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ENCOURAGING AND MAINTAINING PARTICIPATION IN HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS: THE CASE OF THE SWISS HOUSEHOLD PANEL

MONICA BUDOWSKI & ANNETTE SCHERPENZEEL

The maintenance of high participation rates is a crucial issue for panel surveys. Because losses of participants do not tend to be random, high initial and continuing participation rates are the best solution to ensure accurate representation of the target population from year to year. Proper representation of a sample is important not only to facilitate the examination of various phenomena, but also to allow for the analysis of changes in people's trajectories and circumstances, and to identify the reasons for such changes. The various strategies employed by the Swiss Household Panel to counteract attrition may be categorized according to the stage in the survey process during which they were applied: (i) the first contact, (ii) the request for participation, (iii) the interview itself, or (iv) between interview waves. This paper provides an overview of the chosen strategies used at each of these stages, the theory or arguments underlying the choices of certain strategies, and evaluations of the effects of these strategies on response rates. The focus is on communication and transmission of information as a directed means to convince potential respondents about the utility and importance of their participation.¹

1 Description of the Swiss Household Panel Survey

The purpose of the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) survey is to collect basic longitudinal data on changing living conditions and, thereby, to provide better quality information for the quantitatively oriented social science sector in Switzerland. The comprehensive survey covers a broad range of social fields and a variety of topics. Information is collected from

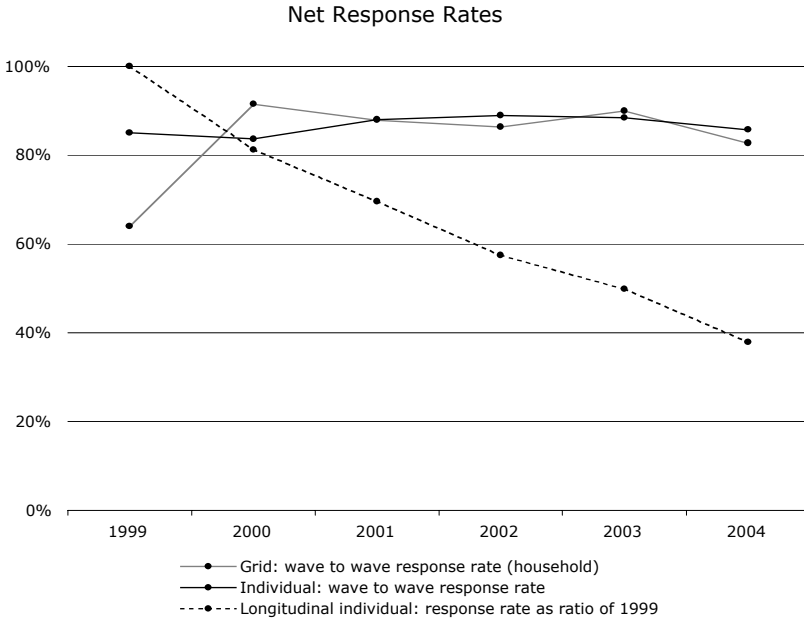
1 We thank Erwin Zimmermann, Director of the Swiss Household Panel, for having financed the English editing of this article.

a representative sample of households of the resident population of Switzerland. A small amount of information is collected about all household members and everyone who is aged 14 years or older and is capable of doing so responds to a 35-minute telephone interview. The data collected offers opportunities for analyzing gross social change and enables research on social trajectories of individuals and groups.

The interviews are carried out in German, French and Italian with four questionnaires made by the company MIS Trend, based in the city of Lausanne: the household grid seeks basic sociodemographic information on all household members; the household questionnaire requests common information that encompasses all household members regarding living conditions, income, and housing; the individual questionnaire includes both objective and subjective questions dealing with a broad range of topics; finally, the proxy questionnaire details objective information on children, handicapped, or temporarily absent household members. The proxy questionnaire does not include data for household members who refuse to participate in the survey (for details on the SHP see Budowski et al. (2001); Tillmann et al. (2001), or <http://www.swisspanel.ch/>).

The first wave of the SHP took place in 1999. In it, 7,799 members living in 5,074 households from a representative, stratified, random sample of the permanent resident population of Switzerland were interviewed about their living conditions by means of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). At the household level, the net response rate for this first wave was 64%, calculated as the ratio of the number of interviews completed to the number of households reached, excluding those who did not participate for neutral reasons. The ratio for the subsequent waves represents the re-interview rates from one wave to the next. In the second wave, 91% of the original panel households participated again. This rate decreased in the third and fourth waves to 88% and 86%, respectively, but then increased slightly to 90% in the fifth wave. In the sixth, last wave completed, the net household participation rate dropped again to 83%. Interestingly, when calculated in the same way, the individual participation rate does not show quite the same pattern. The individual rate began at 85% for the first wave in 1999, and then it decreased slightly to 84% for the second wave. From the third wave on, the participation rate remained roughly constant, at 88%. In the sixth wave a slight decrease to 86% was observed. As Graph 1 shows, however, if the participation rate is calculated as a ratio in relation to the first wave, the percentage of participants having completed an interview declines to 44% in the sixth year.²

2 The SHP considers only the interviews valid for use in data analyses and calculates the ratio therewith; consequently new household members as well as household members passing away,

Graph 1 Net Response Rates of the Swiss Household Panel 1999 to 2004

2 The Importance of Participation

In many countries, participation rates in surveys have decreased in the past decade (e.g. Dey, 1997); in 1971 in Switzerland, a paper and pencil survey (PAPI) conducted about political behavior attained a participation rate of 80% whereas the Eurobarometer, conducted in 1999, attained only 25% (Joye, 2000:4). As Joye argues, complex social processes make it increasingly difficult to obtain a high participation rate for any type of survey to begin with. Both social science research and official statistics are confronted with this problem. Panel surveys face not only the challenge of obtaining a good initial participation rate in a time in which this is becoming a problem in itself, but also the challenge of maintaining good participation over time. The cumulative loss of respondents at each

emigrating, being born or turning 14 years old and hence becoming eligible for the individual questionnaire are not included. The calculation of the wave-to-wave response rates must therefore be considered conservative and restrictive.

