Social Desirability in Differing Data Collection Methods  
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Abstract
Social desirability bias can invalidate research data and provide motivation for deception in everyday life. We examined whether differing levels of anonymity affected participants’ responses to sensitive questions. Participants were either individually interviewed, or given a survey to complete in private, both of which contained a variety of sensitive questions. We hypothesized that respondents in a face-to-face interview would provide more socially desirable answers than in a written survey. Our results trended towards our hypothesis, but the differences between the groups fell short of statistical significance. Implications indicate the possible need for accommodation of social desirability factors in psychological research, with applications in academic, social, and professional settings.

Hypothesis
Personal, sensitive questions will provoke a greater degree of socially desirable responses in a face to face interview than in an anonymous survey.

Background

- Social desirability is characterized as a pattern of response designed to please another person by over-representing the positive characteristics of the respondent.
- Method of administration in research may have an effect on social desirability.
- We tested whether personal interviews yielded different results than anonymous surveys.
- A survey was administered either by face-to-face interview or by anonymous survey.

Methods

- Research staff designed a questionnaire containing items to intentionally provoke discomfort.
- NSCC student and faculty body was administered this survey in either an interview or anonymous setting.

Results

- We observed a general trend supporting our Hypothesis.
- Statistical significance was observed in the response patterns for question 14: “I have used illegal drugs”.
- \( p \) values for question 14: \( t(82) = -2.59, p = 0.012 \).

Discussion

- Statistical significance was not observed in our experiment. Possible reasons for this may have included questions that failed to provoke social discomfort or an insensitive measure of social desirability.
- These findings fail to support previous research results in the area of social desirability.
- The ability to generalize research results to the population is dependent on acquiring accurate data.
- Possible confounds for this study may have included language, age, and gender of interviewer.
- Future studies should control for these factors and possibly manipulate the consequences of providing socially undesirable responses (i.e. job interview).

Conclusion

- In spite of our non-significant results, the data trended towards supporting previous research showing social desirability as a factor that influences responses to potentially uncomfortable questions.

References