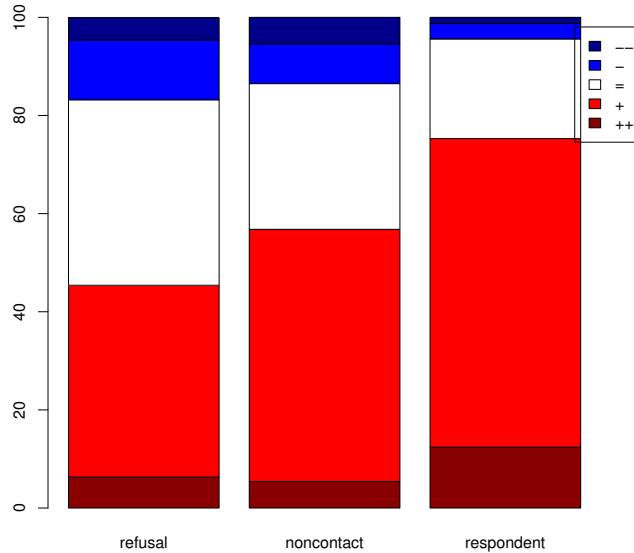


Figure 3: Interest for surveys

institutions sponsoring the survey. It is interesting to see that the difference in such an aspect is small between universities and national statistical offices, at least by comparison to the media.

### 3.4 Some items in order to measure survey climate?

This is important to consider when going back to the Survey climate. In their paper from 2008, Loosveldt & Storms<sup>15</sup> proposed 5 dimensions: value (V), cost for respondent (C), pleasure to participate (E), quality of representing the truth (R) and the potential of breaking privacy (P). 9 items taking back these dimensions have been taken into the MOSAiCH survey of 2009 and are enumerated in figure 4.

Which is more interesting than the frequencies is the underlying structure. An exploratory factor analysis distinguish first the positive aspects, the "Benefits" while the other one insists on the "Costs": privacy, waste of time and boring character. These 2 factor scores can each be modelled through regression models combining 3 sets of variables:

- Socio-demographic variables
- Variables related to values, in particular trust and attitude toward science
- Variables related before all to the past experience with surveys in general and this survey in particular.

<sup>15</sup>"Measuring Public Opinions about Surveys", *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 20, 74-89.

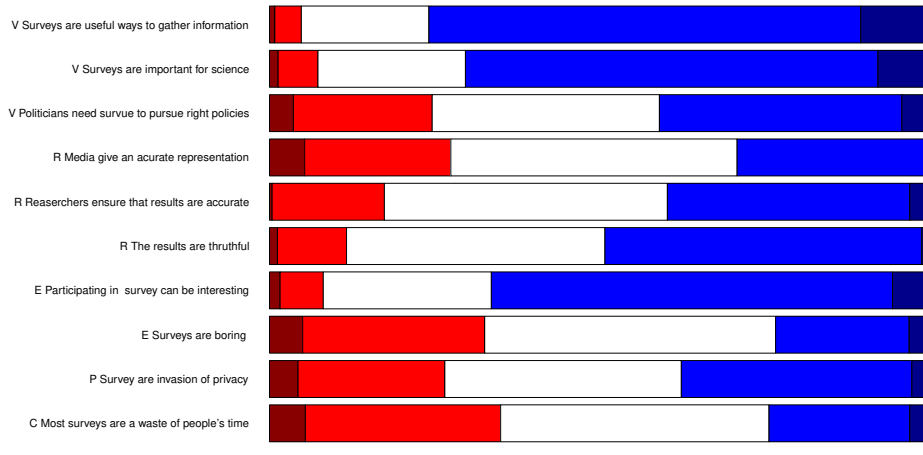


Figure 4: Agreement with different aspects of surveys

Without going into details, it is interesting to underline that we are therefore confronted to 2 rather different models when we are trying to explain "Costs" and "Benefits".

- The dimension of *Cost* (8% of variance explained) is before all salient for people having had bad experiences with past surveys as well as people with a lower educational level.
- The dimensions of *Benefits* (11% of variance explained) is more linked to the values, either the trust in the society or the attitude toward science.

The set of items used here seem to be pertinent to measure attitude of the people about surveys. They show also that the variables explaining attitude towards the *Costs* are not at all the same as the ones towards the expected *Benefits*. And finally that the social position as well as the social values, depending on the position inside the social structure, are important to describe opinions about surveys. In other words, we need to consider other levels than only the individual one when trying to interpret responses and non-responses.

### 3.5 Results so far

If we try to summarize the results obtained so far when looking to the different aspects of Survey climate and opinion about surveys, we have to mention the following points:

- There are different explanations for the *cost* and *benefits* dimensions. That means also that the weight of these dimensions in the propensity to answer is different according the social position. In other words, different groups can have different perceptions and evaluation of the surveys. By the way, more precisely
  - The experience with past surveys is part of the story and this is also is an argument for considering Survey climate

- The social utility of the surveys is also one more argument to consider the way that the surveys are perceived in a given context
- The way that usefulness of survey is considered and the link with perception of science and trust in the social institutions is also one indication that the surveys are perceived differently by different groups of population and there is not only a national *Survey Climate*, but rather that different social groups perceived differently the fact that surveys could be also part of the social functioning.

