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Do Respondents Who Pen Comments Onto Mail Surveys Differ From Other Respondents? A Research Note on the Human Services Job Satisfaction Literature

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A current study has criticized the human services job satisfaction literature for relying solely on information obtained by “closed-ended” questionnaires. Stating that these studies may not accurately reflect the actual conditions under which public welfare employees function, the authors base their criticisms on an analysis of the extemporaneous comments of subjects participating in a national study. Nonetheless, whether or not those who pen comments are representative of the broader population of human service workers remains an open question. The study reported in this article sought to shed light on this issue by comparing respondents who commented versus those who did not. Findings indicate that the two groups are quite similar although some differences were observed.

McNeely and Schultz (1986) recently have assailed what they assert are methodological weaknesses in the job satisfaction literature involving human service workers. Their assertions are based on a content analysis of the extemporaneously penned comments of 481 human service workers employed in county welfare departments located in disparate areas of the nation.

According to the authors the image of social services work derived from an examination of these remarks differs substantially from images based upon data collected in studies relying solely on “closed-ended” questionnaires. Among other factors,

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the authors suggest that closed-ended questionnaires may be constructed in ways that miss key sources of dissatisfaction with the job, may be insensitive to situational influences peculiar to the different study sites being surveyed, or may miss altogether the impact of broader situational influences such as the shock of present-day federal and state budgetary cutbacks. Too, McNeely and Schultz suggest that "the closed-ended" questionnaires may be forcing respondents' replies into structured explanators not fully reflective of the work-site dynamics being investigated (1986, p.11). For example, indices designed to assess influences such as "job challenge," "job autonomy," and similar concepts may not capture adequately the concerns of those actually involved in the "dust and smoke" of public welfare work. Finally, the authors note that the analysis of subjects' extemporaneous feedback is responsive to criticisms (cf. Gutek, 1978) that have been leveled against job satisfaction researchers who rely exclusively on closed-ended questionnaires.

Nonetheless, the representativeness of replies penned by a comparatively small group of motivated respondents participating in McNeely and Schultz's study remain an open question. While 481 respondents provided written comments, 1,179 other subjects did not. Could the 481 subjects be significantly different than the other respondents? Could it be that only the most disgruntled or most enthusiastic participants took the additional time necessary to write about their concerns after completing a lengthy survey? Or, could it be that only those in higher occupational and income categories were responsive to the invitation to provide written comments?

These questions represent rather significant research issues about which little is known and, to the author's knowledge, nothing at all is known in the human services job satisfaction literature. Specifically, if the two types of respondents are significantly different, issues relating to sample noncomparability abound. Too, the image of working conditions constructed from the minority who provide written comments can be said to misrepresent conditions as experienced by the majority of subjects. These possibilities are broader than the McNeely and Schultz study under scrutiny in this article. The issue really is one of whether or not respondents who pen comments are significantly

different that those who do not, irrespective of any particular study.

Method

Data obtained for McNeely and Schultz's study were collected by mail survey for the period 1977-1984. Data were collected in 1979 and 1981 from the Racine (Wisconsin) Comprehensive Human Services Department. One portion of the 1979 survey requested retrospective information for 1977. One hundred and sixty respondents from Racine participated in the study in 1979 and 105 participated in 1981. The Dade County (Miami) Department of Human Resources was surveyed in 1983. In 1984, the Genesee County (Flint, Michigan) Department of Social Services and the Sacramento County (California) Department of Social Welfare were surveyed. A total of 337 respondents from Dade County returned questionnaires, 303 were returned from Genesee County, and 755 were returned from Sacramento County. Altogether, 3,287 questionnaires were sent out. Thus, the 1,660 returned questionnaires resulted in a response rate of 50.5%. Unfortunately, 25 questionnaires were too insufficiently completed to warrant inclusion in most analyses. (Most of these respondents provided extensive written comments but failed to complete the structured questionnaire.)

