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The two-factor model of social desirability: Relation to coping and defense, and implications for health

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Abstract

Recent research has questioned whether two components of social desirability, impression management (IM) and self-deception (SDE) are reflective of conscious and unconscious processes. This paper examines if IM and SDE, as measured by the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR-6), are differentially related to measures of coping strategies, defensive mechanisms, and self-efficacy. In addition this paper will analyse associations between these constructs and health complaints as measured by the Subjective Health Complaints Inventory. A student sample ($N = 237$) completed the BIDR-6, the General Self-efficacy Scale, the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale, CODE, and the SHC. A factor-analysis of these scales revealed five dimensions. The factor structure did not support the hypothesis that SDE would cluster with defense scales, and that IM would cluster with active mastery-oriented coping strategies. SDE loaded on an *active coping* factor as did self-efficacy and three coping strategies; active problem-solving, depressive reactions and comforting cognitions. IM and MC loaded on a separate factor *other-deception*. Both *active coping* and *other-deception* were negatively related to subjective health complaints. The results question the widespread practice of applying social desirability measures as indicators of psychological defense and the interchangeable use of these constructs in the literature.

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Keywords: Social desirability; Self-deception; Impression management; Defense; Coping; Health

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1. Introduction

The interpretation of socially desirable responding is of both theoretical and practical interest. Early research assumed that socially desirable responding reflect only a response style which is a tendency to respond in a manner that makes the respondent look good. Soon it emerged that social desirability could be conceptualised as a personality style (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) and consequently as an individual difference variable of theoretical importance in its own right. The debate on the 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 respondents actually believe in their positive self-reports, from impression management (IM), where the respondents consciously misrepresent themselves. The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1998b) was developed specifically to measure conscious and unconscious deception by two separate scales. This paper further examines the construct validity of BIDR, by focusing on how SDE and IM are conceptually related to psychological defense and coping within the framework of the Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (CATS, Levine & Ursin, 1991; Ursin & Eriksen, 2004). The two socially desirability components have been referred to as coping styles, and researchers have treated socially desirable responding as conceptually identical to psychological defense (Brosschot & Janssen, 1998). This socially desirable responding has been linked to stress-related diseases (see e.g. Brody et al., 2000). Nevertheless, few attempts have been made to understand the outcomes or mechanisms underlying socially desirable responding in a stress-theoretical framework.

1.1. *Socially desirable responding, psychological defense, and coping*

There seems to be a consensus among stress-researchers that threats to the organism produce a general and unspecific neurophysiological activation or *stress response* that affects the physiological systems, endocrine systems, autonomic systems, and immune systems, as well as the biochemistry of the brain. According to CATS, defensive strategies and coping represent psychological mechanisms that act to dampen the stress response. Defensive coping strategies are filters that affect the way in which a situation is perceived and serve the purpose of warding off negative emotional states by distorting aspects of reality (Eriksen, Olf, & Ursin, 1997). Defensiveness may lead to the denial of psychologically threatening thoughts and feelings, or to overconfidence in one's judgments and rationality. These tendencies which are emphasized in the BIDR, seem to fit with definitions of the defense mechanism of reversal, involving denial and reaction formation. In agreement with this hypothesis Paulhus (1998a) has reported positive relationships between SDE and traditional measures of defense such as repressive style, reversal, positive re-appraisal, distancing, and self-controlling ("cognitive defense"). According to Lobel, Kashtan, and Winch (1987) high social desirability scorers tend to use less externalizing defense mechanisms, such as projection and turning against others ("defensive hostility"). Since these individuals are highly motivated towards approval, they may tend to avoid mechanisms that may evoke criticism or which are likely to be upsetting to other people. Instead, they may show a tendency to deal with frustrating situations by use of "cognitive defense" (Olf, Brosschot, & Godaert, 1993). This assumption will be tested in this study. Since psychological defense by definition is reflective of unconscious processes, we expected that "cognitive defense" would be most strongly related to self-deceptive enhancement in the BIDR.

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