Impression management pressures on racial attitude surveys

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ABSTRACT

For decades, researchers have expressed concern that self-report racial attitude measures are vulnerable to distortion from pressures respondents feel to present themselves as unprejudiced. A common response to this problem is to measure social desirability separately from racial attitudes and control for its variance in statistical analyses. The present study is designed to test whether such controls are sufficient. Participants rated items from both racial attitude and social desirability scales in terms of the amount of pressure they would feel to respond in a particular way regardless of their true attitudes. Participants report significantly greater response pressure on racial attitude items than on social desirability items, and ratings on the two types of items have only moderately shared variance. Implications for controlling social desirability in racial attitude research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

No one wants to look like a racist. Nearly everyone wants to appear non-prejudiced, and people often go to great lengths to point out their own egalitarian attitudes. Even blatantly prejudiced comments are often preceded by the phrase, "I'm not a racist, but . . .". Actors and comedians have been crucified in the media for spewing racial epithets they later invariably retract (Farhi, 2006). Political candidates have seen their chances for election disappear as a consequence of offhand remarks that they deny reveal any actual biases (Craig & Shear, 2006). Academicians have lost their jobs when their words hint at various prejudices (Schreiner, 2011). It often seems that the worst condemnation a person might face is to be called racist; people try to avoid being seen in this way, and few people wish to see themselves in such a light (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Social pressures have evolved over the past several decades such that most people publicly disapprove

of holding or expressing racial biases, even though subtle biases remain. The powerful influence of contemporary social norms prohibiting prejudicial attitudes (Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996) has inspired psychologists to develop a host of self-report racial attitude instruments designed to detect prejudice while staying one step ahead of the ever increasing pressure to appear unbiased.

The social prohibitions against revealing racial biases have not necessarily eliminated the biases themselves but have complicated the process of assessing racial attitudes. Surveys are the most common method of measuring attitudes, and social psychologists have had self-report racial attitude instruments in their research arsenals for decades. Concern about the potential reactivity of attitude instruments is not new and is not unique to racial attitude scales. A reactive measure is one that activates characteristics in the responder other than – or in addition to – those that the researcher wishes to measure (Sechrest & Belew, 1983). This occurs in a variety of ways, but in the case of racial attitude instruments, the unwanted quality particularly likely to be activated is social desirability – the tendency to present oneself favorably to make oneself look good (Holden & Passey, 2009). Should the respondent detect

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the sensitive nature of the items, he or she might provide inaccurate responses. Given the aforementioned motivation people feel to deny racial biases both to others and to themselves, concerns about the precision of attitude measurement via self-report are particularly relevant in this domain.

Although researchers propose several strategies for dealing with potential social desirability problems, two strategies are most prevalent in studies using racial attitude surveys. The first is to attempt to avoid reactivity in the first place by minimizing the degree that items activate social desirability concerns. In the 1970s and 80s, researchers became increasingly aware that the civil rights movement and other socio-political trends were influencing people's willingness to admit racial bias (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1981; McConahay & Hough, 1976; Silverman, 1974). On the surface it appeared that racism was on the decline but researchers were uncertain how much of the apparent drop in prejudicial attitudes was real and how much simply reflected a shift toward more subtle prejudice.

McConahay (1986) developed the Modern Racism Scale as a less reactive measure than the blatant and transparent surveys most commonly used in research at the time. Modern racism items are stated in relative terms rather than absolutes. For example, instead of asking respondents to indicate whether they feel Blacks are entitled to equal rights, a modern racism item asks whether Blacks are moving too quickly in pursuit of equal rights. The Modern Racism Scale was followed by other measures of similar constructs, such as symbolic racism (Henry & Sears, 2002), and color-blind racial attitudes (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). These scales and others are designed to minimize reactivity on the part of respondents by making the items less transparent with respect to their potential for portraying oneself in a positive light. Maass, Castelli, and Arcuri (2000) emphasize that such instruments are based on the assumption that it is possible to construct items in a way that makes social desirability contamination unlikely. Unfortunately it is difficult to produce racial attitude items that have credible construct validity but that are not transparent with respect to what constitutes a favorable response. The results of one recent study show that scores of participants instructed to respond honestly to racial attitude scales are indistinguishable from the scores of participants instructed to make themselves look good (Holmes, 2009).

The second common strategy for dealing with social desirability in racial attitude research is to control for it by administering a social desirability scale along with the primary instruments and then partialling out the variance when conducting statistical analyses (Aosved & Long, 2006; Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978; Constantine, Juby, & Liang, 2001; Duckitt, 1984; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Little, Murry, & Wimbush, 1998; Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006). This strategy is based on the assumption that controlling for the variance attributable to social desirability yields a relatively pure measure of racial attitudes, but also relies on the less certain assumption that the tendency to provide socially desirable responses is, at least within individuals, equivalent across different types of survey items. It seems

reasonable to suspect that typical social desirability scale items such as "At times I have really insisted on having things go my own way" (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), and typical racial attitude items such as, "Because of my personal values, I believe that using stereotypes about Black people is wrong" (Plant & Devine, 1998) might not elicit the same degree – or even the same variety – of social desirability pressure.

Two previous studies, both conducted using European samples and locally relevant measures, touched on participants' perceptions of the social desirability of prejudice items. In one study, Dutch students rated items from a blatant prejudice scale as less socially acceptable than items from a subtle prejudice scale (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1996); this finding was replicated with a sample of Italian college students (Rattazzi & Volpato, 2003). Neither of these studies includes racial attitude scales relevant in the United States. More importantly, participants rated the social desirability of the items based on what they believed the views of the general public would be but did not provide ratings of the pressure they would personally feel when responding to the items. Furthermore, neither study permitted comparison of participants' desirability ratings of prejudice items to their ratings of social desirability items. Therefore, the data for the prejudice scales cannot be compared to the data for items designed to detect desirable responding. Given concerns about the potential reactivity triggered by racial attitude scales and the common practice of partialling out social desirability variance from responses to racial attitude measures, it is important to compare the pressure respondents feel to answer each type of item in a certain way.

2. The present study

The objective of the present study is to assess the degree to which typical participants responding to typical racial attitude items feel pressure to respond in a particular way regardless of their true attitudes. Holmes (2009) investigates the transparency of a number of common racial attitude instruments by testing whether people ascertain the socially appropriate answers and can manipulate their responses even on more covert items. The findings show that participants can easily discern the socially appropriate responses to racial attitude items, but the study does not examine the amount of pressure that participants' feel to provide such responses under ordinary survey conditions. The present study addresses the question of motivation by directly asking people to report how much pressure they would feel to respond in a particular way to scale items – regardless of their true attitudes. Participants rated items from both racial attitude and social desirability measures. The social desirability items served as a baseline since those items had been designed to detect desirable responding. The comparison of item types is also important because researchers use social desirability scales to partial out variance from other measures. As noted earlier, previous research demonstrates that respondents can reliably identify socially desirable responses on racial attitude