Three structured indices were imbedded into the questionnaire. The Science Research Associates Attitude Survey (SRA) was included because it pinpoints very specific aspects of subjects' working conditions such as effectiveness of internal grievance procedures, availability of support services, quality of fringe benefits, etc. Two job satisfaction measures, the Index of Job Satisfaction (IJS) and the Morse Index (MI), also were included. The IJS measures overall work satisfaction while the MI seeks to assess "intrinsic" satisfaction levels. Intrinsic satisfaction refers to the capacity of the job to satisfy needs for creative and challenging work. All three indices may be examined by the reader as published in Miller's (1977) reference text. Other questionnaire items required information on demographic characteristics such as gender, marital status, educational attainment, etc.

Following completion of the questionnaire respondents read the following statement: "Please use the reverse side of this page

to write any comments you may have. Thank you very much for your cooperation." Thus, respondents were free to comment extemporaneously on any matter of importance to them. There was no effort to guide respondents' replies and members of the research team did not seek to anticipate the remarks subjects would make.

There were several differences in the questionnaires prepared for Racine County versus those prepared for Dade, Genesee and Sacramento counties. First, data were not collected for race and income in Racine County. Second, one portion of the 1979 survey requested information for 1977. Third, an index assessing organizational styles (McNeely, 1983) was imbedded in the 1981 Racine instrument. However, the format of the questionnaires were identical in all other respects.

Speaking with reference to the particular research questions addressed within this article, the Racine data posed an additional problem. Unlike the other sites, Racine County was surveyed more than once. Forty-five respondents had been employed in Racine during both survey periods (McNeely, Fey-erherm, & Johnson, 1986). Some of these individuals penned comments onto the backs of their questionnaires in 1979 but not in 1981. Consequently, were Racine subjects to be included in the present analysis it could artificially inflate similarities between those who penned comments versus those who did not. For this reason, and the fact that information had not been collected for race and income, a decision was reached to exclude Racine respondents from this examination.

Several statistical measures were utilized in order to determine whether or not there were significant differences between those penning comments versus those who did not. These included chi-squared (X^2), Pearson's r , t -tests and multiple step-wise regression analysis.

Findings

There were no differences in the tendency to write comments based on gender ($X^2=.229$; $p=.632$; Yates correction). However, younger respondents were more likely than other respondents to provide comments. The average (mean) age of commenters was 39.7 years versus 41.5 for noncommenters ($t=3.05$; $p=.002$;

separate variance estimate). Commenters were no more likely than noncommenters to be “professionals” (includes administrators, supervisors and professionals) or nonprofessionals ($X^2 = 15.3$; $p = .696$; Yates correction). The average employment length for commenters was 9.1 years while noncommenters had been employed an average of 9.3 years. The standard deviations on employment length for both groups were precisely equivalent ($Sd = 6.76$). Differences in employment length did not achieve statistical significance ($t = .61$; $p = .541$; pooled variance estimate). Although commenters ($\bar{X} = \$19,225$) earned less than noncommenters ($\bar{X} = \$19,558$), these differences were not statistically significant ($t = .51$; $p = .621$; pooled variance estimate).

A nonsignificant trend was observed wherein commenters were slightly better educated than noncommenters. For example, 56.5% of the commenters had completed at least one college degree compared to 51.5% of noncommenters who were similarly educated. However, these differences did not achieve statistical significance ($X^2 = 13.69$; $p = .09$). No differences were observed in

Table 1

Profile of the Sample by Selected Demographic Characteristics*

	Commenters	%	Non-Commenters	%
Entire Sample	435	31.8	935	68.2
<i>Gender</i>	435	100.0	927	100.0
Females	327	75.2	684	73.8
Males	108	24.8	243	26.2
<i>Age</i>	435	100.0	915	99.9
< 30	52	12.0	110	12.0
30–41	229	52.6	390	42.6
42–53	101	23.2	274	29.9
> 53	53	12.2	141	15.4
<i>Occupation</i>	435	100.0	931	100.0
Professional**	185	42.5	408	43.8
Non-professional**	250	57.5	523	56.2
<i>Employment Length</i>	433	100.0	916	100.0
< 4	90	20.8	194	21.2
4–6	85	19.6	163	17.8
7–9	76	17.5	163	17.8

