

The Effects of Anonymity Versus Identified But Confidential Response Conditions In Organizational Research

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An important consideration when using questionnaires in organizational research is whether or not they should be administered under anonymous or identified but confidential response conditions. If the responses are to be used with other data (e.g., that obtainable from personnel files), respondent identification is mandatory. Research findings in the literature on the anonymity question suffer from two main inadequacies. First the research subjects may be students, thereby making inferences for research using employees impractical. Second, the research using employees as subjects does not deal with issues of high risk (e.g., a subordinate's perception of the technical expertise of his supervisor). The present study recognized these limitations by (1) using employees of a public agency as subjects and (2) dealing with high risk issues. The researchers concluded that under the anonymous condition, responses will be significantly more negative than under the IBC condition.

INTRODUCTION

An important consideration when using questionnaires in personnel and organizational research is whether or not they should be administered under anonymous or identified but confidential response conditions. Some instances require that the researcher be able to identify respondents (e.g., whenever questionnaire responses are to be correlated with other data, thereby making respondent identification mandatory). However, asking individuals to identify themselves may result in biased responses. Thus, a researcher must know what effect both the anonymous and identified but confidential (IBC) conditions have upon an individual's response to questionnaires.

Several studies have investigated the effects of anonymity on questionnaire responses. Many have involved students in an educational context, [e.g., 1; 2; 3; 4; 9] while others have used employees as subjects. [e.g., 5; 6; 7; 8] Most have reported no differences in questionnaire responses due to the conditions under which the data were collected. In contrast, empirical evidence concerning the effects on questionnaire responses collected under the IBC response condition is generally lacking. Gordon and Petty [5] have suggested that "additional research should be performed with other self-report measures to get further evidence on the impact of dissimulation on the character of data collected under the IBC condition." [5, pp. 60-61]

The purpose of the present study was to extend available evidence regarding possible differences that may exist in response to questionnaires obtained under anonymous versus IBC response conditions. Specifically, it was hypothesized that job satisfaction scores obtained under an anonymous questionnaire response condition would not differ from questionnaire responses collected under an identified but confidential response condition.

METHOD

The study was conducted in conjunction with a larger employee job satisfaction survey. The short-form of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) developed by Weiss, Davis, England, and Lofquist [10] was administered on two occasions to 32 employees of a public agency. Each administration was conducted under a separate response condition (IBC and anonymous). The results obtained were used to test the research hypothesis of the study.

In the first administration (IBC response), the MSQ and a cover letter explaining the purposes of the study were given to each employee in a personally-addressed envelope. The cover letter specifically noted that employee responses would be kept confidential. The director of the agency in which the study was being conducted instructed the survey's respondents to complete the MSQ, replace it in the envelope (bearing their name) in which it was distributed, and then to deposit it in a ballot box provided by the researchers.

One week after the questionnaires were completed, a second MSQ and cover letter were mailed to each of the agency's 32 employees. The respondents were again asked to complete the MSQ, but without giving their names (anonymous response). The reason given for this second administration was that the surveyors did not intend for the respondents to return the first questionnaires in the personally addressed envelopes in which they were distributed.

Basic demographic characteristics (i.e., age, race, sex, level of education) were obtained on each individual in both administrations. These variables were used to pair the questionnaires received in the two sessions. Once paired, the responses were used to analyze the MSQ results under the two response conditions (IBC vs. anonymous).

RESULTS

Of the 32 employees in the surveyed group, 30 (93%) participated in the study. However, not all employees responded under both response conditions. Response rates for each condition are presented in Table 1.

The returned questionnaire responses were classified into four groups: (a) Group A contained questionnaire responses from those individuals who responded under the IBC condition only; (b) Group B contained questionnaire responses (completed under the IBC condition) from those individuals who also responded under the anonymous condition; (c) Group C contained questionnaire responses (completed under the anonymous condition) from those individuals who also responded under the IBC condition; (d) Group D contained questionnaire responses from those individuals who responded under the anonymous condition only.

TABLE 1

NUMBER RESPONDING AND PERCENTAGE RESPONSE FOR EACH RESPONSE CONDITION

Condition	No.	Percent
IBC (only)	9	28
IBC and Anonymous	17	53
Anonymous (only)	4	12
No Response	2	7
Total	32	100

To test the hypothesis that job satisfaction scores obtained under an anonymous questionnaire response condition would not differ from questionnaire responses collected under an IBC response condition, t-tests were computed between the data groups. The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

RESULTS OF t-TESTS COMPUTED ON DATA GROUPS

Group Comparisons	Level of Significance (two-tailed tests)
B vs. C	.01
A vs. B	.01
A vs. C	.001
A vs. D	.001
C vs. D	.001
B vs. D	.001

A dependent t-test was computed on Groups B and C. All other tests were independent t-tests.

DISCUSSION

The difference in responses for Group B (the IBC condition) and Group C (the anonymous condition) was found to be significant (i.e., $p < .01$). This difference may be due to different response conditions (i.e., the null hypothesis might be rejected), but two other possible reasons for this difference may exist. First is the order effect. For example, it would have been preferable in the present study to have controlled for an order effect by having two groups respond under the separate conditions being studied. One group would have responded under the IBC condition first and then the anonymous condition; the second group would have responded under the anonymous condition first and then the IBC condition. This was not possible, and thus the order effect cannot be ruled out as a rival hypothesis. However, there are certain findings that may weaken this as a rival hypothesis.

First, the responses of Groups A and B were significantly different ($p < .01$). The age education and racial mix of these groups were not significantly different. Yet, Group B were statistically more positive in their responses than Group A. Perhaps individuals in Group B perceived that they had more to lose and thereby indicated they were more positive. But under the anonymous condition (perhaps when they felt more secure) they were significantly more negative in their response than they were under the IBC condition. In light of the present economic conditions, i.e., high unemployment, it is conceivable that individuals may fear retaliation (e.g., losing their jobs if higher management discovers that they are not satisfied with certain aspects of their organization).

Second, the responses of those in Group D were significantly more negative than those of Group A. Even though it was the first time for both groups to respond to the questionnaire, the response conditions were different (i.e., Group D responded anonymously while Group A responded under the IBC condition). Therefore, order effect cannot be used to explain the differences here.

The second possible reason for the significant difference between Groups B and C may be due to method variance (i.e., having the questionnaires returned via the ballot box or via mail). The research design employed does not permit ruling out this possibility; and, unlike the above case, test results cannot be used to logically discount method variance.

Prior research surveyed on the anonymity issue cannot be generalized to all situations. Findings from research completed using students as subjects cannot be transferred to that using employees as subjects in organizational research. Also, the research completed using employees as subjects did not deal with issues of high risk. The items on the MSQ deal with areas that may be perceived as risky to the respondent because they pertain to areas that affect the supervisor or areas that he can directly affect (e.g., "the way my supervisor and I understand each other"). In light of this, the researchers of this study cautiously reject the null hypothesis, and conclude that the different response conditions did account for the different responses to the job satisfaction questionnaire.

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