

This Week's Citation Classic®

Crowne D P & Marlowe D. *The approval motive: studies in evaluative dependence*.
New York: Wiley, 1964. 233 p.
[University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA]

The Approval Motive reviews a series of studies investigating both susceptibility to social influence and defensiveness. The studies helped to establish that responses to personality tests, even ones "contaminated" by social desirability, reflect the person's approach to being evaluated and are related to significant behavior in other situations. [This book has been cited in more than 1,285 publications.]

From Response Style to Motive

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One summer afternoon, as we sat in his office at Ohio State University, Columbus, David Marlowe and I thought up some personality test items and borrowed a few from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. The items seemed to us so extreme that few people could agree to them. But if they did, we thought, their endorsement would have to reflect a potent motive to respond in a socially desirable manner. That was the birth of the Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale.

A common argument had it that personality tests are infected by a variety of response sets and styles, and one could almost hear the refrain, "Is that all there is?" Marlowe and I thought that social desirability had to mean something—that it had to express a motivated self-evaluative style—and we set out to determine if this was so. Whitewashing one's self-appraisal implied a need to be thought well of by others, a need for approval. We had, then, an indirect measure of the need in the social desirability scale. How would that need appear behaviorally?

Dependence on the approval of others should make it difficult to assert one's independence, and so the approval-motivated person should be susceptible to social influence, compliant, and conforming. A series of social influence and conformity experiments strongly confirmed the hypothesis. We thought we had found the perfect exemplar

when one approval-motivated subject, a nearly complete conformer, commented brightly about her conformity in the post-experimental interview, "Yes, of course. That's teamwork, isn't it?"

At this point, we recognized that such favorably biased self-appraisal had to imply more than a simple and straightforward need for approval. It had to entail vulnerability in self-esteem and the use of repressive defenses. In fact, we found that the self-evaluative style that expresses the approval motive is more than impression management; it is very self-protective and defensive.

A substantial amount of work followed *The Approval Motive*. Among the most important of it, Virginia C. Crandall and colleagues studied the developmental antecedents of approval dependence.^{1,2} This research is well reviewed by D.A. Weinberger.³ The Marlowe-Crowne scale continues in wide use, but I am afraid that a lot of it pursues a chimera. Many investigators still think that by identifying respondents with high social desirability scores, research on other personality variables can be decontaminated. But I believe, more strongly now than ever before, that social desirability, as we defined and measured it, represents a personality variable in its own right. We cannot strip away the self-evaluative style of our research participants to find the "real person" underneath, and eliminating people from our studies because their self-appraisals are defensive simply biases our samples.

The work that made up *The Approval Motive* made an impact because it demonstrated just how powerful a systematic approach to construct validity can be. The need that our studies characterized made social desirability more than a nuisance in personality assessment; it showed that people do not leave their needs and expectancies, like a pair of rubbers, outside the tester's door. The social desirability scale itself lives on in part because investigators misconstrue a socially desirable response style and what it expresses.

1. Allaman J D, Joyce C S & Crandall V C. The antecedents of social desirability response tendencies of children and young adults. *Child Develop.* 43:1135-60, 1972.
2. Crowne D P. *The experimental study of personality*. Hillsdale, NJ: LEA, 1979. 254 p.
3. Weinberger D A. The construct validity of the repressive coping style. (Singer J L, ed.) *Repression and dissociation: implications for personality theory, psychopathology, and health*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990. p. 337-86.

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