interviewing wave (“attrition”) causes problems because it (i) decreases the total size of the sample over the years and (ii) affects the representativeness of the sample. The total size of the longitudinal sample is limited by the sample size of the first wave, and, in the worst-case scenario, the panel may “die” after a certain period (as the line in Graph 1 concerning the longitudinal individual response rate as of 1999 shows). In addition, the representation of only small population groups may prevent or invalidate statistical analyses (Duncan & Kalton, 1987; Kasprzyk et al., 1989). The longitudinal sample’s representativeness is threatened by systematic losses of participants. Laurie et al. (1999:269ff) contends that panels face two main causes of attrition: geographic mobility and refusal to participate (see also Duncan & Kalton, 1987:107). The problem of systematic losses arises, as those people with greater geographic mobility also tend to differ in other regards from those remaining more geographically stable. Also, among those who refuse to participate, the “more extensive source of loss,” Laurie et al. (1999:269ff) identify what they term “panel fatigue.” Here again, the problem of non-random loss is prevalent with respect to those who refuse and those who do not refuse to participate. Lynn & Clarke (2001:4) make reference to a study of five UK governmental surveys in the year 1991, where two distinct types of propensity regarding “losses” were also distinguished: (i) those people who are less easily contacted (men, residents of apartments, single-person households, and households with a young and/or unmarried head) and (ii) those who have a propensity to refuse (those who lack academic qualifications, who live in London, and/or who live in households with an older head and/or ethnic minorities). Indeed, a comparison of the “dropouts” with the “continuous participants” of the Swiss Household Panel showed that younger, more mobile people, foreigners, unemployed, elderly, and less healthy people are more often found among the dropouts.³ In conclusion, it is crucial to minimize attrition in order to keep a sample representative over time.

The focus of this paper is not on strategies to counteract losses due to geographic mobility, but rather strategies to prevent losses due to “panel-fatigue” and refusals. Duncan & Kalton (1987) briefly review a variety of methods to improve continuous participation rates. Their focus is mainly on material and other measures of tracing the respondents. They also state that existing panel surveys invest sizable resources to maintain response rates. Laurie et al. (1999) describe the measures applied by the British Household Panel survey (BHPS) to ensure panel participation. Among them were: providing incentives, keeping in touch with people by sending them information between waves, and attempting to get the same interviewer to interview those respondents he or she had interviewed in previous years. The measure mentioned last enables a personal relationship to be forged

3 These calculations were carried out by our colleague, Dr. Boris Wernli.

between interviewer and respondent, enhancing response rates considerably. Trivellato (1999:347) distinguishes field operations designed “to encourage potential respondents to participate,” tracking techniques to “to maintain contact with sample members in the period between waves,” tracing techniques to “to find missing panel members,” and direct incentives “to maintain a high rate of participation in the survey.” Interestingly, Trivellato refers only to monetary and material rewards. No category appears to exist for techniques associated with the transmission of information about panel surveys as a specific and directed means to convince potential respondents about the utility and importance of their participation. Trivellato subsumes such practices in the category tracking techniques. However, in that category, information and letters are sent for tracking purposes, to provide a reason to communicate with the respondents between interview waves, and not necessarily to convince them to continue to participate (measures subsumed in the category, field operations). Indeed, most authors simply consider the main objective of sending information to be keeping in touch with people.

The unique contribution of the present paper is its focus on communication with potential interviewees regarding information about the study, its scientific content, and the intelligibility of the endeavor as the main means of encouraging and prolonging participation and counteracting the loss of respondents through refusal to participate in the various panel waves. All of the endeavors aimed at stimulating participation in the Swiss Household Panel survey may be categorized according to the stage in the survey process during which they were applied: (i) the first contact, (ii) the request for participation, (iii) the interview itself, or (iv) between interview waves. In the next paragraphs, we give an overview of the efforts made by the SHP at each of these points in time. Furthermore, we will describe the theory or arguments underlying the choices of measures, the application of these measures in practice, and, if the information is available, evaluations of the effects of these measures on response rates.⁴

3 The First Contact

The first contact with potential respondents was based on a letter inviting them to participate, a brochure explaining the nature of the survey, and a magazine serving as an example of what type of results might be obtained and how they might contribute to public discussion. The underlying assumption was: if people are informed and interested, the chances that they will be more willing to participate are greater. Preceding the choice

4 Experiments that were carried out to evaluate the effects on the response rates will be described briefly here, with the emphasis on the results. For further details about the design and the analyses we will refer to separate publications.

made among different options for means of establishing the initial contact, several focus group studies were carried out to test different ways of presenting the study, including different layout versions of the brochure and different variants of possible envelopes. In addition a small, transversal survey on a salient topic was conducted in order to serve as an example to the future respondents of what panel studies could be like and what their personal contribution could be. All preparative studies are described below and summarized in Table 1 at the end of this section.

It was in fact the survey institute, MIS Trend, which was first concerned with how to introduce the panel to potential respondents in order to best achieve the target of obtaining a high participation rate. This concern was formulated in the call for tenders by the Swiss Household Panel. For this purpose MIS Trend had conducted a series of focus groups⁵ (three focus groups in two linguistic regions, – Bern for Swiss-German and Lausanne for French native speakers). This survey was designed to determine under which conditions people of middle and lower educational levels would be most likely participate in such a household panel survey, and what conditions would be conducive to their continued participation.⁶ A further purpose of this focus group survey was to explore whether the CATI mode of data collection for a 40-50 minute telephone interview would be acceptable to the potential respondents. MIS recruited the participants in October 1998 from a list of people it has at its disposal and about whom it has certain sociodemographic information. Two collaborators of the MIS Institute participated, one person videotaping the discussion and the group participants, the other moderating the discussion by means of an open interview guide. The focus groups took place either at the head-quarters of MIS or in a hotel conference room; the participants received a moderate payment and were offered sandwiches and something to drink. The structure of the approximately two-hour discussion was the following: the focus group moderator introduced the two MIS collaborators and made an introduction about the aims, the length of the meeting, and the videotaping. The discussion rules were made explicit: no self-censorship and no censorship of others; no answers are correct or wrong; short statements, maybe also words and feelings, should be formulated. After this introduction the participants introduced themselves, mentioning their name and their profession. This series of focus groups started with questions aimed at evoking associations concerning the telephone. Another set of questions dealt with general feelings towards surveys. A third set of questions addressed the public interest component

5 The focus group has been defined as a “carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5).

6 It was assumed that people with higher educational levels would participate more voluntarily than those with lower ones.

of surveys and also past experience with surveys.⁷ Then the Swiss Household Panel survey was described and specific questions were asked regarding associations with the three funding and supporting partners of the survey: The Swiss Federal Statistical Office, the University of Neuchâtel and the Program of the Swiss National Science Foundation “Switzerland towards the Future.” Further sets of questions addressed different motivations to participate, possibilities to further loyalty and continuous participation rates. The answers and discussion of the focus groups were transcribed, sorted and analyzed. These focus group studies showed that if the survey was considered to be a scientific study, it was more highly valued than if it was considered to be administrative⁸ (MIS Trend, 1998) or commercial (MIS Trend, 1999).

