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Relationship Social Desirability in the National Family Structures Study (Nfss): Replicating Old Findings and Reporting New Results

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Abstract

Social desirability as it pertains to marital or relationship satisfaction and quality is not well understood. Earlier research raises the possibility that social desirability may be related to satisfaction outcomes nonlinearly and that the meaning of social desirability may change with the level of marital satisfaction. These issues were evaluated with data from the 2012 National Family Structures Study's survey whose advantages include a large sample (> 2,000), a well-known measure of relationship quality (QMI), a measure of social desirability, and a measure of marital instability, among other demographics. Furthermore, unmarried and married couples were surveyed about their relationship quality and relationship social desirability. Results indicate that some very unhappy persons nevertheless reported very high levels of social desirability, that nonlinear associations between social desirability and relationship satisfaction were often observed, and that the apparent meaning of social desirability changed across different subsamples (gender, marital status) and as a function of relationship quality levels. More research, including improved measures of relationship social desirability, is needed to improve our understanding of why respondents often report high levels of social desirability; without such understanding, knowing how best to counteract or control for social desirability bias in statistical analyses may continue to elude us.

Keywords: Relationship satisfaction, Social desirability, Research methods, Marital satisfaction, Marital conventionalization, KMSS, Quality Marriage Index, Regnerus, NFSS, Replication, Social science

Introduction

For nearly eighty years, scholars have been concerned about the confounding effects of social desirability response bias, as summarized recently in terms of marital social desirability [1]. Various attempts to control for it have been suggested [2]. In spite of its assumed importance, recent research in family social science has often neglected to measure or to control for marital social desirability, especially with large (n > 2,000) samples. Furthermore, even less seldom has family social science attempted to measure social desirability among the unmarried who are nevertheless in involved relationships with varying levels of satisfaction or quality. In addition, replication of social science research in general is so infrequent as to be a major concern for the credibility of science itself [3-8]. This report attempts to correct some of the gaps in social science research by investigating social desirability response bias in a large sample (n >2,000) and among both unmarried and married respondents, as well as replicating at least parts of earlier research with social desirability among more limited samples (military only,

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mostly men, n < 300) of married respondents [9]. Earlier research found statistically significant nonlinear relationships between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction, as well as a lower-than-expected rate of marital social desirability [9]. This research will involve replication of previous research (prevalence of social desirability, nonlinear patterns) as well as the introduction of new research questions regarding associations between gender and marital status with social desirability among both married and unmarried respondents.

Research Questions

Most previous research on marital social desirability has not used nationally representative data nor has that research tested relationship social desirability among non-married respondents. Furthermore, a great deal of social science research has not been subjected to replication, leaving its value in question. Here, the objectives include, as noted above, replication of previous research with social desirability, use of nationally representative data, and assessing RSD among non-married persons. RQ1 is a descriptive question, designed to replicate earlier findings with marital social desirability: "How prevalent are high levels of Relationship Social Desirability (RSD) in a nationally representative sample across both married and unmarried respondents?". If RSD occurs infrequently in a national representative sample, scholars might relax with respect to fears of its ability to confound analyses using relationship quality as a variable. If RSD does occur frequently, then scholars might need and desire to place more emphasis on its measurement and control than has been done so far. Since non-married respondents have seldom been queried about relationship social desirability, RQ2 concerned whether RSD would differ as a function of marital status (married vs. non-married). RQ3 concerned any association that might exist between male/female gender and RSD, important because some previous research involved samples that were predominately male [9]. RQ4 extended the issue to how both marital status and gender in combination might predict RSD. Because past research has found strong correlations between MSD and marital satisfaction [10], the same questions were applied to Relationship Quality (RQ) here.

Since previous research has found some significant nonlinear associations between MSD and marital satisfaction [1,9], RQ5 concerned replicating such previous research, not just for both men and women but for men and women separately. Accordingly, these potential associations will be re-examined (replication) for the entire sample, for men, for women, for married, and unmarried. RQ6 concerned the prediction of RSD, controlling for RQ, and using a variety of independent variables, including two measures of religiosity, age, educational attainment, gender, a measure of relationship instability, marital status, and sum of children under age 18. Most of the independent variables represent a replication (or extension) of previous research on social desirability. This question will also be evaluated separately for men and women and for four different categorical levels of RQ. RQ7 concerns the issue of religious variables for which a significant interaction effect had been found previously for intrinsic religiosity, which was negatively associated with social desirability at an intermediate level of marital satisfaction but positively associated at the highest level of marital satisfaction [11].

