

Your social desirability is the cause of my personal unhappiness:

On the effect of social desirability on roommates' relationship quality, satisfaction with life, and acquaintanceship

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that social desirability represents a substantive trait rather than merely a response bias (e.g., Bradburn et al., 1979; McCrae & Costa, 1983). However, not much is known about the effects of social desirability on behavior beyond the context of questionnaire responding.

Existing approaches to social desirability offer opposing predictions regarding the way this trait will affect interpersonal behavior. Some researchers suggest that social desirability is associated with defensiveness, repression, and other-deception (e.g., Crowne, 1979; Paulhus, 1984; Weinberger, 1990). Their approach implies that this trait will carry negative effects on interpersonal behavior. In contrast, alternative views of social desirability consider it to be a source of emotional stability, agreeableness, subjective well-being, and benevolence (e.g., Diener et al., 1991; McCrae & Costa, 1983; Schwartz et al., 1997). These views predict positive interpersonal outcomes for social desirability.

The present study tested these contrasting predictions by longitudinally studying interpersonal behavior among roommates in university dormitories. We investigated how, after three months of living together, social desirability affected multiple aspects of interpersonal relationship and personal well-being, including acquaintanceship between roommates, roommates' relationship quality, and satisfaction with life.

Method

Participants

Eighty-five roommate dyads (170 students), which were living in the Hebrew University dormitories (mean age = 24, 65% females, 60% first-year students).

Materials

Social desirability. EPQ-RS Lie scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985). Reliability (T1) = .76.

Big-5 traits. Saucier's (1994) Mini-Markers, adapted for self and other report. Reliabilities exceeded .70.

Personal values. A short (46 items) version of the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992) adapted for self and other report. Reliabilities exceeded .63.

Satisfaction with life. Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Reliabilities = .76 (T1), .83 (T2).

Relationship quality. Relationship Depth scale of the Quality of Relationship Inventory (QRI; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). Reliabilities = .89 (T1), .90 (T2).

Liking of roommate. Adapted from Stafford and Canary (1991). Reliabilities = .84 (T1), .89 (T2).

Procedure

Roommate dyads were recruited for the study during the first days of a new academic year. They were approached in their dormitories and were offered to volunteer for the study in return for personal monetary compensation. In the first wave of data collection (T1) each roommate filled out self-report (personality traits, personal values, social desirability, satisfaction with life, relationship quality, liking of roommate, demographic info) and other-report (personality traits, personal values) questionnaires. Three months later (T2) the dyads were approached again for the second wave of the study, which included filling out the same packet of questionnaires.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the contribution of social desirability to interpersonal adaptation under naturalistic conditions. Using a two-wave (three months apart) longitudinal design, 170 participants (85 roommate dyads) rated their satisfaction with life and the quality of their dyadic relationships. In addition, they completed traits and personal values questionnaires describing themselves and their roommates. The results revealed that the higher one's roommate was on social desirability, the greater was the decrease in one's evaluation of the quality of their relationship, in the liking of the roommate, and in one's satisfaction with life after three months of living together. In addition, the higher one's roommate was on social desirability the less was the level of agreement within each dyad about the roommate's personal values after three months of acquaintanceship. These results indicate that social desirability carries a negative effect on the quality of evolving social relations and on the depth of interpersonal communication.

Results

Acquaintanceship

Roommates' acquaintanceship with each other's traits and values is one indicator of a constructive interpersonal relationship. This is especially true for values, which are less visible than traits, and depend more on the formation of open interpersonal communication and self-disclosure (Cross & Morris, 2003).

The present data showed that social desirability moderated change in self-other agreement (i.e., acquaintanceship) on values (Table 1), but not on traits ($t < 1$): *High social desirability of roommate 1 predicted reduced ability by roommate 2 to accurately perceive roommate 1's values after three months of acquaintanceship.*

That is, high social desirability appears to be associated with a less open interpersonal communication.

Table 1: Regression to predict change in self-other agreement from T1 to T2

	B	SE	β	t
(T1) Agreement on Roommate 1's values	.39	.08	.35	4.78**
Roommate 1's social desirability	-.11	.06	-.14	-1.98*

Notes. Predicting T2 agreement on roommate 1's personal values; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$

Relationship Quality

Roommate 1's social desirability predicted a *negative* change in roommate 2's perception of their relationship quality (RLQ) from T1 to T2.

Table 2: Regression to predict change in relationship quality from T1 to T2

	B	SE	β	t
Roommate 2's (T1) RLQ judgment	.57	.08	.49	7.26**
Roommate 1's social desirability	-.29	.15	-.14	-2.01*

Notes. Predicting roommate 2's RLQ judgment on T2; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$

Liking of Roommate

Roommate 1's social desirability predicted a *negative* change in roommate 2's liking of him/her from T1 to T2.

Table 3: Regression to predict change in liking of roommate from T1 to T2

	B	SE	β	t
Roommate 2's (T1) liking of Roommate 1	.51	.08	.44	6.32**
Roommate 1's social desirability	-.28	.14	-.14	-1.97*

Notes. Predicting roommate 2's liking of Roommate 1 on T2; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$

Satisfaction with Life

Roommate 1's social desirability predicted a *negative* change in roommate 2's satisfaction with life from T1 to T2.

Table 4: Regression to predict change in satisfaction with life from T1 to T2

	B	SE	β	t
Roommate 2's (T1) satisfaction with life	.71	.06	.69	12.66**
Roommate 1's social desirability	-.51	.17	-.16	-2.96**

Notes. Predicting roommate 2's satisfaction with life on T2; ** = $p < .01$

Conclusions

- Social desirability has a negative effect on evolving social relations. This effect appears to reflect difficulty in maintaining open interpersonal communication, thus favoring approaches to this trait that associate it with defensiveness.
- Notwithstanding, in light of previous results (Uziel, 2007), which found that social desirability promotes interpersonal success in the very early stages of relationship, the effects of this trait on interpersonal behavior appear to be neither simple nor straightforward, but rather to depend on contextual factors.