Original article

A bidimensional scale of scholastic value: Social desirability and social utility, two dimensions of personological judgment[☆]

Une échelle bidimensionnelle de la valeur scolaire : désirabilité sociale et utilité sociale, deux dimensions du jugement personnologique

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Abstract

Three studies were conducted to construct and validate a bidimensional scale of social value adapted to the personological description of young pupils (social desirability and social utility). In a first study, 142 teachers-in-training were invited to describe pupils they knew, assigning each pupil three personality traits from a list of 150 traits. The results led us to retain 24 traits, composing the bidimensional scholastic desirability/scholastic utility scale. In a second study, this scale was tested on 113 teachers-in-training who were asked to describe a pupil they knew based on these two dimensions of social value. The results revealed that the scale was structured by two factors (scholastic desirability and scholastic utility) and that it could be reduced to eight specific traits. Finally, in a third study, the reduced version of the scale was tested on 33 Grade 3 teachers who were asked to describe each of their pupils using this scale ($n = 499$). Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that a bidimensional model fit better with the data than a unidimensional one or than another model which structured the traits on the basis of their positivity/negativity. On the whole, the results support the reliability and the internal validity of the bidimensional scale of scholastic value.
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Keywords: Social desirability; Social utility; Scholastic judgment; Personality traits; Social value of persons

Résumé

Trois études ont été conduites pour construire et valider une échelle bidimensionnelle de la valeur sociale adaptée à la description personnologique de jeunes élèves (désirabilité sociale versus utilité sociale). Dans une première étude, 142 enseignants stagiaires ont été invités à décrire des élèves qu'ils connaissaient à partir de trois adjectifs issus d'une liste de 150 traits de personnalité. Les résultats ont permis de retenir 24 traits composant l'échelle bidimensionnelle de désirabilité/utilité scolaires. Dans une deuxième étude, cette échelle a été testée auprès de 113 enseignants stagiaires qui devaient décrire un élève qu'ils connaissaient à partir des deux dimensions de la valeur scolaire. Les résultats indiquent que l'échelle s'organise en deux facteurs (la désirabilité scolaire et l'utilité scolaire) et qu'elle peut être réduite à huit traits spécifiques. Enfin dans une troisième et dernière étude, cette version réduite a été testée auprès de 33 enseignants de CE2 qui étaient invités à décrire chacun de leurs élèves ($n = 499$). Des analyses factorielles confirmatoires révèlent qu'un modèle bidimensionnel de la valeur s'ajuste mieux aux données qu'un modèle unidimensionnel ou qu'un modèle organisant les traits sur la base de leur valence positive ou négative. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats révèlent que l'échelle bidimensionnelle de la valeur scolaire dispose d'une fiabilité et d'une validité interne satisfaisantes.
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Mots clés : Connaissance évaluative ; Désirabilité sociale ; Utilité sociale ; Jugement scolaire ; Traits de personnalité ; Valeur sociale des personnes

For social psychologists, the notion of *value* usually refers to the positive or negative affects that an object, event, person or group of persons can have on an individual. In this sense, it focuses solely on the domains of motivations and affects (Jones and Gerard, 1967). Although this perspective, which is

highly centred on intra-individual processes, has been widely adopted to by psychologists, another more original and more social approach was put forward by Beauvois (1976, 1990, 1995; see also Beauvois and Dubois, 1992, 2000; Dubois and Beauvois, 2001, 2005). This alternate approach postulates that knowing an object, an event or a person is equivalent to evaluating this object, event or person, and refers to the social exchange prevalent in the activation of a particular mode of knowledge: evaluative knowledge. This knowledge should be distinguished from another mode of knowledge, descriptive knowledge, which depicts behaviours from a scientific perspective.

