SURVEY RESEARCH FEEDBACK: ASSESSING AND MOVING BEYOND

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Survey research feedback—in contrast to naturally occurring feedback in which part of the output of a system returns to its input to regulate its further output for optimal operation—is information based on answers to questions. Answers are unreliable (may or may not be correct) and, therefore, may, or may not, regulate output for optimal operation. Moving beyond survey research feedback occurs when reliable information (obtained by observation, experiments, formal/predictive models, documents, and comparison of non-asking phenomena) regulates output, and when antecedent control and consequence control are practiced.

Feedback, as natural phenomena—for example, in biology—is part of the output (of any living thing) that returns as input (to the living thing) to regulate its further output. Natural feedback (excluding major and sudden disruptions to the system in which the feedback occurs) always works; i.e., via positive and negative feedback, natural systems operate/perform optimally.

Assessing Survey Research Feedback

Survey research feedback (concerning a program, policy, or any other human-made object) is answers to questions and, as will be shown in the remainder of this section, unreliable information; i.e., information that may, or may not, be correct or accurate. Because survey research feedback is unreliable, it may not be able to keep the system of which it is a part operating optimally. (Also—and this will be discussed later—in many instances, survey research feedback does not keep the system operating optimally because it is not used to regulate output but, instead, is used to provide opportunities for respondents to express themselves, and for other purposes.)

Answers Unreliable

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i Parts of this paper are based on George Beam, The Problem with Survey Research (Transaction, 2012).

ii Survey research is the use of any instrument or procedure that asks questions of respondents.
Answers to questions—whether produced by feedback or any other instrument or procedure that asks questions of respondents—are unreliable because when all you have are answers to questions it’s impossible to know if the answers are correct (Category One Answers) or incorrect (Category Two Answers). It’s not the every answer is incorrect; obviously, some are but, when all you have are answers, it’s impossible to determine which, if any, are in either Category. The only way to know if answers are correct or incorrect is to check or verify them with information from one or, preferably, two or more non-asking sources of information; say, from observation, experimentation, and documents. Those who rely on survey research (for feedback or any other purpose) do not have information from non-asking sources and, therefore, not able to discern which, if any, answers are in Category One or Category Two; all survey researchers/askers have is unreliable information. Each of the four components of survey research, singly and in combination, makes answers unreliable: respondents, asking instruments, settings in which questions are asked and answers given, and survey researcher/askers themselves.

Respondents

Respondents make answers unreliable—i.e., give answers that may, or may not, correspond to what’s really going on—and, thus, information in their answers may, or may not, be sufficient to regulate output optimally because they (1) sometimes lie, (2) often do not have relevant and correct information, (3) and because their values and norms affect answers, as do their (4) interest in, and (5) sensitivity to question topics. Also, (6) answerers’ memory biases responses, (7) they are not always who they say they are, (8) those dissatisfied (with a product or program) are more likely to respond/give feedback than those satisfied, and there are (9) many other ways respondents make answers unreliable; e.g., by improperly marking Likert
scales, by not following questionnaire branching instructions, and so on.°

Instruments

Asking instruments (surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other types of asking) skew answers, producing information that may, or may not, be accurate. Thus, polls, interviews, and other survey research instruments (as is the case for respondents) do not produce reliable information for regulating further output. Evidence that asking instruments produce unreliable information is provided by numerous studies demonstrating (1) that asking instruments produce symbolic and unrealistic answers, (2) that each instrument produces different results, and that they (3) often generate inconsistent or conflicting answers, (4) much nonresponse, and, more often than not, (5) unrepresentative results.

Settings

Settings in which questions are asked and answers given make answers unreliable because settings are stimuli and reinforcers that skew answers into Category One or Category Two. Askers for feedback, having only answers to their questions, cannot identify which, if any, are in either Category; thus, they’re not able to regulate output for optimum benefit.

Both types of settings, societal and immediate, have powerful attributes or components that affect answers. Characteristics of, and forces within, societal settings—such as culture, laws, media, and socialization—bias answers, as do aspects of immediate asking settings, including third parties, gender of interviewer, whether the setting is the workplace, school, or home, and so on. Virtually every component of every setting “contaminates” forcing respondents to say what’s compatible with each particular setting.