The second series of focus group surveys (conducted in German and French) dealt with a variety of issues⁹: (i) the impressions such mailings made on the people receiving them; (ii) the effects of varying the amount of information in a letter and/or using different designs for brochures and people’s spontaneous reactions to the brochures; (iii) the impression made by an envelope containing an advance incentive (see Table 1 for an overview).

(i) The SHP was very concerned about whether potential respondents would even open a letter or if it would just end up in the trash unread. Therefore, the mailing varied the type of envelopes, once indicating an unknown sender (the Swiss Household Panel), and once not indicating any sender.

(ii) In order to have an information leaflet that would be as attractive and comprehensible as possible, encouraging potential respondents to read it, different layouts and texts were tested.

(iii) Finally, the SHP and MIS Trend team discussed “advance incentives” (monetary and/or non-monetary rewards) as encouraging factors, because another Swiss survey, the

7 Examples from the questionnaire are: “What associations do you have when you think about the telephone? The question was reiterated and other associations were provoked such as “and if it had a personality?” “and if it were an animal?,” “What thoughts or feelings come up when you think of communicating by telephone?,” “What are the telephone’s strengths, what are its weaknesses?”.

8 We interpret this result to be at least in part due to the fact that Switzerland had recently experienced intrusive intelligence activities (“Fichenaffaire”), through which over 200,000 people had been registered. “... il faut savoir que la recherche scientifique a meilleure presse que l’Etat. ... Aux premiers on reconnaît l’objectivité et la rigueur académique. Chez les seconds, on craint l’ingérence dans la sphère privée, l’utilisation des résultats à des fins non avouées, le gaspillage des deniers publics” (MIS Trend 1998:20).

9 In contrast to the series of focus groups conducted in 1998, this series was commissioned by the SHP.

Swiss Labor Force Survey (SLSF), obtained good results when sending a monetary incentive.¹⁰ Therefore the question of an advance incentive was addressed by examining the possibility of using an envelope with a ball-point pen in it.

In practice, the focus group members were presented with two different versions of the brochure about the future survey "Living in Switzerland," each with its own, different text and two different envelopes. This happened in a two-stage procedure to find out which would be the most attractive, which wording would be the most comprehensible, and which degree of information would be sufficient for potential respondents.¹¹ Each version was submitted to half of the members of the focus groups together with a self-administered questionnaire, before the focus groups took place. The participants answered questions regarding items of interest individually, without having seen the other version or having discussed with anyone who also had received the same or the other version. These results were analyzed by MIS before entering into a discussion in the group. The participants then convened and discussed their reactions to the version they had seen beforehand and the version they had not seen together with the results within the group. During the focus groups the participants were confronted with all the different variants of envelopes: an envelope indicating a sender versus one not doing so, one with a ballpoint pen inside versus one without a pen, and one with a real stamp versus one with a printed stamp. Furthermore, the letters signed by hand were compared with those with a scanned signature. Reactions to all these variations were videotaped and entered into the interpretation.

The conclusions of these endeavors were that a more "traditional" design of the brochure was preferred to a more graphic design; a concise, short text was more appealing than more detailed information; a short letter with a personal signature was more appealing than other variants; (for more details see MIS Trend (1999)). Interestingly, the design of the envelope was quite important: with respect to its presentation, many members of the focus groups were curious about the envelope that did not indicate a sender and thus felt compelled to open it since such letters generally either come from the bank (making them important), are invitations, or contain some other type of surprise or significant message. By contrast, the envelope indicating that the sender was the Swiss Household Panel was considered by members of the focus group to come from an unknown organization, leading to the assumption that it was probably advertising something or asking for money. This made people less interested in the letter and more predisposed to throw it away without opening it. The focus groups also indicated that details in the layout of the envelope,

10 This was, however, a "thank-you incentive" sent after the interview and not an advance incentive of the sort that the SHP was interested in.

11 Some participants were sent the letter, some picked the letter up at the head-quarters.

as well as whether a real stamp or an electronic one was used, were factors influencing whether an envelope would be opened and the information contained received or not. A real stamp and a personal signature appeared to encourage the most interest in the mailing among members of the focus groups. (for more details see MIS Trend (1999)). A clear result emerged from the focus groups receiving an envelope containing a ballpoint pen: the pen apparently made the study appear commercial and caused the recipients to question its sincerity and scientific merit. For this reason the SHP dropped the idea of including such an item for the time being.

Starting with the presumption that came out of the focus group studies that individuals are more open to the idea of participating in specifically scientific studies, the SHP decided to carry out a small-scale transversal representative survey from which results could be presented to potential future respondents as an example of how data is analyzed and how relevant such data are. The survey was based on a representative sample of individuals from the French, German, and Italian speaking parts of Switzerland (n=895) aged 18 to 74 years old. The respondents' own experiences of actual and past unemployment as well as those of their acquaintances, friends, or relatives were chosen as the subject of this survey. Unemployment was a highly debated topic in the media at that point because it had become a more widespread phenomenon that concerned many people. The survey on unemployment was intended to illustrate the nature of (retrospectively gathered) longitudinal information on a topic of common interest (such as unemployment) and how it would be analyzed. The results of the survey were to be published in weekly magazines before a first communication with potential respondents took place. The idea underlying this endeavor was that if people understood the importance of their participation in a survey aimed at understanding social change they would be more willing to participate in one than if they did not. Their personal participation would contribute to enabling analyses of social change, thus something was to be gained by taking part and, at the same time, participation would contribute something to the greater good, to the community, and to social progress. These ideas were also formulated in specific brochures about the nature of the survey "Living in Switzerland," the people responsible for the survey, and its aims.

Thus the various series of focus groups helped to answer our stylistic questions. However, we sometimes opted for a less attractive solution than that most strongly preferred by the focus groups in order to make sure the project was clearly intelligible (for example, indicating a sender on the envelope). Table 1 shows all studies and the related decisions of the SHP. The SHP did not wish to "trick" or deceive people (as possible in the case of the envelope without a sender). Moreover, the goals were pragmatic: to figure out the most appealing and "simplest" means of communication, to reduce the burden of participation, and to provide clear information.