Of course, these are partial results and more elaboration of the usefulness of the model presented in figure 2 would be interesting to discuss. Nevertheless, this is an indication that we have to develop theoretical models that can discuss surveys in the different levels, from micro to macro levels, going through some meso levels. How far social sciences have developed such theoretical tools?

## 4 How to go further?

In order to go further, and to open also the "Black Box" of factors outside the action of the researchers mentioned by Groves & Couper, we would propose to turn to specific developments of urban sociology in particular and sociology in general. The reasoning can go along two main lines that can integrate lifestyles, social position and surveys: mobility and relation to different spheres of the daily life, related to lifestyle and important for understanding the response process.

### 4.1 Mobility and Motility

Of course, mobility<sup>16</sup> is of first importance for the people involved in survey research as it is one of the main factor explaining possibility of contact. The difference between "hard to reach" and "reluctant" respondent is well known since years<sup>17</sup> and reflect very different lifestyles and attitudes. However, in the urban sociology, the question is not only the movements realised in the geographical space but also the way to incorporate them in the daily life and the resources involved in order to profit from the territory. For example, an old German aphorism can be translated as "The rich people leave where they want, the poor ones where they have to"<sup>18</sup> and the choice of the place of residence can imply some mobility. Developing this idea further, Kaufmann et al. speak of *Motility* and write in the abstract of a paper: "Based on our examination of the conceptual and theoretical links between spatial and social mobility, we propose a concept that represents a new form of inequality. Termed 'motility', this construct describes the potential and actual capacity of goods, information or people to be mobile both geographically and socially. Three major features of motility — access, competence and appropriation — are introduced".<sup>19</sup> The interest of such a concept is to link the probability to contact a potential

<sup>16</sup>See for example on this V. Kaufmann, *Re-thinking Mobility*, Ashgate,2002

<sup>17</sup>Largely related to the work realised around the ESS

<sup>18</sup>"Die Reichen wohnen, wo sie wollen. Die Armen wohnen, wo sie müssen" following a quote of urban sociologist Hartmut Häußermann

<sup>19</sup>V. Kaufmann, M.M. Bergman & D. Joye, "Motility: mobility as capital" in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2004,745-756



respondent with lifestyles and strategy of residential choices. It is also a way to reintroduce the fact that the living environment is not chosen at random but correspond to the use of some social resources. In this perspective, it could also be a mean to interpret the paradata that many surveys collect about the living environment of the respondents<sup>20</sup> which is an indicator of lifestyle. In other words, Mobility and Mobility can not only help to better understand the potential biases in the quest for respondents but also think at this aspect in terms of social resources.<sup>21</sup>

## 4.2 The spheres of the daily life

If mobility is a way to take into account the relation to the geographical context, the type of activities which is deployed in the different territories is also of importance and can explain propensity to answer as well as social resources at disposal. Vincent Kaufmann proposes to distinguish between four different spheres:

- The sphere of *Work* and related activities
- The sphere of social and political *Engagement*
- The sphere of *Domestic* activities related to maintenance of the household and socialisation of the members
- The sphere of *Free time* and leisures

In fact this is also generated by a double combination: activities who are free in their organisation like engagement or free tome of constraint on one side and paid as Work or Engagement (even if it is more in term of power or recognition in the later case).

In earlier times, all these spheres were strongly overlapping and defining a geographical unit. In many contexts nowadays they are more disconnected and the relative implication in one or some of them is determining for explaining the resources and behaviours of the respondents.

One further aspect is ineteresting to consider here: when looking to the probability of response, we have not only to consider the involvment of the respondent into the different spehres but also the ones of his household. This is one more argument for considering more levels than just the individual one.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, we would advocate that considering the contexts in which the people that we want survey are living is an essential point in order to understand better response and non-response and interpret in a more explicative frame the data accumulated about non-respondents. If we want to interpret the different

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<sup>20</sup>See among others T.W. Smith, *Report on the International Workshop on Using Multi-level Data from Sample Frames, Auxiliary Databases, Paradata and Related Sources to Detect and Adjust for Nonresponse Bias in Surveys*, Chicago, June 2011, retrieved from <http://www.norc.org/PDFs/ARC/CSPS/midareport615.pdf>, 11.8.2016

<sup>21</sup>The general debate about "Winners" and "losers" of the globalization process can also be interpreted along this line.

elements influencing the response propensity we need such a model that integrates the social contexts in which the survey process occurs.

To consider survey climate is a first step showing the need of a multilevel perspective. The reference also to economic conditions and neighbourhood characteristics as phrased by Groves and Couper is also a way to make reference to social contexts. However, if we want to think along these lines we need a more integrating sociological perspective giving sense to the indicators that we take into considerations, to begin with the socio-demographics ones.

In the tradition of the nonresponse workshop, this is a paper which want to promote discussion. the main points are:

- Is it really useful to open the "Black box" of the elements outside the control of the survey methodologist – in the terminology of Groves & Couper – in order to understand better the survey process?
- How far is a multilevel perspective going from the micro-level (the individual) to the macro level (the national societies) through meso-levels an important step in this direction?
- If these elements help to understand response and non-response how far are they important to understand – and possibly correct- non-response biases.
- And, if yes to the previous questions, which could be the tools needed to develop the knowledge in this direction?

In any cases, this is also a discussion that we can have between a survey methodology a discipline by itself or a field open to competing contributions of different disciplines.