10-13	61	14.1	134	14.6
13-15	60	13.9	94	10.3
> 15	61	14.1	168	18.3
<i>Income</i>	435	100.0	928	99.9
< \$15,000	89	20.4	223	24.0
15,000-20,999	141	32.4	297	32.0
21,000-26,999	143	32.9	263	28.3
27,000-32,999	39	9.0	95	10.2
33,000-38,999	14	3.2	27	2.9
> 39,000	9	2.1	23	2.5
<i>Education</i>	435	100.0	926	100.0
< H.S.	6	1.4	29	3.1
H. S. Diploma	183	42.1	420	45.4
College Degree	169	38.8	319	34.4
Grad. Degree	69	15.9	145	15.7
Ph.D./M.D.	8	1.8	13	1.4
<i>Marital Status</i>	434	100.0	927	100.0
Married	229	52.8	503	54.3
Widowed	16	3.7	31	3.3
Divorced	101	23.3	194	20.9
Separated	11	2.5	49	5.3
Never Married	77	17.7	150	16.2
<i>Race</i>	435	100.0	924	100.0
Asian	9	2.1	59	6.4
Black	67	15.4	198	21.4
Caucasian	318	73.1	565	61.1
Hispanic	31	7.1	83	9.0
Other	10	2.3	19	2.1
<i>Food Stamps/AFDC</i>	434	100.0	929	100.0
Recipient	104	24.0	241	26.0
Non-Recipient	330	76.0	688	74.0

*Excludes 25 insufficiently completed questionnaires. Excludes Racine questionnaires (N=265).

**"Professionals"=Administrators, supervisors and professionals.

Non-professionals=Paraprofessionals, clericals and service workers.
(Service workers = Building custodians, vehicle operators, etc.)

the propensity to comment based on marital status ($X^2=6.48$; $p=.166$). However, Caucasian respondents were more likely to comment than members of other racial/ethnic groups ($X^2=24.3$;

p=.001). Individuals who had been recipients of food stamps and/or AFDC were no more likely than other respondents to pen extemporaneous comments ($X^2=20.79$; $p=.409$; Yates correction).

As evidenced in Table 2, commenters were less satisfied on both measures of job satisfaction. Differences between the two groups achieved statistical significance on overall (IJS) satisfaction ($t=3.80$; $p=.000$; separate variance estimate) and intrinsic (MI) satisfaction ($t=3.07$; $p=.002$; pooled variance estimate).

Table 2

Overall (IJS) and Intrinsic (MI) Job Satisfaction: Commenters Versus Non-commenters

Comment Status	N	\bar{X}	Sd	t-Value	Significance*
<i>Index of Job Satisfaction</i>					
Commenters	432	59.32	12.61	3.80**	.000
Non-Commenters	916	62.03	11.30		
<i>Morse Index</i>					
Commenters	428	14.23	3.58	3.07**	.002
Non-Commenters	925	14.93	3.24		

*Two-tailed probability.

**Separate variance estimate.

Multiple stepwise regression analysis was performed to determine the predictors of overall job satisfaction for both groups. The SRA variables, as well as the demographic variables, comprised the independent variables in the regression model.

Table 3 indicates substantial similarities in the predictors of job satisfaction for the two groups. Respondents' assessments of the degree to which their jobs were dull was the best predictor of job satisfaction for both groups. Those who agreed that "My job is often dull and monotonous" were considerably less satisfied than other respondents. The near equivalence of this predictor's importance for both groups is reflected by near equal beta weight values (.455 and .474).

Table 3

Multiple Stepwise Regression of Demographic and SRA Variables on Overall (IJS) Job Satisfaction by Age

Variables	Simple r	Beta Weight	R ² Changes	Total R ²
<i>Commenters</i>				
Job Dullness	-.610	-.455	.372	
Use of Abilities	.540	.302	.084	
Too Much Pressure	-.235	-.162	.027	
Age	.156	.137	.010	
Employment Length	-.026	-.105	.010	
				.503
<i>Non-Commenters</i>				
Job Dullness	-.609	-.474	.371	
Use of Abilities	.461	.193	.046	
Too Much Pressure	-.257	-.157	.030	
Belongingness Increases	.204	.108	.013	
Complaints Handled Well	.296	.098	.011	
				.471

Both groups were affected by whether or not their jobs permitted them to use their abilities. Those agreeing with the statement "I have little opportunity to use my abilities in this organization" were much less satisfied than other subjects. However, the importance of this predictor was greater for commenters (Beta weight=.302) than for noncommenters (Beta weight=.193). Too, both groups were affected by perceptions of job pressures, with less satisfied employees agreeing that "There is too much pressure on my job."

