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# ***Social Desirability Response Effects: Three Alternative Models<sup>1</sup>***

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*Three models are developed for the effects of social desirability (SD) on organizational behavior research results. SD can act as (a) an unmeasured variable that produces spurious correlations between study variables, (b) a suppressor variable that hides relationships, or (c) a moderator variable that conditions the relationship between two other variables.*

No progress accrues to any scientific discipline without adequate measurement. In the study of organizational behavior, questionnaires are the most often used method of measuring constructs. The popularity of questionnaire measures is not surprising. They are relatively easy to use and inexpensive and often are the most plausible alternative for measuring unobservable constructs such as the attitudes of organizational participants (e.g., job satisfaction), individuals' values and preferences, their intentions (e.g., to quit their job), and their personalities (e.g., needs and traits). In addition, questionnaires are commonly used to measure the perceptions of respondents regarding organizational factors (e.g., decentralization, formalization, and climate), job factors (e.g., task characteristics), work group characteristics (e.g., cohesiveness and group norms), role characteristics (e.g., role conflict and ambiguity), and the behavior of other organizational members (e.g., leadership style and job performance). In these latter questionnaires the perceptions of the respondents are what are measured; however, the purpose of the researcher often is to make inferences about what is being perceived rather than about the respondents.

In the use of any questionnaire measure, a number of factors can operate to lower its reliability and validity. The purpose of this study is to examine one of these factors—social desirability response style. Social desirability

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was chosen for several reasons: (1) an increasing number of researchers feel that as a response style it may contaminate commonly used measures used in the field of organizational behavior; (2) investigators generally hold a too simplified model of the effects of social desirability response style; and (3) social desirability contamination can serve both to mask true relationships and to produce spurious relationships. More specifically, this paper has the following objectives:

1. Develop conceptual and statistical models for the effects of social desirability;
2. Empirically demonstrate each of the conceptual and statistical models that are presented; and
3. Reach tentative conclusions about the probable seriousness of social desirability response style in organizational behavior research.

### **Models of Social Desirability Effects**

Social desirability (SD) generally is viewed as a tendency for an individual to present him or herself, in test-taking situations, in a way that makes the person look positive with regard to culturally derived norms and standards. One interpretation of this tendency is that it represents one's propensity for faking, specifically, "faking to look good." Interest in this factor developed as early as the 1930s, when researchers sought ways to detect dissimulators taking personnel selection inventories (Humm & Humm, 1944). It was reasoned that such a tendency in test-takers would lower the predictive validity of the tests. Crowne and Marlowe (1964) attribute this behavior to individual differences in need for approval. Nunnally (1978) broadens the scope of the construct further by suggesting that there is evidence that SD has a number of sources of variance; e.g., the person's level of psychological adjustment, his or her self-knowledge, and his or her level of frankness. Nunnally's view of SD clearly encompasses more than another commonly held view that SD is merely a response bias in large part elicited by the inventory items themselves.

In the organizational research literature SD continues to be regarded as a response style to be controlled or eliminated by the researcher. Additionally, there is evidence that a number of measures commonly used in organizational behavior research are "contaminated" by SD (Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 1975; Schriesheim, 1979). For example, Stone, Ganster, Woodman, and Fusilier (1979) recently examined the convergent validity of the growth need strength (GNS) scales (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). They noted that two versions (ostensible parallel forms) of this widely used measure were significantly correlated with an independent measure of SD. Stone et al. (1979) argued that such shared variance with SD suggested validity problems with the GNS scales. In another recent study Arnold and Feldman (1981) compared different methods of measuring self-ratings of the importance of different job and organizational characteristics in making job choices. They found that the more direct, or transparent, methods

seemed to be more subject to SD bias than an indirect method. As did Stone et al. (1979), Arnold and Feldman argued that a relationship between a measure and SD constituted evidence that the measure "evokes a social desirability response bias" (1981, p. 378), and that such "bias" threatens the validity of the measure. In general, it is not surprising that such self-inventories are correlated with SD response style. In fact, many scales of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), perhaps the most carefully developed and researched self-inventory extant, are significantly related to measures of SD. (See Edwards, 1970, for an extensive discussion of this large body of research.)

If the proposition is accepted that a correlation between an inventory and SD means that the inventory is contaminated with social desirability, then it is logical to explore the possible consequences of using such contaminated measures in organizational research. Presented below are three alternative models of what these consequences could be.