Askers

Askers, as is the case for instruments and settings, affect answers; thereby answers are
made unreliable and unfit to regulate output for optimal operation. Characteristics of askers that
cue and induce the answers they receive include their styles of behavior (e.g., asking questions
rapidly, pausing, voice intonation, and so on\(^{18}\)) as well as their personal attributes, such as
judgments when coding responses, experiences, competencies, ethnicity, socioeconomic
features, gender, and age\(^{19}\).

**Survey Research Feedback for Self Expression and Other Purposes**

Of course, people should be asked for feedback because both askers and answers benefit. Answerers feel better than those who’ve not been asked. Askers, as a result of
answerers feeling better, are in a more pleasant and productive relationship with answerers—and
correct information might be obtained.

Survey research feedback also is used by organizations, groups, and individuals
for promotion and sales. For example, university alumni associations ask for feedback
via surveys of members to promote the association and induce renewals. However,
those who ask for feedback for sales, promotion, and the like, need to keep in mind that the
only way to know if information in feedback answers is correct—and, thus, the type of action
required to regulate output for optimum output (in sales, promotion, or anything else)—is to check
answers with data from two or more non-asking sources. Ask for feedback, but don’t rely on it.

**Moving Beyond Survey Research Feedback**

Moving beyond survey research feedback requires (1) obtaining information from
observation, documents, experiments, formal/predictive models, and comparison of non-asking
phenomena. (When two or more of these sources or procedures are used to determine if the data
from each are compatible, or moving in the same direction, the reliability of the acquired
information is enhanced\(^{20}\).) (2) Also, antecedent control and consequence control are procedures
that effectively regulate output for optimal operation.

Observation

The greater value of data produced by observation over answers produced by questions and, thus the greater value of observation-based information for regulating output, is captured in common speech; e.g., actions speak louder than words, and, do what I say, don’t do as I do. Similarly, a maxim of political scientist, Arthur Bentley (1870-1957)—one of the first modern proponents of observation to collect data about what’s really going on—was: observe “something doing”\textsuperscript{21}; “actually performed . . . activities”\textsuperscript{22}. Sociologist, C. Wright Mills, points out that answers to questions are unreliable because many times respondents do not say what they have done, or intend to do: “[O]ften there is a disparity between lingual and social-motor types of behavior. . . . [i.e.,] between talk and action”\textsuperscript{23}.

Observation, including observation of behavioral traces, produces reliable information about outputs of individuals and institutions, as well as of policies and programs (e.g., concerning illicit drug use, littering, taxes, recycling, and so on) that can be, and sometimes are, used as inputs to regulate further outputs of those policies and programs\textsuperscript{24}. When you want to improve policy and program outputs, don’t ask for feedback, observe.

Experiments

Another procedure for acquiring reliable information about output that can be used as input to regulate further output is to experiment with the inputs of a system to identify effects on outputs. An experiment is “a test or a series of test in which purposeful changes are made to the input variables of a process or system so that we may observe the reasons [causes\textsuperscript{25}] for changes that may be observed in the output”\textsuperscript{26}. Experiment-based studies have led to improvements in organizational personnel retention, productivity, as well as in educational and other social
When you want to improve policy and program outputs, don’t ask for feedback, experiment.

Models

Building and testing models is a research design for generating reliable data that can be used as input to improve further output. A formal, or logical, model is a simplified description of the object of investigation (e.g., a policy, program, or institution) from which hypotheses are deduced and, then, tested. Support for the deduced hypotheses is support for the model’s assumptions, which are inputs for further output.

When a computer is used for modeling, it’s called a simulation, a simulation model, or a computer simulation. An example of computer simulation, as well as its application to social, political, and organizational problems and issues, is a specific research design, named “system dynamics”. As stated on the System Dynamics Society website: “System dynamics is a methodology for studying and managing . . . feedback systems, such as one finds in business and other social systems. . . . The methodology: identifies problem, develops a hypothesis explaining the cause of the problem, builds a computer simulation model of the system at the root of the problem, tests the model to be certain that it reproduces the behavior seen in the real world, devises and tests in the model alternative policies that alleviate the problem, and implements this solution”\(^{28}\). The “alternative policies” are the inputs for further outputs. Rather than using survey research for feedback to be used as input, generate input for further output by building and testing formal models. This is “essential” if the social sciences are to have greater and positive impacts on “the real world”\(^{29}\).

