Assessing the Past and Promise of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey for Public Management Research: A Research Synthesis

**Abstract:** Since 2002, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management has used the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) to monitor efforts by federal executive agencies to manage human capital. Public management researchers have used FEVS data to produce dozens of peer-reviewed publications on a range of topics of interest to policy makers, practitioners, and academics. Despite the proliferation of these empirical studies, the field of public management until now has lacked a critical assessment of the FEVS and how researchers have used the data. In this article, the authors discuss the strengths of the FEVS and the opportunities this survey has created for public management researchers. Despite important contributions made to the literature using the data, there are weaknesses in the content, design, and implementation of the FEVS. The authors offer a set of recommendations for refining the survey and its implementation with the aim of improving the quality and value of the data. In doing so, they hope to foster a dialogue between public management researchers and the Office of Personnel Management on the future of the FEVS and to forge a stronger link between these two communities.

For more than a decade, government officials in the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere have used large surveys of public sector employees to gauge employee perceptions and attitudes about their jobs, working conditions, organizational policies, coworkers, leaders, and performance. These surveys have been designed and implemented to enhance our understanding of how to improve managerial capacity and performance and increase recruitment and retention of talented managers and employees in government. In 2002, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) launched the Federal Human Capital Survey (FHCS)—now called the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)—using a stratified sampling approach to produce survey results that are representative of the entire federal executive branch workforce as well as of employees within individual agencies. Responses to FEVS items concerning job satisfaction, satisfaction with pay, and generic barometers of organizational climate serve as indicators of trends within the federal bureaucracy to both external and internal stakeholders. Moreover, agencies regularly use particular items to identify internal weaknesses and areas for improvement.

Public management researchers have also used these survey data to produce several dozen peer-reviewed articles, books, and other publications that examine a variety of issues central to public management and governance. Despite the proliferation of published work based on FEVS data, the field of public management to date, from both a practitioner and an academic perspective, lacks a critical assessment of these surveys and of how the data have been used to make contributions to the public management literature. In this article, we aim to undertake such an assessment.

In our review of more than 40 research articles based on FEVS data, we find that public management researchers have used the survey to measure a number of critical concepts and to enhance our understanding of a range of organizational phenomena, including different leadership styles and approaches, performance management practices, equity and fairness, diversification, change and innovation, employee attitudes such as job satisfaction, different forms of turnover intention, and performance. Pulling from this sample of articles, we focus on employee empowerment and diversity management, two distinct constructs that have been studied in a concerted manner using FEVS data, to illustrate the advances that have been achieved but also the limitations of using these survey data. In assessing the contributions that public management researchers have made using FEVS data, we also discuss the strengths and limitations of the FEVS and explore the prospects for improving the quality and value of these surveys. We conclude by offering a set of recommendations to further advance public management research and theory using FEVS data. Our aim is to forge a stronger link between those in OPM, which produces the FEVS data, and researchers who use the data to generate scholarly work.
History of the FHCS/FEVS
The Federal Employee Attitudes Survey (FEAS) of 1979–80 was the precursor to the FEVS. The FEAS was developed in the wake of the landmark Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 to gauge federal employee attitudes toward reform and the general state of the federal bureaucracy. The 1979 FEAS survey was distributed to a stratified random sample of 20,000 federal civilian employees in more than 20 federal departments and independent agencies. It included 225 items addressing issues such as job and pay satisfaction, work relationships with other employees and supervisors, work group performance, attitudes about agency culture, and perceived promotional opportunities. In 1980, a second part was administered to a random sample of senior federal executives to probe deeper into respondents’ attitudes toward the Senior Executive Service, labor–management relations, and job incentives. Many of the survey items in the FEVS, or similarly worded versions of those items, can be found in the 1979–80 FEAS. However, the FEAS had more items focused on physical working conditions, motivation, relationships found in the 1979–80 FEAS. However, the FEAS had more items focused on physical working conditions, motivation, relationships between careerists and political appointees, labor–management relations, performance appraisal, and job mobility than the FEVS.

The FEVS is a product of more recent developments. In 2002, President George W. Bush released the President’s Management Agenda, a broad effort to improve the management and performance of federal agencies. That same year, Congress, as part of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, enacted the Chief Human Capital Officers Act, which required 24 executive departments and independent agencies to appoint or designate chief human capital officers; the act also established the Chief Human Capital Officers Council. OPM’s mandate under the Chief Human Capital Officers Act included designing systems, standards, and metrics to assess efforts by federal agencies to develop and manage human capital.

In order to achieve this mandate from Congress and advance the President’s Management Agenda, OPM developed the Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework (HCAAF), which identified five human capital systems that “together provide a consistent, comprehensive representation of human capital management for the Federal Government” (OPM 2006, 1): (1) strategic alignment, (2) leadership and knowledge management, (3) results-oriented performance culture, (4) talent management, and (5) accountability. Federal regulations for the implementation of the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002 (5 CFR, part 250.203) called on federal agencies to maintain a human capital plan based on the HCAAF and to submit an annual report to OPM on their efforts to achieve HCAAF standards. OPM monitors human capital management initiatives and outcomes as communicated in these annual reports and provides guidance, resources, and technical assistance. The FEVS has become one of the main tools used by OPM to monitor federal agency efforts to manage human capital.

