

THE JOURNAL OF SPURIOUS CORRELATIONS SURVEY

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES FOR THE

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The survey, conducted among academics on behalf of the team of editors, describes expectations about the opportunity, form and content of a journal of negative results. Questions were designed to solicit scholar's experience with negative results. Once assembled, answers count, name and predict the function of research findings that are perceived to fall systematically out of the current 'publishable' range and are consequently only indirectly perceived in literature as systematic shortcomings of the published form.

The process: The survey is carried out by disseminating an electronic questionnaire on several large independent or institutional mailing lists addressing mainly social science methodologists, but also social science academics at large. Questions explore researchers' experience with negative results and their expectations concerning the opportunity, content, form and use of a journal dedicated to such content.

Data: One hundred seventy five responses collected from the mailing lists of the American Political Science Association (APSA), the International Sociological Association (ISA), the European Science Foundation (ESF), The Canadian Political Science Association, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), H-Net, PolMeth, and COMPASSS.

Response Summary:

To accommodate systematically unreported negative results on equal footing with traditionally publishable content, invites rethinking publication. On average, responses suggest that 'negative' and 'unpublishable' are all but confounded for the predictable suspects of significance and confirmatory bias. However, what keeps such findings hidden are likely wastebaskets not file drawers: more likely priority is given to publishable results by authors along the research process, then by reviewers at the end. Taking the circumstantial evidence of the survey – publication bias works out most intensely well before peer-review comes into play. The effects implicit publication standards have on knowledge cumulation beyond (or despite?) method and theory have received relatively little consideration. Rethinking the relationship between evidence and theory through analyzing the research process will be one of the tasks a journal of negative results in social sciences is invited to uphold.

Simply declaring an alternative venue to tackle publication bias does not open floodgates of failed & filed research. And although averting replication of 'mistakes' - a long since predicted use of published negative results, or meta-analysis are obvious applications, the real use may have greater potential come elsewhere: results averting significance and confirmatory bias ought to inform new choices of research interests and explicit consideration of how findings become positive, public and applied through the research process as a community enterprise.

Following the topics groups of questions have been devised:

On file drawer manuscripts: Nearly all respondents (84%) believe that a substantial proportion of research results in their field goes unreported, but concede that these are suppressed by their authors in favor of more publishable content rather than by journal reviewers. Also, nearly all consider that negative results are as much a fact of

life for qualitative as for quantitative methods, but only slightly more than half believe that qualitative negative results are sufficiently well defined to be reported.

What are negative results: More than half answered this open question meaningfully, and a first attempt to categorize the answers finds three broader categories: inconclusive findings (failing to reject the null hypothesis by the accepted threshold, or some qualitative equivalent), unexpected results (that do not conform authors hypothesis or broadly accepted conjectures) and contrary evidence (that goes inconveniently against mainstream theory). A few answers mention all of the above. Only three recount instances of intentional review bias against specialized topics. Responses appear to fit either of the two species of publication bias identified in literature: *significance bias* – confounding statistical and substantive significance in awarding priority to statistically significant findings, and *confirmatory bias* – priority given to findings consistent with established theory, and, in a broader sense, priority given to results confirming the authors' hypothesis.

What should a journal of negative results disseminate: Mainly 'Empirical results that do not fit traditional theories, methods or assumptions' followed at a distance by 'Results contradicting mainstream findings'.

What would be the main function of such a journal: Mainly 'Rethinking the relationship between evidence and theory', but also 'Analyzing the research process' and 'Reporting trial and error from research leading to published results'. Interestingly, one potential scholarly function of electronic space for registering data sets was ignored, despite substantial attention received by the subject. Respondents do not believe that datasets for replication would be made freely available, although individual researchers rather than centralizing registries are better trusted with the task. A repository of unpublished research is overwhelmingly welcome.

What form should take a journal of negative results: Interestingly, the choice is split: the relative minority of respondents who maintain that most research results are suppressed from publication by reviewers prefer a publication mostly or entirely dedicated to negative results. The majority of respondents who indicate that publication bias is embedded in authors choice of results for publication in the first place, prefer negative results brought into the mainstream publications or at least embedded in a methodology journal. Regarding the choice of paper versus electronic format, the majority prefers reading and contributing to an electronic publication, but would prefer to recommend to their library a traditional (methodology) journal dedicated to negative results. The preferred forms of publication are also split by function: an electronic publication is considered most suitable for reporting trial and error, and, more surprisingly, for comparative studies, while the overall preferred function ('Rethinking...') is considered suitable for any format. However, responses are not significantly split between these options.

The survey questionnaire is available for reference online at:

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/surveys/1771/>

Your comments are welcome by the editors at: survey@jspurc.org.

Response statistics are included below.