The final question to address is whether all of the efforts to make this first contact as attractive as possible actually do lead to better response rates. We have no ability to compare the rates of the Swiss Household Panel survey both with and without the measures described, but we did carry out a small experiment to explore the impact of an advance letter. In this experiment, a letter announcing the study was sent to all target households one week before a telephone contact was made. The first person contacted in each household was asked whether he/she had seen this letter. The viewing of the letter appeared to be very strongly correlated with participation rates in the experiment: among people who reported seeing the letter, participation was 20% higher. Such large effects are not usually reported in the wide literature on the effects of such advance letters. However, many published studies report the effects of simply sending an advance letter while this study made the distinction on the basis of whether the letter was actually seen. Still, we cannot exclude the possibility that the observed relationship is a spurious one, caused by the fact that people who are interested in the subject of the study are both more likely to read the letter and to participate (for details on the study see Scherpenzeel & Eichenberger, 2001).

Table 1 SHP studies concerning the first contact

Study	Design	Result	SHP Decision
Favored surveys	Focus groups	Scientific surveys more valued than administrative or commercial	Strong emphasis on scientific nature of the survey in all communications
Acceptability of telephone interview	Focus groups	Telephone viewed as reliable and flexible; would be accepted	Telephone interview
Envelope design	Focus groups	Envelope without sender evokes more interest than with sender	SHP as sender on envelope for ethical reasons
Envelope stamp	Focus groups	Envelope with real stamp evokes more interest than with printed stamp	A real stamp for first contact; printed stamps for further contacts
Design advance letter	Focus groups	Short letter with personal signature is most appealing	Short advance letter with personal signature for first contact; scanned signature for further contacts
Brochure text	Focus groups	Short text is preferred to detailed information	Short, concise brochure
Brochure design	Focus groups	Traditional design more appealing than graphic design	Traditionally designed brochures with pictures
Advance incentive	Focus groups	Ballpoint pen gives a commercial impression	No incentives with first letter
Impact advance letter	Experiment	Participation is 20% higher among people who report seeing the letter	Advance letter with thoroughly tested design and envelope

4 The Request for Participation

The previous section indicated how the first contact with the future respondents of the panel survey consisted of a letter, a brochure, and a magazine in which a survey on unemployment was reported to illustrate the nature of survey data.¹² The passage focused on discussion of the most attractive formats of these items, designed to increase the probability that they would be well received and read. In this section, we go into more detail on the contents of these mailings, focusing on the arguments used to convince the recipients to participate. Unfortunately, no experiment was carried out to evaluate these strategies, i.e. the effects of the contents of the mailings on the response rate; however, a study regarding interviewer effects was carried out and is described in this section (see Table 2 for an overview of the studies concerning this stage). Interviewers are the key assets in surveys. Consequently, we describe how the interviewers were instructed to request participation during the telephone contact.

In all forms of contact, the issues of interest for convincing people from the perspective of the SHP were: the scientific nature of the study being conducted, data confidentiality, the credibility and sincerity of the study, its transparency, and the degree of burden placed on interviewees. In addition, persuasive measures were always preferred to coercive measures. In the letter and brochure announcing the study, since the focus group studies described in the Section 3 had suggested that it was important to distinguish a scientific study from an administrative or commercial one, evidence was presented to convince people of the scientific nature of the survey. Furthermore, the SHP aimed at portraying the sincerity and transparency of its endeavor. The brochure contained explicit information about how the project would proceed with respect to data protection. It clearly indicated what the burden would be, should people decide to participate: the overall message was an encouragement to weigh the small, manageable commitment on the part of a respondent against the larger gain achieved for the whole of the project and society at large. Finally, the brochure expressed that the project was financed for five years, suggesting that the commitment might be finite.

A study on unemployment was published in a magazine, and sent to the selected households. The intention of mailing the magazine was three-fold: first, to convince the people of the utility of the study, second, to provide a first acquaintance with results stemming from longitudinal data and third, to present an example of the way personal information in this study would be analyzed. Aggregate analyses were intended to help demonstrate that the study had no interest in identifying individuals. This message aimed at diminishing

12 The magazine was included with the brochure and the letter.

fears regarding questions of confidentiality. Unfortunately, we have no evaluation of the effects of the letter, brochure, or magazine on the response rates.

After having made the first contact by means of the aforementioned letter and other information, the potential respondents were contacted by telephone. During this stage of the survey process, the issues emphasized most were data protection, and the credibility and sincerity of the study. During each direct telephone contact, the MIS Trend interviewers presented themselves in a clear, straight-forward way: they indicated their name and the organization they were working for, they referred to the letter and information brochure which had previously been received to legitimize their phone call, and they clarified questions regarding data protection, the utility, commitment, and burden of the engagement, and others issues about the SHP. If the people who were contacted had questions that the interviewer could not answer, they were quickly put in touch with a supervisor present at the call center, specifically to support the interviewers. As a last measure, the respondents were provided with the telephone number of the Swiss Household Panel in case of any further inquiries. MIS Trend is convinced that the CATI mode of data collection enhances legitimacy, as the respondents hear other interviewers while they themselves are being interviewed. Such measures are all considered to be reassuring; consequently they should diminish doubts and enhance participation. An experiment designed to evaluate the choice of interview method is described in Section 5.

Because communication on the telephone depends strongly on the abilities of the interviewers, the interviewers received extensive training and a large repertoire of instructions. MIS Trend trained the interviewers not to be coercive during the first contact and to make the interview as agreeable as possible, so that the interviewees would not have bad memories associated with the interview. Potential respondents were to be convinced by the repertoire of arguments prepared for the interviewers (although the limit between convincing and coercing is not clear cut; for example, referring to “public interest” may be coercive or/and convincing). Pressing people too intensely to participate could have a negative impact on subsequent waves.

In order to determine whether the extensive training and repertoire of instructions could prevent or diminish “interviewer effects” in the first and in subsequent waves, the SHP carried out an evaluation of such effects on the response rates and on the data (for more details see Scherpenzeel (2002)). Immediately after the second panel interview, a paper-and-pencil questionnaire was sent to the interviewers, in French or in German depending on their mother language. This questionnaire measured a number of interviewer characteristics: demographic traits such as sex, age, language, and education, but also characteristics such as the attitude of the interviewers towards this type of study and towards sensitive questions.

