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Social desirability and controllability in computerized and paper-and-pencil personality questionnaires

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to examine Steel's [Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 21 (1988) 261] self-affirmation theory, by checking the effects of different levels of manipulated control on participants' performance on personality tests. Specifically, we assessed the impact of participants' level of control (i.e. prior familiarity of questionnaire's items, choosing of test content) and anonymous or identified data collection on two different forms of socially desirable responses: impression management and self-deception [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 46 (1984) 598]. Second, we compared these effects on paper-and-pencil versus computerized testing conditions. In Study 1 ($N=91$) we showed that perceived control can be manipulated in computerized tests and that higher level of control is related to more positive attitudes towards the test and to lower levels of anxiety experienced during test taking. In Study 2 ($N=200$) we found a significant positive relationship between manipulated control and impression management. The hypothesis claiming a significant relationship between controllability and self-deception has not been corroborated. In addition, no differences were found between the paper-and-pencil and the computerized mode of administration on measures of perceived control, trust, candor, and social desirability. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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1. Introduction

The prevalent use of self-report measures of personality in psychological research has raised doubts regarding the accuracy of these measures in assessing personality

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attributes. Self-report measures may be so heavily influenced by response sets that they may not provide a valid picture of the respondents' psychological condition. One of the most common of these response sets that has raised concern among personality researchers is social desirability. This tendency to create a positive impression is manifested especially when respondents are highly motivated to achieve some goal, such as when applying for a job. In these situations, people may be strongly motivated to make a positive impression, and may alter their responses to deny negative elements of their personality and to claim favorable qualities.

There is still controversy in the literature on whether socially desirable responses to self-report personality tests are only contaminants or whether they may disclose substantive information regarding the respondents' personality. On the one hand, they could merely be reflecting respondents' deceptive accounts of themselves that may adversely affect the validity of the tests (Levin & Montag, 1987; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). However, these responses could possibly represent certain traits related to other scores of personality measures as well as to external criteria, and thus may serve as predictors in their own right (McCrae & Costa, 1983; Nicholson & Hogan, 1990; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996).

A significant contribution to this debate was introduced by Paulhus (1984). He distinguished between two categories of socially desirable responses: self-deception and impression management. Self-deception is an unconscious drive to perceive oneself in a favorable light, to reduce inconsistency, or to protect one's ego. Respondents, in this case, do not try to fabricate their responses, rather they answer the questions honestly, as they believe. However, this belief is a concealment derived from their positively biased view of themselves (or from lack of self-insight). Self-deception is mainly manifested in the tendency of respondents to deny their negative qualities.

In contrast, the impression management component of social desirability is a conscious attempt to impress others, and to present a false facade in order to pursue a personally meaningful goal. The respondents purposely try to present an honorable front by claiming positive qualities they know they do not possess, or by denying negative qualities they know they have. Paulhus (1984) developed a social desirability scale (Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding, BIDR) that measures these two aspects.

Respondents to self-report personality tests are required to expose their weaknesses to a stranger, who could possibly use the information to make critical decisions about their future. Socially desirable responses can be viewed, therefore, as a defensive means against this threat. Making a good impression on others is a common behavioral tactic in many interpersonal interactions, and it is assumed to be used more frequently in threatening or stressful social interaction situations, where the impression made may determine the likelihood of achieving personally significant goals.

Aside from the motivation to impress others, when responding to a self-report personality questionnaire one is directly exposed to his or her own faults. This is an unpleasant and threatening situation that may arouse ego-protective processes. Therefore, by denying one's faults and at the same time stressing positive

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