

## When to give or not give incentives: A researcher's reflection on incentives in the field

By Irene Honam Tsey

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As researchers in the field, we are very concerned with ensuring positive community relations and conducting ethical research. But my experiences from the field show how challenging this can be. We are very careful to say “thank you” to study participants for taking part in our study and being respectful of their time. For qualitative research when a participant takes part in a focus group discussion or in-depth interview, we provide an incentive as a token of our appreciation or gratitude. In my organization, this has tended to come after we have conducted the method so participants do not feel pressure to participate. Yet, a dictionary definition of incentive is “a thing that motivates or encourages someone to do something”.



*Busy fishing community*

We were left with mixed feelings after the last COUNTDOWN research trip to the field. There was a sense of guilt and disappointment following various experiences with “incentives”. Throughout our data collection experiences, timing remained an important factor. We ensure we are in the field at times that suit the community. For example, in fishing and farming communities, we would arrive very early or much later to accommodate their activities. We also try to persuade community members to participate by telling them it will not take very long. However, despite our best efforts delays happen which can be very time consuming and frustrating. If we are undertaking in-depth interviews, we try to ensure we meet participants at the right time. But if we have made a few appointments and participants are not available at the agreed time, this can have an impact on the next appointment. If people have agreed to attend a focus group discussion and then turn up late, this can mean other people who were there on time must wait. In communities where people do not have sufficient food, asking people to wait longer can leave them feeling hungry and frustrated. This frustration can spill into the interview or focus group discussions.

I have noticed a pattern with participants. In the morning participants are often hungry and unhappy to wait. Sometimes we give them snacks. However, it has been agreed those snacks (incentives) be given at the end of the interview. We make sure they are hidden from their sight until the end of a discussion. Yet, once participants get the incentives they tell you *“Oh we didn't know you were going to give us anything, or we would not have pushed you and given our best”*.

News of incentives does spread and there have been instances where an entire community troops to the venue of the meeting. They then tell us: *“You should have told us you would give something!”* One community surprised us when its members asked why survey participants were not given incentives. This is because the norm has always been not to give them incentives.

After one such community, a thought occurred to me: why do we not use advertisements for our recruitments? For example: “12men/women needed for an FGD” and spell out what our study is about, including “incentives”. The advert could also add that admission of participants will be based on first come, first serve basis. Interestingly, ***advertisement is an ethically acceptable tool for recruiting research participants*** but we barely talk about it or consider it in the context of our research.

In my seven years at the research centre, it took my involvement on the COUNTDOWN project to realise this. Advertisement should however be done with the best interest of participants at heart, and in a clear, transparent and accountable manner. After all, they are volunteers and must not be forced or coerced in any way.

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