On behalf of the entire Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) program at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), we commend Sergio Fernandez and his colleagues for their perspicacious critical review. Reflecting on this article has broadened our own perspective, and we anticipate that it will incite even more academic interest in the survey, which is very beneficial for the program, federal agencies, as well as our internal and external stakeholders.

OPM understands how important and valuable data and research are to helping us make policy for our current workforce and plan for the federal workforce of the future. Using data and research to drive our policy decisions at OPM is so important to Director Katherine Archuleta and the current administration that it is one of the nine goals in OPM’s 2014–18 Strategic Plan.

The FEVS is increasingly used as a management tool to assist agencies in understanding the needs of their employee populations at all levels of the organization and in taking specific action to improve employee engagement and performance. If the overall purpose of conducting the survey were strictly to collect demographic, economic, or workforce statistics, or even if it were primarily a research, academic, or methodological exercise, taking a more purely technical perspective would be in order. However, we are consistently balancing the demands for a technically rigorous survey program with the needs of a practical, user-friendly data implementation strategy for more than 80 federal agencies.

Although resource limitations, logistical constraints, and public law render us unable to act on each and every suggestion, we continually strive to improve the overall quality and utility of the data produced. For example, we redesigned our sampling strategy in 2013 to provide an even deeper level of stratification, improving representativeness and enabling human resource managers to receive employee feedback in work units as deep as nine levels down into the organization. In addition to disseminating thousands of static reports, we recently unveiled two Web-based tools for managers and executives to conduct customized analyses.

We found it both impressive and gratifying that the authors were able to identify more than 40 peer-reviewed journal articles in the public administration literature featuring FEVS data. This has spurred an ongoing internal effort to augment the list with works from additional literatures, such as those encompassing industrial and organizational psychology and survey methodology. We plan to post the more comprehensive bibliography on our website, similar in spirit to what other government-sponsored surveys have done (see, e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s bibliography at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg_bibliography.htm), and continually update it based on our own discoveries and an automated mechanism by which website visitors can notify the FEVS team of additional qualifying works.

As noted by the authors, one of the strengths of a repeated cross-sectional survey such as the FEVS is the ability to track changes over time. Currently, this is done in the aggregate, for the government as a whole or for a particular agency or agency component. In fact, researchers should be advised that we recently released a consolidated survey response file to facilitate this (see http://www.fedview.opm.gov/2014/EVSDATA/ for more details). The authors urge OPM to construct a panel data set, one differentiating specific individuals’ survey responses at multiple points in time, which would enable researchers to employ more sophisticated longitudinal and causal analysis model techniques. That is a good suggestion that may be possible with some careful thought and planning. One approach would be to retroactively assimilate individual responses from prior survey administrations, but that introduces the complexity of how to jointly compensate for individuals’ variable sampling rates within and across administrations.
not to mention how to account for a particular employee changing agencies. Perhaps a more tractable approach would be to embed a panel survey component into the FEVS sample design moving forward, either independently or in the form of a rotating panel design, which is a hybrid approach in which each successive sample includes a (designer-controlled) portion of employees from the previous period’s sample complemented by a portion of new employees.

The authors comment on the absence of any efforts to reproduce the research in the studies enumerated within the public administration literature. One potentially fruitful avenue for filling this research gap is to investigate ways to incorporate auxiliary information from other OPM data sources. For instance, numerous works model factors associated with federal employees’ turnover intentions (e.g., Pitts et al. 2011; Whitford and Lee 2015; Wynen, Op de Beeck, and Hondeghem 2013). A natural limitation of these studies is that one’s self-reported turnover intention is not the same as actually carrying through and voluntarily terminating employment with the agency or the federal government. It is possible, however, to verify the future employment status of FEVS respondents, and research is currently under way to evaluate whether, and to what extent, conclusions would change if these models were refitted after substituting a dependent variable measuring actual turnover in lieu of turnover intent. However, extreme caution is needed as we discuss the possibility of linking survey results to other administrative data. Although it may further our research endeavors, it may be to the detriment of the survey program, specifically if employees feel that their responses are no longer confidential.

With respect to the survey instrument, we contend that there is no compelling evidence to support the authors’ call to reverse some of the five-point Likert-scale response option sets. We would argue that the results from empirical studies on the effect of scale direction are generally mixed. For example, Toepoel, Das, and Van Soest (2009) find that survey respondents tend to be biased toward the starting point of the scale, which could lead to satisficing or acquiescence bias. However, Rammstedt and Kreb’s (2007) results suggest that the direction of the response scale did not affect response behavior in their study, and Christian, Parsons, and Dillman found “that consistently presenting the positive end of the scale first did not impact responses but increases response times” (2009, 393).

If there were truly appreciable levels of mono-method bias (also known as acquiescence bias) in the FEVS, it seems we might discover uncomfortably high levels of straightlining, or respondents answering each question in the exact same way (e.g., by anchoring to the position of a single radio button while progressing through the survey). Using the FEVS 2014 public use data set, however, we find that 98.7 percent of response sequences to the first 71 Likert-scale items preceding the work–life items and demographic questions are unique. Even when elections are collapsed down to an indicator of responding positively or nonpositively, 91.3 percent of all sequences are unique. Indeed, federal employees exhibit a remarkable degree of differentiability in how they answer the items making up the FEVS.

Again, we commend Fernandez and his colleagues for their thoughtful review of the FEVS. The utility of the survey grows at a seemingly exponential pace within the milieu of the federal government, and with this article and associated commentary, we hope to witness an equally expansive growth in academic capacity. OPM is committed to working with researchers from the federal government and the research community all across the country. We believe the rich trove of data that we have is important to a diverse set of disciplines, from human capital management to psychology to law to economics. These relationships can be mutually beneficial. Greater use of our data can help institutions of higher learning advance their research, and that research can be an invaluable resource to us as we plan for the workforce of the future.

References