Measurement

Relationship quality was based on the sum of five items that were revisions of the first five items of Norton's [12-15] Quality Marriage Index, in which the word "marital" was replaced by "relationship" so as to be pertinent to non-married respondents. Norton's scale's sixth item was measured but not used because its inclusion in the five-item scale reduced the scale's Cronbach's [16] alpha to 0.93. The five-item scale was answered by 2,130 respondents (858 missing) with a mean of 20.46 and a median of 21.00 (SD = 4.91), with a range of 5 to 25. Cronbach's alpha was 0.967 for this five-item scale. Recoding the scale into qualitative categories, 4.6% of respondents were very distressed (scores of 5-10), 42.7% were of mixed levels of quality [11-20], a mixture of distressed respondents and those of somewhat higher quality), 18.4% were of relatively high quality [21-24], and 34.3% reported the highest possible quality scores [25]. For the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale 10] a score of 16 or below was deemed "marital distress); by comparison the five-item revised QMI would yield a level of distress below either 15 (using 21 vs. 25, assuming the lowest scores being 1 for both scales) or at 19 or below (using 18 vs. 20, the maximum difference between the lowest possible and highest possible actual scores). Using the latter approach, which is likely more accurate, the second lowest group of RQ scores would mostly fall into a "somewhat distressed quality" level.

Relationship Social Desirability (RSD) was measured by a single item, "Our relationship is pretty much perfect", with item responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree, coded from 1 to 5 (recoded, 8.8%, 17.5%, 19.4%, 33.1%, and 21.2%, respectively), an item that immediately followed the revised QMI items in the survey format. Relationship instability, labeled UNSTABLEREL3, was measured by the sum of three items, Q106A, Q106B, and Q106C: How often have you thought your relationship might be in trouble? How often have you and your partner discussed ending your relationship? And how often have you broken up or separated and then gotten back together? Each item has four possible responses: never/once (1), once or twice (2), several times (3), and numerous times (4). The Cronbach [16] alpha for this scale was 0.841. For the entire sample, RSD and UNSTABLEREL3 were correlated -.564 ($p < .001$); however, that correlation was significantly different ($z = 3.64$, $p < .001$) for men ($r = -.497$, $p < .001$) versus women ($r = -.606$, $p < .001$). In the NFSS, marital status (recoded here as married/unmarried) was measured as a screener question and as part of the final survey; here the latter was used because that marital status was concurrent with the other questions in the survey while the former occurred sometime prior to the actual final survey. Gender was measured as male/female. Religious attendance, labeled Q71ATTENDR, other

than for weddings or similar events, was measured in eight levels – never, one to two times a year, several times a year, once a month, twice a month, three times a month, once a week, and more than once a week, coded from 1 to 8. The importance of one's religious faith, Q70RELIM, was measured in five levels from not important at all, not very important, somewhat important, very important, and more important than anything else, coded from 1 to 5. Age was measured in two-digit years of age. Educational attainment was measured from no formal education (1) to a professional degree (14).

Analysis

All analyses were conducted with SPSS, Version 31.0 [17]. RQ1 was assessed in terms of the percentages of responses for each category of the RSD item. RQ2 and RQ3 were evaluated with independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests, predicting RSD and RQ from marital status and gender and for the joint associations of marital status and gender predicting RSD. RQ5 was assessed in two ways. First, one way analysis of variance was used, predicting RQ from RSD, testing for linear, quadratic, and cubic trends. Second, RQ5 was tested with the SPSS curve estimation program, predicting RQ from RSD, assessing the statistical significance of linear, quadratic, cubic trends and of an S curve function. The patterns were assessed for the entire sample, for men, and for women. RQ6 was evaluated with linear regression predicting RSD, controlling for RQ, and using independent variables of religiosity, age, educational attainment, gender, marital status, UNSTABLEREL 3, and the sum of children under age 18. Backward selection of variables was used for two reasons: (1) the two variables of religiosity, number of children, and age and educational status were likely to be highly correlated and (2) in the author's experience, backward selection works better in exploratory research by eliminating variables with no predictive effect while keeping some variables that might have been suppressed by the eliminated variables, yielding a maximum number of variables of predictive interest. RQ7 was assessed by predicting RSD from RQ, UNSTABLEREL3, and the two religious measures for the entire sample, for men, for women, and for the four levels of RQ, using linear regression with direct entry.

