

MARLOWE-CROWNE SOCIAL DESIRABILITY SCALE (M-C

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November 1, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *MARLOWE-CROWNE SOCIAL DESIRABILITY SCALE (M-C. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES*. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=63412>

MARLOWE-CROWNE SOCIAL DESIRABILITY SCALE (M-C SDS)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Sociology, Research Methodology

1. Core Definition and Function

The **Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (M-C SDS)** is a seminal and extensively utilized psychometric instrument designed to quantify an individual's tendency to respond to self-report questions in a manner deemed culturally or socially acceptable, rather than providing responses that accurately reflect their genuine beliefs, behaviors, or attitudes. This measurement scale, often abbreviated as the M-C SDS, serves as a crucial control mechanism in psychological and sociological research, providing researchers with a means to identify and potentially mitigate the influence of **response bias**, specifically the distortion introduced by the participant's desire to present themselves favorably. The scale posits that participants, when completing personality inventories or behavioral surveys, often engage in what is known as **impression management**, consciously or unconsciously altering their answers to satisfy societal norms or the perceived expectations of the researcher.

Functionally, the scale acts as an indirect measure of the participant's need for approval or their propensity toward defensiveness in evaluative situations. It is fundamentally concerned with identifying situations where the reported data may be artificially inflated or deflated due to systematic distortion, thereby questioning the internal validity of the self-report measures used. By including the M-C SDS alongside substantive measures, researchers can statistically control for the variance attributable to social desirability, allowing for a clearer interpretation of the true psychological constructs being investigated. A high score on the M-C SDS suggests that the respondent is highly attuned to social expectations and is likely attempting to portray an overly virtuous or competent self-image, often referred to colloquially as "faking good."

The continued relevance of the M-C SDS stems from the inherent weakness of self-report methodologies in measuring sensitive topics, such as aggression, substance abuse, or prejudice. Without a measure like the M-C SDS, researchers risk drawing erroneous conclusions about population behavior or personality traits when the observed results are merely artifacts of the participants' motivation to conform to established norms. Therefore, the scale's primary objective remains the quantification of systematic error introduced by the participant, enabling a more robust and reliable foundation for data analysis and theory building within the social sciences.

2. Historical Background and Development

The M-C SDS was first published in 1960 by American psychologists Douglas P. Crowne and **David A. Marlowe** in response to perceived methodological issues with existing measures of

social desirability. Prior scales, most notably the Lie Scale derived from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), often treated social desirability as an indicator of psychopathology or defensiveness linked to denial of emotional problems. Crowne and Marlowe argued that this approach confounded the measure of social desirability with underlying neurotic tendencies, failing to isolate the construct of the need for approval as a stable, non-pathological personality characteristic.

Crowne and Marlowe's pioneering work aimed to create a more neutral, content-independent measure of desirability. They meticulously developed items that were culturally sanctioned (i.e., behaviors that society generally approves of) but had a low probability of being universally true. For example, statements reflecting minor, common failings or exceptionally virtuous actions were chosen. The deliberate selection of items that were not overtly linked to clinical pathology marked a significant theoretical shift, allowing the scale to measure a general tendency toward impression management rather than merely defensiveness against psychiatric labeling.

The scale's foundation is rooted in the social learning and behaviorist traditions prevalent during the mid-20th century. Crowne and Marlowe conceptualized the need for approval as a learned drive reinforced by societal rewards for conforming behavior. This approach solidified the M-C SDS as a measure of normative compliance and public self-presentation, differentiating it from scales focused on internal, often unconscious, forms of self-deception. The subsequent widespread adoption of the M-C SDS established it as the gold standard for controlling social desirability bias, leading to its incorporation into thousands of studies across psychology and related disciplines throughout the latter half of the 20th century and into the present day.

3. Structure and Administration of the M-C SDS

The standard Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale consists of **33 dichotomous items**, requiring participants to respond either "True" or "False." These items describe a mix of exceptionally virtuous, yet rare, behaviors and common, minor flaws or culturally disapproved actions. A key structural feature is the balance of item types: approximately half of the items are keyed "True" for the socially desirable response, while the other half are keyed "False." This counterbalancing helps prevent the development of a simple response set based solely on affirmation or negation.

Examples of socially desirable items keyed True might include statements like: "I never hesitate to go out of my way to help someone in trouble," or "I have never intensely disliked anyone." Examples of items keyed False might include: "I sometimes feel resentful when I don't get my way," or "There have been times when I took advantage of someone." The score is calculated by summing the number of desirable responses given. High scores indicate a strong tendency toward social desirability, suggesting the individual is either highly motivated to manage impressions or

genuinely believes themselves to be exceptionally virtuous, which is statistically improbable for a large number of items.

Administration is straightforward, typically requiring only 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The scale is easily integrated into larger batteries of questionnaires, making it highly practical for large-scale survey research. Crucially, the validity of the M-C SDS relies on the assumption that the items are indeed culturally desirable but statistically uncommon. If an item were common (e.g., "I sometimes eat breakfast"), answering in the desirable direction (True) would reflect reality, not bias. Conversely, if an item were considered universally undesirable (e.g., "I frequently steal money"), answering in the undesirable direction would be truthful, but answering False would reflect bias. Crowne and Marlowe ensured their items met the critical criteria of high desirability but low probability of occurrence in the general population, maximizing the scale's utility in capturing response distortion.

4. Theoretical Framework: Impression Management vs. Self-Deception

The M-C SDS operates within the broader conceptual domain of **Social Desirability Bias**, which refers to the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Within this framework, two distinct psychological mechanisms are often discussed, both of which contribute to elevated M-C SDS scores: **Impression Management** and **Self-Deception Enhancement**. The M-C SDS is primarily designed to measure Impression Management.

