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DOI 10.32999/ksu2312-3206/2019-1-33**LIFE SUCCESSFULNESS* AS A PHENOMENON INFLUENCED
BY SOCIAL DESIRABILITY EFFECT**Borovynska I.Ye., Postgraduate Student of the
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The article is dedicated to the issue of social desirability and its influence on the questionnaire validity. Through the example of the development of a questionnaire for evaluation of life successfulness level, the impact of social desirability on data distortion is shown. Scales influenced by social desirability are demonstrated. Ways of social desirability effect decrease are shown.

Key words: *social desirability, life successfulness, questionnaire, validity, distort.*

Боровинская И.Е. ЖИЗНЕННАЯ УСПЕШНОСТЬ КАК ФЕНОМЕН, НА КОТОРЫЙ ВЛИЯЕТ ЭФФЕКТ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ЖЕЛАТЕЛЬНОСТИ

Статья посвящена вопросу социальной желательности и её влияния на валидность опросника. На примере разработки опросника для оценки уровня жизненной успешности показано влияние социальной желательности на искажение данных. Также продемонстрированы шкалы, которые попали под влияние социальной желательности. Рассматриваются пути снижения эффекта социальной желательности.

Ключевые слова: *социальная желательность, жизненная успешность, опросник, валидность, искажение.*

Боровинська І.Є. ЖИТТЄВА УСПІШНІСТЬ ЯК ФЕНОМЕН, НА ЯКИЙ ВПЛИВАЄ ЕФЕКТ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ БАЖАНОСТІ

Статтю присвячено питанню соціальної бажаності та її впливу на валидність опитувальника. На прикладі розроблення опитувальника для оцінювання рівня життєвої успішності показано вплив соціальної бажаності на викривлення даних. Також продемонстровано шкали, які потрапили під вплив соціальної бажаності. Розглядаються шляхи зниження ефекту соціальної бажаності.

Під час розроблення опитувальника для оцінювання рівня життєвої успішності виявлено проблему соціальної бажаності та її впливу на отримані дані. Після першого випробування опитувальника на вибірці студентів з'ясовано відсутність нормального розподілу за декількома шкалами. Проаналізовано можливість помилки у формуванні вибірки або результату впливу соціальної бажаності. Після повторної перевірки опитувальника на іншій вибірці виявлено відсутність нормального розподілу, але після поділу вибірки на групи показано нормальний розподіл у групі з низьким рівнем соціальної бажаності й відсутність нормального розподілу в групі з високим рівнем соціальної бажаності. На основі подальшого порівняльного аналізу показано значущу різницю в рівні соціальної бажаності в чоловіків і жінок. Виявлено також значущу різницю в рівні деяких змінних між групами чоловіків з високим і низьким рівнями соціальної бажаності. Виявлено лише одну істотну різницю в групах жінок з високим і низьким рівнями соціальної бажаності. Доведено, що під ефект соціальної бажаності під час дослідження життєвої успішності в основному підпадають відповіді чоловіків. Можливо, це стається через високі очікування в суспільстві щодо досягнення успіху чоловіками. Профілактичних заходів зі зменшення ефекту соціальної бажаності, таких як різні типи питань (прямі і зворотні) або різні способи постановки питань (самооцінка, оцінювання партнером, оцінювання іншими), недостатньо, краще використовувати шкалу соціальної бажаності.

Ключові слова: *соціальна бажаність, життєва успішність, питальник, валидність, викривлення.*

Problem and goal setting. Social psychology as a branch of scientific knowledge formed at the intersection of social and psychological sciences operates different kinds of research methods from both parental fields

of knowledge. One of the most popular ways of studying social-psychological reality is an implementation of questionnaires. The last are used for the investigation of personality characteristics, attitudes, a frequency with which people engage in certain behaviours and so on. Existent questionnaires are not always enough for the survey of some new fields of study; therefore, scientists need to develop

* The author understands that word "successfulness" is not linguistically correct for the English language, but it is the only way to differentiate notions "success" and "successfulness" which is considered by the author as different.



new means of research. It is not news that many questionnaires are based on the provision of self-report data and this fact raises the question of the validity of such research method. One of the effects which influence responds is social desirability which is a tendency to underreport of socially undesirable behaviour and overreport socially desirable behaviour. We faced this phenomenon during the development of a questionnaire aimed to evaluate the level of life successfulness.