The satisfaction of commenters also was predicted by age and employment length although these variables explained comparatively small amounts of the variance in commenters' job satisfaction scores. Older commenters were more satisfied than younger commenters but employment tenure was inversely related to satisfaction, with longer employed commenters being less satisfied than more recently employed commenters.

Noncommenters who agreed that "The longer you work for this organization the more you feel you belong" and that "They

have a (good) way of handling employee complaints here" were more satisfied with their jobs. However, both predictors explained relatively small amounts of the variance. Altogether, predictors depicted in Table 3 explained 50.3% of the variance in commenters' job satisfaction scores, and 47.1% of the variance in noncommenters' job satisfaction.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Demographically speaking, there are no substantive differences between commenting and noncommenting respondents except that commenters tend to be younger than noncommenters and non-Hispanic Caucasians are more likely to pen comments than other subjects. Although commenters, as a group, were slightly better educated, differences in educational attainment between commenters and noncommenters did not achieve statistical significance.

Both of the statistically significant demographic differences are related to the major difference observed between the two groups. The major difference, of course, is the fact that commenters are significantly less satisfied with their jobs than the noncommenters. Research on job satisfaction has demonstrated consistently that younger workers are less satisfied than older workers (Hall, 1986; Doering, Rhodes, and Schuster, 1983; Wright and Hamilton, 1978) and, although the findings are less consistent, that Caucasians tend to be less satisfied than minority-group members (Bartell, 1981; Jones et al., 1977; Gavin and Ewen, 1974). These same patterns are present among the human services stratum of workers as evidenced by previous analyses conducted on the subjects comprising this study's sample frame (McNeely, 1986a; McNeely, 1986b).

Factors affecting satisfaction for both groups are surprisingly similar, although younger commenters are less satisfied than older commenters and employment tenure is inversely related to satisfaction among these respondents. Among noncommenters, more satisfied respondents experience a sense of increasing "belongingness" and feel that workers' complaints tend to be handled reasonably well. But the strength of all of these influences were comparatively weak. Insofar as the

predictors are concerned, the only notable difference is that the importance of being in jobs permitting one to use one's abilities is more profound in predicting the satisfaction of commenters versus noncommenters. The latter observation, again, perhaps is tied to the greater youthfulness of commenters given the fact that younger workers are less likely than older workers to have secured the jobs present in county human services work that provide the most autonomy and involve the greatest task complexity (McNeely, 1986b). Taken in sum the data lead this investigator to the conclusion that the major risk of constructing images of working conditions based upon the remarks of respondents is that these remarks may not fully represent the views of minority group members and older employees, both of whom tend to be more job satisfied. However, if this risk is placed within the context of the purpose of most job satisfaction research, which is to identify job satisfaction levels and to locate the sources of worker discontent, the risk of underrepresentation pales given the need to pinpoint factors that mitigate satisfaction. In this respect, the images constructed are accurate although some groups of employees, such as minority group members and older workers, may be less affected by the conditions that reduce satisfaction among other employees. Thus, the most likely outcome of having greater representation from older workers and minority workers in employees' written comments is that the intensity rather than the substance of conditions specified as dissatisfying would be reduced. This possibility, in fact, is evident in the quantitative data depicted in Table 3 showing the greater strength of one of the major job satisfaction predictors, "Use of Abilities," for commenters versus noncommenters.

In conclusion, and returning to the questions that led to the examination reported in this article, it appears that analysis of subjects' penned comments may be a better "barometer" in efforts to locate the sources of discontent among those actually involved in the "dust and smoke" of human services work. Forcing respondents' replies into the structured explanators of closed-ended questionnaires simply may not tell all.

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