### **The Spuriousness Model**

In this first model it is posited that SD contamination can produce spurious observed correlations between variables. This outcome could occur, for example, if SD were correlated with both the independent and dependent variables of interest. An observed correlation between the independent and dependent variables, then, might be due to their shared variance in SD and not due to shared variance in the constructs that the measures purport to tap. Statistically, one tests for this effect by partialling SD from the independent and dependent variables and noting whether the partial correlation is reduced to zero. One complication with this approach is that partialling underestimates the spuriousness effect when SD is measured with less than a perfectly reliable scale. A conservative approach would be to "correct" the zero-order correlations for attenuation before computing the partial correlation. In practice, however, attenuation effects due to unreliability are fairly minor when reasonably reliable scales are employed.

It is this spuriousness model that most investigators implicitly endorse when they advocate the inclusion of an SD scale in research designs. However, despite this apparent general acceptance of the spuriousness model, rare are the cases in which SD actually is incorporated into one's set of measures. In fact, even though the spuriousness model is a plausible one for the effects of SD response bias on research results, the present authors know of no evidence demonstrating that any observed correlation between organizational variables was due to the spurious effects of SD.

### **The Suppression Model**

This second model posits that the SD response style produces just the opposite effect from that proposed in the spuriousness model. That is, a real correlation between independent and dependent variables may go

undetected because of SD contamination in one or both of the measures. Consider the following example. It is a common finding that self-inventories of effort or motivation (e.g., the internal motivation scale of the Job Diagnostic Survey) do not correlate with measures of actual performance. There are a number of reasons for such a lack of correlation, one of which is that self-perceptions of motivation (even unbiased ones) simply are not related to actual job performance. Before failing to reject this null hypothesis, however, one should consider other explanations for the lack of observed correlation (and perhaps preclude the commission of a Type II error). One such explanation is that the self-inventory of motivation is heavily contaminated by SD (a not implausible assertion) and this SD component, which has nothing to do with job performance, is masking the true relationship between motivation and performance. In this situation, partialling SD from both variables would change the relationship from zero to non-zero. This example, of course, is one of what has been termed "classical suppression" (Conger, 1974) and, hence, the reason for naming this model thus. The "classical" variety is not the only kind of plausible suppression effect, however. (See Cohen and Cohen, 1975, for a general discussion of suppression.) Suppose that the simple correlations between SD and the independent and dependent variables are positive and so is the correlation between the independent and dependent variables. Of course, this is the pattern of correlations that must exist in the spuriousness model. However, when the conservative researcher "controls for" SD by partialling, one finds that the partial correlation is bigger than the simple one. Thus, what at first glance looks like spuriousness is actually "net" suppression. In any given case the spuriousness and suppression models of SD effects are readily pitted against each other. One simply computes a multiple regression with both SD and the independent variable ( $X$ ) in the equation. If the beta for  $X$  is zero, or just less than the simple correlation between  $X$  and  $Y$ , then the spuriousness model is correct. If the beta for  $X$  is bigger than the simple  $r$  (technically, outside the range of  $r$  and zero), then the suppression model is correct. Of course, the other alternative is that neither of these two models is correct. In that case, one would conclude that SD simply is not an important factor in the research. However, one more model should be considered before the issue of SD response is dismissed as unimportant.

### **The Moderator Model**

In this model SD may or may not be correlated with either the independent or dependent variables. The distinguishing feature of this model is that there is an interaction effect between the independent variable and SD. The special case in which SD is uncorrelated with both independent and dependent variables is what traditionally has been referred to as the moderator effect in the personnel selection literature (Saunders, 1956; Zedeck, 1971).

