

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

What is it and what can researchers do about it?

Nicole Bergen,¹ Ronald Labonté,¹ Shifera Asfaw,² Abebe Mamo,² Lakew Abebe,² Getachew Kiros² & Sudhakar Morankar²
¹ University of Ottawa, Canada; ² Jimma University, Ethiopia



Social desirability bias in research is the tendency for participants to present reality in line with what they believe to be socially acceptable.

Researchers can take measures to minimize social desirability bias to enhance the relevance and quality of data for evidence-based decision making.

BACKGROUND

Social desirability bias tends to emerge in research in characteristic ways, arising more often in discussions around sensitive topics, or when participants are exposed to strong societal norms or behaviours. (1, 2, 3) While many qualitative research studies acknowledge social desirability bias as a limitation, detailed characterization of the phenomenon is lacking, especially in highly collectivist settings. (4)

METHODS

This study provides an empirical account of how our research team developed strategies to detect and limit social desirability bias in our research in rural Ethiopia.

- The Safe Motherhood Project in Jimma Zone, Ethiopia conducted 24 interviews and 12 focus group discussions about maternal and child health topics with community stakeholders.
- A team of 9 data collectors and 3 data collection supervisors held regular debriefing sessions and kept extensive field notes; social desirability bias emerged as a key concern.
- Field notes and reports were analysed to identify themes related to how social desirability bias presented during data collection, and strategies developed by the researchers to navigate these influences.

RESULTS

Social desirability tendencies, interpreted within the socio-cultural context of the research, were identified based on the nature of the responses given, body language and word choice patterns (Figure 1).

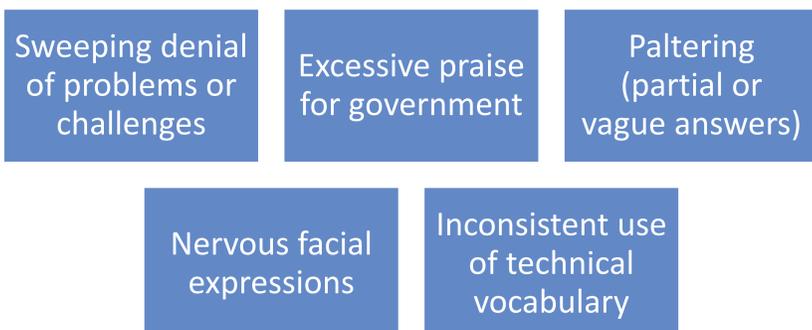


Figure 1. Common cues of social desirability bias identified in the research

Strategies to avoid or limit bias spanned pre-fieldwork and fieldwork stages of research. To avert social desirability bias during data collection, we considered how we introduced the study, established rapport with participants, and asked questions (Figure 2). Pre-fieldwork training sessions with data collectors, debriefing sessions during fieldwork, and research team meetings provided opportunities to discuss social desirability tendencies and refine approaches to account for them.

Indirect questioning	• Pose questions about the past actions of others
Providing assurances	• Remind participants about confidentiality & anonymity protocols; assure them their opinions are not wrong
Probing for more information	• Ask follow up questions or prompts
Requesting stories or examples	• Ask the participant to recount a personal experience
Prefacing the question	• Acknowledge that all communities have challenges and that people have diverse experiences

Figure 2. Strategies for posing questions

CONCLUSIONS

Strategies to mitigate social desirability bias in research have implications for developing research instruments, determining participant recruitment strategies, training data collectors and establishing data collection protocols.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SDGs

Qualitative research has an important place in informing decision making for the Sustainable Development Goals. Accounting for social desirability bias helps to strengthen the quality of qualitative research by promoting a more rigorous representation of diverse views and voices.

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