During the George W. Bush presidency, Congress enacted the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2004, which required federal agencies to conduct an employee survey to assess employee satisfaction with human capital systems similar to the five outlined in the HCAAF (see NDAA of 2004, 5 USC 7101 § 1128 n. 5; USC 7101 § 1128). To comply with the NDAA, OPM had to identify and codify questions that best align with these areas of human resource management by prescribing that certain survey items appear on all agency surveys. Through a step-wise process of data analysis, stakeholder engagement, solicitation of expert opinion, and input from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), OPM selected 28 questions that it argued complied with the NDAA to provide assessment requirements to agencies. OPM then quietly proposed a rule in 2005 that prescribed these 28 items as required in agencies’ Annual Employee Surveys (AES), for which there were no public comments (see § 250.301, subsection C). Since then, OPM has expanded its list of 28 codified requirements to a larger set of 40 questions that have become a permanent fixture of the FEVS and constitute the AES (OPM 2008).

The FEVS was conducted every two years from 2002 through 2010 and then every year beginning in 2011. In 2010, the name of the survey was changed from the Federal Human Capital Survey to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. OPM uses a stratified sampling approach to produce generalizable results for each individual agency as well as the entire federal executive branch workforce; in many of the smaller independent agencies, all employees have been surveyed. Statistical weights, to account for demographic factors such as gender, age, and managerial status, are used by OPM to generate more representative survey results. The number of agencies participating in the survey and the number of respondents have increased dramatically since 2002. In 2002, 106,742 employees (51 percent government-wide response rate) in 29 agencies responded to the survey. By 2013, the number of respondents and agencies had increased to 376,577 respondents (48 percent government-wide response rate) and 81 agencies, representing about 98 percent of the federal executive branch workforce.

In the 2013 FEVS, items were grouped into the following categories: My Work Experience (items 1–28); My Agency (items 29–41); My Supervisor/Team Leader (items 42–52); Leadership (items 53–62); My Satisfaction (items 63–71); Work/Life (items 72–84); and Demographics (including intention to leave) (items 85–98). There were 77 nondemographic items in common between the 2011 and 2010 surveys, 58 between the 2011 and 2008 surveys, and 57 between the 2011 and 2006 surveys. Most of the changes between the 2011 and 2010 surveys involved the addition of six questions in the Work/Life section. More significant changes occurred from 2008 to 2010, when 20 questions were either added or significantly revised; these questions were fairly evenly distributed across the nondemographic categories. Fourteen of the items appearing in the 2011 survey were used by OPM to compare the responses of federal government employees to those of counterparts in the private sector. The surveys remained virtually unchanged from 2011 to 2013, with just the addition of three demographic questions.

The items focusing on employee demographics have remained generally consistent from 2004 to 2013. However, minority and managerial status indicators have at times been truncated from specific delineations to more general categorical variables (e.g., minority, nonminority in the 2013 FEVS). Although the reporting scales did not change, OPM
Table 1 Published Articles Using FEVS Data

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<td>Survey item(s) and scale(s)</td>
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<td>Kim and Schachter (2013)</td>
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<td>Lee and Cho (2011)</td>
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<td>Oberfield (2014a)</td>
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<td>Rubin (2009)</td>
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<td>Wynen, Op de Beeck, and Hondeghem (2013)</td>
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<td>Job satisfaction</td>
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</table>
Figure 1 shows the major dependent variables that were measured using FEVS data in our sample of 42 research articles. Researchers modeled these dependent variables as a function of individual-level factors derived from the surveys as well as of meso- and macro-level factors derived from aggregated results of the surveys or from additional data sources such as the Central Personnel Data File and other administrative data (e.g., budget data, oversight data, performance data). Job satisfaction and different forms of turnover intention are the first and third most used dependent variables, appearing in 14 and 5 articles, respectively. The former was typically measured using a single item for overall job satisfaction and the latter with a series of categorical indicators measuring whether the employee intended to leave his or her organization and, if so, whether he or she planned to retire, take another job within the federal government, take another job outside the federal government, or other. Frequent use of these two dependent variables in our sample of research articles is not surprising, insofar as they represent two sufficiently singular and concrete attitudes toward work that can be measured with a single survey item (see Judge and Church 2000; Wansou, Reichers, and Hudy 1997). Perceived performance was the second most commonly used dependent variable, appearing in 8 articles, usually measured with a single item capturing the employee’s perception of his or her work unit performance that has been around since the first FEVS in 2002. More recently, OPM added another item measuring the employee’s perception of his or her organization’s ability to achieve its goals. Several other dependent variables appeared twice in our sample of research articles, including the employee’s level of trust in leaders/supervisors and his or her motivation to innovate.

Figure 2 shows the main independent variables appearing in these 42 research articles. Leadership behavior or styles and employee empowerment are the first and second most used independent variables, appearing in 11 and 6 articles, respectively. These variables were frequently measured using summated rating scales constructed from multiple items. Diversity management appeared in 5 articles as a main independent variable and was measured using a summated rating scale constructed from multiple items.