It is reasoned that the moderator model of SD effects might operate when the research issue involves the operation of implicit theories (DeNisi & Pritchard, 1978; Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977), especially when there is an implicit theory that a respondent considers "correct," and thus socially desirable to espouse. Consider the following example. An investigator wishes to test the hypothesis that a leader who uses contingent rewards will have more satisfied subordinates than will one who does not use contingent rewards. The investigator then has subordinates complete an inventory measuring the extent to which their leader uses contingent rewards and a self-inventory measuring their level of satisfaction with their leader. Now suppose that this population of subordinates has been acculturated to accept the implicit theory that "good" leaders reward people on the basis of their performance. There is no particular reason to suspect that high SD respondents will be more likely to yield higher scores on either the leader behavior inventory or the satisfaction self-inventory, so a measure of SD turns out to be uncorrelated with them. Assume that the observed correlation between leader behavior and satisfaction is .30 and it is statistically significant. What is one to conclude? This result might be interpreted to mean that there *is* a relationship between the two variables, but because it accounts for only 9 percent of the variance, it is of only modest interest. However, it is argued that the real relationship might be very different, perhaps even a significant negative correlation. Suppose that there is an interaction effect between the measure of leader behavior and SD such that for people high in SD the observed correlation is strong positive, and for people low in SD the correlation is somewhat negative. For an "average" level of SD the relationship is moderate positive (i.e.,  $r = .30$ ). Obviously, the correlation between the measure of leader behavior and satisfaction is contingent on the respondent's level of SD. Letting significant interactions go undetected leads the investigator to make misleading interpretations about general main effects when the actual simple main effects paint a very different picture (Winer, 1971).

The Arnold and Feldman (1981) study suggests another example of a moderating effect of SD. They asked respondents to indicate, using various methods, the importance of different job factors. They reasoned that most people would find it socially desirable to indicate a preference for intrinsic factors rather than extrinsic sorts of factors such as pay and benefits. Now suppose that people were asked, instead, to evaluate the degree to which intrinsic and extrinsic factors were present on various jobs (variable  $X$ ) and then were asked to indicate their preference for these jobs (variable  $Y$ ). The findings of Arnold and Feldman (1981) and Stone et al. (1979) would suggest that a measure of SD would be uncorrelated with  $X$  and  $Y$  but would moderate the relationship between  $X$  and  $Y$ .

To test whether SD is a moderator variable, one tests for an interaction between it and any independent variable(s) of interest using product terms in hierarchical multiple regression (Cohen & Cohen, 1975). The term "moderator" here refers to interaction effects. Thus, the noninteracting

“homologizer” moderator variable recently described by Sharma, Durand, and Gur-Arie (1981) is not of interest in the present case (nor is its associated subgroup analysis technique). Two points regarding the assessment of SD moderating effects should be stressed. First, the partial correlation and regression method without interaction terms, used to test for the spuriousness and suppression models, will not uncover moderator effects. Second, when one partials a variable from any relationship one is actually performing an analysis of covariance (more generally, an analysis of partial variance, Cohen and Cohen, 1975). For such partialling to be valid, one makes the assumption of homogeneity of regression, that is, that the regression of the covariate with  $Y$  is the same across all levels of  $X$ . To test this assumption, one tests for an interaction effect between the covariate and  $X$ . Therefore, one always should test the moderator model of SD effects first and, if no interaction is found, then examine the regression results for evidence of spuriousness or suppression.

These three models produce very different outcomes and can grossly affect the substantive interpretation of any given research question. Further, the three models are mutually exclusive and are readily tested against each other. They thus form the basis for a strong inference strategy in research (Platt, 1964). The illustrated examples of each of these models are intended not so much to document the existence of such SD effects, but rather to demonstrate their occurrence in a data set composed of commonly used measures obtained from a sample fairly typical of those employed in much organizational research.

## Method

### Sample

As part of a larger study, data were collected from a total of 424 managerial and nonmanagerial employees in three diverse organizations.

**Financial Institution.** A representative sample of 257 employees from the highest to lowest levels, performing all functions, was taken from a relatively large financial institution. The median age was 36; 106 had completed college, and 16 held graduate degrees. Median tenure with this organization was 8 years.

**Manufacturing Plant.** A representative sample of 87 employees from the highest to lowest levels, performing all functions, was taken from this medium sized plant. The median age was 36; 19 had completed college, and 3 had not completed high school. Median tenure with the firm was 10 years.

**State Agency.** A representative sample of 80 employees from the highest to lowest levels, performing all functions, was taken from a relatively large agency of state government. Median age was 35; 25 had completed college, and 5 held graduate degrees. Median tenure with this agency was four years.

## Measures

In order to illustrate the potential effects of SD on relationships among organizational variables, measures were chosen so as to represent individuals' self-reports of (a) role characteristics (role conflict and ambiguity), (b) others' behavior (leader descriptions), (c) their needs, and (d) their attitudes.