Results

RQ1. In this sample, the correlation between RSD and RQ was r = .773 ($p < .001$, indicating that the lower bound of reliability for RSD as a single item was 0.62), raising the possibility that controlling for RSD when predicting RQ might lead to overcontrol for RSD. Yet, overall, only 21.2% of respondents strongly agreed that their relationship was nearly perfect, which may reassure scholars that it may not be as much of a threat to validity as some might suspect. However, 33.1% of the sample "agreed" with that degree of perfection. If one were to "control" for relationship social desirability by eliminating those two groups of respondents from this sample, over half of the sample size would be lost. On the other hand, among the group with the highest level of relationship quality, 59.3% of those respondents strongly agreed (35.8% agreed) that their relationship was nearly perfect, while nearly 60 percent of the next highest quality group either agreed (57.1%) or strongly agreed (1.9%) with the RSD item, a result stronger than found previously [9]. From this latter perspective, the impact of social desirability might be a much more serious concern. One surprising result that was replicated within this sample was that a small percentage (7.1%) of respondents in the lowest level of relationship quality reported the highest level of RSD, which also occurred in previous research [9], raising a concern about the intended meaning of RSD among those very low in RQ. Among those with the lowest reported level of RSD, most were in the lowest level (41.4%) or next lowest level (54.8%) of RQ; it could be argued that at its lowest level, RSD was merely a different form of measuring low RQ. Overall, these results highlight the complexity of the functioning of RSD relative to RQ.

RQ2. Comparing the respondents on marital status, 976 unmarried yielded a mean score on RSD of 3.21 (SD = 1.25) compared to 1192 married with 3.60 (SD = 1.21). The variances were not significantly different, but t (2166) = -7.33 ($p < .001$, g = -.316). Using the crosstabulation between marital status and RSD, at the lowest level of RSD, the unmarried made up 59.4%, while at the next lowest level, the two groups split almost evenly (1.2% difference). At level three for RSD, the difference was only 4.0%. In contrast, at levels 4 and 5 for RSD, married persons represented 58.4% and 66.4% of those groups, respectively. The chi-square (df = 4) test yielded a value of 57.07 ($p < .001$) with r = .155 ($p < .001$). Comparing the respondents on marital status, 960 unmarried yielded an RQ mean score of 19.33 (SD = 5.20) while 1169 married yielded 21.39 (SD = 4.45) with t (2128) = -9.86 ($p < .001$, g = -.429). While the variances were significantly different ($p < .001$), both equal and unequal variance tests provided the same results ($p < .001$). RQ3. Comparing men and women on RSD, 1003 men yielded a mean score of 3.55 (SD = 1.67) compared to 1164 women with results of 3.31 (SD = 1.29), with t (2166) = 4.63 ($p < .001$), with Hedge's g = 0.199. Looking at the same situation with a crosstabulation of gender with RSD, for RSD scores between 2 and 5, both genders remained within 4 points of 50%, with women making up a higher proportion of persons (52.4 to 53.5%) at levels 2, 3, and 4 while men made up a higher proportion of scores at level 5 (51.1%). However, the largest gender difference was at the lowest level of RSD, where women made up 74.3% of that group. The chi-square value, with df = 4, was 37.07 ($p < .001$), with r = -.098 ($p < .001$). In sum, women scored lower on RSD than men although the effect size was modest (g = .20). Reviewing t-test results for gender and RQ, 972 men yielded a mean score of 20.67 (SD = 4.68) versus 1157 women of 20.29 (SD = 5.09), with t(2166) = 1.78 ($p < .08$, g = .078). Their variances differed slightly ($p < .05$) but not enough to lead to a significant difference in mean scores. RQ4. A univariate analysis of variance was performed, predicting RQ from marital status, gender, and the interaction; only the main effect of marital status was significant, F (1, 2024) = 90.04 ($p < .001$).