The second wave refusal rates contained, in total, 4% interviewer variance. Linking this variance to the interviewer characteristics demonstrated, interestingly, that older interviewers (aged 50 and older) obtained less overall refusals and fewer item-nonresponses. It is, however, just as interesting to note that none of the other interviewer characteristics had any effect on the refusal rates. We cannot know whether extensive training and repertoire of arguments provided by the SHP diminished interviewer effects, but Fowler and Mangione (1990) showed that interviewer effects are associated with the amount of training received and the types of supervision present.

Table 2 SHP studies concerning the participation request

Study	Design	Result	SHP Decision
Unemployment study	Transversal survey	Results were used to demonstrate the utility of surveys and the treatment of personal information	
Interviewer study	Questionnaire	Age effect on refusals, no effect of other interviewer characteristics	Extensive training and repertoire of instructions

5 The Interview

Given the length of the questionnaire, three factors are identified that could possibly reduce the interviewing burden for participants and increase the probability of continued participation in subsequent waves. First, the method of interviewing used, second, the instructions provided and third, the interviewer as a person. The first and second factor are discussed below; the effect of the interviewer as a person was evaluated in the previous section.

Computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI) can decrease the interview burden for the respondents because they do not require them to host an interviewer in their home; interviewers are able to set or modify the date of the interview, postpone it, or even interrupt it, leaving it to be continued another day. Given that interviewer continuity is a factor known to enhance participation in face-to-face surveys (Laurie et al. 1999), the major disadvantage of telephone interviewing for a panel study is that it is rather difficult to maintain such continuity.

To evaluate the choice of interview method, an experiment was designed in which two data collection strategies were compared: Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) and Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI). This experiment was con-

ducted in the German-speaking region of Bern. Results showed that the participation rates were similar for both modes of interviewing. In addition, the choice of CATI versus CAPI seemed to have no implications for the quality of the data (for details see Scherpenzeel & Eichenberger (2001)). Table 3 summarizes the studies concerning the interview method.

An advantage of telephone interviewing mentioned above is that, in order to prevent quick refusals, the interview can be postponed when a person appears rushed or preoccupied. However, also determined by the experiment just described, the opposite can also happen: an interview may be postponed so many times that it may never actually occur; or a person may never be successfully reached again after the first contact.

In both the CATI and the CAPI conditions, respondents were contacted by telephone a week after an advance letter had been sent. During this first telephone contact, a “screening” was carried out. This screening procedure served to determine whether the household would participate or not. Furthermore, it documented the composition of the household, and involved the making of an appointment for the household interview. In general, the screening was done with the person first contacted in each household, provided that this person was 15 years or older and was a member of the household. When a household member was not reached by the first call, up to twenty callbacks were made until the end of the fieldwork period.

In total, 12% of the households reached dropped out after the screening interview; in the CATI data collection mode this was 10%. Hence, the total refusal rate in this experiment could have perhaps been lower if a special effort had been made to motivate people during or at the end of a screening contact, and by interviewing people immediately, thus avoiding the necessity of a subsequent appointment. Previous experiences confirm this result: as a result of their daily experience, the MIS team that carried out the interviewing for the Swiss Household Panel survey insisted on being able to start interviewing right after the screening process in order to prevent loss of a “compliant” household for the reason mentioned above. However, experience has also demonstrated that “hold” households, meaning those that kept postponing the interviews, could be converted into participating ones once the interviewers informed the respondents about the deadline indicating the end of the interviewing phase. Apparently, the suggestion that the respondents would miss the opportunity to be interviewed (application of the “scarcity” principle described in Section 6) stimulated these respondents to complete the interview.

The interviewers were trained to convince people that their particular individual situation was important for the study and that their personal engagement was very valuable. Although the study was longitudinal and thus requested a longer involvement of the participants, the participants were assured that the questions were easy to answer and that they

could decline participation whenever they wished. Such communications sought to reassure the respondents that their commitment to the survey would not be too burdensome or complicated, and that the research and interview team would do their best to accommodate any desires they might have regarding the time of interview. The interviewers were also instructed to make the interview as agreeable as possible, to increase the probability that interviewees would participate again in subsequent waves.

Table 3 SHP studies concerning the interview

Study	Design	Result	SHP Decision
CATI/CAPI comparison	Experiment	No difference in response or quality of the data	All interviews done in CATI
CATI/CAPI comparison	Experiment	In CATI 10% of the households reached drop out after the screening interview	Strive to do interviews right after the screening

6 Between Interview Waves

The SHP deliberately chose to inform respondents during the first contact about the annual repetition of the interviews. This was referred to when re-contacting interviewees in the following years. In this section, the arguments for this strategy and its consequences will be described. Again, most participation maintenance strategies of the SHP were based on the assumption that if people were well informed and interested, they would be more willing to continue their participation. Hence, the respondents received announcement letters preceding each interview wave and newsletters and newspaper or magazine articles between waves. We will give an overview of the contents of these mailings and evaluate their effectiveness in terms of persuasive power. Furthermore, the goal of ensuring continuous participation also involves activities to convert refusals, which will be discussed here. Finally, we will present a small experiment designed to evaluate the effects of an incentive offered between waves. A summary of the studies done is shown in Table 5 at the end of this section.

As mentioned above, the SHP thought it important to communicate the details of the longitudinal character of the survey clearly to the respondents. Addressing this, the first leaflet included information about the annual repetition of the interviews for five years following the first contact; this was also referred to during each wave. The SHP chose this strategy not only to sincerely inform the participants of what they were engaging themselves in, but also in order to avoid participant frustration that could lead to aversion

against the SHP survey and other surveys in following waves. Another option would have been to not indicate a precise number of years that the study would span but, during each interview, to tell the respondents that they will be contacted again the following year. The British Household Panel Survey does this, for example. Yet another possibility is not to mention the longitudinal nature of the study at all in order to maximize the initial response rates and then to simply contact the respondents again in the subsequent wave, which is the strategy employed by the Swiss Labor Force Survey.

Graph 1 shows that the wave-to-wave grid response rate steadily decreased from the second to the fourth wave. In the fifth wave, the decreasing trend of the previous waves reversed and the rate increased slightly only to drop again somewhat more strongly in the sixth wave. This response behavior suggests that the specific communication used was important for the following reason: if someone who had participated for four years appeared prone to renounce their participation, based on the previous knowledge that the study was supposed to be five years long, the interviewers were able to argue that the respondent's attrition would comprise a loss for the whole project. In order to convince the respondents they thus made use of the "implicit contract" to participate for five years that the respondents had tacitly agreed upon by their initial participation. This hypothesis arises because Graph 1 shows a somewhat larger decrease in the wave-to-wave grid participation rates from wave five to wave six when compared with the previous years. This result lends itself to the possible interpretation that the "implicit contract" to participate for five years was considered to be more legitimately "dissolved" after five years than after four years.

