



Review Article

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A Review and Further Investigation of Social Desirability Response Bias (Marital Conventionalization) with Measures of Marital, Parental, and Family Life Satisfaction

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Abstract

Researchers have long been concerned about the contamination of family satisfaction measures with social desirability response bias, a threat to the validity of such measures and to the accuracy of correlations among family satisfaction measures and with other theoretically related constructs. However, some have been skeptical about the validity of various attempts to measure social desirability or to control for it by design or statistically. How social desirability has been measured and the results of various attempts to control for it are reviewed. No perfect solutions have been found. Using a likert-type response format is probably preferable to using a true/false response format and may be useful even with only one item. The two most tested methods, sample restriction (to only respondents giving lower social desirability responses) and using social desirability as a control variable (with partial correlations or regression analyses) both have serious drawbacks. A preferred approach may be to analyze data from the entire sample without controlling for social desirability and then check those results by repeating them for low social desirability respondents. However, what is needed is to rethink and retest the reasons why respondents might report what appear to be socially desirable responses and to craft more precise measures of social desirability.

Keywords: Marital conventionalization, Marital social desirability, Individual social desirability, Marital satisfaction, Parental satisfaction, Reliability, Validity, Measurement

Introduction

Since at least 1948 [1] researchers [2-7] have struggled with the issue of “controlling the potential effects of social desirability upon self-reported marital satisfaction [8:607]. Therefore, many scholars [9-14] have indicated that marital adjustment or marital satisfaction should not be studied “without measuring conventionalization or its equivalent in order to permit statistical control for social desirability [8:608]. The concern was the apparent “tendency of some respondents to report impossibly perfect, though perhaps

socially desirable, levels of marital adjustment [8: 607].

Yet, some scholars have continued to refuse to measure marital social desirability, even when such measures were available, much less attempt to control for it [15: 3278]. In fairness, though, some scholars have contested the validity of Edmonds’ scale [16-19]; Schumm, et al. [20] did not find support for that scale in terms of conventionality, measured by duration of marriage, education, importance of church, traditional gender roles, familism, importance



of religion, or age, though the scale was correlated .43 to .54 ($p < .001$) with marital satisfaction across two different samples of husbands and wives. *Russell and Wells* [21] used LISREL to evaluate three models of the relationship between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction – the best model found the two measures to be independent, with social desirability having a positive effect on marital satisfaction, which they explained as a selection effect, in which unhappy marriages dissolved, leaving behind only the most favorable ones, creating a skew in marital satisfaction scores. They concluded that essentially marital social desirability was a bad measure of marital quality. They also found no evidence of a correlation between individual social desirability and marital social desirability, which seemed to further confirm their results.

Measuring Social Desirability Bias

Edmonds' [22,23] Marital Conventionalization Scale has been used to measure marital social desirability in numerous studies [11,12,24-28]; some scholars have used either eight [8], six [29-31], or five [25,32]: $\alpha = 0.63$ of the most discriminating items of that scale. However, *Schumm et al.* [33] used a single item to measure marital social desirability, as did *Schumm, et al.* [34]. The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale [14] includes ten items for marital satisfaction and five to measure idealistic distortion in marital satisfaction scores (the latter featured an α of 0.92 and a four-week test-retest reliability of .92); a recent factor analysis found that marital satisfaction and idealistic distortion formed two separate factors, indicating that the two concepts were distinct [15]. Used less often is the Marital Aggrandizement Scale [35]. Other scales have been used to measure individual social desirability, keyed to giving highly positive answers about one's self [36-39].

