Social Desirability in Survey Research

SURVEY RESEARCH LABORATORY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Outline
1. Overview
2. Detection and measurement
3. Prevention
4. Adjustment
5. Recommendations

Is socially desirable responding multi-dimensional?
- Impression Management: intentional misrepresentation to project favorable image
  - closest to traditional concept of Socially Desirable Responding
- Self-Deception: tendency to have inflated yet genuinely held positive views of oneself

What is Social Desirability?
- the systematic tendency to give answers that make the respondent look good, sometimes at the expense of accuracy
- basic human tendency to overstate and sometimes exaggerate positive personal qualities and behaviors and de-emphasize or understate negative ones
- Marlowe & Crowne (1961: 109): “the need for social approval and acceptance and the belief that it can be attained by means of culturally acceptable and appropriate behaviors”

Methods of Detection
- Individual Level
  - use of social desirability trait measures
- Question Level
  - validation of self-reports using objective criteria
  - assessment of item-level missing data
  - respondent probes
  - comparison of aspects of data collection

Measuring Social Desirability
- measures based on assumption that socially desirable responding is a tendency that varies across individuals (i.e., a person characteristic)
- Crowne-Marlowe (1961) Need for Approval Scale
- Eysenck & Eysenck (1964) Lie Scale
- Paulhus (1998) Deception Scales – measures 2 dimensions:
  - Impression management
  - Self-deception
- unclear if scales measure social desirability or actual behavior
Paulhus Measures: Example Items

"Read each statement, and circle the number that best describes you, from Not True (1) to Very True (5) about you."

- **Impression Management**
  - "I sometimes drive faster than the speed limit" (reverse scored)
  - "I have never dropped litter on the street"
  - "I sometimes tell lies if I have to" (reverse scored)
  - "I never take things that don’t belong to me"

- **Self-Deceptive Enhancement**
  - "My first impressions of people usually turn out to be right"
  - "I am very confident in my judgments"
  - "It would be hard for me to break any of my bad habits" (reverse scored)
  - "I have not always been honest with myself" (reverse scored)

Crowne-Marlowe Measure: Example Items

"Listed below are a number of statements concerning personal attitudes and traits. Read each item and decide whether the statement is true or false as it pertains to you."

- "My table manners at home are as good as when I eat out in a restaurant"
- "If I could get into a movie without paying and be sure I was not seen, I would probably do it" (reverse coded)
- "I have never intensely disliked anyone"
- "I never hesitate to go out of my way to help someone in trouble"
- "No matter who I am talking to, I’m always a good listener" (reverse coded)

Validation Studies

- Survey validation studies generally support the presence of socially desirable responding for responses that have either positive or negative implications
- Behaviors that are over-reported:
  - Voting (Sigelman, 1982)
  - Church attendance (F NAS, 1993)
  - Physical exercise (Adams et al., 2005)
- Behaviors that are under-reported:
  - Smoking (Patrick et al., 1994)
  - Drug use (Hendrich et al., 2004)
  - Sexually transmitted diseases (Clark et al., 1997)

Assessment of Item-Level Missing Data

- A common strategy is to employ high item missing data rates as a proxy indicator of highly sensitive question content
- This simple strategy can be very effective
- May not be adequate, however, as respondents may satisfice rather than refuse to answer sensitive questions
- Example from 2006 German ALLBUS Survey (data source: Krumpal, 2013: 2027)

Respondent Probes

- Researchers can directly ask respondents which topics they consider too sensitive to discuss:
  - "In general, how much difficulty did you have being truthful when answering the drug-related questions in this survey?"
- Respondents can misrepresent themselves when answering probes, as well.
- Using projective probes is another strategy to consider:
  - "How comfortable do you think most people are with answering questions about the use of marijuana?"
Variability across aspects of data collection

**Data collection mode**
- There is considerable evidence that social desirability pressures vary by data collection mode (Tourangeau, Rips & Rasinski, 2000)
  - Greater social desirability effects for interviewer-assisted modes (telephone & face-to-face)
  - Lesser social desirability effects for self-administered modes (mail, web & paper-and-pencil)
- Presence of others (Bystander effect)
  - Interviewer characteristics can influence respondents when those characteristics are relevant to the questions being asked
  - Respondent-interviewer social distance can also lead to socially desirable reporting

**Self-Reported Past 18-Month Drug Use by Interviewer-Respondent Social Distance Index**

![Bar chart showing drug use by social distance index](image)


Social Desirability Prevention Strategies

1. Question wording approaches
2. Randomized response technique
3. Bogus pipeline procedure
4. Privacy assurances
5. Interviewer-respondent matching
6. Ask proxies to report

Sudman & Bradburn (1982): some guidelines for collecting sensitive data

1. Use open rather than closed questions for eliciting the frequency of sensitive behaviors
2. Use long rather than short questions
3. Use familiar words in describing sensitive behaviors
4. Deliberately load the question to reduce under-reporting
5. Ask about long periods (such as one’s entire lifetime) or periods from the distant past first when asking about sensitive behaviors
6. Embed the sensitive question among other sensitive items to make it stand out less
7. Use self-administration or some similar method to improve reporting
8. At the end of the questionnaire, include some items to assess how sensitive the key behavioral questions were
9. Collect validation data

Examples of question loading strategies

**Everybody-does-it approach**
"Even the calmest people sometimes get upset and curse. During the past week, did anything happen that caused you to get angry and use curse words?"

