

Understanding Survey Participation

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The [Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics \(PSSD\)](#), Singapore's first long-term study of family structures and relationships, was launched in November 2014 by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab. Information was collected from over 5,000 respondents over the course of eight months. Interviewers fanned across the island to conduct face-to-face interviews with randomly-selected households. The same families will be interviewed every year, enabling researchers to assess how Singaporeans deal with, among other issues, fluctuating incomes, domestic changes (marriage, divorce, birth of children, retirement) and external shocks (environmental threats, medical epidemics).

Researchers sifting through the data will report on their findings, with an eye to help policymakers formulate better social and economic policies. Researchers are also preparing to begin the next wave of interviews. The survey respondents in the Panel Study will form part of an eco-system which will reveal important insights into the Singaporean family. In a longitudinal tracking survey like the Panel Study, maintaining response rates is crucial to ensuring the usability of the data. There will be a concerted effort to retain members of the panel from year to year through regular communications, such as specially-organised events and the release of relevant survey findings.

Keen to understand what motivates Singaporeans to participate in policy surveys, IPS Social Lab held a series of focus group discussions. Attendees were asked what perceived value they derive from participating in policy surveys. We also set out to explore the different policy survey topics that would be more likely to interest Singaporeans and to encourage them to take part in surveys. In addition, we looked into Singaporeans' expectations of interviewers and their perceived importance of incentives and/or compensation in their decision on whether to participate in policy surveys.

Over the course of two Saturdays (16 and 23 May 2015), researchers conducted six sessions of focus group discussions. A total of 32 participants were grouped into three different age groups (21–34 years; 35–49 years; 50 years and above). Participants were recruited through random street intercepts and the online classifieds Gumtree.sg. On average, each session took one-and-a-half hours, and was moderated by IPS researchers. Participants each received \$50 worth of supermarket vouchers after the discussion.

Key Findings

Factors such as timing, duration and venue of the survey are primary concerns for participants. Hence, convenience to respondents is a key consideration in planning interviews for research studies. Respondents should have an option to set up appointments for interviews, so that they can select their preferred date/time and location.

Next is the respondent's interest in the survey topic, and relevance of the subject matter. In general, people see themselves as agents of change. Participants said they take part in surveys because they feel they can contribute to policymaking through their feedback. The opportunity to exchange views is also a motivating factor to take part in focus group discussions.

Most participants are wary of survey questionnaires to do with politics and political views. This is the case across all age groups. Other considerations that would affect their decision whether to take part in a survey include environment and setting; for instance, a number of participants expressed that they would prefer to be interviewed without the presence of family members, especially if the survey is about families. A range of options, including online, phone and face-to-face surveys, should therefore be considered.

Another factor is the reputation and credibility of the research organisation. Most participants said they are more likely to open a letter addressed to the head of household or an individual within the household if the envelopes bears the official logo of a reputable organisation, such as an academic institution or a government agency. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with observations from other studies, such as the Swiss Household Panel Study, where participants are more wary of mail purportedly from official institutions versus unmarked stationery. This may be an indication of the local context, where Singaporeans place greater faith in authorities.

Areas of Interest

Not surprisingly, a participant's age influences the type of topics that he or she is interested in. From the feedback, we found that younger participants are attracted to issues concerning education and housing, while middle-aged participants tend to want to know about manpower-related policies such as the SkillsFuture scheme, seniors are more interested in retirement and health-related topics.

While monetary rewards are not the primary motivation for participants, there is general acknowledgement that incentives do play a part in increasing survey response rates. In the words of one participant, it is only "human nature" to feel happy about receiving something in return for the time spent on answering a survey. Grocery or supermarket vouchers which can be used at a wide network of outlets are the preferred type of incentives across the different age groups.

The study also delved into the participants' expectations towards interviewers. Ultimately, participants are more concerned with how professionally trained an interviewer is rather than their physical attributes such as gender, age and ethnicity. However, there is a preference for gender-matching in the context of a household interview, where female respondents said they would prefer to be interviewed by a female interviewer, due to safety concerns.

Learning Points

One of the major learning points from the focus group discussions is that respondents perceive themselves as drivers of change. They are curious to know how their responses are used, and appreciate being briefed on the objectives of the study from the outset. More importantly, they are keen to be updated on the findings; this is especially relevant to longitudinal studies which target the same group of respondents over time. An effective engagement and communication strategy that highlights how respondents add value to the project can help keep the momentum of the study going, thereby strengthening the rigour and reliability of data collected.

Moving forward, surveys should incorporate a multi-mode approach; for instance, a combination of self-administered and guided questionnaires could be applied, whereby respondents are given the option of completing specific sections, such as finance and income-related details, on their own. This would alleviate the anxiety and stress associated with topics that are deemed sensitive to respondents. Similarly, a combination of online and personal interviews could be used. While the value of face-to-face interviews cannot be discounted, response rates could be boosted by offering the option of online or web surveys.

Finally, data integrity and security are important to respondents, who want to know that their personal details and privacy are protected. The importance vested in the credibility of research organisations is tied to the level of trust and confidence that a respondent places in the survey. The interviewer, who acts as the bridge between the research organisation and respondent, must be professionally trained and able to convey the objectives of the project. For longitudinal tracking surveys, having the same interviewers visit the same households is a strong boost to participation rates. This has implications for branding, and highlights the importance of strategic engagement and communication with respondents.

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