



The construct of social desirability: one or two dimensions?

Edward Helmes^a, Ronald R. Holden^{b,*}

^a*James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia*

^b*Department of Psychology, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6*

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Abstract

The construct of social desirability continues to be controversial, even though it was introduced over 50 years ago. Recent work has emphasized two dimensions of social desirability: self-deception and impression management. Other research has continued to regard social desirability as a unitary construct. Here we test the one- and two-dimensional models of social desirability within a nomological network of related psychological constructs. Results of a preliminary factor analysis of the responses of 202 university undergraduates were ambiguous in that both one- and two-dimensional solutions were plausible. There was even some support for a three-dimensional structure. The results in all solutions, however, did not correspond to the expected distinction of self-deception from impression management. Further theoretical developments and improved measurement instruments are clearly required. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The original development of the psychological construct of social desirability essentially defined it as a unidimensional construct, but one without a major theoretical definition. The bulk of the work of Alan Edwards was to elaborate the empirical connections and domain of influence of social desirability. He defined social desirability as “the tendency of subjects to attribute to themselves in self-description, personality statements with socially desirable scale values and to reject those with socially undesirable scale values” (Edwards, 1957, p. vi). In the 50 years since his work contributed to the continuing debate over response styles, interest in social desirability has waxed and waned, but has never entirely disappeared. It continues to be regarded both as a nuisance variable to be controlled (Nederhof, 1985) and as a variable of theoretical importance in its

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-613-533-2879; fax: +1-613-533-2499.

E-mail address: holdenr@psyc.queensu.ca (R.R. Holden).

own right (Millham & Kellogg, 1980; Nevid, 1983). The highpoint in the debate over social desirability was the 1960s, with major works being published on the topic of response styles or sets (Block, 1965; Rorer, 1965). Although Rorer excluded social desirability from his review, Block's review was influential in reducing the strength of arguments in favor of social desirability in some circles. At about the same time, the work of Crowne and Marlowe (1960) led both to the publication of what is likely the most widely used measure of social desirability and to the argument that socially desirable responding was not a confounding stylistic construct, but one with more substantive meaning, which they termed the *need for approval* (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964).

Other aspects of social desirability were derived from the work of Hartshorne and May (1930). This work elaborated related ideas for the construct of social desirability through the incorporation of the concept of persons deliberately manipulating their public presentation in order to conceal faults or to exaggerate positive attributes. Because of the connotations of deliberate deception, this attribute has come to be seen as somewhat distinct from other aspects of social desirability. The work of Sackeim and Gur (1978) extended and helped to define the concepts of self-deception and other-deception or impression management. This tradition has made contributions to the extensive literature on malingering and the body of work on faking psychological tests (Rogers, 1997). Currently, this tradition is embodied in the work of Paulhus (Paulhus, 1984) and his Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1991), which uses these dimensions of self-deception and impression management. Paulhus sees the traditional concept of social desirability reflected in the construct of self-deception. In contrast, impression management is both conceptually and empirically distinct from self-deception, and is more closely related to conscious efforts to present a positive picture of oneself.

If the social desirability construct indeed has these characteristics of reflecting a basic attribute of personality in its own right beyond that of a pervasive confound to personality assessment by means of self-report instruments, then it should fit into a theoretically meaningful nomological network. Social desirability has been related to many psychological traits over the years when regarded primarily as a response style whose main effect is to weaken the interpretation of other traits. If, on the other hand, desirability is a meaningful trait in its own right, then an examination of various measures of social desirability and how they relate to conceptually related traits becomes of broader interest. Although there are many possible characteristics that may be linked in some way to social desirability, there are some traits that appear to be particularly germane. We selected some of these as being apt to illuminate aspects of social desirability, particularly as it relates to self-deception.

There are several areas from which relevant psychological traits might be drawn. Defence mechanisms provide one area that might be relevant to the interpretation of social desirability as self-deception. Whether the traditional psychoanalytic view of defence mechanisms as unconscious is true or not, their operation is to prevent unpleasant or threatening memories or thoughts from influencing present thinking. On the face of it, such processes would be influential in self-deception. The elements of self-deception that relate to a denial of negative attributes in oneself fit with definitions of the defense mechanism of *denial*, although this view of self-deception is not one shared by Paulhus. In contrast, the ascription of positive attributes to oneself can be seen as related to those stereotypic conventional social values that are implicit in the construct of *value orthodoxy*, with its emphasis on traditional and conventional social practices. At the same time, those positive attributes also are consistent with true psychological adjustment and high *self-esteem*.

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