Table 1 provides additional information about these 42 research articles. In 31 of the articles, one or more main independent variables were measured using summated rating scales constructed from multiple items. Summated rating scales were also frequently used to measure dependent variables, with 24 articles using them as measures of at least one outcome of interest. We find a wide range of statistical modeling approaches used to estimate these dependent variables, including ordinary least squares regression; models such as a logit, ordered logit, or multinomial logit regression for categorical dependent variables; and hierarchical linear modeling for multilevel data. In 15 of the research articles, the authors used multiple sources of data by merging FEVS data with data from OPM, OMB (e.g., Program Assessment Rating Tool scores), federal agency archival data, and other sources, often in an attempt to minimize common method bias.

These empirical studies using FEVS data have already produced findings that should be of definitive interest to both OPM and public managers within federal agencies. This should, above all, be credited to OPM’s implementation approach. For instance, because of its stratified sampling approach, the data can be analyzed at the individual level or aggregated as important agency-level measures. At the individual level, for example, research has captured how generalized perceptions of leadership, dyadic relations with immediate supervisors, and shared/integrated leadership across managerial levels of an organization are related to individual outcomes such as different forms of turnover intention, job satisfaction, and performance. By aggregating the data, researchers such as Bertelli and colleagues (2013) have identified meaningful agency-level attributes such as the relative autonomy of the agencies’ employees and their intrinsic motivation. However, the aggregation of the data at the subagency or agency level results in significant loss of information, potentially overlooking important micro-level associations. Additionally, Oberfield (2014b) has shown that aggregated, cross-sectional examinations may overestimate the effect of a theoretical causal driver, such as leadership, relative to longitudinal examinations.

Next we turn our attention to two distinct constructs, employee empowerment and diversity management, to illustrate how researchers have used FEVS data in a concerted manner across a range of empirical studies despite the fact these surveys were not expressly designed for this purpose. The research on employee empowerment and diversity management is not representative of all research using FEVS data. However, unlike other constructs, researchers have adopted a consistent measurement approach when
studying employee empowerment and diversity management using FEVS indicators. This enables us to take an in-depth look at how researchers have capitalized on the advantages offered by FEVS to make important contributions to the literature and the obstacles they have encountered along the way.

Employee Empowerment

The concept of employee empowerment dates back to the human relations movement, with prominent researchers from that era discussing the importance of empowering employees in order to create a fulfilling and productive work environment. It was not until the late 1980s, however, that empowerment programs became a popular innovation in the private sector (Bowen and Lawler 1992) as well as a key feature of New Public Management reforms.

Researchers have conceptualized employee empowerment in two different ways. For those approaching this phenomenon from a psychological perspective, employee empowerment is a state of mind in which someone feels strongly in his or her ability to perform a task (Conger and Kanungo 1988) or experiences a heightened level of intrinsic task motivation (Thomas and Velthouse 1990). Other researchers, however, treat employee empowerment as a relational construct, which takes the form of a leadership style, managerial approach, or set of managerial practices aimed at sharing authority, information, resources, and rewards with lower-level employees (Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp 2005; Arnold et al. 2000; Bowen and Lawler 1992, 1995; Kanter 1979). The latter appears to be the more common conceptualization employed by public management researchers.

A growing literature shows that an employee empowerment approach (or employee empowerment practices) is positively related to performance (Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2011; Kirkman and Rosen 1999; Lee, Cayer, and Lan 2006; Spreitzer 1995), innovativeness (Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2013c; Spreitzer 1995), job satisfaction (Fullford and Enz 1995; Kim 2002; Lee, Cayer, and Lan 2006; Wright and Kim 2004; Wu and Short 1996), organizational commitment (Guthrie 2001; Kirkman and Rosen 1999), and job involvement (Coye and Belohlav 1995) and negatively related to turnover (Arthur 1994; Grisson 2012; Moinihan and Landuyt 2008). While studies have made important contributions to our understanding of employee empowerment as managerial practice and its relationship to key organizational outcomes, a tendency among them—particularly those from the public sector—has been to conceptualize employee empowerment as a one-dimensional construct (e.g., focusing just on discretion or involvement) or to operationalize employee empowerment using a single item, without capturing the full breadth of an employee empowerment approach as conceptualized in the literature (Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp 2005; Arnold et al. 2000; Bowen and Lawler 1992, 1995; Kanter 1979). Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) have undertaken a series of empirical studies using FEVS data to overcome these limitations of previous research.

In their research, Fernandez and Moldogaziev adopted Bowen and Lawler’s (1992, 1995) conceptualization of employee empowerment as an approach to service delivery in which managers share with their employees four organizational ingredients: “(1) information about the organization’s performance, (2) rewards based on the organization’s performance, (3) knowledge that enables employees to understand and contribute to organizational performance, and (4) power to make decisions that influence organizational direction and performance” (Bowen and Lawler 1992, 32). Using 12 FEVS items, they developed an overall measure of an employee empowerment approach as well as measures of each of the four practices or dimensions in Bowen and Lawler’s conceptual definition (see the appendix). Their measurement of employee empowerment was validated using confirmatory factor analysis, with the results exhibiting evidence of both convergent and discriminant validity (see Fornell and Larcker 1981), thus justifying the use of separate measures for each of the four empowerment practices.

A consistent finding across Fernandez and Moldogaziev’s studies is that while the overall package of empowerment practices seems to work well in the public sector, individual empowerment practices vary in their effectiveness, and some even appear to be counterproductive. For example, empowering employees by giving them opportunities to learn and grow and by granting them discretion typically leads to positive outcomes, including higher perceived performance, greater innovativeness, and higher job satisfaction. However, the empowerment practice of rewarding employees based on performance does little to improve perceptions of performance and actually discourages innovation by promoting shortsightedness and risk aversion.

