FEATURE ARTICLES

Assessing Survey Satisficing: The Impact of Unmotivated Questionnaire Responding on Data Quality

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Education researchers use surveys widely. Yet, critics question respondents' ability to provide high-quality responses. As schools increasingly use student surveys to drive local policy making, respondents' (lack of) motivation to provide quality responses may threaten the wisdom of using questionnaires for data-based decision making. To better understand student satisficing—the practice of suboptimal responding on surveys—and its impact on data quality, we examined its pervasiveness and impact on a large-scale social–emotional learning survey administered to 409,721 elementary and secondary students. Findings indicated that despite the prevalence of satisficing, its impact on data quality appeared more modest than anticipated. We conclude by outlining an accessible approach for defining and calculating satisficing for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Keywords: attitude; educational policy; motivation; questionnaire responding; satisficing; social–emotional learning (SEL); student behavior/attitude; survey research

Social scientists, including educational researchers, have long maintained a love–hate relationship with surveys. On the one hand, surveys uncover respondents' values, perceptions, and attitudes efficiently and at scale (Gehlbach, 2015; Gilbert, 2006; West et al., 2017). Surveys' flexibility allows respondents to report on themselves (i.e., self-report measures), other individuals, or their perceptions of a whole class or community.

On the other hand, skeptics have critiqued the value of survey data, often focusing on three concerns. First, some raise questions about the introspective abilities participants need to provide high-quality answers. For example, Nisbett and Wilson (1977a, 1977b) provided multiple examples of people's erroneous attempts to understand their own choices. Others show how respondents readily report on policies that do not exist, thus, showing how people report opinions that they could not possibly have (Bishop et al., 1980).

A second challenge arises from critics who acknowledge that people might know their own attitudes but worry that subtle forces may inhibit respondents' accurate reporting. These forces include phenomena such as acquiescence bias, social desirability, floor/ceiling effects, biased question wording, response order effects, and so forth (e.g., Krosnick, 1999).

Yet, survey designers can delimit surveys to topics that respondents might reasonably have opinions on. Furthermore, they can design surveys to accord with many of the best practices that survey researchers have developed (Gehlbach & Artino, 2018). So, although these two potential problems with survey research as a methodology are real and need to be taken seriously, they are rarely insurmountable.

Third, and potentially more challenging, are concerns about participants' motivation to take the survey seriously. In its most extreme form, some may become "mischievous responders" (Robinson-Cimpian, 2014) who actively strive to give false answers, perhaps out of boredom or an attempt to be funny. Krosnick (1991) describes milder, and potentially more prevalent forms of "satisficing," where respondents fail to put forth their best efforts in responding. This motivation problem is sufficiently common that some researchers have even used

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Increasingly, people are using survey data to inform decision making. Yet, survey respondents are not always motivated to provide quality responses. Respondents sometimes stop early, omit items, or repeatedly select the same response option—behaviors that reflect a practice known as "survey satisficing." We examined the frequency of satisficing and its impact on a survey administered to 409,721 elementary and secondary school students. Findings indicated that although approximately 30% of students satisficed, these behaviors did not pose a meaningful threat to data quality. Our paper includes accessible strategies for calculating satisficing and provides recommendations for individuals working with survey data.