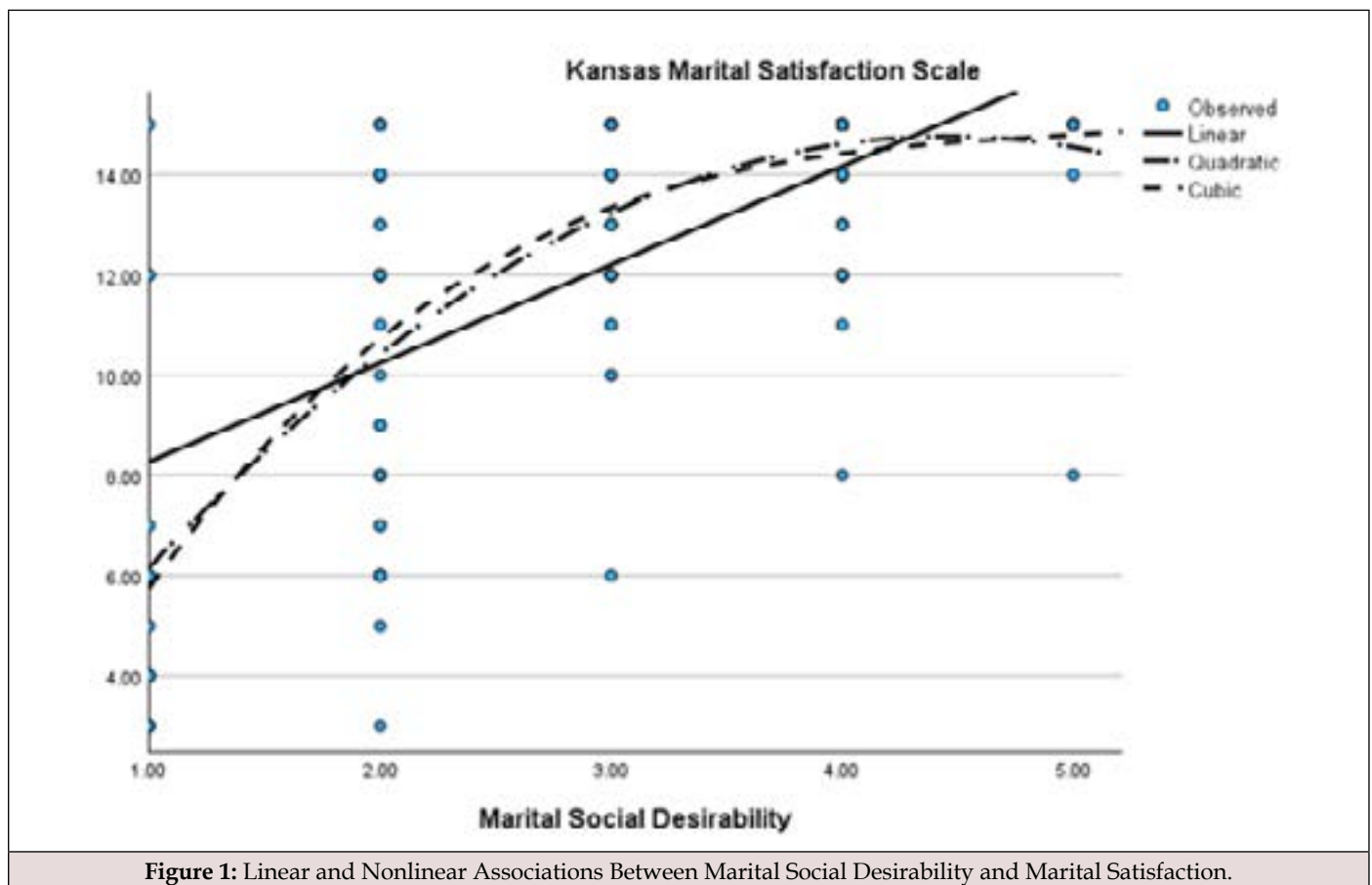


Figure 1: Linear and Nonlinear Associations Between Marital Social Desirability and Marital Satisfaction.

Cronbach [40] alpha measures of internal consistency reliability for Edmonds' scale have been 0.67 [27], .81-.82 for husbands and wives, respectively [28]; .70 [30]; .74 [41]; between .59 and .85 [30,42,43]; and .79 [31]. *Nunes et al.* [15] found alphas for idealistic distortion of 0.74 and 0.85. For other measures, of individual social desirability, alphas have been weaker (.50, husbands, .65, wives) [28]; 0.56 [44].

Marital Satisfaction and Social Desirability

O'Rourke and Cappeliez [45,46] have noted correctly that "marital satisfaction can exist without idealization, but marital idealization does not exist without satisfaction" [35: 449]. Figure 1 illustrates this unusual pattern. Even so, marital satisfaction scores have been associated with marital social desirability in numerous studies [34, $r = .70$, $p < .001$; 27, $r = .41$, $p < .001$; 28, $r = .53$,

husbands, $r = .48$ wives; 30, $r = .67$, $p < .001$) but less strongly with individual social desirability (27, $r = .05$, even though marital and individual social desirability were correlated at .44, $p < .001$; 28, $r = .25$, $p < .03$, husbands, $r = .39$, $p < .001$, wives, even though marital and individual social desirability were correlated .56, $p < .001$, for husbands, and .65, $p < .001$, for wives; [47], for mothers, $r = .19$ ($p < .06$) and $r = .34$ ($p < .002$). Fay, et al. [48] found nonsignificant correlations between SCORE-28 (.08) and SCORE-15 (.04) with individual social desirability, using SDRS-5 [39].

