Social Desirability Bias and Faculty Respondents: Is "Good Behavior" Harming Survey Results?

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FSSE
faculty survey of
student engagement

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Issue of Social Desirability Bias (SDB)

- Idea that respondents do not answer survey questions truthfully because they are trying to provide socially appropriate responses
  - Traditionally only a major concern for surveys with sensitive topics, such as sexual behaviors or drug use
- Many scales have been developed to measure the tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner
- If instrument is free from SDB, scores should not be related to scores on a measure of SDB

SDB in Higher Education Research

- More recently, SDB is a concern for student responses in a variety of self-reported topics

- Mixed results on presence of SDB in college student surveys (Bowman & Hill, 2011; Luo et al., 2009)

- Findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggest presence of SDB for *some* student-reported academic behaviors, but minimal effect sizes indicate little practical significance (Miller, 2012)

Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)

- Complimentary survey to NSSE, assesses a variety of behaviors related to student engagement with faculty at 4-year colleges and universities across the United States and Canada

- FSSE items represent good practices related to desirable college outcomes

- Respondents reflect on frequency of promoting various academic behaviors as well as growth, learning, and development in their students

FSSE ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS

- Higher-Order Learning
- Reflective & Integrative Learning
- Learning Strategies
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Collaborative Learning
- Discussions with Diverse Others
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Effective Teaching Practices
- Quality of Interactions
- Supportive Environment

DATA SOURCE

- Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)

- In 2014, subsample of 1,574 faculty at 18 institutions received experimental item set that included a short (8-item) social desirability measure (Ray, 1984)

- Combined with Engagement Indicator scores and demographic information from the core FSSE survey

METHODS

OLS regression models (10 total)

- Each of 10 Engagement Indicators as DV
- Controlling for faculty and institutional characteristics known to relate to engagement and work experiences
- All categorical variables were dummy-coded
- SDB score was entered as second step of model to examine unique variance
- Multicollinearity check: all VIF values below 5

OLS Independent Variables

Faculty demographics

Gender

Race/Ethnicity

U.S. citizenship

Doctorate-earned status

Job rank

Discipline of appointment

Age

Number of years teaching

Institutional context

Locale

Enrollment size

Barron's selectivity

Control (public/private)

*Social desirability score

RESULTS

DV Engagement Indicator	Adj. R^2	ΔR^2	β
Higher-Order Learning	.081***	.002	0.049
Reflective & Integrative Learning	.235***	.001	0.038
Quantitative Reasoning	.202***	.006	0.082**
Learning Strategies	.066***	.008	0.098**
Collaborative Learning	.052***	.008	0.100**
Discussions with Diverse Others	.105***	.008	0.100**
Student-Faculty Interaction	.119***	.000	0.017
Effective Teaching Practices	.130***	.041	0.220***
Quality of Interactions	.078***	.011	0.116***
Supportive Environment	.139***	.002	0.050

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

- For 4 out of the 10 models, the effect of the social desirability scale is not statistically significant, after controlling for faculty and institutional characteristics

- For 6 of the 10 models, there was statistical significance but coefficient sizes suggest little to no practical significance

DISCUSSION

- Effective Teaching Practices was the most predicted by social desirability scores
  - Although still small in magnitude (β = .220)
- Might be partially explained due to the similarity between these items and ones found on course evaluations at many institutions
  - Higher stakes associated with results, faculty might be more sensitive to these items
  - Also evidence that student course evaluations might be biased in terms of the gender and race/ethnicity of instructors (Stark & Frieshtat, 2014), adding to more sensitive nature of items

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

- Self-selection: for institutions and faculty respondents
- Only data from 18 institutions
- Correlational, not causal design
- Further explore if SDB has disparate impact depending on institutional climate
- Consideration for interpreting results from faculty surveys – include measure as control variable in analytic models?
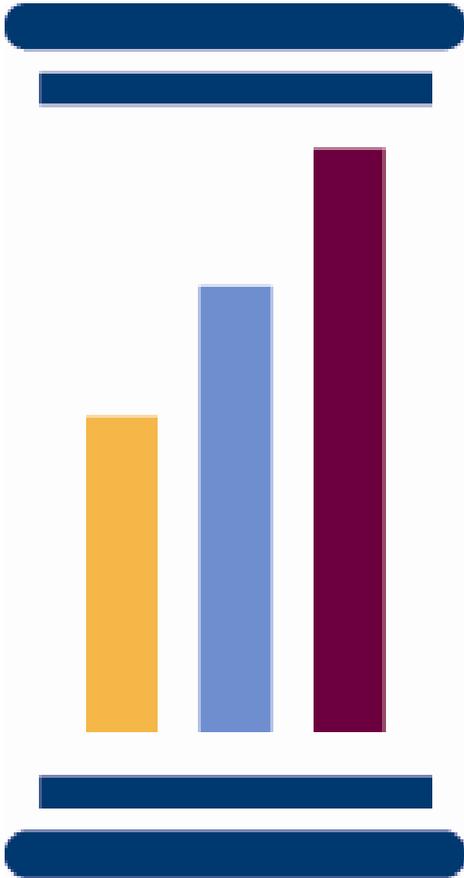
Questions & Comments?

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***Reference list and/or the full paper can be provided upon request