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Substance and bias in social desirability responding

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Abstract

In this study, self-reports from $N=67$ participants were compared to the external criterion of three observer ratings on the Big Five personality traits. In addition, Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) and Impression Management (IM) were assessed with a shortened version of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR-6; Paulhus, 1991) in German language. Hypotheses were derived from the model of Paulhus and John (1998), who argued for the existence of two self-favouring tendencies: egoistic and moralistic bias. Firstly, we calculated self-report inflation or bias scores by regressing self-reports on observer ratings. Residual scores of this analysis were correlated with SDE and IM. In accordance with our expectations, SDE was positively correlated with bias scores of emotional stability, extraversion, and openness, whereas IM was positively related to bias scores of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Secondly, self-observer agreement was unaffected or even decreased when self-reports were corrected for SDE and IM. Results were discussed with regard to their implications for further research in socially desirable responding.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 40 years a variety of instruments have been designed to assess individual differences in socially desirable responding. At the beginning of research in this area it was assumed that socially desirable responding reflected only a response style, that is, a tendency to respond in a way that makes the respondent look good. However, soon it emerged that social desirability could be conceptualised as a personality style (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Nevertheless, many psychologists still regarded correlations with social desirability scales as evidence for the invalid-

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ity of measures. McCrae and Costa (1983) attempted to separate substance from style in social desirability scales by comparing self-reports to the external criterion of spouse ratings along a range of personality traits in the domains of neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness (hostility and warmth), and openness. Validity coefficients, that is, correlations between self-reports and spouse ratings corrected for Eysenck's Lie and the Marlowe–Crowne (MC) scale most often decreased. Especially, the MC scale was shown to be substantively related to neuroticism and depression, hostility and warmth as well as to impulsiveness and extraversion. Likewise, a recent large scale study of Piedmont, McCrae, Riemann, and Angleitner (2000) showed that correcting self-reports of the Big Five for social desirability scales such as the unlikely virtues scale developed for the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire and the Positive Presentation Management scale did not improve self-peer agreement. By using meta-analysis, Ones, Viswesvaran, and Reis (1996) showed that even in personnel selection, where faking good is very probable, removing the effects of social desirability from the Big Five leaves the criterion-related validity of personality constructs for predicting job performance intact. Thus, these results suggest that correlations with social desirability scales should be given substantive rather than artifactual interpretations and that the widespread practice of correcting scores for lying or social desirability should be questioned.

1.1. Self-deception and impression management

The debate on substance and style in socially desirable responding was brought forward by the work of Paulhus (1984), who proposed a two-factor model of socially desirable responding that distinguishes self-deceptive enhancement (SDE), where the respondent actually believes in his or her positive self-reports, from impression management (IM), where the respondent consciously dissembles, especially under public conditions. The author could show that the MC scale loads on both factors, although more prominently on IM. Starting from the Self-Deception and Other-Deception Questionnaire of Sackeim and Gur (1978), he developed the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR), which went through several revisions (Paulhus, 1984, 1997, 1998). The two scales are relatively independent showing only low correlations, which ranged from 0.05 to 0.40 (Paulhus, 1991). It was recommended that the effects of IM, but not the effects of SDE on self-reports should be controlled (e.g. Paulhus, 1991).

Whereas the original SDE items of the Sackeim and Gur scale were rationally developed on the assumption that individuals with a propensity for SDE tend to deny having psychologically threatening thoughts or feelings, the SDE items of the Paulhus scale emphasize exaggerated claims of positive cognitive attributes (overconfidence in one's judgements and rationality). Thus, the focus has shifted from ego defense to ego enhancement (Paulhus, 1991). Several experimental studies have supported the construct validity of the SDE scale. For example, as described in Paulhus (1991) the SDE scale is positively related to several traditional measures of defense and coping such as repressive style, reversal, positive re-appraisal, distancing and self-controlling. Accordingly, it could be shown that after a failure experience, participants with high compared to low scores in SDE were more likely to show a self-serving bias (Paulhus, 1991). Participants with high compared to low scores in SDE also showed more illusions of control, had higher scores in self-esteem, and lower scores in neuroticism, depression, empathic distress, and social anxiety (Holden, Starzyk, McLeod, & Edwards, 2000; Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Under relatively anony-

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