



Is the Neuroticism Scale of the Eysenck Personality Inventory contaminated by response bias?

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Abstract

Neuroticism (N) is perceived to be socially undesirable and the items measuring it in the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) are all positively keyed. To investigate whether N is contaminated by social desirability or acquiescence response bias, undergraduates completed the EPI Form A or B [measuring N, extraversion (E) and lie (L)] in its original version, or in a balanced version where items were positively or negatively keyed. A measure of self-deceptive enhancement (SDE) and various criterion measures for N and E were also administered. Reliability, convergent validity and discriminative validity of the original and balanced EPIs were similar, indicating that acquiescence was not a problem. N and SDE were negatively related, but convergent validity coefficients corrected for SDE were *lower* than the raw ones, indicating that SDE represented content not error variance. In contrast, some L-corrected validity coefficients increased, indicating that N may be distorted by faking. Finally, some psychometric properties were weaker for Form B than for Form A.

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1. Introduction

Hans Eysenck's inventories have been widely employed to measure the major dimensions of personality, one of which is neuroticism (N). N means emotional lability, and high scorers are worriers who exhibit overly strong emotional reactions that do not dissipate quickly (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1968). N is scored by awarding one point for each item that is endorsed.

Scores on self-report inventories may be contaminated by response biases, particularly acquiescence (the tendency to agree or disagree), and social desirability (the tendency to convey

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favourable or unfavourable impressions) (Webster, 1958). Although Eysenck's N has good psychometric properties, it is open to both distortions (Ferrando, 2001). First, all items are worded in the neurotic direction (e.g. "My feelings are easily hurt"), so that a yeasayer will score high and appear neurotic, whereas a naysayer will score low and appear stable. Second, neuroticism is perceived as socially undesirable (Dunnett, Koun, & Barber, 1981; Edwards & Walsh, 1964; Francis, 1993), so that a person who paints themselves positively will score low and appear stable, whereas a person who paints themselves negatively will score high and appear neurotic. Because acquiescence and social desirability are independent (Greenwald & Clausen, 1970), a naysayer could also answer in the socially desirable direction, and appear extremely stable. Similarly, a yeasayer answering in the socially undesirable direction would appear extremely neurotic.

1.1. *Acquiescence*

1.1.1. *Past research*

According to Paulhus (1991), agreement acquiescence means giving a positive response to all items (e.g. "yes" to both happy and not happy) and acceptance acquiescence means endorsing all qualities (e.g. "yes" to happy and sad and "no" to not happy and not sad). Most research has been conducted on agreement acquiescence, with arguments both for (Ray, 1983) and against (Grimm & Church, 1999; Rorer, 1965) its importance. With Eysenck's N Scales, scores may be slightly affected by this bias because Eysenck and Eysenck (1964) found that N/E correlations were somewhat higher for congruent scales (both N and E positively keyed) than for incongruent scales (N positively keyed, E both positively and negatively keyed; see also Martin & Stanley, 1963). The first purpose of the present study was to examine this problem with a new approach by comparing the psychometric properties of the original N Scale with those of a redesigned scale that controlled for agreement response bias.

The standard recommendation for minimizing agreement acquiescence is to balance the scale so that a score is obtained by answering "yes" on half the items and "no" on half the items (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997; Couch & Keniston, 1960). That is, items are positively or negatively keyed. However, this may not remove the effect (Holden & Fekken, 1985; Jackson, 1967). First, negative items may be more prone to response bias than positive items (Ibrahim, 2001), so that acquiescence effects may not be cancelled out.¹ Second, positively and negatively keyed items may load on separate factors (Barnette, 2000; Ibrahim, 2001; Miller & Cleary, 1993), perhaps because reversed scoring is often created by using negatively worded items (e.g. a point for happy is given for responding "no" to "not happy"). The important distinction here is between positive and negative *wording* and positive and negative *keying*, because Holden and Fekken (1985) found that criterion validity was only lower with negative wording. Moreover, the effect of negative wording was greater for items containing the modifier "not" than for items with a negative prefix (e.g. un-) or a negative frequency (e.g. seldom).

1.1.2. *Present research*

Acquiescence was investigated by creating a balanced N Scale in which the items were positively or negatively keyed. To avoid negative wording, the negatively keyed items were positively worded

¹ I am grateful to a reviewer for this observation.

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