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## Examining biases in organizational survey data

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## Introduction to Current Empirical Research

# Examining biases in organizational survey data

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“Interpreting Organizational Survey Results: A Critical Application of the Self-Serving Bias,” by Peter A. Hausdorf, Stephen D. Risavy, and Michael J. Stanley, the article appearing in Current Empirical Research in this issue, takes on an important task: critiquing the most common source of data in organizational behavior. Organizational surveys are used by researchers and practitioners alike to gauge the attitudes and emotions of employees. The feedback managers receive is potentially used to alter critical aspects of work specification and organizational structure, and researchers use their findings to assess hypotheses developed to make a contribution to the literature. Without accurate data, conclusions in both areas are clearly suspect.

Researchers are aware that individual survey data are fraught with potential biases and self-delusions, yet there are few alternate methods of capturing how individuals actually see the world. Hausdorf makes a clever prediction: that the wording of questions on surveys that are self-focused will result in different responses from those that are other-focused, regardless of the actual content of the question. In other words, how the question is structured will dramatically affect the results. Hausdorf, Risavy, and Stanley base their predictions on the rationale that individuals will be affected by a powerful cognitive bias, the self-serving bias, a bias suggesting that individuals often reason, “When things go well, it’s because of something internal to me,” and when things go wrong, “It was someone else’s doing.” In two studies, the authors find substantial evidence of this bias at work: individuals were far more likely to ascribe Organizational Strengths to themselves and Areas for Improvement to someone else.

The findings of this article should concern those of us conducting organizational surveys and confidently conveying those results as some version of the “truth.” This article suggests we should word our survey items very carefully and be ever-cautious about our claims about the truth derived from survey studies.