Based on the distinction between these two modes of knowledge, it is possible to distinguish that which pertains, in the domain of descriptive knowledge, to knowledge about the characteristics of the *objects of knowledge* (e.g., what the objects are) from that which pertains, in the domain of evaluative knowledge, to knowledge about the value of the *objects of evaluation* (e.g., what the objects are worth). In the latter case, this knowledge tells us what we can do with these objects or persons in the context of the social relationship that brings us together. What is distinctive about this form of knowledge, therefore, is that it is derived from a social relationship which involves creating values and develops through this social relationship in order to express the value of the objects or persons therein. According to Beauvois (1976, 1995, 2005), the psychological knowledge stemming from evaluative knowledge cannot be dissociated from the model of individual differences or from the use of *personology* for comparative and evaluative purposes. Evaluative knowledge can thus only come close to "*objectivity*" based on social consensus and does not represent a criterion of truth. From this deliberately social perspective, social evaluation practices constitute the basis of specific sociocognitive processes which produce the contents of evaluative knowledge and make it possible to attribute social value to persons. This value can include at least two essential components: social utility and social desirability (Beauvois, 1995, 2003; Beauvois and Dubois, 2008; Cambon, 2006a, 2006b; Cambon et al., 2006; Dubois, 2000; Dubois and Beauvois, 2005; Pansu and Beauvois, 2004). This article is in line with this theoretical approach and presents a measure (scale) of social value adapted to the personological description of young pupils which will be referred to here as scholastic value – and by extension, will include scholastic desirability and scholastic utility. Scholastic value is considered to be a particular case of social value in a specific evaluative context which, while having its own education and selection goals, plays a role in a more global political-economic (and evaluative) context – that of liberal Western societies.

1. Two components of the social value of persons: social desirability and social utility

In the field of psychology, when considering personality traits, the idea of distinguishing two domains is far from new. It goes back, at least, to the studies of Osgood (Osgood, 1962, 1969; Osgood et al., 1957) who developed a model depicting the connotative meaning of concepts. After first postulating a model in which most concepts were distributed across a three-factor semantic space (Evaluation, Potency and Activity), Osgood et al. (1957) proposed a bidimensional model composed of a first factor "Evaluation" (e.g., good vs. bad, kind vs. unkind) and a second factor "Dynamism" including the "Potency" and "Activity" factors (e.g., fast vs. slow, strong vs. weak). This bidimensional conception was subsequently formulated in different ways in the study of personology, with different names being given to the two dimensions: warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002; Judd et al., 2005), morality and competence (Wojciszke, 1997, 2005), other-profitability and self-profitability (Peeters, 1992, 2002), social desirability and intellectual desirability (Rosenberg et al., 1968) or social desirability and social utility (Beauvois, 1995, 2003; Dubois and Beauvois, 2001, 2005). With this last proposal, Beauvois (1995, 2005) opened the way for an original approach by viewing traits, not as constructs describing the actual characteristics of people but as judgment criteria that serve to communicate the value to be expected from a person in a given social environment (Beauvois, 1995; Beauvois and Dubois, 2000, 2009; Beauvois et al., 1999; Dubois, 2006; Pansu and Beauvois, 2004). Thus, he put forward this evaluative conception in opposition to the markedly more common conception, which pertains to "psychological realism" (Beauvois and Dépret, 2008). In Beauvois's approach, the two dimensions are not two aspects of the psychological nature of persons, or two types of psychological information, but rather two aspects of the social value attributed to persons in evaluation processes.

This article deals with this bidimensional conception of social value (for a recent synthesis, see Beauvois and Dubois, 2009). It distinguishes that which pertains to the *socially desirable* from that which pertains to the *socially useful*. *Social desirability,* rooted in the relational (or interpersonal) domain, can be defined as "the communicable knowledge of the more or less strong ability of a person (1) to give rise to positive affects (vs. negative affects) in other people, and (2) to act in a way that is consistent with (vs. goes against) their main motivations" (Beauvois and Dubois, 2008, p. 109) (our trans.). Thus, it implies a person's adopting strategies likely to cause him/herself to be liked or disliked by other people. *Social utility*, on the other hand, is grounded in social functioning and can be defined as "the communicable knowledge – within a particular social structure involving an order of positions with respect to social value – of the more or less strong ability of a person (1) to display the capacities associated with the most highly valued social positions and to not display characteristics interfering with the preceding and (2) to feel at ease in exercising these capacities" (Beauvois and Dubois, 2008, p. 109) (our trans.). Utility is thus understood here in a quasi-economic sense since it indicates the profit that a social organization can obtain from a given object or person.

Since Beauvois's (1995) first conceptualization, a whole set of studies have shown that social desirability judgments can be differentiated from social utility judgments (Cambon, 2002; Dubois, 2003; Dubois and Beauvois, 2005; Le Barbenchon et al., 2005). These studies are mostly based on a method involving "portraits" produced from lists of positive and negative traits, some of which are known (based on factor analyses, *ad hoc* judgment analyses, etc.) to be very saturated in social utility (smart, hard-working... vs. shy, vulnerable...) or, on the contrary,