Each employee completed a packet of questionnaires while at work. Included in this packet were (a) role conflict and ambiguity scales (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), (b) leader behavior description scales from the managerial behavior survey (MBS) (Yukl & Nemeroff, 1979), (c) need for achievement, affiliation, autonomy, and power scales from the manifest needs questionnaire (MNQ) (Steers & Braunstein, 1976), and (d) satisfaction with pay, work, supervision, co-workers, and promotions from the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) (Smith, Kendall & Hulin, 1969). Finally, SD was measured with the Marlowe-Crowne scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). The preceding are all relatively familiar measures in organizational research, with the possible exception of the MBS. The MBS was developed in an attempt to overcome criticisms of previously existing leadership measures and consists of 76 items intended to measure 19 categories of leader behavior, using 4 items per subscale. In the present study the subscales used were (a) consideration, (b) structuring reward contingencies, (c) decision participation, (d) goal setting, and (e) role clarification.

The variables measured in the present study thus represent some of the most commonly examined constructs in organizational behavior. For present purposes of illustrating the effects of SD, the JDI satisfaction scales were considered as dependent variables predicted by the leadership variables, needs, and role perceptions. The role perception variables also were considered as dependent variables predicted by leadership variables and needs.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations with SD of all study variables. About a third of the scales were significantly correlated with SD. Given that the self-descriptions tend to have a larger SD component than do descriptions of others or others' behavior, it is not surprising that two of the MNQ scales (nAut and nPow) are correlated with SD. It is noted that the role conflict and ambiguity scales also are significantly contaminated by SD, with those high in SD showing a tendency to report less of both role stresses. Inspection of the wording of the conflict and ambiguity items, however, reveals that almost all the items are really self-descriptors (e.g., "I am uncertain as to how my job is linked"). Thus, the scales probably are best described as self-inventories, and as with other self-inventories, it would not be unusual to find SD contamination.

The rest of the analysis proceeded by examining the three SD models on each independent-dependent variable pair, using the regression methods



**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Reliability</i>	<i>Correlation with SD<sup>a</sup></i>
SD	17.2	6.24	.80	—
Consideration (MBS)	3.9	.79	.86	.17**
Structure (MBS)	3.4	.85	.76	.00
Goal-setting (MBS)	3.1	1.02	.91	.00
Participation (MBS)	3.0	.89	.89	.07
Role clarification (MBS)	3.5	.88	.90	.07
JDI pay	25.6	12.38	.76	-.02
JDI work	36.9	9.74	.76	-.03
JDI promotion	23.6	16.28	.88	.05
JDI co-workers	43.6	10.49	.82	.03
JDI supervision	38.9	8.38	.71	.08
Role conflict	2.5	.77	.73	-.28**
Role ambiguity	2.3	.83	.83	-.27**
nAch	4.0	.50	.65	.03
nAff	3.0	.49	.52	.10
nAut	2.6	.58	.63	-.28**
nPow	3.3	.86	.60	-.13*

<sup>a</sup>With listwise deletion of missing or incomplete cases, *N* = 280.

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

described above. To conserve space, only those instances in which there were significant SD effects are illustrated.

### Moderator Effects

In four relationships SD was found to have significant moderating effects, and these are displayed in Table 2. Two of these cases are examples of the "true" moderator model (Saunders, 1956; Zedeck, 1971) in that the

**Table 2**  
**Illustrations of SD Moderator Effect**

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i>
Case #1: JDI promotions	SD	2.19	2.13*	
	nAff	15.91	2.48*	
	SD × nAff	-.72	-2.13*	
	Intercept	19.35		.16*
Case #2: JDI work	SD	-.99	-2.07	
	nAut	-7.75	-2.49	
	SD × nAut	.33	2.09*	
	Intercept	59.97		.19**
Case #3: JDI supervision	SD	.67	2.10*	
	Structure	7.71	4.58**	
	SD × structure	-.16	-2.07*	
	Intercept	10.27		.49**
Case #4: Role conflict	SD	-.10	-3.10**	
	nAut	-.16	-.74	
	SD × nAut	.03	2.37*	
	Intercept	3.37		.39**