A univariate analysis of variance predicting RSD from marital status, gender, and the interaction did not find the interaction to be significant, but the main effects of gender, F (1, 2066) = 16.10 (p < .001), and marital status, F (1, 2066) = 48.07 (p < .001), were significant. RQ5. The primary reason for RQ5 was to attempt a replication of the nonlinear findings previously found when predicting RQ from RSD. With the entire sample (N = 2,121), predicting RQ from RSD using one way analysis of variance, linear [F (1, 2115) = 3089.51], quadratic [F (1, 2115) = 56.12], and cubic [F (1, 2115) = 26.87] trends were significant (p < .001), as well as the deviation from cubic [F (1, 2115) = 170.37, p < .001]. Visually, the steepest decline in RQ occurred between RSD values of 1 and 2, which may be associated with the apparent quadratic effect. For men, only the linear term [F (1, 966) = 912.29, p < .001] was significant, except for the deviation from cubic term [F (1, 966) = 69.67, p < .001]. For women, all terms were significant (p < .001), linear [F (1, 1143) = 2419.28], quadratic [F (1, 1143) = 73.94], cubic [F (1,1143) = 43.28], and deviation from cubic [F (1,1143) = 95.04]. For the unmarried, all terms were significant (p < .001), linear [F (1, 953) = 1199.38], quadratic [F (1, 953) = 31.85], cubic [F (1, 953) = 12.52, and deviation from cubic [F (1, 953) = 59.43]. For the married, all terms were significant (p < .001), linear [F (1, 1156) = 1830.45], quadratic [F (1, 1156) = 24.05], cubic [F (1, 1156) = 11.89, and deviation from cubic [F (1, 1156) = 117.20]. Similar results were found using the curve estimation program in SPSS whose results are presented in (Table 1).

Table 1: Adjusted R-Squared Results for Linear, Quadratic, and Cubic Trends (and S functions) Predicting Relationship Quality from Relationship Social Desirability Using Data from the National Family Structures Study's Survey.

Group	N	Linear	Linear& Quadratic	L&Q& Cubic	S Curve Only
Total Sample	2,121	0.566***	0.576 (both P<.001)	0.581 (each, P< .0001)	0.529 (P <.001)
Men	972	0.467***	0.468 (linear P<.001)	0.467 (Linear, P< .07)	0.375 (P <.001)
Women	1,149	0.641***	0.660 (both P <.001)	0.671 (each, P< .001)	0.634 (P <.001)
Unmarried	959	0.531***	0.545 (both P<.001)	0.550 (each <.001)	0.500 (P <.001)
Married	1,162	0.583***	0.590 (both P<.001)	0.593 (each < .001)	0.549 (P < .001)

Note*: *** p < .001

RQ6. The issue with this question was if or how the meaning of RSD might change across different samples or subsamples, and different levels of RQ, as expressed in differences in the demographic variables that would (or not) significantly predict RSD. The results of these analyses are presented in. An unplanned finding regarding the four levels of RQ was that the correlation between RSD and UNSTABLEREL3 was lower as the levels of RQ increased (1, r = -.396; 2, r = -.375; 3, r = -.328; 4, r = -.139, all r's, p < .001) (Table 2).

Table 2: Regression Models (Backward Selection, Standardized Regression Coefficients) Predicting RSD from RQ and Several Independent Variables Across Different Samples and Levels of RQ.

Groups:	All	Men	Women	RQ = 1	RQ = 2	RQ = 3	RQ = 4
Variables							
RQ	.647***	.589***	.704***	.229*	.469***	.205***	------
Instability	-.189***	-.210***	-.151***	-.358**	-.172***	-.295***	-.164***
Education	-.063***	-.126***	------	------	-.052+	-.143**	-.118**
Faith	------	------	------	------	------	------	------
Attendance	.040**	.079**	------	.294**	------	------	------
Children	-.031*	-.061*	------	------	-.068*	.094*	------
Gender	-.057***	NA	NA	------	-.110***	------	------
Married	------	------	------	------	------	------	------
Age	-.034*	------	------	-.167+	-.081**	------	------
Adjusted R^2	0.592	0.501	0.654	0.424	0.343	0.176	0.032
Sample size	2,081	960	1,121	93	890	387	716