While these findings are important, the use of FEVS data to study employee empowerment in the public sector poses several limitations. First, researchers have been able to use FEVS indicators to develop a novel and valid measure of Bowen and Lawler’s (1992, 1995) conceptualization of employee empowerment. However, the FEVS was not developed for the purpose of studying employee empowerment. As a result, other approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing employee empowerment have essentially been ruled out given the restricted number of items in the FEVS (e.g., Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp 2005; Arnold et al. 2000). This limits public management researchers’ ability to use FEVS data in a way that speaks to and contributes to other lines of research on employee empowerment. Second, and more important, the FEVS does not contain items that can be used to adequately measure psychological empowerment. This is a significant limitation because research suggests that relational empowerment is the immediate antecedent of psychological empowerment and that it is the latter that directly influences employee attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Spreitzer 1995). Finally, the inability to track individual survey respondents over time has precluded performing panel data analysis to estimate the causal effects of employee empowerment on a range of outcomes. This is a limitation of using FEVS data that we will return to again later in the article.

Diversity Management

For many years, racial and ethnic minorities and women were systematically excluded from an array of U.S. public agencies (King
Public management researchers, with their long-standing interest in issues of fairness and equality, have devoted considerable attention to exploring the implementation and effects of diversity management (Kellough and Naff 2004; Pitts et al. 2010). In recent years, several researchers have used three FEVS survey items to examine the business case for diversity management in the public sector (see the appendix). Most studies used a latent variable created by adding individuals’ responses to all three questions (Choi 2009, 2013; Choi and Rainey 2010, 2014; Oberfield 2014a; Pitts 2009); one study used a latent variable built from respondents’ answers to the last two questions (Jung 2010).

While these works use different approaches to modeling and analysis, they generally lend support to the business case for diversity management. For instance, when federal employees agree that diversity is managed well, they are more likely to perceive their work unit as doing quality work (Pitts 2009), more likely to be satisfied with their work (Choi 2009, 2013; Choi and Rainey 2014; Pitts 2009), more likely to remain in their organizations (Choi 2009), and more likely to perceive their organization as performing well (Choi and Rainey 2010). FEVS data have also been used to show that diversity management can play a moderating role in organizational life. Employees in organizations with greater racial diversity tend, all else being equal, to report lower job satisfaction; however, when diversity is managed well, employees in organizations with more racial diversity report greater job satisfaction (Choi 2009; Choi and Rainey 2010). In addition, although minorities are generally less likely to agree that their teams do quality work or that they are satisfied, when they perceive that diversity is managed well, they are more likely than whites to see their teams as doing quality work and to be satisfied (Pitts 2009). Finally, a longitudinal, organizational-level analysis of FEVS data further supports the causal relationship between diversity management and perceived performance. When agencies improve in diversity management over time, they are also likely to experience improvements in cooperation, satisfaction, and quality (Oberfield 2014a).

These studies have taught us much about diversity management in the federal government. Nonetheless, there is still much to learn as well as limitations to overcome in order to make additional advances using FEVS data. Although research shows the varying impact of diversity management among workers with different backgrounds, identities, and organizational statuses, OPM has at times collapsed information about the respondents’ racial or ethnic backgrounds into “minority” or “nonminority” categories when making the data available to the public. This prevents the analysis of important issues involving specific minority groups’ perceptions in the federal government and could easily be changed to match the more granular approach used by other federal agencies, such as the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, although the current diversity questions are useful for general explorations of diversity management, it would be beneficial to include a battery of questions about specific diversity management practices taken. In other words, the current questions cannot provide guidance about exactly how agency leaders might improve their management of diversity; however, it would be relatively simple to draw up 5 to 10 questions that ask about specific practices. By using these questions, OPM and researchers could help agencies identify the most useful approaches to managing diversity.

Critical Assessment of the FEVS
In this section, we take stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the FEVS with an eye toward the opportunities for research created by this survey as well as the limitations it imposes on researchers.

Strengths and Opportunities
The FEVS has a number of distinct strengths that make it very appealing as a source of data for empirical studies of public management and public organizations. One such strength of the FEVS is its representativeness and generalizability. Since 2004, when the survey was conducted for the second time, OPM has surveyed employees in the vast majority of agencies making up the federal executive branch workforce. Seventy-three major agencies, including cabinet departments, and smaller independent agencies participated in 2004, representing 93 percent of the federal executive branch workforce. By the time of the 2013 FEVS, those figures had risen to 81 agencies and 97 percent of the federal executive branch workforce. To further ensure generalizability, OPM draws statistically valid samples from each of the agencies participating in the survey. These samples are stratified by supervisory level, from senior executives to nonsupervisory employees. Prior to 2011, a census was taken of employees in some of the smaller independent agencies. Starting in 2011, this approach was extended to most of the smaller independent agencies as well as 13 of the larger ones, although it is not entirely clear why these agencies were chosen and not others. Survey respondents include federal employees at all levels of the bureaucracy, from the Senior Executive Service all the way down through GS (General Schedule) 1–6. Moreover, OPM assigns weights to respondents that are indicative of the number of employees in the federal workforce they represent. While it states that demographic characteristics such as gender, race, supervisory status, and age are all used to develop these weights, it would be helpful for OPM to provide more detail on how the weights were developed. As a result of these features of the FEVS, the survey data can be used to draw statistical inferences that are generalizable to the federal bureaucracy as well to the workforce within a particular agency.