If this drop in the grid wave-to-wave response rate from the fifth to the sixth wave was not just a spurious deviation and really was related to the clear communication by the brochure that the survey was financed for five years and by the interviewer's referencing of that fact to motivate participation in the fifth wave, it would imply that clear communication might indeed have an impact. The lesson to learn from such response behavior with regard to panel studies would then be to communicate the duration of the study as vaguely as possible. However, such vague communication might result in a small, gradual decline rather than an increase in participation in the year that people think is the last, followed by a more dramatic decline if the study continues, as observed in Graph 1 with the SHP data. This would lead to a further hypothesis that both strategies for communicating the duration of the study might ultimately yield the same result over time. Taking into account not only the participation rates but also questions of ethical principles, a vague indication of the interviews to follow might be most effective.

Nonetheless, various questions remain for panel surveys: How long we can realistically expect people or households to participate: three years, five years, ten years, or a lifetime? How much information is necessary, how precise should it be, and when and how should it be communicated? These questions merit serious further thought.

Following the practices of other panels, the Swiss Household Panel decided to keep people who refused the interview in the address database until they had refused for two consecutive waves. However, this rather unrelenting means of counteracting attrition did not yield optimal results. Indeed, at each wave we had some respondents complain that their previous refusals to participate, in the form of phone calls, emails, or letters indicating why they wished to stop participating, had not been taken seriously. Therefore, the SHP is constantly working on detailed, personally-tailored means of converting refusals that do not use this approach. In addition, more thought is being invested in formulating convincing arguments that take into consideration individual conditions (e.g. arguments based on age or a specific year being inconvenient for an interview, etc.).

In letters or telephone calls some panel respondents claim to be disillusioned regarding the effects of such surveys (e.g. that the surveys will not result in any change in poverty). A frequent reason cited for not wanting to continue to participate was that nothing had actually changed due to the survey in the past year. In order to better equip the interviewers to convince the respondents that continuity was very important, the SHP provided them with a repertoire of counterarguments to such conjectures. Interestingly, no comments were received from respondents that suggested that they lacked information about or did not understand the survey.

Even if some 62% of the households that refused to participate in the interview during the sixth wave could not be convinced to participate even by specially trained interviewers who called them again at the end of the interview period¹³, activities to convert refusals are nonetheless not negligible for a panel study. Approximately 23% of all grid-level refusals could be motivated to provide information for the grid, the household, and at least one individual questionnaire; hence one of every five refusing households became a validly participating one. About half of the eligible individuals within the households who were convinced to participate could be convinced to participate again in the sixth wave.

13 The main reasons these households provided for not wanting to participate were that they were no longer interested (52%) and that they did not want to be interviewed every year (13%). Both of these reasons suggest panel fatigue. These percentages are different from those observed for the refresher sample completed for the 2004 SHP survey, in which 38% of the households reported that they were not interested and 1% indicated that they did not want to be interviewed every year.

Apart from the arguments presented by the interviewers during their telephone contact with the respondents and the refusal conversion measures, other participation maintenance strategies relied on different channels of communication such as newspaper or magazine articles, a webpage, or newsletters to provide information about the SHP and its functioning. Given the general flood of information received on a regular basis by mail, the SHP assumed it prudent to provide information regularly but not too often. The SHP also recognized that the channels used to communicate might need to be varied for different population groups. However, targeting different population groups is complicated. One way to cope with this was to use various channels to address different topics. Some newspapers and magazines contained information about the SHP and analyses performed using SHP data. Other information was distributed by means of newsletters that presented results from previous waves. An overview of all mailings and a description of their contents are given in Appendix 1. In one newsletter titled, "A glimpse behind the scenes," the panel and MIS team were presented in order to explain how a survey works and to provide "real faces" behind the project. In addition, a website with working papers and news published in three languages, as well as a hotline based at the MIS office headquarters was made available. When the hotline was confronted with difficult questions or was facing too much frustration among participants, the SHP telephone number was sometimes given out. Finally, all written emails and letters were answered personally by the director of the Swiss Household Panel.

No experimental study has been done to estimate the effect of the contents of the mailings on the participation or dropout rates, but we have tried to evaluate how persuasive the mailings were from a psychological perspective. Assuming that a text that includes many sociopsychological concepts known to influence the compliance with a request is more persuasive than a text that contains fewer or no such concepts, we can evaluate the persuasiveness of a text by counting the number of concepts it contains. For that reason, we have (a posteriori) categorized the contents of all mailings according to a set of sociopsychological concepts taken from Groves, Cialdini & Couper (1992). To their original set, we have added some concepts that are more specific for panel surveys.

In total, ten letters were sent to the panel members: six preceding the six waves of panel interviewing and four extra between waves. In addition, nine German or ten French brochures and publications were sent together with these letters. Table 4 shows which concepts were used for the categorization and how frequently they appeared in the mailings. In general, the advance letters sent by the SHP did not contain many of the psychological concepts.

In the brochures and publications the authorities behind the study, the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Federal Office of Statistics, and the University of Neuchatel, were almost always explicitly mentioned. Groves, Cialdini & Couper state that people are more likely to comply with a request if it comes from someone whom they perceive to be a legitimate authority. As a consequence of the basic assumptions of the SHP about the respondents (see above), a lot of information and results were given in the brochures and publications and a strong emphasis was put on the public interest of the panel study. “Information/interest” and “public interest” are concepts we added to the original list. Information about the subject of the study and the use of the results is often given in an attempt to stimulate interest. Emphasizing the public interest of the results of the study might be seen as a special form of the norm of reciprocity, making people feel obliged to provide information to social institutions (coercive factors). More traditionally, the norm of reciprocity in a panel study entails that incentives will increase participation, as will informational letters, brochures, and so on, prior to asking for participation. Finally, the concept of “social validation” was frequently used. This concept refers to the idea that people should be more willing to participate if they believe others like them would participate. In many of the mailings, the high cooperation rate was indicated, sometimes split up for specific subgroups with which respondents might identify. Of course, confidentiality constraints prevent the naming of specific respondents (such as neighbors) as standards for social validation. A special form of social validation, which we have deemed “international” (instead of interpersonal) social validation, was sometimes given in the documents provided by the SHP to the respondents by stating that similar studies are done in other European countries, and that Switzerland is one of the last to finally join in. Although used infrequently, “personalization” was still a concept rather strongly present because the last newsletter was completely filled with a “glimpse at the people behind the scenes.”