Note*: + p < .10* p < .05 ** p < .01*** p < .001

RQ7. For this issue, religiosity was the focus; did any apparent association between measures of religiosity have substantially different patterns across different levels of relationship quality? Given the small number of variables, direct entry was used for the regressions. At each of the four qualitative levels of RQ, the two measures of religiosity and RQ and UNSTABLEREL3 (as control variables) were used to predict RSD. At the lowest level of RQ (= 1, N = 93), the adjusted R square was 0.266 ($p < .001$) and the standardized regression coefficients for the four variables were .042 (n.s.) for RQ, -.234 ($p = .021$) for UNSTABLEREL3, .426 ($p < .001$) for church attendance, and -.305 ($p = .002$) for importance of faith. At level 2 of RQ (N = 889), neither religious measure was significant, only RQ ($b = .470$, $p < .001$) and UNSTABLEREL3 ($b = -.161$, $p < .001$) were significant. The same pattern occurred at level 3 (N = 386) of RQ except $b = .207$ ($p < .001$) for RQ and $b = -.307$ ($p < .001$) for UNSTABLEREL3; however, importance of faith was also significant ($b = .138$, $p < .05$) while church attendance was nearly so ($b = -.119$, $p < .09$). At level 4 (N = 713) of RQ, neither measure of religiosity was significant statistically while UNSTABLEREL3 was ($b = -.147$, $p < .001$). Patterns were similar for men and women, but the sample sizes were often small and potentially unstable upon replication.

Discussion

First of all, the results suggest that the relationship between relationship quality and relationship social desirability is more complex than most researchers have assumed in that (1) the associations are often nonlinear, especially for women (2) may differ depending on marital status and gender, (3) social desirability may occur most often at both the lowest and highest levels of relationship satisfaction, (4) RQ and UNSTABLEREL3 each, independently, predict RSD, (5) for men, higher levels of education predicted lower RSD scores, (6) religiosity may be associated with higher RSD scores at very low levels of RQ, and (7) the association between RSD and relationship instability may decline as RQ increases. The linear correlation between RSD and a modified version of the QMI scale was strong ($r = .77$) as has occurred with similar measures. Women and unmarried persons reported lower RSD scores than did men and married persons; higher RQ differences for the unmarried might explain the RSD difference but RQ did not differ significantly between men and women. Such results, though revealing a strong linear relationship between RQ and RSD, also indicate that RQ and RSD are not identical concepts. Further work should be done with longer measures of RSD to allow for calculation of Cronbach's alpha and to clarify the differences between RQ and RSD. Even though we did not find a gender difference for RQ in terms of mean scores, women's RQ scores did exhibit greater variance than men's ($p < .05$), as has been found in another research (18).

Limitations and Strengths

The NFSS [19] has received a great deal of criticism [20-24] but that was mostly for its weak measure of parental sexual orientation rather than the survey of the adult respondents themselves [20,21]. The quality of the survey itself has been demonstrated recently [25-27]. While the sample is adequate (nearly 3,000), removing those who were not in a relationship or did not respond to relationship questions, the sample size was reduced by several hundred. Only one item was used to assess social desirability. Unlike previous research where a measure of intrinsic religiosity was available, here only religious attendance and importance of religious faith were available. On the other hand, strengths include a large sample size, which allowed for investigating patterns among subsamples, as well as the entire sample; use of a revised measure of a well-known scale for marital quality; replication of previous research with social desirability; use of a data set weighted to represent a random national sample, and the ability to predict outcome variables from multiple independent variables with no need to worry about sample size per model variable ratios being at least 10 (or 30) even when investigating multiple subsamples.

Conclusion

Social desirability as it pertains to marital satisfaction is not well understood. Its relationship with relationship satisfaction or quality reports is more complex than realized in prior research. Results indicate that some very unhappy persons nevertheless reported very high levels of social desirability, that nonlinear associations between social desirability and relationship satisfaction were often observed, and that the apparent meaning of social desirability changed across different subsamples and as a function of relationship quality levels. More research is needed to improve our understanding of why respondents often report high levels of social desirability, even in a sample designed to reflect nationally representative data. Until we better understand why some respondents provide answers that seem to reflect high levels of social desirability, it will be difficult to decide how to best control for such answers in multivariate analyses of family data.

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Informed Consent Statement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, 45 CFR @104(d), category: Exempt Category 4 Subsection ii.

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