Another strength of the FEVS is the breadth of important public management concepts that are covered in the survey. FEVS items can and have been used to measure a range of dependent and
independent variables that are of significant interest to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. Even though the measurement of some of these concepts is of questionable validity, as we discuss further later, the list of dependent and independent variables is impressive (see figures 1 and 2). In a large number of instances, academics have been able to use multiple items to construct summated rating scales of concepts, or of dimensions of concepts, to improve measurement reliability. As table 1 shows, more than three-quarters of the research articles that came up in our literature review developed summated rating scales to measure a dependent and/or independent variable. The breadth of concepts measured in the survey also provides a rich source of data from which to draw on for measures of control variables that may not be central to the empirical analysis but whose omission from multivariate models could bias the results.

The fact that the FEVS was conducted eight times from 2002 to 2013, with many of the same agencies participating in the surveys and with a large majority of items appearing regularly from one year to the next, offers rare opportunities for undertaking public management research. FEVS items can be used to replicate multivariate regression analyses and to validate measures of concepts (e.g., using confirmatory factor analysis) across different samples of employees taken over time. Replication of studies and validation of measurements across multiple samples can help gauge the extent to which empirical findings are sensitive to differences in samples and to buttress arguments about the validity of measures. In addition, insofar as nearly all of the agencies that participated in the 2004 FEVS have participated in every FEVS since then, researchers can use the data to create a panel at the agency and subagency levels of analysis. Panel data enable researchers to study relationships dynamically in a way that cross-sectional data do not and to take into account intranit as well as intranuit differences, leading to more accurate causal inferences. In 2014, the OPM facilitated this type of analysis when it developed and released the first file combining survey data at the agency level from 2004 to 2014.

The FEVS is an extremely valuable source of data for researchers in that the data are made available to the public, are released promptly, and can be used and shared by a large community of public management researchers working on similar research topics. This creates opportunities for reproducibility of findings by researchers located just about anywhere in the world, reproducibility being a hallmark of the sciences. It also allows researchers to build on published research and to test the robustness of published findings using different methods. Although we found little evidence of efforts to reproduce research using FEVS data in the research articles we reviewed, this is an untapped opportunity we hope more researchers will capitalize on to advance public management research and theory.

Finally, an advantage of using FEVS data is that respondents are coded by agency in a manner that allows researchers to easily merge the survey data with many other sources of federal government data. Every survey respondent is coded according to the federal government agency in which he or she works. Agencies are composed of subagencies, and each respondent also receives a subagency code indicating the part of the agency in which they work. This agency coding scheme, or ones very much like it, are used regularly by federal agencies such as OPM (e.g., FedScope), the Office of Management and Budget (e.g., Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance), the U.S. Government Printing Office (e.g., United States Government Manual), and the Administrative Conference of the United States (e.g., Sourcebook of United States Executive Agencies) to gather, analyze, and report statistics. FEVS survey responses can be aggregated or averaged at the agency or subagency level and merged with these and other data sources to create new data sets for organizational-level analyses. Alternatively, FEVS individual-level survey data can be merged with other sources at the agency or subagency level to create multilevel data sets (i.e., individual and organizational levels) that can be analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling methods.

Weaknesses and Limitations

We now turn to the main weaknesses and limitations of the FEVS. Survey research experts suggest that a survey should have a central focus or guiding research question(s) that drives the design of the survey so that relevant concepts can be identified and measured (Robbins 1999; Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen 1996; Zikmund 2003). The selection of relevant concepts and proper instrumentation to answer one’s research question should be grounded in a thorough review of the literature and sound theoretical reasoning. Failure to do this when undertaking a survey can result in haphazard accumulation of largely irrelevant data that does not offer much insight beyond mere descriptive statistics.

The FEVS 2012 technical report states, “The content of the 2012 FEVS reflects the overall goal of measuring how effectively agencies are managing their workforces in the Federal Government. The FEVS focuses on employee perceptions regarding critical work life areas that drive employee satisfaction, commitment, and ultimately, retention in the workforce. The survey results represent a snapshot in time of Federal workforce perceptions” (OPM 2012, 6). While many of the items in the survey are useful for fulfilling this purpose, the inclusion—or omission—of other items seems to be indiscriminate. This results in important concepts not being properly measured or not measured at all. For example, given the emphasis placed on leadership, the FEVS has surprisingly few validated survey items measuring leadership styles or behaviors. In addition, OPM seems to have largely overlooked key outcomes such as organizational commitment and work motivation when designing the survey, even though the literature points to the significance of these variables in managing human resources and improving performance. As we noted earlier, many of the items in the FEVS are either identical to or close reflections of items found in the 1979–80 FEAS. However, that earlier survey was designed for a different purpose, namely, to analyze the impact of civil service reforms undertaken at that time. Moreover, it appears that in addressing its mandate under the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002 and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2004, OPM’s leadership simply made use of what was on hand rather than allowing the guiding research question(s) to drive the design of the survey instrument.