Documents

Another method for collecting reliable information to be used as input for further output
is document analysis\(^30\) (or content analysis when maps, Internet sites, social media, and so on are included\(^31\).) Analyses of budgets and other documents\(^32\) provide reliable information about organizations\(^33\)—and, more specifically, organizational decision making\(^34\), budget decision making processes, structures, and personnel—as well as individual performance, organizational change, and strategy formation\(^35\). When you want to improve policy and program outputs, don’t ask for feedback, analyze documents.

Comparison

Comparison is a social science procedure that generates reliable information that can be used as input to enhance further output. In one form of comparative research, an ideal type of the phenomenon investigated (e.g., bureaucracy, or a particular policy, program, or process), is constructed. Then, the ideal type is compared or contrasted with actual instances of the phenomenon and, on the basis of similarities and differences, hypotheses that postulate explanations—causes—for the similarities and differences are constructed and tested. Hypotheses supported by empirical evidence become inputs for the generation of further outputs.

Another variety of the comparative approach begins with identifications of similarities and differences between two or more actual instances of the phenomenon being investigated; then hypotheses are formed and tested, and when empirically substantiated become inputs for further output. Examples of this approach include comparing decision making in organizations, organizational personnel, environmental policies, bureaucratic systems, and so on\(^36\). Instead of asking for feedback, compare to generate input data for further output.

Antecedent Control and Consequence Control

Antecedent control and consequence control are, in contrast to survey research feedback, better able to improve the further output of the policies, programs, institutions, groups or
individuals being investigated. Because outputs are functions of their antecedents and consequences, antecedent control and consequence control enhance outputs by controlling what stimulates (antecedents) and by controlling what reinforces them (consequences).

**Antecedent Control**

Optimizing output requires going beyond survey research feedback to antecedent control; to input control. Antecedent control is control over an output by control over its antecedent, its input. Control of the antecedent, the input, increases the likelihood that the desired output will occur\(^{37}\).

Antecedent control, by identifying the input data that cause an output, can be preventive. For example, managers practicing antecedent control identify and resolve labor problems/issues as they arise; thereby preventing a strike. Also, “‘[s]etting an objective, restructuring a boring task to make it more interesting, and providing skill training all amount to [antecedent] control because each is carried out prior to job performance’”\(^{38}\).

**Consequence Control**

Although antecedents cue or stimulate outputs, the fact remains that outputs cannot be sustained without reinforcing consequences of the stimulated or cued outputs. Consequence control sustains the antecedent-cued output via positive or negative consequences of that output. Thus, consequence control is essential to keep the system at optimal output\(^{39}\). Practitioners of consequence control, to paraphrasing Skinner, control consequences that return as input and, thereby, increase the probability that the output that produced these consequences will occur again\(^{40}\).

**Conclusion**

Survey research feedback produces unreliable information and, therefore, should not be
used to evaluate outputs of policies, programs, institutions, or individuals. Reliable information for assessments and betterment is acquired from observation, experiments, logical/predictive models, documents, and comparison of non-asking phenomena. Also, outputs are enhanced by antecedent control and consequence control.

Endnotes


5 See, e.g., Fendrich, Michael, et al., “Accuracy of Parent Mental Health Service Reporting: Results from a Reverse Record-Check Study”, Journal of American Academy of Child and


8 “[I]nbound communications [feedback] from customers [citizens, clients of programs] tend to include more complaints and negative comments than compliments or positive comments. Essentially, customers having negative experiences are overrepresented . . . , and the experiences of other customers are underrepresented, if not completely excluded”. D. Randall Brandt, “Hearing Aids: How well are you capturing the voice of the customer?” Quality Progress (Oct. 2012), p. 22.

9 E.g., respondents make answers unreliable when, rather than responding to the questions put to them, make their own points. This is common practice by government officials, always crafting answers for maximum advantage.


22 Ibid., pp. 187, 180.


30 For the use of documents as sources for input that improves output, see, e.g., relevant parts of, Hatry, et al., *How Effective Are Your Community Services?*, 3rd ed.


Luthens and Kreitner, *Organizational Behavior Modification and Beyond*, p. 113.


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