**Assume-the-behavior approach**
"How many times during the past week did something happen that caused you to get angry and use curse words?"

**Authorities-recommend-it approach**
"Many psychologists believe it is important to express anger rather than hold it inside. Did anything happen in the past week that caused you to get angry and use curse words?"

**Reasons-for-doing-it approach**
"When people are tired or distracted, they are more likely to curse. During the past week, were you ever so tired or distracted that you got angry and used curse words?"

Bogus Pipeline Procedure

- Any procedure that causes respondents to believe that an objective standard will be used to identify misreported information
- In practice, it is rare that researcher actually intends to follow-through with such a validation effort. Rather, it is the threat of possibly doing so that is employed to motivate respondents to provide accurate information
- Examples: lie-detector test, bio-chemical assays, verification of self-reports with other knowledgeable persons
- Literature reviews produce mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of the bogus pipeline procedure (Appuhamy et al., 1993; 1993; Roese & Jamieson, 1993).
- Bogus pipeline may reduce impression management deception but probably not self-deception
- Ethical implications of bogus pipeline procedures, which is essentially a form of deception, need to be considered
Randomized Response Technique

- Provides the respondent confidentiality by randomizing the question they are being asked to answer.
- Respondent is provided with a randomizing device that only they know the outcome of (e.g., flip a coin).
- Respondent asked to answer one of two alternative questions, depending on the outcome of the randomizing process.
- Literature reviews disagree as to the validity and effectiveness of this technique (Tracy & Fox, 1981; Holbrook and Krosnick, 2010).
- It is also difficult to implement in practice during survey interviews (McAuliffe et al., 1991).
- And can be confusing to respondents.
- It can only be employed to estimate prevalence of sensitive topics... correlates of sensitive topics cannot be examined because information is not provided regarding the behavior of individual respondents.

Randomized Response Example (Zdep et al., 1976)

The next question is one which some people find hard to answer. It deals with the use of physical force on children. We also have a question dealing with attendance at PTA meetings (church or synagogue attendance).

I'm going to give you a nickel and a card with these two questions on it. I want you to take this coin and shake it in your hands. [DEMONSTRATE]. Let it rest on the palm of your hand. Don't let me see which side is up. If the heads side turns up, answer the question on the card next to the heads-up coin. If the tails side turns up, answer the question printed next to the tails-up coin. You are to answer "Yes" or "No", without telling me which question you are answering. [HAND RESPONDENT COIN AND EXHIBIT].

The first question reads, "Have you or your spouse ever intentionally used physical force on any of your children in an effort specifically meant to hurt or cause injury to that child?"

The second question reads, "Have you attended a PTA meeting at school within the past 12 months (attended church or synagogue within the past week)?"

Confidentiality Assurances

- IRB's require basic assurances of confidentiality for respondents.
- Additional reminder that all answers are strictly confidential immediately before asking sensitive questions can also be helpful.
- Confidentiality assurances can lower item nonresponse, increase response rates and improve response accuracy for sensitive questions (Singer et al., 1995).
- IRB Certificate of Confidentiality is an option when answering sensitive questions might put the respondent at additional risk.

Recommendations

- Be aware that social desirability pressures are always a risk.
- Consider implementing prevention, detection & implementation strategies.
- One of best approaches to minimize social desirability is use of self-administered mode.
- Recognize that social desirability scales are not an adequate solution.
- Always provide confidentiality assurances.
- Make sure others are not present during interviews.
- Be aware that social desirability can be culture-specific.

Adjusting for Social Desirability

Use social desirability scales to:
1. Screen out (remove) persons who score very high on social desirability.
2. Statistically adjust for social desirability bias.
3. Analysis to determine if/how social desirability affects substantive findings — Determine if social desirability is responsible for spurious correlations, or serves as a suppressor or moderating variable.

Respondent-Interviewer Matching

- Many researchers deliberately match respondents with interviewers by gender, race/ethnicity, age or other variables in order to:
  - Place respondents more at ease and encourage greater candor when collecting sensitive information.
  - Avoid activating stereotypes that may encourage socially desirable responding.
  - Does not always work: men may be more willing to report risky sexual behavior to women.
- Evidence suggests social desirability is greatest when interviewer characteristics are relevant to question topics (Krosnick and Presser, 2010).
Two final things...

1. Webinar evaluation coming your way

THANKS FOR ATTENDING.
TIMJ@UIC.EDU

Two final things...

1. Webinar evaluation coming your way
2. Another free webinar coming next week:
   Survey Experiments
   Presented by Allyson Holbrook
   Wednesday, November 8 - noon