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

simple correlations between SD and both the independent and dependent variables are not significantly greater than zero. This holds for case #1 (JDI promotions and nAff) and case #3 (JDI supervision and MBS structure). Examining the interactions, one finds that in the case of JDI promotions, the effects of nAff become less positive with increases in the level of SD, and actually become negative at high levels of SD. For example, at  $SD = 5$  the raw regression weight for nAff is 12.31; at  $SD = 30$  the nAff regression weight is  $-5.69$ . An investigator interested in the relationship between nAff and satisfaction with promotions might have concluded that they were unrelated, while, in fact, they are positively related for low SD individuals and negatively related for high SD individuals. In a similar vein (case #3), SD might have been dismissed as irrelevant because it was uncorrelated with both independent and dependent variables. In fact, the relationship between structuring of reward contingencies and satisfaction with supervision is more positive for low SD individuals than for high SD individuals.

The case #2 moderating effect of SD on the nAut-satisfaction with work relationship is one in which SD is uncorrelated with the dependent variable but *is* correlated with the independent variable. Finally, case #4 is of some interest because here SD is correlated with *both* the independent and dependent variables yet it significantly moderates the relationship between them.

### Suppression Effects

Two cases were discovered in which SD acted to mask a relationship between two other variables. The first case involved the relationship between leader consideration and satisfaction with work. The simple correlations between these variables is not significant at  $r = .07$ . However, when SD is controlled the partial  $r$  between the variables is .13, which is significant at  $p < .05$ . In the case of leader decision participation and satisfaction with work, the correlation is increased from .13 to .18 when SD is partialled. Although neither of these suppression effects is dramatic, an investigator, at least in the first case, would have concluded that no relationship existed when, in fact, one did exist but was obscured by SD contamination of the satisfaction with supervision scale.

### Spuriousness Effects

Three cases were found that exhibited evidence that observed correlations between independent and dependent variables were attributable in part to shared variance in SD. The first case involved the relationship between leader role clarification and role conflict. The zero-order correlation between these scales was  $-.20$  ( $p < .01$ ); the partial  $r$  (controlling for SD) was  $-.14$  ( $p < .05$ ). The simple  $r$  was reduced somewhat but remains significant nonetheless. In the second case, partialling SD reduced the correlation between nAut and role conflict from .30 ( $p < .01$ ) to .24 ( $p < .01$ ). Not only does this effect appear minor, but, as discussed above, the primary role

of SD in this relationship is really as a moderator variable. Finally, partialling SD reduced the correlation between nAut and role ambiguity from .17 ( $p < .05$ ) to .10 ( $p < .10$ ). Although one might argue later that this latter effect is a true demonstration of spuriousness because the partial correlation no longer meets an arbitrary level of significance ( $\alpha = .05$ ), the real effect of SD is in fact quite small.

## Conclusions

Two conclusions seem warranted from this investigation. First social desirability contamination effects do not seem very widespread. SD effects were examined in 73 different bivariate relationships in this study. By any standard, that represents quite a "fishing expedition." However, only 9 cases were uncovered in which SD showed any evidence of influencing the observed relationship between two other variables. Admittedly, variables were not systematically chosen that most likely would be influenced by SD. Rather, they were chosen for a "representative" sampling of variables. On a priori grounds, and consistent with the findings, those variables most likely to be affected by SD are self-inventories. It is recommended, then, that SD be assessed in those studies whose central hypotheses involve self-inventories. This would include the use of such measures as self-reports of effort, motivation, performance, and attributions of performance.

Second, the empirical results are consistent with the statistical reasoning that when SD affects research findings, spuriousness is not the only, or even most likely, result. In fact, the most common finding in the empirical examples here is that of a moderator role for SD. In addition, in half of the moderator cases, SD was unrelated to either the independent or dependent variable. This suggests that SD is of interest as a variable in its own right and not just as a source of bias in measurement. As noted earlier, SD may play a significant role in the operation of implicit theories; in such cases it would act primarily as a moderator variable.

In conclusion, social desirability can affect research findings in three different ways: (a) produce spurious results; (b) hide real results (suppression); and (c) moderate relationships. Because SD can be measured fairly reliably in less than ten minutes of respondents' time, there seems to be no good reason why these three models should not be tested in any organizational behavior study—especially those studies that incorporate self-inventory measures and those that test relationships in which an implicit theory might be operable.

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