Once the purpose of the survey has been established and the main concepts identified, the next task in survey design is appropriate instrumentation (Fowler 1992; Kelley et al. 2003; Robbins 1999; Schaeffer and Dykema 2011; Schoorman and Mayer 2008). In survey research, there are conventional criteria for assessing the quality of a survey item. Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen (1996) and Robbins (1999) summarize that a strong question must be
relevant and unambiguous, capture a single concept (i.e., avoid being “double-barreled”), and not lead the respondent to answer in a particular way. If the concept is multidimensional, where a single question cannot capture it fully, a valid and reliable battery of questions should be used. In this respect, examples from previous studies can be of much help.

FEVS items are grouped by thematic area (e.g., leadership or job satisfaction). However, very few, if any, explanations are provided in the technical notes as to how these batteries of questions were developed or selected. Furthermore, there are double-barrel questions in FEVS. For illustration, a survey item states, “In my organization, leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.” The concepts of motivation and commitment are distinct concepts in the management literature. What is more, each is a multidimensional concept. Organizational commitment generally has four dimensions (i.e., affective, normative, accumulated costs, and limited alternatives continuance commitment) (see Allen and Meyer 1990; Blau 2003). Motivation can refer to affect, effort, or a performance outcome (see Latham 2011). Given the complexity of these concepts and their distinctiveness, the decision to use a single survey item to measure them both is perplexing.

Once the survey items have been constructed, the questionnaire is put together. Sanchez (1992) finds that certain questionnaire layouts and designs may introduce errors in the data collection process. In general, when it comes to question order, it is important to control for the possibility of biases such as consistency (or anchoring) bias, response set bias, or social desirability bias. Careful sorting and ordering of questions can help limit anchoring bias. To mitigate potential response set bias, the usual advice is to alter the order or scale (or both) of questions. The FEVS has a five-choice response scale for most questions, for example, choices from “strongly disagree” = 1 to “strongly agree” = 5. Such an approach is susceptible to response set bias.

Researchers using survey data should provide evidence that demonstrates the validity and reliability of their approach to measuring concepts. A number of reliability tests are available, with Cronbach’s alpha test of internal reliability appearing to be the most commonly used when creating summated rating scales out of multiple items (see Haertel 2006 for an in-depth discussion of measurement reliability). Summated rating scales were used in 31 of the 42 research articles that we examined; in 26 of those 31 articles, a Cronbach’s alpha test was used. In most cases, the test results indicated an adequate or higher level of reliability (alpha of 0.70 or higher). However, when it comes to measurement validity, the FEVS imposes significant limitations.

Messick (1995) provides a unifying framework for measurement validity, arguing that validity is a single construct but that different types of evidence can be used to validate measurement of concepts. These include evidence of test content, response process, internal structure of the measure, relationships with other measures (i.e., discriminant and convergent validity), and consequences of testing (see also Kane 2006). We noted that the wide range of phenomena captured by the FEVS is one of the strengths of the survey. However, it appears a trade-off was made between breadth and quality of measurement. Many concepts are measured in the FEVS using just one or a handful of items, making it difficult for researchers to show that their measurement approach captures all or most of the key dimensions that make up a concept’s content. Job satisfaction is the exception, as the survey includes a global indicator of job satisfaction as well as multiple indicators of satisfaction with different facets of work (e.g., pay, benefits, opportunities for advancement). Moreover, in constructing the survey, OPM did not appear to capitalize on previously published research by using measures of concepts that have been validated across settings and samples, even though the management literature is replete with such examples (see Fields 2002). Indeed, we failed to find any mention of measurement validity in the annual publications and accompanying technical documentation related to the FEVS. Not surprisingly, measurement validity is rarely discussed in published research using FEVS data (exceptions include Bertelli 2007; Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2013c).

Finally, we arrive at the issue of longitudinality of the FEVS data. One critical shortcoming of the survey is the absence of a system of unique identifiers to track even a subsample of individual respondents across time. This precludes undertaking panel data analysis at the individual level, even though analysis of panel data can offer a distinct advantage over cross-sectional analysis when it comes to estimating causal impact. Panel data analysis takes into account differences between individual observations as well as differences within observations across time and enables researchers to reduce bias in their causal estimates (Baltagi 2005). As stated earlier, it is possible to aggregate data to the subagency or agency level using FEVS data. However, this aggregation results in significant losses of information and smoothing over of individual-level changes across time. Relatedly, longitudinal surveys require that the questions asked and the sampling methods employed remain consistent across survey waves. Unfortunately, there have been instances when OPM has added and deleted questions from one survey to the next, changed the wording of questions, or changed the response categories.

Recommendations and Next Steps

We conclude by offering a set of recommendations to OPM for increasing the quality and value of FEVS data. We recognize that the following recommendations are not comprehensive in scope. However, if implemented, they will begin to forge a stronger link between OPM and a growing number of researchers who use the data.

**Expand the List of Topics and Concepts Measured in the Survey**

There are many topics and concepts of interest to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers that do not appear in the FEVS but are worthy of inclusion. Examples include transformational leadership, change management, intrinsic motivation, organizational commitment, and psychological burnout, just to name a few. In addition, much would be gained from developing new items that directly address managerial practices that have been shown to be effective at improving performance and employee attitudes toward work. Such questions would augment those in the survey that measure general
work conditions or climate. For example, in the area of work teams, OPM could include a series of questions on the degree to which respondents agree that their work team shares a common mission or goal, that their team receives adequate material resources from the organization, and that a team-based appraisal and reward system is used (for a review of the literature, see Ilgen et al. 2005; Kozlowski and Bell 2003). Responses to these questions point to tangible steps managers can take to improve work team performance.