The goal of this article is to demonstrate the effect of social desirability on responses connected with life successfulness evaluation and to highlight some means of this effect decrease.

Theoretical background

Social Desirability

The question of social desirability (SD) was raised in the 1960s, and its effect “on non-cognitive assessment, and in particular the possible effects of SD on the predictive validity of personality tests, have been subject to great controversy” [1, p. 310].

The question of SD influence on questionnaire and test validity remain open. Therefore, we would like to give a short observation of what social desirability is, how it influences the research subject and, what are the latest investigations on this theme.

One of the concepts which come on the stage when talking about self-report data is self-disclosure – the “extent to which individuals share information about themselves purposely and voluntarily” [2, p. 284]. Several conditions influence a person’s self-disclosure: nature and sensitivity of the question, individual being asked the question, the asker of the question, and the social acceptability of the subject. It is evident that the same issue could be accepted with various levels of sensitivity by different people and even one person can react variously for the same question in different circumstances. People can choose how to answer questions in order to influence their image in front of other people. The tendency of people to give answers in such a way as to present themselves in a better manner is called social desirability.

Giving socially desirable answers reflects the tendency “to endorse self-describing statements that are perceived as socially desirable and rejecting statements that are socially undesirable” [3, p. 234]. There are several points of views on what socially desirable responding (SDR) is:

- confounding variable, which introduces error into self-report scores and attenuates their validity;
- a meaningful individual difference variable;

- a consequence of an innate sense of self-worth and conscious attempts at impression management [1; 3; 4].

As for SDR structure, we can see the next motivational backgrounds: “SDR is composed of two separate components, one refers to an attribution motivation which reflects the tendency to attribute socially desirable characteristics to oneself; the other refers to a denial motivation, which reflects the tendency to deny undesirable characteristics” [4, p. 2]. It worth saying that SDR affects the results depending on the importance of each scale for the overall goal of respondents [5, p. 549].

Of course, the question of social desirability wouldn’t be raised if there was no influence of this effect on the research results. So, what is its impact on the survey data?

1. Distortion changes the mean of scores of trait questionnaires.
2. The distribution of variables influenced by social desirability also changes.
3. The effect of social desirability distorts real associations.
4. The difference in strength and direction of social desirability “artificially create or mask real differentiation between groups” [6]. For example, in the case with life successfulness which is presented in this article, men with a high level of SD tended to overreport their health level, while women with high level of SD underreported their health level.
5. Distortion caused by social desirability affects the covariance structure of faked scales.

Either of two well-known Western scales usually measures socially desirable responding: The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability and the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding [4, p. 1]. We included short Social Desirability scale into our questionnaire on the second stage, because its primary goal was to sort-out respondents with high scores within this scale. It worth saying that in case of studying Social Desirability as a subject of research this scale should be extended.

Life Successfulness

We consider life successfulness as an emotionally coloured state which is experienced by the person as a result of realisation his/her achievements in major life spheres and evaluation of those results as significant. This state is accompanied by experiencing subjective well-being, life satisfaction, a sensation of authorship and sense of life, self-realisation etc. [7, p. 147]. Striving for life successfulness is a natural desire of a mentally and physically healthy person. High level of life successfulness is one of the ways to distinguish oneself from the crowd, to demonstrate achievements and to earn respect. That is the reason why

the phenomenon of life successfulness is one of the topics influenced by social desirability effect.

The structure of life successfulness includes emotional component (as it is emotionally coloured state and suppose experience of subjective well-being, life satisfaction, a sensation of authorship and sense of life, self-realisation etc.) and evaluation component. The last relates to the assessment of significant life spheres which are essential for a concrete person. Different scientists consider various areas to be dominant. For example, U. Il'ina considers life success to consist of the next components: financial, communicative, experience, family, age, health, gender, motivation and value, emotional and professional components [8].

