

Question Wording Experiments:
Job Satisfaction and the Co-residence of Adult Children and their Parents

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GSS Methodological Report No. 127

September, 2017

On the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS) two question-wording experiments were conducted testing variant versions of core GSS items on job satisfaction (SATJOB) and the co-residence of adult children and their parents (AGED).

Job Satisfaction

Previous research has found that different measures of job satisfaction produced notably variant depictions of worker satisfaction. But differences across studies in sampling methods, target populations, data-collection mode, response options, and other features made it very difficult to isolate and explain the observed differences (Chambers, 2013). We thought that some differences might come from how “job satisfaction” was conceptualized and what terms were used to implement the concept.

What is meant by “job satisfaction” has been under conceptualized. As Wanous and Lawler (1972, p. 102) noted, “There is a serious lack of good theory about the very meaning of job satisfaction.” They also note that “there probably are several types of feelings that people have which can be satisfaction or which influence their feelings of satisfaction about their job (Wanous and Lawler, 1972, p. 104).” See also Baker, 2004, Kalleberg, 1974; and Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy, 1997 on multiple components of job satisfaction.

The literature on job satisfaction has used a wide range of terms to describe what they are asking about including “your job,” “your work,” “problems with your work,” “getting along on the job,” “work I do,” “my job,” and many other similar variants (Robinson, Athanasiou, and Head, 1969; Spector, 1997). One key generalization from their review was that “extrinsic factors were found to be more often mentioned as dissatisfying features of one’s job while intrinsic features were more often noted as satisfying features (Robinson, Athanasiou, and Head, 1969, p. 67).” Spector (1997, p. 15) defines extrinsic as “aspects of work having little to do with the job task itself, such as pay” and intrinsic as “the nature of job tasks themselves and how people feel about the work they do.” Based on this research, one would expect that different terms used to describe “job satisfaction” could well produce differing measurements, especially if the alternative wordings varied in tapping the extrinsic/intrinsic aspects of jobs/work.

On the 2016 GSS, the standard, job-satisfaction item was asked on a random five-sixth of the sample who were in the labor force or keeping house. It is not asked of the retired, students, and others – mostly disabled people:

On the whole how satisfied are you with **the work you do** – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little satisfied, and very satisfied? **SATJOB**

The variant wording was asked to the remaining random one-sixth of the sample:

On the whole how satisfied are you with **the job you have** – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little satisfied, and very satisfied? **SATJOBHV**

As expected, Table 1 shows that the revised wording focusing on “the job you have” recorded significantly fewer “very satisfied” responses than the standard “the work you do” wording (-10.3 percentage points, prob. = .002). The differences are almost entirely within the two positive satisfaction categories and there is very little variation across wordings when comparing the combined positive and combined negative ratings.

Cognitive testing of the two versions revealed factors contributing to the different measurement outcomes (Dugoni, 2017). SATJOB (“the work you do”) was more respondent centric, having to do with their personal performance and accomplishments. As Dugoni (2017) noted, “Respondents...talked about the tasks they performed, things they produced, and the value of what they produced for others. Their satisfaction had more to do with the quality and value of the output of their work than in what they received in return.” SATJOBHV (“the job you have”) was more position/employment centered, having more to do with attributes of their job and not their individual actions. Dugoni (2017) observed that “Respondents...talked about their position, their place of work, working conditions/hours, their supervisors, their salary, or their benefits.” Thus, as expected, the standard version produced higher reports of “job satisfaction,” at least in part and probably mainly, because the evaluation is more ego-centric, while the variant wording focuses on elements of their employment.

A series of three-way interactions were tested to ascertain whether the difference in satisfaction ratings varied across sub-groups. None of the variables analyzed showed significant interaction effects (RICHWORK –wanting to continue working if the money was not needed, JOBLOSE – expectation of losing employment, JOBFIND – likelihood finding new job if unemployed, WRKSTAT – labor force status, WRKSLF – self-employment status, SEX – gender, DEGREE – highest education degree, CLASS – subjective social class, RINCOM16 – earned income; PRESTG10 – occupational prestige). However, Table 2 shows three interesting, but not statistically significant, interactions. Assuming that these results are reliable, the wording differences are greatest among workers without even a high school degree, intermediate among those with a high-school degree through a bachelor’s degree and smallest for those with graduate-level degrees. Similarly, those who are working class have larger wording effects than those who are middle class. This pattern suggests workers with no degrees and those self-rating themselves as working class are more affected by the wording differences. Essentially, these groups have less job satisfaction on both measures, but the ratings are lower on the variant “job you have” wording than the standard “work you do” wording. This may well be because the jobs they have tend to have employment conditions that people tend to find less favorable. The third result finds that those keeping house show a larger wording effect than those in paid employment. Since homemakers are not in conventional employment and don’t have an employer in the way that those in the labor force do, it is harder to discern why they might be more affected by the wording differences. Conti and Pudney (2011) did find that women have been more sensitive to variations in the methods for measuring job satisfaction than men are. Particularly for education and self-identified social class, the possible interactions are consistent with results from the both the cognitive testing and the existing literature.

In sum, the standard GSS question about job satisfaction measures higher levels of satisfaction than the variant wording because it is more likely to access intrinsic factors and these are more positively rated than extrinsic factors are.