It would not be particularly costly in terms of survey implementation to devise an additional set of items for inclusion in the FEVS. Space is obviously a concern, as respondents are now asked more than 80 questions on the FEVS. However, a subset of respondents could be asked an extended or supplementary battery of items. Because of the large sample sizes drawn by OPM, a variety of item subsets focused on different topics or concepts could be rotated at random and still ensure generalizability of results across the federal executive workforce as well as within many, if not most, agencies. For instance, two small batteries of items focusing on affective commitment and psychological burnout could be devised and randomly assigned to respondents across the entire sample. This would provide for coverage of additional topics and concepts and help ensure statistically valid results while not burdening respondents and adversely affecting response rates. These short supplementary batteries of items could be added to the instrument without altering the other questions that have consistently appeared on the survey so as not to interrupt the response trends that began as far back as 2002. The Australian Public Service Commission in its State of the Service Agency Survey uses such an approach. The vast majority of items on that survey are grouped into a set of thematic categories that consistently reappear from one year to the next in order to gauge trends over time. However, these “trend” questions are supplemented every year by short batteries of items that focus on additional themes or topics of interest (e.g., innovation), with the topics changing from one year to the next.

**Reconsider Item Selection and Construction, Making Greater Use of Reliable and Valid Measures Reported in the Literature**

In constructing the survey, OPM does not appear to have capitalized on existing research by using measures of concepts that have been validated across settings and samples, even though management researchers have often gone to great lengths to demonstrate the reliability and validity of measures (see Fields 2002). For example, the FEVS includes a single item that is intended to measure both motivation and commitment. This poorly constructed double-barrel question fails to validly or reliably measure either concept. A review of the literature would have revealed the existence of much better options for measuring these concepts, for instance, Lawler and Hall’s (1970) relatively short four-item intrinsic motivation scale, which has been validated by researchers in various published studies.

We recommend a thorough accounting of both the item selection and construction in the FEVS. Technical notes to the survey should explicitly describe the method of item selection, the source of these measures and their prior use, and any evidence of their validity and reliability. In doing this, we believe that the burden of item selection and construction can be vastly reduced by a review of the management literature that explores many of the concepts that are central to the FEVS and the intent of its creators. The use of existing validated measures not only eases the burden of item selection but also prevents ambiguities over interpretation and helps assuage concerns over external criticisms that might undermine the subsequent value and use of findings based on FEVS data. At the same time, it is critical that any adoption of existing measures ensures that they have been validated across multiple studies and samples. As some authors note, “publication does not necessarily mean it is well validated” (Lyon, Möllering, and Saunders 2012, 182).

While the item selection process is very important, so is item construction. For instance, to reduce mono-method bias and to enhance accuracy of measurement, the order of response choices for some items could be reversed (from the current “strongly disagree” = 1 through “strongly agree” = 5 to “strongly disagree” = 5 through “strongly agree” = 1). Alternatively, a different scale (e.g., a 7- or 10-point scale from the current 5-point scale) could be used for some items to mitigate response set bias. In addition, using statements that are polar opposites on the same spectrum may introduce some variety in the response choice compared with the currently ubiquitous “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” 5-point scale. Langbein and Felbinger recommend avoiding these types of questions altogether. They point to the potential for the respondent to conflate “intensity of opinion with the position of the opinion” (2006, 204). In other words, when a respondent is asked to provide his or her level of agreement with a statement such as, “Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization,” is a “strongly agree” response an indication that the respondent believes this behavior to be extremely important (intensity) or that the respondent is highly confident in his or her manager’s respective behavior in this area (strong position)? Thus, we recommend a more accurate method of measurement such as bipolar, balanced questions that are specific to the precise responses OPM seeks to illicit, thereby avoiding the ambiguities inherent in traditional Likert scale measures of agreement.

The kinds of improvements in measurement we have just described could be made in a way that minimizes interruptions to the response trends going back to 2002. For example, more valid and reliable measures of constructs such as affective commitment or intrinsic motivation could be added to the instrument as supplementary batteries of questions without affecting the questions that regularly appear on the survey. Reversing the order of response categories and expanding response scales from 5 to 7 or 10 points are also improvements that could be made with minimal disruption to the existing survey instrument.

With due consideration to the impact that changes will have to the 40 questions that make up the core of the FEVS, we argue that consistency does not equate to validity. While consistency across panels for a set of items is critical to assessing changes over time, the validity of the items must be established first and foremost. Otherwise, we are assessing trends with items that are not accurately capturing a single, identifiable construct or dimension of a construct. Thus, our criticisms regarding the measurement validity of existing items...
still holds, and some small sacrifices will need to be made to better ensure measurement rigor and more accurate assessment of trends going forward. Given the lack of substantive feedback from the notice and comment stage of the original regulation codifying many of these items, we recommend a newly proposed rule to amend a small selection of these items that, upon OPM’s evaluation, are found to be inconsistent with the standards of item construction we outline in this review.

