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This Week's Citation Classic
Crowne D P & Marlowe D. The approval motive: studies in evaluative dependence.
[University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA]

The Approval Motive reviews a series of studies investigat-
ing both susceptibility to social influence and defense-ness. The studies helped to establish that responses to personality tests, even ones "contami-
nated" by social desirability, reflect the person's ap-

proach to being evaluated and are related to signifi-
cant 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 per-
sonality test items and borrowed a few from
the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality In-
tomy. 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 desir-
ability 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 moti-
vated 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 inde-
pendence, and so the approval-motivated
person should be susceptible to social influ-
ence, 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 fa-
vorably 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 de-
fenses. In fact, we found that the self-evalu-
ativa 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. They this research is well
reviewed by D.A. Weinberger. 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 person-
ality 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 partici-
pants to find the "real person" underneath,
and eliminating people from our studies be-
cause their self-appraisals are defensive simply
biases our samples.

The work that made up The Approval Mo-
tive 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 assess-
ment; 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 be-
cause investigators misconstrue a socially de-
sirable response style and what it expresses.


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