O. Polivanova studying youth beliefs about life success highlighted the next components of this notion: material welfare (money, professional demand); social state (recognition, stability, rank); interpersonal relationships (family, friendship, love); emotional intention (happiness, well-being, inspiration); state of health and self-sentiment (health, beauty, energy); self-realization (goals achievement, confidence) [9].

N. Mercer, D.P. Farrington et al., talking about general life success mark its next aspects: satisfactory accommodation; satisfactory employment; satisfactory intimate relationship; adequate anxiety and depression scores [10].

B. Parker i H. Chusmir, analysing different approaches to life success, say that most people could consider themselves more successful if they could be good parents, make something good for society or have good relations with somebody else. B. Parker and H. Chusmir also point out the multicomponent nature of life success: "... career success, as well as, other components can be one of life success parameters" [11]. Authors introduce such a notion as "cognitive map of life-success" which includes all important for person life aspects, global view of one's life project. As a result of the research, scientists developed a scale which helps to measure life success, and which consists of six sub-scales: social status/wealth; family relations; contribution to the society; personal satisfaction; safety [11].

Based on the theoretical analysis we developed our questionnaire for assessment of life successfulness level which included both emotional and evaluation components of life successfulness.

Method

As we mentioned above our main task was to develop a questionnaire for evaluating the

life successfulness level. Firstly, we pointed out what scales to include in our inquiry and we chose to go with: hobby and rest, inner world, emotional state, general assessment of life successfulness, life satisfaction, health, social environment, partner relations, family relations, professional development, personal development, wealth (financial sphere). Secondly, we developed direct and reverse questions. Thirdly, to prevent high scores in self-reported measures we created different types of questions: self-evaluating, evaluating-by-partner and evaluating-by-others. It means that in self-evaluating questions we asked how person assesses his/her successfulness in one of the spheres, in evaluating-by-partner questions we asked how person's partner evaluates respondent's successfulness in a certain area, and in evaluating-by-others questions, we wondered how other people assess person's successfulness in one of the fields.

We decided to test our questionnaire on student sample. We choose 1st-year students from the faculty of Psychology at Kyiv National University named after Taras Shevchenko. A sample of 55 participants was recruited and invited for an off-line survey. All statistical analysis was conducted with IBM SPSS v. 22.

The sample mentioned above didn't show normal distribution according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov test: 5 from 12 scales were not normally distributed (among them were a general assessment of life successfulness, emotional state, partner relations, family relations, inner world).

We had two hypotheses according to such results. One of them related to student sample (we suggested that absence of normal distribution is the result of sampling mistake) and other was connected with social desirability effect (we suggested that respondents due to the specific issue could give socially desirable responses). Our next step was devoted to checking hypotheses mentioned above.

We decided to conduct a web-based survey which was designed with Google Form instruments and promoted via social media. We added demographical questions and Social Desirability Scale to the original questionnaire which was used with student sample. The on-line survey was chosen because of its widespread use, administrative convenience and easy access to diverse respondent groups.

For the recruitment process, we used two most popular social media platforms: Facebook and LinkedIn. We chose those platforms to reduce the potential self-selection bias among respondents who are involved in the discussion of specific issues which can be related with the topic of our research (for



Table 1

Social-demographic characteristics of the sample

N=161	Men (N=73)		Women (N=88)		N=161	Men (N=73)		Women (N=88)	
	High SD*	Low SD**	High SD	Low SD		High SD	Low SD	High SD	Low SD
Age	N=57	N=16	N=46	N=42	Occupation	N=57	N=16	N=46	N=42
18–25	13	5	15	8	Unemployed	2	0	2	0
26–35	25	9	24	20	Top-manager	8	0	5	7
36–45	15	1	5	11	Middle-manager	12	9	14	10
46–55	4	0	1	2	Entrepreneur	14	2	6	9
56–65	0	1	0	1	Specialist	19	4	18	14
66–75	0	0	1	0	Student	2	1	1	0
					Maternity leave	0	0	0	2

* High SD – high scores (11–19) on the Social Desirability Scale.

