

social desirability bias

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Social desirability bias refers to the tendency of research subjects to choose responses they believe are more socially desirable or acceptable rather than choosing responses that are reflective of their true thoughts or feelings. This tendency results in over-reporting of responses that are socially desirable and under-reporting of those responses that are deemed to be socially undesirable/less desirable. This tendency is believed to be a personality trait based on the subject's need for approval. Social desirability bias may become an issue when research involves collecting data on personal or socially sensitive issues. For example, respondents may believe that society expects them to be responsible for the environment, even though the respondent may not care much about the environment. In such a situation, the respondent may simply indicate an environmentally conscious attitude rather than choose an option that represents his or her true feelings. The idea of "political correctness" is based on social desirability bias.

The problem of social desirability bias is most likely to occur in those situations in which questions relate to what are widely accepted attitudes, or behavioral or social norms (e.g., smoking, drug use, lying, cheating, and protection of environment). This bias is reported to be most apparent when data are collected through a survey method where the respondent can be easily identified. For example, social desirability bias may occur when collecting data through personal interviews, specifically because of the presence of another individual. Collecting data through a mechanism that allows for privacy may decrease social desirability bias. For example, a mail survey may be least susceptible to such bias because of the impersonal nature of responses and the ability of the respondent to submit the survey anonymously. Reassuring subjects that their responses will be kept confidential or anonymous should also help minimize social desirability bias.

The concept of social desirability bias is also related to a concept termed *demand effects*. The

idea behind demand effects is that the subject responds to a question in the way he or she believes the researcher desires. Demand effects are specific to the researcher and may or may not reference the subject's beliefs about what society as a whole believes about a specific topic. Careful design of a survey or focus group outline, which avoids leading questions, should be able to minimize or reduce demand effects.

Recent research on social desirability bias indicates that this bias may not be as prevalent as previously believed. Part of "intentional misrepresentation" may actually be attributable to accidental mistakes in recall (Krosnick, 1999, p. 546), rather than intentional lying.

Researchers have suggested a number of actions to address this issue (Nederhof, 1985). If the length of the survey permits, it is advisable to measure the social desirability bias by administering the social desirability scale. This allows the researcher to assess the extent of the problem of social desirability influence in survey responses. A properly designed survey could also help mitigate this problem. For example, in the case of questions that are prone to generate "socially desirable" responses, it is important to provide response options to such questions where the respondents have the opportunity to tell the truth. One of the sources of social desirability influence is the interviewer himself/herself, whereby the respondents try to "please" the interviewer by guessing what are "acceptable answers." When possible, collecting data through mail surveys rather than telephone or face-to-face surveys tends to reduce the social desirability bias. If it is necessary to use other modes of data collection using an interviewer, then it is advisable to use professional interviewers.

Bibliography

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