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Worry and social desirability: opposite relationships for socio-political and social-evaluation worries

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Abstract

The present article investigates the relationship between social desirability and worry. In particular, it addresses the question of whether socio-political worries (i.e. worries about societal or environmental problems) show a different relationship with social desirability than worries related to one's social-evaluative self-concept (i.e. worries about one's own relationships, future, work, or finances). A sample of 155 students responded to self-report questionnaires on worry and social desirability, first under standard instructions and then under social desirability-provoking instructions (imaginary job-application instructions). As expected, results showed opposite relationships for socio-political and social-evaluation worries. First, socio-political worries showed positive correlations with scores from the social desirability questionnaire, whereas social-evaluation worries showed negative correlations. Second, endorsements of socio-political worries increased under social desirability-provoking instructions, whereas those of social-evaluation worries decreased. However, all correlations between self-reported worry and social-desirability scores were rather small. Moreover, in absolute terms, socio-political worries did not show any greater social-desirability bias than social-evaluation worries. Implications for self-report measures of socio-political worries (e.g. environmental worry, worry about technological risks) and directions for future research are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Worry; Social desirability; Impression management; Socio-political concerns; Environmental concerns; Risk analysis

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1. Introduction

With the establishment of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), worry — the cardinal diagnostic criterion for GAD — became a major focus of research interest (for a review, see Borkovec, Ray & Stöber, 1998). Whereas most of this research was directed at pathological worry as experienced by individuals diagnosed with GAD, some researchers also directed attention to nonpathological worry, i.e., everyday worries as experienced by “normal” individuals (Tallis, Davey & Capuzzo, 1994; Tallis, Eysenck & Mathews, 1992). The most widely used and comprehensive measure of nonpathological worry is the Worry Domains Questionnaire (WDQ) constructed by Tallis et al. (1992). Participants from a community sample were asked to list their worries. From their answers, a 155-item worry questionnaire was constructed. This questionnaire was then given to a second sample of participants who indicated how often and how much they worried about each item. When these frequency and intensity ratings were subjected to cluster analysis, six coherent clusters emerged, representing worries in the domains of (1) relationships, (2) lack of confidence, (3) aimless future, (4) work, (5) financial, and (6) socio-political issues. From each cluster, the five most representative items were selected to form a first version of the WDQ. Psychometric analyses, however, indicated that socio-political worries showed no or only small correlations with worries from the other five domains. Consequently, the domain of socio-political worries was dropped from the final version of the WDQ (Tallis, Davey, & Bond, 1994; Tallis et al., 1992).

Tallis and associates suggested that social desirability may play a central role in explaining why socio-political worries did not correlate with worries from the other five domains, as it is extremely difficult for respondents to say that socio-political items are not worrying. Thus, socio-political worries are associated with a powerful demand. Consequently, the authors assumed that, whereas worries from all domains are affected by social desirability to a greater or lesser extent, self-reports on socio-political worries show a considerable social-desirability bias (Tallis et al., 1992; Tallis, Davey & Bond, 1994).

This assumption, however, was never put to test. Yet such a test would be of great importance: Whereas socio-political worries were dropped from the WDQ (Tallis et al., 1992), other self-report questionnaires explicitly aim to measure socio-political worries. In health psychology, for example, the measurement of environmental worry plays an important role for health-related behavioral interventions (Bowler & Schwarzer, 1991; Hodapp, Neuhann & Reinschmidt, 1996). Moreover, researchers in risk analysis have started to discuss if worry about technological and environmental issues may be used as an indicator of perceived risk (MacGregor, 1991; Sjöberg, 1998). If Tallis et al.’s assumption holds and self-reports of socio-political worries are considerably distorted by social desirability, the validity of these measures may be questionable (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1992).

Empirical studies on worry and social desirability are few, but results are rather consistent. Overall, there seems to be a small *negative* correlation between self-reported worry and social desirability as measured with the Marlowe–Crowne Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). McCann, Stewin and Short (1991), for example, found a significant correlation of $r(139) = -0.20$ between social desirability and self-reported worry status as measured with a single-item scale from “nonworrier” (1) to “worrier” (9). Two further studies investigated pathological worry. Whereas

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