Examining Self-Report Bias in Post-Divorce Families

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**Self-Report Bias**

Bias in self-reporting has been shown in multiple studies to decrease validity of responses by participants. Social desirability bias, participant reactance, and participant perception of threat by items in surveys have all been identified as reasons for bias in self-reporting. Although many scholars have researched these biases, it is inconclusive whether they are present in all contexts involving self-reports.

One reason identified explaining why participants respond in a manner which they know is not true is social desirability bias. Chung and Monroe (2003) define social desirability as “the tendency of individuals to deny socially undesirable actions and behaviors and to admit to socially desirable ones” (p. 291). Put in the context of responses to questionnaires, social desirability will affect responses in a manner so that respondents will report higher frequencies of actions which are considered positive by societal standards and report lower frequencies of action considered undesirable by societal standards. This poses a threat to the validity of the responses (Myung-Soo, 2000). In addition, Chung and Monroe (2003) assert that this has an effect on decisions based on data collected by self-reports and that those who perceive their behavior as more ethical than that of their peers will be less likely to be motivated to act more ethically. In other words, misperceptions creating a more positive view of one’s behavior can lead that person to not improve him/herself, but rather continue with current behaviors. In addition, Donaldson and Grant-Vallone (2002) claim that issues with accuracy in self-reports can either hinder the advancement of theory development or lead to invalid theories. The practical implications of these biases are problematic because of their influence on behavior.
Ganster, Hennessey, and Luthans (1983) determined that the effects of social desirability bias in self-reports was most salient to conditions of the respondent’s effort, motivation, performance and attitudes. By applying this to turnover investigations, Arnold, Feldman, and Purbhoo (1985) developed a model which predicted that self-reporting would be affected by underlying values. Specifically what was hypothesized and supported by the team’s results was that individuals with high levels of social-desirability bias over reported on job satisfaction and organizational commitment as well as underreported on items determining whether they are looking for another position.

Arnold and Feldman (1981) found that subjective weight methodologies were more likely to result in social desirability bias in questions related to job and organizational characteristics. In addition, the mode in which a survey is administered may also affect validity in responses. Aquilino (1994) found that respondents were less likely to report with bias on questionnaires self-administered than by those conducted over the telephone. Tourangeau and Smith (1996) also found that self-administered surveys resulted in increased reports of frequency of illicit drug use and a decrease in the disparity of sexual partners reported by men and women when compared to computer-assisted personal interviewing. Epstein, Barker, and Kroutil (2001) found that respondents reported more mental health symptoms when the mode of administration was computer assisted self-reporting in comparison to responses when administered by an interviewer.

Although most research on social desirability bias does provide empirical evidence supporting that respondents are likely to over report frequency of actions which are socially desirable and underreport frequency of undesirable actions, some studies exist in which either inconclusive results or empirical evidence does not support the existence of social desirability
bias. Among these is a study conducted by Carr and Krause (1978) in which non-aggressive social desirability bias was found to have no effect on scores on reporting psychiatric symptoms. Finding studies which show no effect of social desirability bias are difficult to come across, but it must be noted that manuscripts in which significant effects are not found are less likely to be published within social science disciplines.

Bias has also been attributed to participants’ reactance to a situation. Participants have been shown to report bias when responding to questions referring to subject matters which are stigmatized by society (Coxen, 1999; Johnson, Gerstein, & Rasinski, 1998) or perceived as threatening (Dwyer, 1980). However, in a study by Cannell and Fowler (1963), items perceived as threatening were found to have no significant effect on over or underreporting. Rather, anonymity had a greater effect on responses.

It is believed by many participants that responses given to survey items will not be kept confidential, resulting in negative consequences for the respondent (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2001). Johnson, Gerstein and, Rasinski (1998) tested for bias in reporting of marijuana usage and found intentional concealment to be the foremost factor responsible for underreporting of marijuana usage. Coxen examined self-reports of sexual behavior and found that 43% of participants reported frequencies of sexual behavior on questionnaires less than reported in what was reported in diaries. In both situations, the investigators concluded that bias could lead to underestimation of participation in these behaviors. This underestimation holds practical implications when considering that educational funding is often allocated by perceived need within a community. If the members of community report a less likelihood to participate in a risky behaviors, adequate funds may not be provided for prevention education.
Although self-report biases have been attributed to social desirability, perceived threat of questionnaire items, and participant reactance to items, none of these have been shown to have an effect across all contexts. In particular, no research has been conducted examining bias in self-reporting concerning parent-child relationships. This is particularly important to investigate because of the assertion made by Chung and Monroe (2003) that one who views their behavior as more positive than the behavior of their peers is less likely to change or improve upon this behavior. In this manner, family members reporting characteristics of their family as better than average when these characteristics are not, actions improving the family dynamics may not take place.

