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Can we trust self-reports of driving? Effects of impression management on driver behaviour questionnaire responses

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Abstract

Driver behaviour is often studied by using self-reports and questionnaires. Despite their obvious advantages, questionnaires are vulnerable to socially desirable response tendencies. In this study, the effects of socially desirable responding on self-reports of driving were studied by recording self-reports of driving in both public and private settings. In public settings, 47 applicants for a driving instructor training course completed the driver behaviour questionnaire (DBQ) and balanced inventory for socially desirable responding as a part of the entrance examination. In a private setting, 54 students of that training course completed the same questionnaires anonymously in the classroom. ANOVA results showed a difference between the two settings in six DBQ item scores, such that aberrant behaviours were reported less frequently in public than in private settings. The results indicated that bias caused by socially desirable responding is relatively small in DBQ responses.

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1. Introduction

Driver behaviour is often studied by using surveys and questionnaires based on self-reports. Questionnaire studies have several advantages compared to other methods: large amounts of data can be collected and analysed in a short time with low costs. Because of the efficiency and low

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costs of self-reports, large national and international studies using representative driver samples can be conducted. In addition to these practical advantages, questionnaires provide a means for studying driving behaviours, which could be difficult or even impossible to study by using other methods like observations, interviews and analyses of national accident statistics. For example, reliable measurements of driving style as an established way of driving requires us to record how a person drives across different traffic situations—not only when observed once or twice during a single trip. It is difficult to measure accurately infrequent phenomena, like deviant behaviours, by using other techniques than self-reports. In addition, attitudes and motives for deviant behaviour and other background information about the driver can be collected in the same form together with the self-reports of driving behaviour. In this way, the questionnaire techniques can provide in-depth information about antecedents of certain driving behaviours.

Despite the obvious advantages of self-report techniques, some traffic researchers have expressed their doubts about using self-reports as a measure of driving behaviour, because self-reports are always more open to socially desirable responding than unobtrusive observations (Nederhof, 1985; Paulhus, 1991). According to social psychological literature, socially desirable responding has been divided into two types, namely impression management and self-deception (Paulhus, 1984, 1986, 1991; Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Impression management refers to the deliberate tendency to give favourable self-descriptions to others and therefore comes close to lying and falsification (Lindeman & Verkasalo, 1994; Paulhus, 1984, 1986, 1991). Self-deception can be defined as a positively biased but subjectively honest self-description (Lindeman & Verkasalo, 1994; Paulhus, 1984, 1986, 1991). In this way, a respondent scoring high on self-deception actually believes that his/her positive self-descriptions are true. In general, it has been recommended that impression management should always be controlled as a source of bias whereas in some cases self-deception scores might be linked to content variance and, therefore, should not be controlled (Paulhus, 1991). In studies about drivers' views of their driving skills, for example, self-deception is an essential factor leading to over-trust in one's driving skills (Lajunen, Corry, Summala, & Hartley, 1997). In studies of driving behaviour, however, the aim is usually to get an accurate and reliable description of driving. When the objective is to measure the frequency of committing certain driving behaviours, both unconscious self-deception and deliberate impression management distort the true description of one's driving and should, therefore, be diminished or controlled statistically.

Surveys about driver behaviour can be conducted either anonymously or respondents may be identified by recording their name or vehicle registration number. In many cases the latter approach is more attractive, because complementary information obtained from the state vehicle register can be added to the self-reports of driving behaviour. In addition, follow-up studies require drivers to be identified. Earlier studies have showed, however, that impression management bias is more severe in non-anonymous situations than in private settings. Self-deception scores do not depend on the degree of anonymity as much as impression management scores (Lautenschlager & Flaherty, 1990; Paulhus, 1984). Hence, the data collection strategy (public vs. private) seems to influence the trustworthiness of the self-reports to some degree. It can be supposed, for example, that responding anonymously to a postal survey leads to less socially desirable responses than a roadside survey conducted by the police.

One of the frequently used instruments for measuring aberrant driver behaviour is the driver behaviour questionnaire (DBQ) developed by the Manchester Driver Behaviour Group (Reason,

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