Reviewer’s report

Title: Voluntary vs. Compulsory Student Evaluation of Clerkships: Effect on Validity and Potential Bias

Version: 0 Date: 01 Sep 2017

Reviewer: Edward Krupat

Reviewer's report:

The paper "Voluntary vs compulsory student evaluation of clerkships" is generally a well-considered, well-written discussion of a concern some people have expressed, the question of whether low response rates from students on clerkship evaluation surveys bias the findings and therefore influence the conclusions that can be drawn from them. It is interesting that the authors tend to avoid talking about the direction of that possible bias. In fact, on p 9 the authors offer a hypothesis about compulsory response and bias with offering any information about directionality (hypotheses should always be stated directionally). It would be important to hear why low response rates would suggest unreasonably high or low ratings, but this is largely unaddressed.

For the most part, the authors have proven the null hypothesis, that when ratings are compulsory vs voluntary we do not find much difference. Typically such findings are hard to publish, but I have no problem with putting forward a paper which has the possibility of reassuring those who worry about surveys, such as clerkship evaluations, with low response rate that the data can be trusted.

Some specific comments:

* The authors over-utilize the terms validity and reliability and sometimes misuse them. It would be so much more direct in presenting and discussing the findings to tell us what they say and mean rather than to constantly say that this makes the students' responses more or less reliable.

* Beginning on p 8 the authors talk about AAPOR guidelines for response rates, etc. From what I can tell, they simply use number returned as the numerator divided by number distributed as the denominator, a simple mathematical calculation that appears pretty self-apparent. Why is complexity in terms of AAPOR guidelines relevant??

* I am fascinated that the authors included the bogus item in the middle of their second round of questionnaires. Why did they not choose to include it in the first, for purposes of comparability? I didn't see any discussion, but did their students not comment and question...
this—this would be interesting for readers to know as a sort of sidebar. And, by the way, there is little or no reporting of this aspect of the paper highlighted in the findings.

* The fact that females are more likely to respond to surveys is well documented. This factor, like any other factor, is only important to the extent that females are likely to be more positive or negative in their ratings. Here again, the authors need to be more attentive to the directionality of bias and those factors that might introduce bias in one direction or another.

* The authors spend almost as much time talking about the factor structure of their questionnaire as other issues, and seem to want to focus our attention on the fact that the conditions of responding didn’t affect this. Personally, I find this part of the story that this paper has to tell far less interesting and relevant.

* When the authors discuss authority-induced bias, they refer us back to the Methods section to remind us what they are talking about. They should describe what they mean briefly right there and then rather than send us back earlier in the paper for a reminder of what this term refers to.

* In the first paragraph of the Discussion, the authors summarize their main findings, and their third finding is that "...the compulsory approach might introduce..." The data presented either indicate that they do or do not—"might" is not appropriate here as a summary of what was found.

* On p 14 in the Discussion session, a good deal of new literature is introduced. For the most part, this should have been raised in the Intro to anticipate the relevant issues, to be re-raised in the Discussion. Also, if new references are to be introduced at all, they ought to be presented in order to clarify the findings, but I did not find this literature functioned to throw light on the interpretation of data presented earlier in the paper.

Overall, this is an interesting paper. I thought there were several flaws that ought to be addressed to improve the paper, however it does speak to an issue of interest with relevant and well-analyzed data.

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes
Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

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