Co-residence of Adult Children and their Parents

The GSS has had an item on the attitudes towards parents and adult children living together since 1973. It shows a notable increase in favorability rising from a record low of 32.8% saying this was a good idea in 1973 to a record high of 59.8% considering it a good idea in 2016. The item is intended to refer to the situation of elderly parents moving in with their adult children rather than either

maintaining their own residence or alternatively residing in assisted living or a nursing home. The item asks:

As you know, many older people share a home with their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or a bad idea? **AGED**

It has been suggested that as worded it could refer to parents coming to live with their adult children, adult children returning to live with their parents after a period of independent living (the so-called boomerang kids), or even parents, children, and potentially grandchildren continuously residing in a multi-generational household.

To sort out the first two living arrangement just mentioned and clarify the meaning of the item, two new versions were created. The first variant refers more explicitly to the standard question's original intent – elderly parents coming to live with their adult children:

As you know, many older people move into the homes of their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or a bad idea? **AGEDPAR**

The second variant refers to the situation of adult children returning to live with their parents:

As you know, many grown children move back home to live with their parents. Do you think this is generally a good idea or a bad idea? **AGEDCHLD**

The standard item (AGED) has been and in 2016 was again asked on a random two-thirds of GSS (BALLOT=2, 3). The two experimental wordings were each asked on opposing random halves of BALLOT=1, thereby each variant being asked of one-sixth of all GSS respondents.

Table 3 shows that the standard wording (AGED) and the variant explicitly about the elder parent living with their adult children (AGEDPAR) have essentially the same distributions. The variant wording about adult children returning to the parental home (AGEDCHLD) had notably different marginals from the other two with “good idea” lower by 13.8 to 15.0 percentage points and “depends” higher by 6.8-7.3 percentage points. This implies, but does not confirm, that respondents mostly thought of the AGEDPAR situation when answering AGED. It certainly indicates that a substantial proportion of those answer AGED did not think of the AGEDCHLD scenario. If they had, AGED would have been lower than AGEDPAR since the less support for AGEDCHLD would have driven down support for AGED compared to AGEDPAR.

To explore further the idea that AGED was essentially understood in a way similar to AGEDPAR, a search was made for variables that correlated with AGED and AGEDPAR in a similar manner and in a different manner from how they correlated with AGEDCHLD. The three wordings were crosstabbed with age (AGE), number of adults in the household (ADULTS), total household size (HOMPOP), number of income earners in the household (EARNRS), number of children in the household (BABIES+PRETEEN+TEENS), number of children born to respondent (CHILDS), household income (INCOME16), gender (SEX), health status (HEALTH), and labor-force status (WRKSTAT). None of these comparisons showed a clear pattern of the AGED crosstabulation being a blend of the patterns from AGEDPAR and AGEDCHLD. Such results did not materialize largely because the three variables often showed similar relationships with the demographics. For example, thinking that co-residence was a good idea declined for AGED from 64.8% among those in their 40s to 36.1% for those 70+, for AGEDCHLD it

decreased from 58.9% among those in their 40s to 33.8% for those 70+, and for AGEPAR it fell from 71.9% for those in their 30s to 28.6% among those 70+. Thus, the crosstabular comparisons could not confirm nor disconfirm the idea that AGED was answered in a way similar to AGEDPAR and different from AGEDCHLD. However, all three co-residence wordings had similar crosstabular patterns with independent demographics and that suggests that attitudes towards co-residence tend to have similar structural relationships even when the nature of the co-residence and the absolute levels of support both vary (i.e. AGEDPAR vs. AGEDCHLD).

In sum, AGED and AGEDPAR have both similar marginals and relationships with demographics and AGED and AGEDCHLD differ on their marginals, but do have similar structural patterns with demographics.

Table 1

Satisfaction with “the work you do” vs. “the job you have”

Responses	The Work You Do (SATJOB)	The Job You Have (SATJOBHV)	SATJOB - SATJOHV
Very satisfied	49.9%	38.6%	+ 10.3
Moderately Satisfied	35.8	43.8	- 8.0
A Little Dissatisfied	9.3	10.5	- 1.2
Very Dissatisfied	3.7	3.3	+ 0.4
Don't Know/Missing	1.3	4.0	- 2.7
	1803	306	

Prob. =.002

SATJOB: On the whole how satisfied are you with **the work you do** – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied?

SATJOBHV: On the whole how satisfied are you with **the job you have** – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied?

Table 2

% Very Satisfied (SATJOB – SATJOBHV) by Other Variables

DEGREE		CLASS		WRKSTAT	
LTHS	+28.5	Working Class	+12.6	Keeping House	+22.7
HS	+ 7.2	Middle Class	+ 1.4	Employed	+ 6.4
Associate	+ 3.8				
Bachelor	+ 8.0				
Graduate	+ 2.2				

Table 3

Three Measures of Attitudes towards the Co-Residence of Parents and Adult Children

	AGED	AGEDPAR	AGEDCHLD
Good Ideas	59.4	60.6	45.6
Depends	14.5	14.0	21.3
Bad Idea	26.2	25.4	33.1
N	1929	478	431
Excluded N (NA+DK)	18	2	6

As you know, many older people share a home with their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or a bad idea? **AGED**

As you know, many older people move into the homes of their grown children. Do you think this is generally a good idea or a bad idea? **AGEDPAR**

As you know, many grown children move back home to live with their parents. Do you think this is generally a good idea or a bad idea? **AGEDCHLD**

Depends was an unread, but precoded response, in the CAPI program for all three versions.

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