Another approach for assessing social desirability was to measure if a spouse would probably read the respondent's answers on their survey before it was returned [27]. Reporting a greater chance of one's spouse reading one's answers about their marriage was correlated .17 with self-reported marital satisfaction [27]. There has been some evidence that face-to-face interviews elicit more socially desirable marital satisfaction responses than do mail surveys [27,49,50]. Marital social desirability, even as a single item, tends to correlate strongly with a variety of other variables (respect from spouse, .62; love and caring from spouse, .60; marriage as very stressed, .55; marriage in trouble, .55; thinking about divorce, .51) [34]. Using the subscales of Schaefer and Olson's [51] PAIR Inventory, Wider, et al. [52] found that the PAIR's measure of conventionality intimacy only predicted marital satisfaction, measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, for men – not women - in their Malaysian sample.

Does Social Desirability Measure a Bad Thing?

Given the substantial correlations between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction, some scholars have questioned if marital social desirability is not another way to measure marital satisfaction, even if a weaker one [18,19,53]. Visschers, et al. [54] claimed that the Idealistic Distortion Scale “did not measure social desirability well and appeared to be a bad measure for relationship satisfaction” [54: 1401, also 1410]. One anecdote along those lines occurred when a survey reached the spouse of one of my graduate students and she told him that she had graded him maximally on all marital variables, including some true/false ones. I told him that since she had scored high on social desirability, I would likely not count her scores in future analyses that controlled for social desirability through sample restriction. When he told her this, she said that she had not meant to lie, even though she knew he wasn't perfect, but to be loyal to him in spite of that lack of perfection. Another student insisted in a class that her marriage was indeed “perfect”, even though almost all the other students in the class were skeptical. In other words, idealistic distortion might be a positive reciprocal pattern in a marriage, in which spouses give each other the benefit of the doubt on a regular basis and assume the best about them, in spite of occasional contrary evidence. It could be argued that the reciprocal nature of intimate relationships may lead to three types of couples: ones who bless each other regularly, those who mostly tolerate each other much of the time, and those who can't stand to live with each other because of high levels of

mutual negativity. Might not the first group be most likely to agree with social desirability items? There may be a few couples, detected by Fowers and Applegate [18] who include one relatively happy partner while the other partner is unhappy; when this happens, it is more often the wife who is the less happy spouse [55]. It is also possible that positive sentiment override works to minimize negative attributions about one's marriage or spouse [35].

Possible Solutions

Fowers and Applegate [18] recommended that any attempt to measure marital social desirability be done with a Likert-type response pattern rather than Edmonds' exaggerated true/false pattern. Doing so would make it easier to test for nonlinear patterns that might exist between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction. Often overlooked in much research is the possibility that the relationship between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction may not be entirely linear in nature; what about potential quadratic or cubic patterns? Schumm, Akagi, and Bosch [33] did observe significant linear ($p < .001$) and cubic effects ($p < .02$).

In general, so far, three approaches have been suggested for controlling for social desirability, two of which were first noted by Edmonds [22], (although Kim, et al. [56] may be proposing more approaches): (1) statistical control by using it as a control variable and (2) research design, by comparing how results differ between those respondents scoring lowest on it versus those scoring highest. The former approach has an advantage of retaining most of one's sample size and statistical power but may risk removing some legitimate marital satisfaction variance from marital satisfaction as a dependent variable. The latter approach risks a substantial loss of sample size [34], 25.4% of original sample remaining] and statistical power but offers advantages of the elimination most, if not all, social desirability present; a possible increase in variation among the remaining variables which may enhance the size of their intercorrelations; and a possible decrease in skew and kurtosis levels for marital satisfaction, reducing levels of non-normality in marital satisfaction score distributions [27,28,31], but it may also reduce Cronbach alpha reliability for marital satisfaction slightly [28], found a reduction from .89 and .93 for husbands and wives to .84 and .87). A third approach was suggested by Fowers and Olson [14] where they adjusted marital satisfaction scores on their ENRICH scale by a formula related to their scale for Idealistic Distortion [57]. Their formula appears to assume a linear form of correction, but what if the relationship between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction is nonlinear?

