Title of Proposal

Abstract
Much of the research about college student outcomes and experiences is based upon self-reported surveys, but studies have begun to problematize the data gleaned from such instruments. This scholarly paper explores the rise of self-reported surveys in higher education research and discusses possible alternative interpretations of such data.

Format
First Choice: F06- Scholarly Paper  
Second Choice: F02- Roundtable  
Third Choice: F04- Poster Session

Content
Purpose of the Inquiry

Much of the research on higher education outcomes is predicated upon the “quantification of the subjective realm of human experience” (Converse, 2000, p. 85). Through questionnaires and surveys, data is gleaned from individuals who self-report frequency of behaviors, assess their personal states (e.g., motivation, work ethic, etc.), and/or relay their attitudes on a variety of topics (Fowler, 1995). Using self-reported data, though, to make population estimates before the early part of the 20th century would have been tantamount to “scientific heresy” (Willis, 2005, p. 13). However, psychologists and social science researchers legitimized “the value of their own instruments for studying this [internal subjective] realm” by the early 1930s (Converse, 2010, p. 59).

Since 1930, the use of such self-reported surveys and questionnaires has proliferated in all social science fields, and they are heavily utilized to measure student outcomes and better understand important student processes within higher education (Gonyea, 2005). But, how do students formulate their responses on such instruments, and is the information attained through such methodologies being appropriately interpreted? This scholarly paper is designed to explore the historical antecedents to the usage of self-reported surveys in higher educational research and explore how scholars have begun to problematize such usage to better understand important student processes and outcomes.

The Philosophical, Theoretical, or Practical Argument and Its Bases

Self-reported survey data is traditionally discussed, critiqued, and applied through a post-positivist lens where the parts “can be broken down into simpler elements” to be able to control and predict phenomena (Davis & Sumara, 2005, p. 307; Porter, 2011). However, as Davis and Sumara (2005) contend, there are “no observeless observations or measureless measurements” (p. 314). With self-reported surveys, students are the portals through which all information is filtered, as they must measure and observe themselves, but how do they inform and construct these responses? McCormick and McClennery (2012) acknowledge “research into how respondents use vague quantifiers has convincingly shown that respondents use various processes of comparison, rather than recall and tally to situate their response” (p. 315). If responses are being made through comparison, they are fundamentally relational, which means they are necessarily culturally and conditionally situated. Accordingly, Bowman (2010) found many students tend to overestimate or underestimate their gains when self-reporting depending upon student characteristics (e.g., first-generation status, gender, race, etc.) and the type of construct being measured (e.g., critical thinking, contact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, etc.).
In a study, which utilized both self-reported data and time-use diaries to study church-going behavior in various cultures, researchers found vast differences in the United States between what was self-reported to what was shown on time-use diaries (Brenner, 2012). Brenner (2012) suggests over-reporting on surveys is “more than an annoyance…, [but] is a survey artifact…to better understand culturally situated behavior” (p. 378). Response errors occur because people are not responding to “who we are, but rather to who we think we are” (Brenner, 2012, p. 378). Accordingly, the manner in which students respond on self-reported surveys may have more to do with how students perceive their environment and construct their identity in response to what is systematically privileged or marginalized by their institutional cultures (Museus, 2014; Olivas, 2011; Tinto, 1993). When individuals respond on self-reported surveys, they may not be responding with an ‘objective’ measurement of their ‘actual’ experiences, but rather they may be responding to how they understand themselves in and through the contexts and conditions of their environment.

The Theoretical Analysis of the Response Process

Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski’s (2000) four-phase survey response process provides a structural framework to understand the complex cognition process individuals utilize when responding to requests for information on surveys or questionnaires (Willis, 2005). The model frames the myriad of cognitive processes individuals utilize when answering a given question into the following four broad phases: comprehension, retrieval, judgment, and response (Tourangeau et al., 2000). Completion of these phases, though, is “not necessarily direct, but rather is reconstructive in nature” (Willis, 2005, p. 38), and as such, the culturally informed lens of the people responding to the instrument inherently shapes and influences their response patterns (Tourangeau et al., 2000). Consequently, Schuman (1982) recommends utilizing social psychological theories to understand the survey response process as an artifact of this culturally situated behavior since such differential response patterns may not be illustrative of biases within the instrument, but of the instruments providing substantively different information.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) human ecology model of development and Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) theory of social reproduction in education will be utilized to consider the historically and culturally situated reciprocal process of meaning-making an individual utilizes when responding to a survey and how these are influenced by environmental factors. Figure 1 provides a schematic illustrating how these theories may be combined to better understand the survey response process.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) model theorizes “human beings are not only partial products, but also partial producers of their environments…, and the created environments are symbolic in nature…, [and] these symbols are…emotionally, socially, and motivationally loaded” (p. 6). The model is theorized as “a system of nested, interdependent, dynamic structures ranging from the proximal, consisting of face-to-face settings, to the most distal, comprising broader social contexts such as classes and cultures” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 4). Within these environments, individuals develop ecological niches, which are “particular regions in the environment that are especially favorable or unfavorable to the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 111). These ecological niches may influence how a student responds on self-reported surveys, as they shape students’ understandings of themselves.

