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.

**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 consideration.
- Field notes and reports were analysed to identify themes related to how social desirability bias presented during data collection, and strategies by the research team to navigate these influences.

**RESULTS**

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

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.

Figure 1. Common cues of social desirability bias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sweeping denial of problems or challenges</th>
<th>Excessive praise for government</th>
<th>Paltering (partial or vague answers)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nervous facial expressions</td>
<td>Inconsistent use of technical vocabulary</td>
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Figure 2. Strategies for posing questions

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

Awareness of the 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.

**FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa initiative, a partnership of Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

**REFERENCES**


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