



The impact of social desirability bias on the EPQ-R item scores: An item response theory analysis

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Abstract

This study assessed the potential influence of social desirability (SD) response bias on the E, N, and P EPQ-R scores at the level of individual items. The study was based on a bidimensional IRT model which was fitted in a large sample. This allowed a detailed analysis of both the internal validities of the items and the content of the items which were most affected by SD. The E items were least affected by SD, but the direction of the impact depended on the type of item. As expected, in the N and P cases the relations obtained were consistently negative, but the strength of the SD impact also depended considerably on the type of item. The P scale was the most problematic in terms of convergent and discriminant validity. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The various Eysenck self-reported personality measures have been and are widely used in basic and applied personality research, selection, and clinical assessment. As expected, their popularity has generated a great deal of research into how they work and their psychometric properties. In

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general, the literature suggests that the scales of Eysenck's questionnaires, particularly Extraversion (E) and Neuroticism (N) have reasonably good psychometric properties, and that they compare favourably to similar Anglo-American measures in terms of reliability and validity (Angleitner, John, & Löhr, 1986). In spite of these positive results, however, they have also been criticised for several potential weaknesses. In particular, the present study deals with the criticism of potential contamination by social desirability (SD) bias.

The research that has been carried out on the relations between SD and the E, N and Psychoticism (P) scores is reviewed in the section below. The present study makes two main contributions to current research. First, most of the previous research focuses on the impact of SD on the total-scale scores (Furnham, 1986). In contrast, the present research deals with the impact of SD on individual item scores. The second contribution concerns the methods of analysis. Most previous research is purely descriptive, and is based on the zero-order correlation between the total-scale scores and the scores on an SD measure which is administered along with the questionnaire (Furnham, 1986; Paulhus, 1991). In contrast, the present research is model-based and uses a bidimensional item response theory (IRT) model, which is calibrated in a rather large sample. This approach allows for a more detailed scrutiny of the impact of SD on the individual item scores as well as for interpretations that go beyond those that have been obtained to date.

1.1. Theoretical framework and review of past research

In most previous studies SD is treated as a unitary construct. However, the present study considers Paulhus's distinction (1991) between two SD components: Self-deceptive positivity and Impression management. The first component is conceptualized as an honest but overly positive view of oneself, and can be considered more as a meaningful personality construct than as a response bias (Paulhus, 1991). The second component, Impression management, is more related to the traditional view of SD, and means that the respondent deliberately tailors his/her answers to create a more positive social image. The present research is particularly concerned with the potential impact of the component of Impression management on the item scores.

The existing SD measures can measure both components to a greater or lesser extent. However, according to Paulhus (1991) some measures tend to measure mainly one dimension or the other. In particular, the Lie scales in Eysenck's questionnaires tend to load primarily on the Impression management component (Paulhus, 1991). Typically the Lie items are statements about attitudes and practices that are socially undesirable but common, such as minor dishonesties, bad thoughts, weaknesses of character, etc. The popular Crowne and Marlowe SD scale is a less pure measure, but also tends to load more on the Impression management component (Paulhus, 1991).

Although this research is solely concerned with the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (EPQ-R), past studies based on several Eysenck questionnaires are reviewed. Some of these studies assessed the whole instrument, but many were only concerned with specific scales, particularly the most 'pathological' N and P. So the review will be carried out on a scale by scale basis. The review is mainly concerned with studies in which the measures were administered under neutral conditions in non-pathological samples.

At the total-scale score level, E scores are, in general, consistent. Correlations with E scores and SD measures are generally weak, and in many studies nonsignificant (Ferrando, Chico, & Lore-

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