**Post-Divorce Families**

Families experiencing divorce go through considerable lifestyle changes that affect communication and perception of other family members. Coping with these changes as well as emotions related to divorce can be very difficult for both parents and children of divorce. Parents and children going through divorce have been identified as being more likely to experience mood disturbance, depression, and difficulties in social adjustment (Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989). Interactions within one’s social networks have been identified as prominent methods of coping. However, it should be noted that these interactions can have both positive and negative effects (Marwit & Carusa, 1998).

In studying family dynamics, self-reports are most commonly used because of the advantage they have of an insider reporting on occurrences in which he or she has the capability of experiencing from within the boundaries of the family (Vuchinichi & De Baryshe, 1997) as well as for their convenience and cost efficiency. Outside researchers cannot fully comprehend the meaning behind interactions between family members. It is also important to have more than
one family member report on perceptions of interactions because of the varying meaning each individual may have. Therefore, multiple reports can help increase accuracy in reporting.

Burgoon and Hale (1984) identify 12 dimensions of communication which are commonly accepted within the communication discipline today. Among these are dominance-submission, intimacy, affection-hostility, intensity of involvement, inclusion-exclusion, trust, depth-superficiality, emotional arousal, composure, similarity, formality, and task-social orientation. Each of these dimensions influences one’s perception of others as well as one’s perception of self. A positive perception of one’s self has been correlated to increased psychological well-being (Paradise & Kernis, 2002; Smith, Kohn, Savage-Stevens, Finch, Ingate, & Lim, 2000; Wise & Stake, 2002). Dillard, Solomon, and Palmer (1999) report that the influences of these dimensions on judgments are hierarchically organized, with dominance-submission being the most influential. Solomon, Dillard, and Anderson (2002) claim that dominance-submission and affiliation-disaffiliation (referred to as inclusion-exclusion by Burgoon and Hale) are the two primary dimensions affecting judgments.

Stress and problems related to post-divorce experience can put strain on parent-child relationships throughout the life course (Amato & Booth, 1996). Identifying these problems and coping with them successfully can help alleviate some of these tensions that persist. Communication between parents and children can change drastically during and after divorce. For example, warmth and affection have been shown to decrease. Affection has been inversely related to post-divorce adjustment problems (Wolchik, Tein, Sandler, & Doyle, 2002).

In a study by Amato and Booth (1996), it was found that only 4% of parents reported that their marriage had a negative effect on their children and only 2% reported that one or both parents were sometimes abusive. The authors report that this is most likely underreported due to
social desirability bias. These results also contradict Thomas’ (1995) contention that studies have shown consistently that children of divorced families experience decreases in social adjustment and may experience lowered self-esteem as well as interaction discomfort as a result of interactions related to marriage and divorce.

Children must have a sense of security in order to disclose information. During stressful times, such as divorce, it is difficult for a child to openly communicate with a parent (Gentry, 1997). Children of divorce often experience resentment and hostility as a result of feelings of deception. This may continue for long periods as long as the feeling of mistrust persists (Thomas, 1995). Parents may not disclose information to children regarding divorce in an effort to protect the child. Therefore, perceptions of interactions, or lack there of, are perceived very differently among the actors and judgments will vary as well.

Very little research has been conducted examining perceptions of family strength, dominance, and similarity/depth in interactions between members of post-divorce families. In addition, no research could be found examining how these phenomena are communicated within this context.

Judgments based on interactions between family members will affect perceptions of family strength, immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, receptivity/trust, and dominance. The different experiences of each family member as well as report biases will affect one’s responses concerning family dynamics.

Because self-report biases have not been concluded to have significant effects in all contexts, this proposal asserts that it is necessary to examine whether biases exist in self-reports regarding family characteristics as reported by custodial parents and adolescents. Specifically, the following study will attempt to measure self-report biases in regards to family strength,
immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, receptivity/trust, and dominance and, if this bias exists, whether it is more positive or negative than behavior rated by an independent coder observing their behaviors. It is hypothesized that both custodial parents and children of post-divorce families will report family strength, immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, and receptivity/trust more positively than the independent coder. However, it is expected that adolescents will rate dominance of the parent as higher than the coder and custodial parent will rate this variable lower. To measure these attributes, Burgoon and Hale’s (1987) Relational Communication Scale will be utilized along with an item designed to measure the overall perception of familial strength.
Methods

Fifty families in Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania were recruited to participate in this study through newspaper ads and snowball sampling. Families interviewed were divorced within the past eight years and had an adolescent between the ages of 10 and 18. Each participant received $20 for taking part.

The custodial parent and an adolescent were first interviewed together with a set of predetermined questions which attempted to uncover each person’s individual as well as dyadic coping strategies after the divorce as well as familial strengths. In addition, participants were asked to develop a list of stressors each experienced as a result of the divorce and a list of strengths of the family. Participants were then asked to discuss these stressors and decide together which two they would like to discuss. This was repeated for family strengths. Interviewers were all female and were trained to probe for responses from participants. The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Each group interview was videotaped.