Impression Management refers to the conscious and deliberate effort to distort responses to create a favorable public image. This is a strategic process where the individual understands the true nature of their behavior but chooses to misrepresent it to gain social acceptance, avoid criticism, or achieve a specific goal (e.g., securing a job after a personality test). Crowne and Marlowe intentionally constructed the M-C SDS items to tap into this public presentation aspect--the need for approval from others. High scores are therefore interpreted as a strong indicator that the participant is actively filtering their answers based on perceived social norms during the testing situation.

In contrast, **Self-Deception Enhancement** refers to a genuinely unconscious tendency to honestly believe that one is morally superior, more competent, or better adjusted than reality might suggest. The individual is not deliberately lying but rather holds inflated, positive self-views. While the M-C SDS might capture some element of this self-deception, researchers like Paulhus later developed orthogonal scales to specifically differentiate these two processes, arguing that conflating them limits the understanding of personality structure. Nevertheless, the M-C SDS remains highly correlated with measures of positive self-presentation, making it invaluable for quantifying the systematic variance associated with the respondent's defensive style in research settings.

5. Applications Across Research Fields

The M-C SDS has been applied extensively across nearly all fields of social science research where self-report data is collected, demonstrating its status as an indispensable methodological tool. Its primary application lies in the **validation of survey research**. When researchers administer questionnaires on sensitive topics--such as racial attitudes, financial honesty, or sexual history--they routinely include the M-C SDS. If a participant scores exceptionally high on social desirability, the researcher knows to interpret the participant's substantive responses with caution, often leading to the exclusion of the data or the use of statistical corrections.

In **personality psychology**, the scale is used to clarify the relationship between specific traits and social compliance. For instance, studies examining conscientiousness or agreeableness must account for the possibility that high scores on these desirable traits are merely artifacts of a generalized motivation to appear good, rather than true indications of the underlying personality structure. Furthermore, in clinical and counseling psychology, the M-C SDS is occasionally used to assess the client's willingness to cooperate truthfully, especially in intake assessments where defensiveness might mask underlying psychological issues.

Beyond traditional psychology, the M-C SDS has found crucial applications in **organizational and consumer research**. Companies often use personality inventories in employee selection processes; the M-C SDS helps identify applicants who are likely attempting to "fake good" to secure the position. Similarly, in market research, the scale is utilized to ensure that consumers' reported intentions regarding ethical purchasing or healthy consumption are genuine and not simply reflections of what they believe the survey administrator wishes to hear. The scale's utility thus spans academic integrity testing to high-stakes employment decision-making.

6. Reliability and Validity

The M-C SDS has generally demonstrated strong psychometric properties, contributing to its enduring appeal. Its **internal consistency reliability**, typically measured using Cronbach's alpha, is consistently reported in the acceptable to good range (often between .70 and .85), indicating that the 33 items consistently measure the same underlying construct--the need for approval and public self-presentation. Furthermore, **test-retest reliability** over periods ranging from a few weeks to several months also tends to be high, suggesting that social desirability measured by the scale is a stable, enduring individual difference trait rather than a temporary state.

Establishing the **validity** of the M-C SDS involves demonstrating that it accurately measures impression management and distinguishes it from other constructs. Construct validity has been supported by showing that M-C SDS scores correlate positively with other measures of defensiveness, conformity, and external locus of control, while being largely independent of measures of intelligence or verbal ability. Crucially, the scale exhibits predictable relationships with

behaviors--for example, individuals scoring high on the M-C SDS are often found to conform more readily to group pressure in experimental settings.

Despite its robust standing, debates concerning its **discriminant validity** persist, particularly regarding its overlap with measures of emotional stability or general well-being. Some researchers argue that people who are genuinely well-adjusted and virtuous may naturally score higher on the M-C SDS, suggesting that the scale might sometimes reflect true positive adjustment rather than only deceit. However, the foundational research and subsequent validation studies typically support the conclusion that the M-C SDS measures a response style--the tendency to comply with perceived social expectations--making it a vital tool for assessing methodological rigor rather than a primary measure of personality content itself.

7. Criticisms and Methodological Debates

Despite its status as a foundational measure, the M-C SDS has faced continuous **criticism** regarding its length, content, and theoretical interpretation. One persistent critique relates to the sheer number of items (33), which can contribute to participant fatigue and potentially increase the likelihood of random response patterns when administered alongside lengthy personality inventories. This practical concern led to the development of numerous shortened versions, such as the 13-item short form (BIDR-SDS), though the psychometric equivalence of these brief versions is often debated.

A significant theoretical debate revolves around the scale's ability to truly distinguish between **conscious faking** (impression management) and **unconscious distortion** (self-deception). As discussed, while the M-C SDS was intended to measure external presentation (impression management), correlations with measures of self-deception suggest that it captures a blend of both mechanisms. This ambiguity complicates the interpretation of high scores: does the participant know they are exaggerating, or do they genuinely believe their exaggerated claims? Researchers often employ scales designed specifically to separate these factors, recognizing that the M-C SDS might oversimplify the underlying processes of positive self-presentation.

Furthermore, the scale's items are inherently **culturally specific**. Behaviors deemed universally virtuous in the mid-20th century Western context--such as avoiding gossip or always yielding in an argument--may carry different social weights in various subcultures or international settings. Cross-cultural research necessitates careful validation to ensure that the desirability quotient of the items remains consistent, highlighting the limitation of applying a culturally bound scale universally without rigorous adaptation and testing. These criticisms emphasize the need for careful contextualization when using the M-C SDS in modern, diverse research environments.

Further Reading

[Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Social Desirability Scale \(ScienceDirect Overview\)](#)

[Crowne, D. P., & Marlowe, D. A. \(1960\). A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. Journal of Consulting Psychology.](#)

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