** Low SD – low scores (4–10) on the Social Desirability Scale.

Table 2

Comparative analysis of Social Desirability between men and women

Null-hypothesis	Test	Value	Solution
Distribution of Social Desirability is unimodal for Gender category	Mann-Whitney U test for Independent Samples	0,003	Null-hypothesis is declined

The asymptotic significance is shown. Level of significance is 0,05.

example, such situation can occur on professional forums or in specific online groups). An invitation to participate in survey devoted to life successfulness was posted online, and respondents were clicking the link and were directed to the questionnaire. A sample of 161 participants (73 men, 88 women) was recruited. 100% of the respondents answered all the questions without missing any items.

After data collecting, we started to check our hypotheses. First of all, we checked our sample on a normal distribution with Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. It showed that there is no normal distribution in any scale. Thus, we declined sampling mistake and decided to check the second hypothesis related to social desirability effect. Our scale for Social Desirability consisted of 4 questions evaluated with Likert-type scale (as other questions as well) where “5” was “absolutely agree” answer, “1” – “absolutely disagree” answer, “3” – “hard to tell”. In such case, we received Social Desirability scale scores with minimum 4 and maximum 20 points. We decided to divide our sample into two groups (with low So-

cial Desirability scores – from 4 to 10 points, and high Social Desirability Scores – from 11 till 20 points) and check normal distribution with Kolmogorov-Smirnov test again.

Sample (N=58) with low scores (4–10 points) on Social Desirability Scale showed normal distribution within all the scales. Sample (N=103) with high scores (11–19 points) on Social Desirability Scale didn't show normal distribution within all scales except one (Emotional State).

Thus, we decided to go deeper and to investigate whether there are any differences in the levels of characteristics measured by scales in the questionnaire influenced by social desirability effect. The results of our research you can see in the next section of this article.

Result

In Table 1 all social-demographic characteristics of our sample are presented.

Almost all participants have higher education (N=154), six persons have PhD degree, one person has secondary education. Thus, we didn't consider this demographical characteristic.

Table 3

Difference between men groups with the high and low level of Social Desirability within Scales from Life Successfulness questionnaire

Scale	Average rank for men group with High SD (N=57)	Average rank for men group with Low SD (N=16)	Mann-Whitney U	Two-tailed asymptotic significance
Hobby and Rest	39.62	27.66	605.5	0.045
Emotional State	40.42	24.81	651	0.009
Life Satisfaction	40	26.31	627	0.022
Health	41.2	22.03	695.5	0.001
Professional Development	39.98	26.38	626	0.023

First of all, we wondered whether there is any difference in social desirability levels between men and women, age groups and occupation groups. Last-mentioned groups didn't show any difference in the level of social desirability. For comparative analysis of both groups, we used Kruskal-Wallis test for independent samples. But, a significant difference in the level of social desirability between men and women was founded. For comparative analysis, we used a Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples (see Table 2).

Further comparative analysis showed no significant difference between men and women with a high level of social desirability within all the scales in the questionnaire. So, our next logical step was to compare men groups with high and low levels of social desirability. For this analysis, we used the Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples which allows comparison between groups with different quantity of participants. The smallest group have to include no less than three observations, and the biggest group have to contain no more than 60 observations. We have 16 and 57 correspondingly [12, p. 50]. This comparative analysis showed us a significant difference between men with a high and low level of social desirability in such scales as hobby and rest, emotional state, life satisfaction, health, professional development. In this context, it is essential to mention that group of men with a high level of social desirability has higher ranks within all the scales mentioned above (see Table 3).

We believe that demonstration of social desirability effect within men group in scales mentioned in Table 3 is not accidental. In our society, it is expected that only person with high level of income can afford good rest for him/herself and family and spend extra money on hobbies. Following our society believes males are expected to earn more than fe-

males, so men tend to give socially desirable responses to questions connected with hobby and rest.

As for emotional state there exists a bias that men shouldn't display emotions especially in public, so men tend to increase their scores within this scale to socially desirable level.

The socially desirable level within the life satisfaction scale is a logical reflection of men's desire to be a "master of the universe". This scale is also connected with emotional evaluation, so the explanation of the previous scale also could be applied.

The next scale influenced by social desirability effect is health scale. It is evident that successful men should demonstrate a high level of health, which is a guarantee of further achievements and prosperity.