Modify Survey Design and Implementation to Create a Panel of Respondents

To this point, it appears that all of the FEVS have been structured as unrelated cross-sectional surveys. It is unclear whether it is possible to link individual respondents across points in time in the different waves of the FEVS. Most organizational phenomena are processes that span more than a single calendar year, often with feedback loops of various intensities. If tracing all the respondents from year to year is impossible, or undesirable, OPM could select a subsample of federal employees and track them over time to create a panel. Longitudinal surveys that generate panel data are almost always superior to cross-sectional surveys for making causal inferences and describing phenomena that are dynamic. Concerns about confidentiality can be addressed through the combination of randomly assigned identification codes, restricted data best practices borrowed from agencies such as the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education, and innovative approaches to data sharing partnerships with agency-qualified researchers that protect employee rights vis-à-vis the Privacy Act.

Organize a Working Group of Researchers Who Can Assist OPM with Design and Implementation of Survey

Finally, efforts are already under way through the impetus of both OPM and the Government Accountability Office’s “Data Users Group”—a partnership among various agencies (including OPM, OMB, Government Accountability Office, Merit Systems Protection Board) and other academic and practitioner stakeholders interested in accomplishing professed data transparency and collaboration goals of the Barack Obama administration—to facilitate dialogue toward actionable partnerships between the OPM and researchers who are willing to volunteer time and substantive and methodological expertise to expanding on these suggestions. These efforts should be intensified given the great potential to create an instrument that leverages all the advantages already existent in OPM’s implementation approach and that integrates some of the most current developments in the field of public management research with the most critical management issues facing the federal government. We feel that modest improvements in line with the recommendations offered here would advance our knowledge of organizations and management, not just within federal government agencies for the purposes of improving agency performance and management capacity but across sectors as well. The infrastructure for such a type of enterprise is right here at our fingertips. We are hopeful that the kind of dialogue already started through the Government Accountability Office and others will allow this community of stakeholders to take hold of this distinct opportunity.

Conclusion

For nearly a decade, public management researchers have used FEVS data to produce peer-reviewed research on a variety of managerial issues of interest to practitioners and policy makers as well as the academic community. This is a positive, unintended consequence of this ongoing data collection effort by OPM, as the surveys were not designed for this purpose. Despite the proliferation of empirical studies and the contributions they have made to public management theory and research, we have given a balanced account of the strengths and weaknesses of the FEVS and have pointed to several limitations that must be addressed to enhance the quality of research using the data. With this in mind, we have offered a set of recommendations to OPM for improving the quality and value of this survey. Our aim is to foster dialogue between public management researchers and OPM on the future of the FEVS and the potential for refining this instrument and its implementation. The recommendations focus on the modest expansion of topics covered in the survey in ways that will not burden respondents or diminish response rates, a greater reliance on previously validated measures of concepts, refinements in item construction, the adoption of a longitudinal survey approach, and the establishment of a working group of researchers to assist OPM.

In our study, we have described some of the limits imposed by institutional constraints within and surrounding OPM as they relate to the design and implementation of the FEVS. As we point out, many of the items in the FEVS are close reflections of those found in the FEAS of 1979–80. This suggests a degree of path dependence or imprinting that makes it difficult to effect meaningful and beneficial changes to the FEVS. As research from the new institutionalist perspective contends, when individuals and organizations adopt a common technology, “the cost of adopting once-possible alternatives” increases, thereby “providing individuals with a strong incentive to identify and stick with a single option” (Pierson 2000, 492). The advances in knowledge derived from using FEVS data, as well as those that would ensue from further improvements to the survey, are simply too important to accept such a fate for the FEVS. Public management researchers have much to offer to this process . . . and as much to learn.

Notes

2. These items have also been used to study diversity climate—employees’ assessments of their organizations’ commitment to diversity (Choi 2013). Because diversity management refers to a set of policies (Pitts 2006) rather than employees’ assessments of them, this is arguably a more precise conceptualization of what these items measure.

References


Appendix: Measuring Employee Empowerment and Diversity Management Using FEVS Items

**Employee Empowerment**

1. “Managers review and evaluate the organization’s progress toward meeting its goals and objectives.” (practice 1)
2. “Supervisors/team leaders provide employees with constructive suggestions to improve their job performance.” (practice 1)
3. “How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what’s going on in your organization?” (practice 1)
4. “Promotions in my work unit are based on merit.” (practice 2)
5. “Employees are rewarded for providing high-quality products and services to customers.” (practice 2)
6. “Pay raises depend on how well employees perform their jobs.” (practice 2)
7. “Awards in my work unit depend on how well employees perform their jobs.” (practice 2)
8. “I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.” (practice 3)
9. “The workforce has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals.” (practice 3)
10. “Supervisors/team leaders in my work unit support employee development.” (practice 3)
11. “Employees have a feeling of personal empowerment with respect to work processes.” (practice 4)
12. “How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?” (practice 4)

**Diversity Management**

1. “Managers/supervisors/team leaders work well with employees of different backgrounds.”
2. “My supervisor/team leader is committed to a workforce representative of all segments of society.”
3. “Policies and programs promote diversity in the workplace.”

Note: In 2004, 2006, and 2008, the second question was worded slightly differently: “Supervisors/team leaders in my work unit are committed to a workforce representative of all segments of society.”