However, some have claimed that the Idealistic Distortion Scale is “not a measure for social desirability, but rather functions as a pseudo-measure for marital satisfaction” [54:1415]. Possibly reflecting such a belief, Naveed and Anjum [58] used the entire 15 items of the ENRICH scale to measure marital satisfaction, partly because the two subscales featured Cronbach alphas of only .72 (idealistic distortion) and .75 (marital satisfaction), but the total

set of 15 items featured an alpha of 0.84). On the other hand, *Cyriac*, et al. [59] used only the ten-item marital satisfaction subscale of the ENRICH instrument, without adjustment for idealistic distortion, obtaining an alpha of 0.93.

Some research has found a heteroskedastic pattern of residuals when predicting marital satisfaction from marital social desirability, in which residual variations is much lower at high levels of marital social desirability than at lower levels [27,28]. Concerned about these violations of statistical assumptions, *Dunn*, et al. [60] shifted from the use of Edmonds' scale to the Marlowe-Crowne scale. *Schumm*, *Hess*, et al. [8] found that the correlations between positive regard and marital satisfaction were similar in the full sample and in the sample restricted to low levels of marital social desirability, though in the latter, significance levels were lower because of the reduced sample size. They also found that partialling marital social desirability from the regard/marital satisfaction relationship, reduced the apparent strength of that relationship substantially more than with the other approach, suggesting perhaps that some genuine marital satisfaction was being partialled out of itself. However, *Jeong & Schumm* [30], although limited by a small sample size ($N = 35$) found that the partial correlation approach had no effect for some independent variables predicting marital satisfaction, strengthened others, and weakened some. *McCollum*, et al. [61] found that restricting their sample to lower levels of marital social

desirability did not change most of their correlations, while using partialling had mixed effects; they also found that the correlation of marital social desirability with family items decreased with further distance from the marital relationship ($r = .66$), to children ($r = .30$), and to relationships between children ($r = .12$). *Dunn*, et al. [60], using the *Marlowe-Crowne* [36] measure of individual social desirability among 249 heterosexual, dating, college students, only found $r = .31$ ($p < .001$) with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; contrary to the idea that social desirability would be positively correlated with religiosity, that $r = .125$ (not significant). *Jeong*, et al. [44] found the correlation between the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale and the Marital Status Inventory was essentially unchanged, whether controlling for individual social desirability by partial correlation or sample restriction to lower levels of individual social desirability; *Barnes*, et al. [42] found similar results for correlations between empathy and congruence with marital satisfaction, using a sample restriction approach. *Anderson*, et al. [29] found that the deepest U-shaped curve for marital satisfaction over the family life cycle occurred for those lowest in terms of marital social desirability while a partialling approach found that marital social desirability was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction, along with life cycle categories. *Morris* and *Blanton* [41] also found that restricting their analyses to the lower levels of marital social desirability did not alter the results found in the total sample.