Professional development which also falls under the influence of social desirability is one of the men's primary means of self-realisation. If women can express themselves in a family or within personal relationships, for men, according to social expectations, the professional sphere is a nearly only possible way of expressing himself.

One more significant difference which we found within men's groups with a high level of social desirability was in the spread of ranks for general assessment of life successfulness scale among different occupations. For this comparative analysis, we used a Kruskal-Wallis test. The result of this comparison is shown in Table 4.

As demonstrated in Table 4, top-managers with a high level of social desirability have the highest ranks within general assessment of life successfulness scale. It is not accidental to our point of view because top-position, following social expectations, supposes the high level of life successfulness and it is evident that people with such job tend to demonstrate it.



Table 4

Spread of average ranks for general assessment of life successfulness between different occupations of men with a high level of social desirability

Men group with High SD (N=57)		
Occupation	Average rank for General Assessment of Life Successfulness	Two-tailed asymptotic significance
Top-manager	39.94	0.033
Unemployed	34	
Entrepreneur	32.75	
Specialist	29.13	
Middle-manager	20.39	
Student	4.75	

Table 5

The difference in health ranks between women with high and low level of social desirability

Scale	Average rank for women group with High SD (N=46)	Average rank for women group with Low SD (N=42)	Mann-Whitney U	Two-tailed asymptotic significance
Health	37.63	52.02	650	0.008

As for unemployed participants and their high ranks, it worth saying that there were only two representatives (but such quantity of observations in one group is still allowable for Kruskal-Wallis test usage [12, p. 57]) of this group, so there could be some measure of inaccuracy from one hand. From the other hand maybe, such ranks for general assessment of life successfulness by unemployed can be explained by their need for self-complacency and self-justification in the face of society.

The next group is a group of entrepreneurs. This result is not a surprise. In the mind of our society, a strong correlation between entrepreneurship and life successfulness exist. Thus, people from this group meet society's expectations.

A very interesting disposition is shown in the next two groups: specialists and middle-managers. Why specialists' ranks of general assessment of life successfulness is higher than middle-managers'? The following explanation could be applied: middle-management position usually demands a higher level of responsibility not only for own work but for the work of a team as well. In our circumstances, it is usual to be promoted to middle-management position without any preliminary training, and new duties spring into existence make the life of middle-managers more complicated, and it is not associated with significant success. At the same time, promotion to the middle-man-

agement position is not the ultimate dream for an ambitious employee, so it is not so highly evaluated by the person him/herself and society as well. Thus, we can observe that specialists have higher ranks within the general assessment of life successfulness scale than middle-managers.

In the last students' group, we can see the lowest ranks within the general assessment of life successfulness scale. It could be explained by striving to justify the title of "poor student" which is highly spread in our society.

Comparative analysis of women groups with high and low levels of social desirability didn't show any significant difference in any scale, except health scale. For this comparison, we used the Mann-Whitney U test. The result is interesting because women with high level of social desirability demonstrated low ranks within health scale (see Table 5).

The explanation of the difference could consist in the fact that women in our society are considered as more fragile, tender and so on. Thus, women with a high level of social desirability tend to correspond to society's expectations.

Conclusions. As we see from our research, social desirability is an effect which could influence the results of the investigation. In the case of life successfulness study, we saw a significant difference within some scales in male samples with a high and low level of so-

cial desirability. Such tendency could be explained by the fact that in our society success and successfulness are still more associated with men than with women. Males are considered to achieve high results in career, to earn more money and to demonstrate a significant level of health. At the same time, a taboo on emotions manifestation and bad mood shows high scores in emotional state scale within the male sample with high social desirability level. It is socially expected that men with top job position should be more satisfied with their lives; thus, males follow those expectations and demonstrate the difference in scores for the general assessment of life successfulness associated with their occupation.

The only difference in female samples with high and low levels of social desirability is related to the health scale. Also, it is significant that women with a high level of social desirability showed lower scores within health scale. The explanation of this phenomenon could lay in society's expectations for women to be delicate, fragile and tender.

Thus, social desirability effect could distort investigation results, and the main task of the researcher is to take measures for a decrease of social desirability effect. Reduction of this level could be achieved in different ways, but the launching of social desirability scale is a must for the topics which are sensitive to social desirability effect.

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