The concepts of coercion (trying to make people feel obliged to participate), constancy of behavior (people who participated in the first wave, will also tend to participate in subsequent waves), and the helping norm (motivates people to help others who are in need and who are dependent upon them for aid), were used less often in the SHP mailings.

The least applied concepts were “scarcity” and “liking.” Groves et al. describe these two concepts, but they are, to our opinion, less useful for panel surveys. Using the “scarcity” concept would mean emphasizing the value of “making your voice heard” in combination with suggesting that such an opportunity is rare. Due to “over surveying,” people in Switzerland may no longer consider the chance to have their opinions counted as a rare event. In addition, it is difficult to insist on the scarcity of chance in a panel study with yearly interviews.

“Liking” refers to the tendency to like people who are similar to us in attitude, background, dress, etc. and to be more inclined to comply with the requests of liked others. In a survey setting, this can pertain to either the interviewer or the organization that the interviewer represents. However, little can be done to tailor such interviewer characteristics, and it is doubtful as to whether they are of much influence in telephone interviews. Instead, strongly present in the newsletter containing a “glimpse behind the scenes,” is the concept of “personalization.” In our categorization, “personalization” is taken to be a special means of enhancing “liking.”

The evaluation of the mailings in terms of sociopsychological concepts has shown that the persuasiveness of the texts could still be enhanced. In the future, it might be worthwhile to try to use other, more personal forms of reciprocity than only public interest, and to appeal to “helping” tendencies and to constancy of behavior, which is especially relevant for panel studies. In addition, the SHP should continue to enhance “liking” through “personalization.”

Advance incentives like a lottery number, payment, or other material incentives (such as a small present, a telephone card, or a ballpoint pen) can be considered coercive strategies as they evoke feelings of obligation. At the same time they are appealing to the researcher to boost the participation rates as well as to the interviewers who often feel better when the respondents have received or might receive something in return for the interview. A vast literature on the effects of incentives exists. Here we briefly summarize only a meta-analysis and two recent studies.

Church (1993) reports results from a meta-analysis of 38 experimental and quasi-experimental studies that implemented an incentive (ante-hoc or post-hoc, monetary or non-monetary) in a mail survey to increase response rates. They point towards a significant impact of the ante-hoc mailings including the incentive (both monetary and non-monetary) and no evidence of such post-hoc incentive mailing. Using an announcement letter with cash Singer et al. (1999:254, 257) found significant effects on response rates in a face-to-face survey and even stronger effects in a self-administered mail survey. Martin et al. (2001) report a significant improvement of conversion rates of previous interview refusals, yet suggest that motivational effects of incentives may not be homogeneous. The Swiss Labor Force Survey thanks the respondents at the end of the survey with a small present (some stamps for example) and considers this to yield good results.

Table 4 **Number of mailings (letters, brochures and publications) in which a concept was used**

Concept	Letters	Brochures and Publications	
		German	French
Interest / Information	1	8	9
Coercion	2	2	1
Public Interest	3	7	7
Reciprocity, other forms	2	2	2
Constancy	2	2	2
International Social Validation	0	3	5
Interpersonal Social Validation	1	6	7
Authority	1	9	9
Scarcity	0	1	1
Helping	1	2	2
Personalization	0	2	3
Liking, other forms	0	1	1
Anonymity, data protection	1	3	4
Total	10	9	10

In contrast with these rather positive effects, the focus group studies carried out for the SHP (see Section 3) indicated that an ante-hoc incentive impinged upon the scientific character of the survey in a negative way, which was considered to be a real drawback as the presentation of the survey as a scientific study lends credence to its sincerity in comparison with commercial studies. Therefore, the SHP refrained from using incentives during the first wave. However, at a later stage, the possibility of an incentive re-entered the discussions of the research team because in panel studies, participation may well be limited by reciprocity theory considerations. That is, after participating in one or two waves, an individual may feel they have already done his or her part as participant. In addition, after one or two waves the respondent is aware of the nature of the study and recognizes it as non-commercial.

The SHP finally decided to carry out an experiment to evaluate the actual effect of an incentive offered between waves. The experiment was combined with a second experiment to evaluate the burden of an extra questionnaire mailed between two normal interview waves. This retrospective questionnaire was developed to obtain information about a

respondent’s life prior to the panel study. However, it was feared that the extra questionnaire would burden the respondents and thus increase the dropout rate.

For the combined experiments, a subsample of the total panel was subjected to one of four experimental conditions: (1) biographical questionnaire in combination with a special incentive, (2) biographical questionnaire with no special incentive, (3) no biographical questionnaire but a special incentive, or (4) no biographical questionnaire and no special incentive (for details see Scherpenzeel et al. (2002)). The Swiss-German and French major linguistic groups of Switzerland were proportionally sampled and randomly assigned to the four experimental groups. The incentive chosen was a chance to win a lottery in which there were sixteen cash prizes, ranging from 500 to 10,000 SFr. (approximately 330 to 66,670 Euros). The response rates for the second telephone panel wave were compared for all four experimental groups to estimate the effect of the incentive, the dropout that would result from the extra burden of the questionnaire, and whether combining the questionnaire with an incentive could prevent the possible increase in dropouts.

Sending the biographical questionnaire without a lottery incentive increased the refusals on the household level by about 3%. Sending the biographical questionnaire in combination with the lottery incentive kept the household refusal rates at a normal level. A lottery incentive indeed seemed to lower the household refusal rates in general: Both groups to whom the lottery was announced (groups 1 and 3) exhibited 3% lower grid refusal rates than the respective equivalent groups with no such announcement (groups 2 and 4); this was a significant effect. The experiment was designed for the purpose of estimating the effects on the total response rates and was kept as small as possible (about 200 respondents in each group) to avoid the loss of many respondents in case the extra questionnaire would turn out to have a very large effect. Therefore, no linguistic, cultural, or other critical groups could be compared.

Table 5 SHP studies concerning the continuity of participation

Study	Design	Result	SHP decision
Persuasive power of mailings	Text evaluation	Concepts which could be used more: reciprocity, helping, constancy of behavior, personalization	Inclusion of these concepts in future mailings
Between waves incentive	Experiment	Lottery incentive decreases grid refusal rates by 3%.	No between waves incentives because effect was considered too small in proportion to costs

7 Conclusion

In this article we aimed to achieve a systematic review of all measures taken to encourage and maintain participation in the SHP survey. We analyzed all of the means of communication, the channels through which messages were distributed, their aims, and the content of the messages. We further assessed all of the activities that could indicate whether certain communications or ways of communicating could influence participation and panel fidelity. Finally, with focus groups, we qualitatively evaluated the impressions that the communications made on potential respondents and we performed quantitative methodological experiments to evaluate other possibilities to encourage and maintain participation.