An independent coder viewed the videotapes and rated behavior between the individuals on a seven point Lickert scale, with 1 being strongly disagree to 7 being strongly agree. Dimensions analyzed were family strength, immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, receptivity/trust, and dominance. Items used to measure these dimensions were taken from Burgoon and Hale’s (1987) relational communication scale as well as one question added to measure perceived overall strength of the family (see appendix). Nine items were used to measure immediacy/affection, 5 items were used to measure similarity/depth, 6 items were used to measure receptivity/trust, and 6 items were used to measure dominance.

After the group interview, each participant then completed a pencil and paper survey which took approximately 45 minutes. Participants were asked to rate behavior between his/her
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parent/child and him/herself. The same items from Burgoon and Hale’s Relational Communication Scale and an item to measure overall perceived familial strength were utilized.

In order to test the researcher’s hypotheses that both custodial parents and children of post-divorce families will report family strength, immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, and receptivity/trust more positively than the independent coder and that adolescents will rate dominance of the parent as higher than the coder and custodial parent will rate this variable lower, comparisons will be made between self-reports and values determined by an independent coder.

Scales will be determined for each respondent for each of the dimensions from the questions. Similarly, scales will be determined for each of the independent coder’s ratings of the dimensions. Analysis of variance will be run to compare the means of each dimension of the respondents with the values assigned by the independent coder. This will determine if responses by children and parents in post-divorce families are significantly different than those reported by an independent viewer. Further examination of the means will reveal whether responses by parents and children were more positive or negative than those reported by the independent coder.

**Expected Findings and Limitations**

Because of previous evidence of social desirability bias in self-reports, it is expected that both custodial parents and children of post-divorce families will report family strength, immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, and receptivity/trust more positively than the independent coder. However, because perceptions of dominance often vary by age as well as by one’s role in a family, the same is not expected for the dominance dimension. It is expected that adolescents
will rate dominance of the parent as higher than the coder and the custodial parent will rate this variable lower. Adolescents commonly view regulations and communication by parents as overly controlling. In contrast, parents often view their behavior towards adolescents more lenient than it may be in actuality.

One limitation of this study is that although bias can be detected, the reason for bias in reporting will not surface. As previous literature demonstrates, there are many reasons why responses may not be valid. No causal relationship can be shown by this design to explain why respondents’ answers may vary from an independent coder.

The sample used in this study is not a random sample. Because the criterion used in determining eligibility of a family was so specific, random sampling would not be practical. Newspaper ads were placed in small towns which were known to have lower socioeconomic status in order to over-sample this population. Post-divorce families who were affiliates of the researchers or of others who took part in the study were more likely to be selected to participate. In addition, there could be a large number of families fitting the criteria who were not aware of the study and did not have the opportunity to participate. The can be problematic with generalizability.

The independent coder rating the family’s behaviors is able to view only one session with the family. Many factors could influence the family’s behavior causing them to act in a manner which is not typical of the family. For example, communication apprehension spurred by the presence of a video camera, audio recorder, or interviewer could alter one’s behavior. Furthermore, happenings in the person’s life can cause him/her to behave in a different manner. Mood can also affect the way one communicates. The session viewed by the researcher is not necessarily typical of the family’s behavior.
Finally, because adolescents could range in age from 10 to 18, there is a wide variation of reading comprehension. The scale used to measure perceptions of behavior by participants was initially designed for adult use. Because it was necessary for both parents and children to complete the same questions regarding their interaction, it is possible that younger adolescents may have a disadvantage when completing the survey. Although interviewers were available to answer questions about the survey for participants, it is possible that some responded without having full knowledge of the items.

If it is found that responses by participants and coder values are significantly different, further research should be done to examine which factors are most influential in self-reports on parent/child relationships. Further understanding of these factors and biases can help social scientist develop methods to limit bias and increase validity.
Works Cited


Appendix

Burgoon and Hale’s Relational Communication Scale

**Immediacy/Affection**

1. He/she was intensely involved in our conversation.  
2. He/she did not want a deeper relationship between us.  
3. He/she was not attracted to me.  
4. He/she found the conversation stimulating.  
5. He/she communicated coldness rather than warmth.  
6. He/she created a sense of distance between us.  
7. He/she acted bored by our conversation.  
8. He/she was interested in talking to me.  
9. He/she showed enthusiasm while talking to me.

**Similarity/Depth**

1. He/she made me feel he/she was similar to me. 
2. He/she tried to move the conversation to a deeper level. 
3. He/she acted like we were good friends. 
4. He/she seemed to desire further communication with me. 
5. He/she seemed to care if I liked him/her.

**Family Strength**

1. Overall, how strong do you feel your family is currently?
Receptivity/Trust

1. He/she was sincere. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. He/she was interested in talking with me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. He/she wanted me to trust him/her. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. He/she was willing to listen to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. He/she was open to my ideas. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. He/she was honest in communicating with me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Dominance

1. He/she attempted to persuade me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. He/she didn’t attempt to influence me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. He/she tried to control the interaction. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. He/she tried to gain my approval. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. He/she didn’t try to win my favor. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. He/she had the upper hand in the conversation. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7