A Recent Study

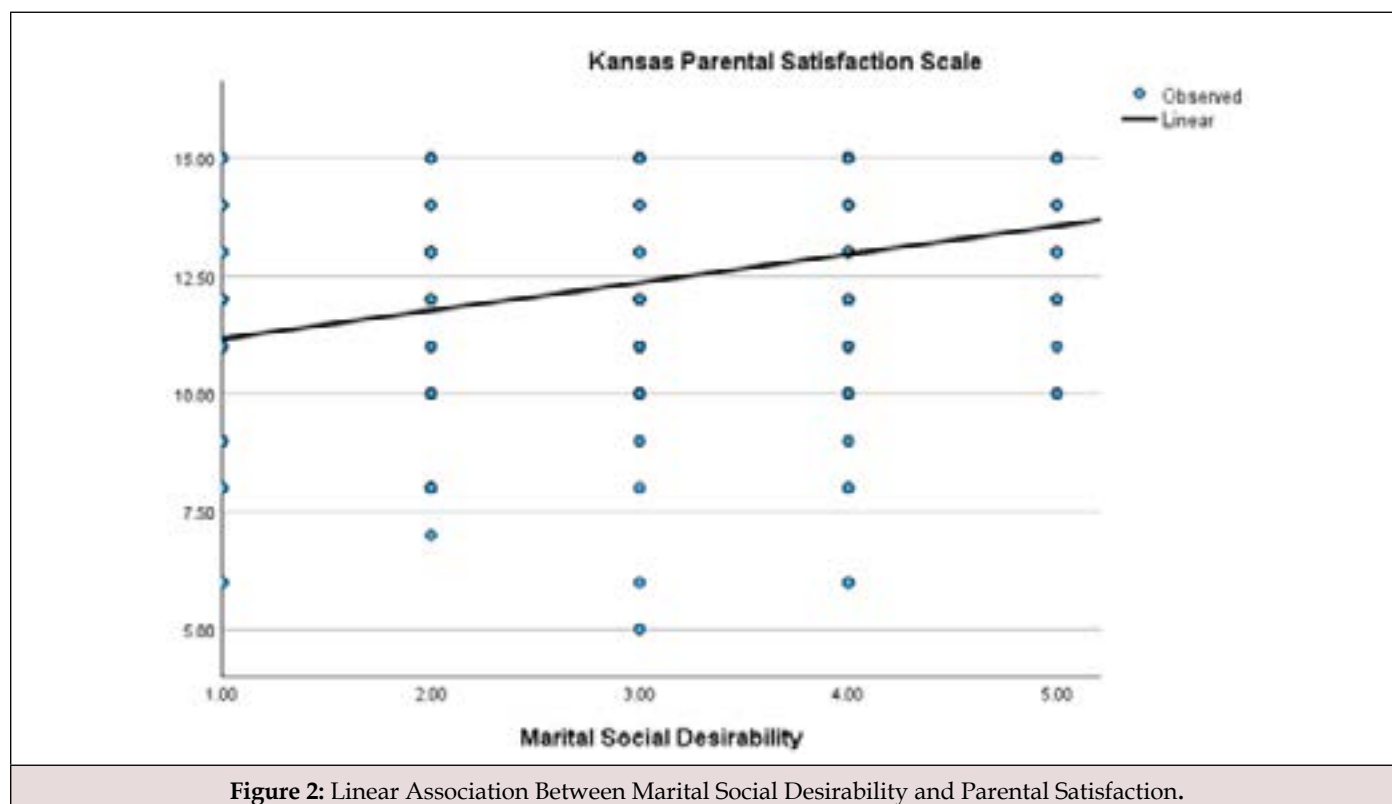


Figure 2: Linear Association Between Marital Social Desirability and Parental Satisfaction.

A more recent analysis, using a sample of over 250 military officers with a single item measure of marital social desirability predicting with OLS regression the KMSS, the standard deviation for residuals was 3.376 for lower (< 3) levels of marital social desirability and 1.389 for higher (> 2) levels of marital social desirability, yielding an $F(187, 63) = 5.906$ ($p < .001$) [34]. Examination of Figure 1 shows that the vertical distances, below or above, from the regression lines to the data points tend to be further at lower levels of social desirability than at higher levels. In Figure 2, that same degree of heterodasticity does not appear. The same data were also analyzed with a one-way analysis of variance. As social desirability increased from low to high, the means for marital satisfaction increased while the associated standard deviations decreased: 5.74/3.53, 10.76/3.35, 13.30/1.92, 14.44/1.19, 14.79/1.14; a visual observation of the pattern of means suggested a quadratic pattern. All four tests in SPSS (version 31.0) for homogeneity of variance yielded significant results ($p < .001$). Both weighted linear ($p < .001$) and quadratic ($p < .001$) trends were significant while the cubic trend was close ($p = .074$), as shown in Figure 1. Using the SPSS routine Curve Estimation, which yielded Figure 1, the adjusted R squared for the linear term was 0.494 ($p < .001$); the quadratic term increased it to 0.587 ($p < .001$), while the cubic term only increased it to 0.590 ($p = .073$).

Notably, using the same procedures with the Kansas Parental Satisfaction Scale as a dependent variable, homogeneity of variance was not violated and only a significant linear trend (adjusted R squared = 0.097, $p < .001$) was found with marital social desirability; residual heteroskedasticity was also much reduced. While such heteroskedastic patterns affirm that marital social desirability and marital satisfaction may be distinct concepts, it also infers that a violation of homogeneity of variance and skedasticity of residuals may occur when predicting marital satisfaction from marital social desirability and other variables, as in partial correlation or multiple regression [8: 608]. It is notable that similar patterns did not occur between marital social desirability and parental satisfaction, as measured by the Kansas Parental Satisfaction Scale (Figure 2), even though both scales contain only three items, the response categories are identical, and the stem questions are similar.