By testing various means of communication and by taking into account the most basic and simple details (such as whether or not a personal signature on a letter or the use of a real stamp is perceived and/or makes a difference) the SHP tried to detect the most alluring way to introduce the project and motivate people to participate in it. The SHP thus applied a rather “market-oriented” approach, yet tried to uphold ethical criteria of communicating in a sincere and transparent way and emphasizing the sincerity of the project. The aim of evaluations with focus groups was not necessarily to find out how to best “sell” the scientific survey, “Living in Switzerland,” (how to obtain the highest possible response rates, regardless of the consequences for subsequent waves, for example). The SHP’s objective was nonetheless to obtain the best participation rates possible (which may appear to be a very similar goal) by making the survey have as few burdens and be as attractive to participate in as possible, without giving in to traditional and often aggressive marketing strategies.

Despite the investments made in the presentation of the written communications and in the method employed for approaching potential interviewees for the first time, the SHP team was conscious of the fact that all indirect communications through mailings, newsletters, articles in journals, etc. would not be able to counterbalance unfavorable “voice-to-voice” encounters, given the data collection mode to be CATI. This “human factor” is probably the most important one in interaction with the respondents. Communication may surge or recede with the interviewers on the telephone, both during the first contact and then particularly in subsequent waves, which was one reason why much energy was invested in the instruction of the interviewers and in working out a repertoire of arguments for them to use when talking to potential panel participants or when attempting to convert refusals.

The systematic evaluation of all of the communications made by the SHP with the interviewees reveals what was actually communicated and what messages were sent to the respondents. The overview of possible activities and communications encouraging or

securing participation illustrates the “picture” that the SHP had made of the potential interviewees, and whether the basic underlying and implicit assumptions of the SHP team actually applied in communication with the interviewees. The underlying assumptions may be summarized as follows: The SHP assumed that people will be most likely to continuously participate if they feel (i) valued and appreciated, that they are taken seriously and are participating in a serious survey; (ii) that the survey is relevant for social policy, for the monitoring of social change, or for other reasons; (iii) that they are not being coerced into participation, but participate because they are convinced or at least not overtly against the interview; and (iv) that they understand the longitudinal nature of the survey, i.e. if they understand what sort of commitment they enter into when they agree to participate in the first wave (an “implicit contract”).

This systematic overview of measures to enhance participation has revealed a void in the methodological literature, particularly regarding the effects of the transmission and amount of information used for the purpose of conducting scientific surveys. Indeed, in our literature review, for panel surveys, we did not come across empirical studies concerned with the layout and presentation of information,¹⁴ or with the impact of the type or amount of information communicated. This is in contrast with the vast body of literature concerned with the impact of things like advance letters and incentives. Within the particular Swiss context, a continuous evaluation of respondents’ reactions to attempts to improve communication should be incorporated into the normal functioning of the SHP survey. More regular and precise studies are lacking regarding the impact of the transmission of information as opposed to cash or other material incentives as explicit measures of making a survey more attractive and of encouraging participation. Such methodological research should therefore be integrated into ongoing panel studies. Indeed, they basically require only a precise experimental design and are not very costly in comparison to other methodological studies. Ethical questions as well as the issue of dividing respondents into experimental and control groups (for example, informing one group and not the other) with the result of possibly losing respondents from the annual CATI survey also need to be evaluated carefully. Our work has thus only just begun in this respect. We hope to be able to contribute to this gap in scientific knowledge in the future by means of such methodological experiments performed within the context of the SHP survey.

14 By contrast, a body of literature on mail surveys exists that evaluates the effects of paper color and size on response rates (Fox et al 1988; Johnson et al. 1993).

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Appendix List of Letters, Brochures, and Publications Sent to the Respondents

Communication for first interview: Sept. 1999 - Feb. 2000.

August 1999

- Letter announcing the study.
- Brochure: "Leben in der Schweiz;" "Vivre en Suisse 1999-2003."
- Publication in l'illustré "Les véritable conséquences du chômage."
- Publication in the Schweizer Familie "Jobs 2000."

July 2000

- Letter of thanks for participation.
- Informative brochure "Leben in der Schweiz. Ein Portrait der Haushalte und Familien in der Schweiz;" "Vivre en Suisse. Portrait des ménages et familles en Suisse."

Communication for second interview: Sept. 2000 - Feb. 2001.

September 2000

- Letter announcing second interview.
- Publication in l'illustré "Plutôt heureux les Suisses."
- Publication in the Schweizer Familie "Fast wie im Paradies."

May 2001

- Biographical experiment: Letter and questionnaire to a sub-sample of interviewees.

Communication for third interview: Sept. 2001 - Feb. 2002.

August 2001

- Letter announcing third interview.
- Brochure "Leben in der Schweiz 1999-2000. Ein Jahr im Leben der Haushalte und Familien in der Schweiz;" "Vivre en Suisse 1999-2000. Une année dans la vie des ménages et familles en Suisse".

October 2001

- Publication in l'illustré "Plutôt branchés, les Suisses".

May 2002

- Biographical survey: Letter and questionnaire to all respondents who had not previously been selected for the biographical experiment in 2001.

Communication for fourth interview: Sept. 2002 - Feb. 2003.

August 2002

- Letter announcing fourth interview.
- Newsletter: "Leben in der Schweiz: Aktuelle Informationen für teilnehmende Haushalte;" "Vivre en Suisse. Actualités à l'intention des ménages interrogés."

March 2003

- Letter of thanks for participation.
- Newsletter "Hinter den Kulissen der Umfrage;" "Dans les coulisses de l'enquête."

Communication for fifth interview: Sept. 2003 - Feb. 2004.

September 2003

- Letter announcing fifth interview.
- Publication in Construire: "Une Suisse de plus en plus polarisée."
- Publication in Brückenbauer: "Familienwahl: So würden Familien wählen."

June 2004

- Letter of thanks for participation.
- Newsletter: "Eine Schatztruhe für gesellschaftsrelevante Forschung;" "Une mine d'informations pour la recherche sociale."

Communication for sixth interview: Sept. 2004 - Feb. 2005.

September 2004

- Letter announcing sixth interview.