Negativity Bias in Open-ended Responses

Poncheri, et al., analyzed data from a web-based climate survey to explore the link between open-ended question format and response patterns. They make the following points, among others:

1. “Numerous researchers…have conducted studies that lend support to the existence of the PNA [positive-negative asymmetry] effect…” [p. 615]

2. “Our results revealed that relatively dissatisfied employees were more likely to provide comments than their more satisfied counterparts…In terms of comment tone, open-ended responses tended to echo the closed-ended satisfaction ratings of the commenter…Taken together, these two trends help explain why open-ended comments were disproportionately negative in tone…This finding provides empirical support for the PNA effect in general and the negativity bias in particular…” [p. 625]

3. “This research also demonstrated that for most of the survey dimensions studied, the length of comments increased as comments became more negative in tone…This suggests that negative comments may be particularly lengthy as respondents attempt to express their dissatisfaction thoroughly…” [p.626]

4. “The results of this study have important practical implications, particularly for consumers of survey research. The finding that open-ended comments are disproportionately negative lends support to a suggestion cited among survey practitioners: Recipients of survey feedback reports should be warned about the negative tone of open-ended comments so that they do not place undue emphasis on the content of these comments…” [p.626]

Poncheri, et al, surveyed 661 members of a large military organization, and had a 77% response rate. About 40% of the respondents self-identified as military personnel, 70% reported gender as male, and 62% self-identified as white. The survey had questions for satisfaction of seven dimensions of organizational climate, and each dimension had between 5 and 20 Likert-type questions as well as one open-ended question.

This study will interest researchers because it can help them interpret survey data that they collect or that others report. Reanna M. Poncheri (North Carolina State U. and Surface, Ward, and Associates), Jennifer T. Lindberg and Lori Foster Thompson (North Carolina State U.), and Eric A. Surface (Surface, Ward, and Associates) provide details in an article (“A Comment on Employee Surveys: Negativity Bias in Open-Ended Responses”) published in Organizational Research Methods (July 2008, Vol. 11, No.3, pp. 614-630). Readers with a background in survey research will find the content and style of the paper accessible.

Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at:

[Abstract by Willard Hom, Director of Research, Analysis & Accountability, Chancellor’s Office, California Community Colleges, 9/28/2011]