Discussion

Kim, et al. [56] have recently offered other alternatives for dealing with social desirability; their methods should be extended to the study of family relationships in future research. Finding a significant quadratic relationship between marital social desirability and a nearly significant cubic one suggests that marital social desirability is not simply related to marital satisfaction in a linear pattern, as was parental satisfaction. It appears from several studies that marital social desirability appears to be associated primarily with marital satisfaction, rather than other aspects of family life satisfaction. Schumm [62] recommended that measures of social desirability be tailored to the concept under investigation, whether one's own satisfactions or satisfaction with various types

of relationships (i.e., marriage, children, parents) with examples of each type of scale (p. 40). It seems clear that measures of individual social desirability are not strongly correlated with measures of family satisfaction, even though measures of marital social desirability and individual social desirability are moderately correlated with each other. If a researcher attempts to use social desirability as an independent control variable, they must assume a risk of violating traditional statistical assumptions with respect to homogeneity of variance and heteroskedasticity of residuals. It is possible that using social desirability as a control variable will lead to both linear and nonlinear statistically significant associations with dependent variables. On the other hand, if they focus a secondary analysis on only those respondents reporting low levels of social desirability, they risk a loss of statistical power from what may be a dramatically decreased sample size. It may be better, given these less than perfect alternatives, to test one's models with the entire sample and then double-check the results using only low social desirability respondents.

Future Research

If we are to come to a better understanding of social desirability response bias, we need more refined theory and measurement. We need to ask respondents more questions about why they are (or not) responding in what appears to be a socially desirable manner. Past research has suggested that social desirability may reflect a desire for impression management (highlighting positives, downplaying negatives) or self-deception, an unconscious positive self-bias [54: 1414]. Positive or negative sentiment override could also be involved. Questions should reflect each of these possible issues. For example, researchers could show a true/false question like "my marriage is perfect" and ask potential respondents to what extent they might agree or disagree with examples of how they might think about answering it. Sample items might be like:

- That's a silly question, no marriage is perfect.
- My marriage isn't perfect but it's closer to that than to the opposite.
- My spouse isn't really perfect but out of loyalty to them, I would answer true.
- My religion says my marriage is perfectly matched to my real needs even if it hurts sometimes. I thought my marriage was perfect when it started but now I know better.
- My spouse isn't perfect but he/she is a perfect match for my needs.
- From the viewpoint of heaven, my marriage is perfect even if it feels otherwise here. We are thinking about divorce, there's no way I'd ever answer true to that question. My spouse has a terminal disease, I do think of her as perfect now.
- My spouse died recently, so she is perfect now in heaven.

- Compared to previous bad relationships, my marriage now seems perfect. My faith forbids divorce, so I might as well look on the bright side.
- I prefer to look for the best in my spouse rather than the worst. Appreciating one's spouse works better than finding fault with them.
- Even if it looks bad on the surface, most people have good reasons for what they do. If my spouse makes a mistake I feel it's my duty to correct them.
- No matter what my spouse may do that I don't like, it's my duty to forgive them. I don't have much of an alternative, so I might as well make the best of it.
- If my spouse overheard me say "false", I'd be in trouble.
- With that type of question, I'd flip a coin and not care how it turned out. I want to give my spouse the benefit of the doubt most of the time.
- If I was in a hurry, I'd just say "true" to every question regardless, without much thought. My spouse criticizes me constantly, so my only answer would be "false".
- If I had to share my answers face-to-face with an interviewer, I'd be more likely to say "true" to such a question.

Some of these possible answers are double-barreled, so in practice they would have issues, but they are presented here to stimulate thought and theory construction rather than to provide perfect focus group or survey questions. In addition to true/false questions, likert-type questions might be asked that were similar to true/false ones and see to what extent a different format changed how potential respondents would evaluate the same base questions. Researchers should "Ask, don't assume" when it comes to understanding how social desirability questions are perceived by respondents. Seldom mentioned is the issue of ethics and the measurement of social desirability; what is involved if we are trying to "trick" respondents into admitting the extent to which, if any, that they are hiding their true feelings or opinions from others or themselves? Based upon the results of such research, in terms of what respondents think they mean when they answer such true/false questions, it might be possible to design measurements that would better capture and distinguish the possible underlying meanings of social desirability response bias and distinguish impression management reasons from alternative ones. Ultimately, such increased knowledge will help us better understand marital satisfaction and its relationship with other constructs [63].

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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