Summary of Responses up to August 18, 2006

QUESTION I. Do you believe that a substantial proportion of research results goes unreported in your field?

- (81%) 'Yes'
- (8%) 'No'
- (11%) 'Don't know'

Question answered by: 100 % of respondents.

QUESTION II. Do most unreported results remain out of print due to:

- (20%) 'Publication bias'
- (55%) 'Priority given to results perceived as more publishable'
- (7%) 'Lack of interest from authors'
- (7%) 'Limited relevance to readers'
- (6%) 'Tradition'
- (14%¹) 'Other: ' (open answer)

Question answered by: 94 % of respondents.

QUESTION III. What is your primary understanding of a negative result in your main research area? Please specify:

Open question answered by: 69 % of respondents.

QUESTION IV. What kind of content would you primarily expect to find in a publication claiming to report negative results in the social sciences?

- (38%) Empirical results that do not fit traditional theories, methods or assumptions
- (5%) Criticism of established theory or methods
- (21%) Results contradicting mainstream findings in your field
- (13%) New questions open for further research
- (5%) Incomplete research
- (5%) Unimportant results not welcome by established journals
- (11%) None of the above

Question answered by: 99% of respondents.

¹ Responses to the open questions are counted as independent questions.

QUESTION V. What additional theme would be of greatest interest to you in a journal reporting negative results in the social sciences?

- (27%) Rethinking the relationship between evidence and theory
- (8%) Bridging the qualitative/quantitative divide
- (15%) Comparing methods across disciplines, subfields or countries
- (11 %) Analyzing the research process
- (10%) Disseminating datasets in your field of research that were previously unavailable
- (26%) Reporting trial and error from research leading to published results
- (9%) Others, please specify (open answer)

Question answered by: 99% of respondents.

QUESTION VI. Does the concept of negative results apply only to quantitative methods?

- (7%) Yes
- (85%) No
- (8%) Don't know

Question answered by: 100 % of respondents.

QUESTION VII. Would qualitative research benefit from more systematic reporting of negative results?

- (76%) Yes
- (4%) No
- (20%) Don't know

Question answered by: 100% of respondents.

QUESTION VIII. Are negative results generated in your research area sufficiently well-defined for systematic reporting?

- (48%) Yes
- (26%) No
- (26%) Don't know

Question answered by: 99% of respondents.

QUESTION IX. In what form should negative results in your research area be published?

- (33%) A publication mostly or entirely dedicated to negative results'
- (33%) An online forum and database reporting trial and error by researchers along with other types of negative results.
- (29%) A small section in your preferred methodology journal
- (2%) No publication - informal communication is sufficient

Question answered by: 98% of respondents.

QUESTION X. To which type of publication would you be most likely to contribute the negative results of your own research?

- (37%) A publication mostly or entirely dedicated to negative results
- (27%) An online forum and database reporting trial and error by researchers along with other types of negative results'
- (29%) A small section in your preferred methodology journal
- (3%) No publication - informal communication is sufficient

Question answered by: 96% of respondents.

QUESTION XI. Which would you be most likely to read and recommend to your library?

- (27%) A publication mostly or entirely dedicated to negative results
- (27%) An online forum and database reporting trial and error by researchers along with other types of negative results
- (39%) A social science methodology journal also reporting negative results'
- (2%) None of the above'

Question answered by: 97 % of respondents.

QUESTION XII. In what context would published negative results be most useful to you?

- (9%) As teaching material
- (58%) As reference for research in general (both new and ongoing interests)
- (15%) As a resource to inform the choice of new research topics
- (8%) As an outlet for submitting unpublished research results
- (4%) As a curiosity at most
- (5%) Other: (open answer)

Question answered by: 95% of respondents.

QUESTION XIII. Who is responsible to make datasets of published and unpublished studies available to other researchers?

- (29%) Each researcher on his webpage
- (13%) Journals in specific subfields
- (6%) The major associations in each discipline
- (4%) National research communities
- (14%) A central data archive
- (7%) Response to individual data requests from colleagues
- (22%) All good ideas, but most researchers will not make their data available

Question answered by: 95% of respondents.

QUESTION XIV. Would you consult an online registry in which you could find abstracts/reports about all unpublished results?

- (80%) Yes
- (5%) No
- (13%) Don't know

Question answered by: 98% of respondents.

QUESTION XV. Do you feel that students or academics in other areas of the social sciences than yours would benefit from access to currently unreported research results?

- (82%) Yes
- (4%) No
- (12%) Don't Know

Question answered by: 98% of respondents.

QUESTION XVI. Please include any further comments.

Open question answered by: 20% of respondents.

RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED THEMSELVES AS:

- (30%) Graduate Student
- (12%) Post-doc/ Researcher
- (5%) Lecturer / Instructor
- (46%) Professor

Question answered by: 96% of respondents.