Additionally, Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) theory on social reproduction is utilized to analyze and consider the differential experiences of students based upon their relative cultural capital. Cultural capital is “the distance between the cultural arbitrary imposed by the dominant pedagogic action and the cultural arbitrary inculcated by the family pedagogic action” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 30). The more individuals are able to align themselves with the preferences of those individuals, which dominate the cultural discourse, the more likely they will be to successfully navigate an environment. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the ultimate distillation of social reproduction in education results in self-censorship where individuals remove and limit themselves because they have inculcated the values of the dominant cultural arbitrary and judge themselves according to their cultural capital within this setting. Specifically with self-reported surveys, how do such instruments value certain ways of being within a college setting and reaffirm the “power of arbitrary imposition (the social reproduction function of cultural reproduction)” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 10)? Quite possibly student responses on self-reported surveys may be a form of self-censorship and/or attempting to adhere to a dominant cultural discourse.

Conclusions & Implications of the Argument

So, what may explain how individuals construct inferences during the survey response process and respond on self-reported surveys? Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecology model of human development may shed some light onto how individuals form these inferences and understand
themselves through person-process-context-time. While each person may bring particular experiences shaped over time through their previous ecologies and have personal dispositions influencing how they interact with the world, their specific ecological niches provide signals for how people understand themselves within that environment. This understanding may influence how they respond on self-reported instruments. Gonyea (2005) suggests “there may be factors within individuals having nothing to do with the particular behaviors assessed…that strongly influence how people respond to self-report questionnaires” (p. 81).

The environment signals to the individual who they are, and perhaps they respond accordingly. Fowler (1995) suggests individuals’ worldview or philosophical outlook partially explains how they may respond to requests for information since “the more consistent an event was with the way the respondent thinks about things, the more likely it is to be recalled” (Fowler, 1995, p. 22). Perhaps what students are truly answering is less a consideration of what they do, but who they think they are. Studies on African-American students at HBCUs or women at single-gender institutions may corroborate such findings. These students report higher levels of cognitive gains, even though objective measures do not necessarily support such a finding (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Why? Why would this be the case?

Perhaps this is evidence of social reproduction, and students responding to the messages within their environments. The students at HBCUs or single-gender institutions think of themselves as smarter, more talented, or harder working because their ecological niches provide them with cues to indicate this. What do responses about how students spend their time actually tell us about the students? Does it tell us how they spend their time, or how they think of themselves? Understanding this distinction would be beneficial in universities formulating appropriate interventions and responses to assist students. By contextualizing and nuancing the process, policymakers will have a better understanding of what tale surveys tell, which would enable them to better understand how the data should be applied to encourage positive student outcomes.

Importance of the Argument for Higher Education

In the past twenty years, the net cost of higher education has increased dramatically, as state governments have continued to divest from public education, and the structure of federal support has shifted from grant aid to student loans. Since the 1993-1994 academic year, the net cost of tuition has increased by 22% in private, four-year institutions and 52.9% in their public counterparts (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014). Such rising costs have had little impact upon affordability for families in the highest income brackets, as net college cost, as a percent of median family income, only increased 3% from 2000 to 2008 for those individuals in the highest income quintile (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education [NCPHE], 2008). However, the financial landscape of college affordability is far direr for those in the lowest-income quintile, as the average cost of attendance has increased from 39% of family income in 1999-2000 to 55% in 2007-2008 (NCPPPHE, 2008). These inequalities in college affordability have not gone unnoticed by the general public. President Barack Obama (2014) has cited a need to make “concrete commitments to reduce inequality in access to higher education” by helping “every hardworking kid go to college and succeed when they get to campus.” But, how do colleges reduce inequality in access to higher education while simultaneously helping students succeed once they arrive on campus?

Paradoxically, the programs, which have most often been linked through research to positive student outcomes, are often the most expensive (Kuh, 2009). As a result, practitioners are challenged to implement initiatives to encourage positive student outcomes without concurrently creating financial barriers preventing the very students the institutions want to help from enrolling in the first place. Colleges and universities will need to utilize their finite resources selectively to best meet institutional and national priorities, but how do researchers and practitioners utilize research to identify those programs most likely to help students succeed without necessarily increasing cost? The answer is most often to implement and utilize self-reported surveys to support ‘evidence-based practice.’

As an illustrative example of the impact of self-reported surveys in higher education, consider the College Student Report (CSR), the primary instrument utilized to collect student self-reported data for the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2014a). The CSR is widely utilized with over 1,500 colleges and universities participating in data collection since 2000 (NSSE, 2014a). While the NSSE indicates a desire for the CSR results to be used to “increase understanding of college quality and...support institutional improvement efforts” (NSSE, 2014b), these efforts often take the form of increasing programming, which is not a cost-neutral endeavor and risk pricing-out the very students the programs are designed to assist (Olivas, 2011). Student engagement and persistence are positively related, but what if what is being defined as an ‘objective’ experience of
engagement is more accurately reflective of how students understand themselves through environment (Kuh, 2009)? Such a finding may support alternate theoretical frameworks of student success and persistence, which highlight the important role of intercultural effort in fostering supportive and engaging atmospheres for students (Museus, 2014). What implications would this have upon the collegiate environment and the design of intervention strategies to prevent student drop-outs, stop-outs, and transfers (Tinto, 1993)? The CSR (and most studies regarding the college-staying process) collects self-reported data to record both “psychological data, relating to the internal states or traits of the individual; and behavioral data, relating to directly observable activities,” but both are measured through the portal of the student (Astin, 2001, p. 9). A richer understanding of the processes students utilize when responding on self-reported surveys is essential to be able to “determine the particular uses to which our data can be put” (Willis, 2005, p. 256).

### Reference(s)

**References**


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