



# Using Over-Claiming Technique to probe social desirability ratings of personality items: A validity examination



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## ABSTRACT

During personality inventory construction, researchers often exclude items that correlate strongly with a social desirability measure. The validity of this practice, however, may vary depending on the choice of social desirability measure and this concern has not been thoroughly evaluated. To redress this methodological gap, the current research examines the validity of using the Over-Claiming Technique (OCT; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003) for probing item social desirability. Results indicate that item desirability values gauged with the OCT showed weak evidence for validity; they correlated negatively, rather than positively, with judges' direct ratings of personality item desirability. Therefore, a recommendation is developed against the usage of the OCT in gauging item desirability. Possible reasons for the weak validity evidence and future research directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

A primary concern among researchers regarding the use of a self-report personality inventory is that respondents may distort their responses to Likert-type scales to appear more desirable (e.g., Griffith, Chmielowski, & Yoshita, 2007; Hough, 1998). It is widely believed that socially desirable response biases introduce systematic error variance and can distort scale scores. If a scale is imbued with items that contain highly desirable (or undesirable) item content, then scale scores may measure social desirability response biases rather than the construct of interest. Therefore, psychometricians often encourage researchers and practitioners to include a social desirability scale during personality assessment and discard items that correlate highly with the social desirability scale in their analysis (e.g., Goffin & Christiansen, 2003; Hinkin, 1995; Jackson, 1974; Stöber, 2001).

Despite the commonality of including a social desirability measure in personality assessment, the assumptions regarding the discarding of measurement items that correlate highly with social desirability scales have seldom been tested. In one of the few exceptions, Kam (2013) tested this underlying assumption using one of the most common social desirability measures: the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1984, 1991). It was found that when assessing the BIDR's self-deception scores, strong

support was established for using this scale in the detection of item desirability. The BIDR, however, has been heavily criticized for its inability to validate participant claims (e.g., Paulhus, 2002) and for containing potentially intrusive item content (e.g., Kam, 2013).

The Over-Claiming Technique (OCT; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003), designed to address the shortcomings of the BIDR, has received relatively favorable reviews (e.g., Burns & Christiansen, 2011). Although the OCT has been referred to as a “promising candidate” (Paulhus et al., 2003, p. 891) when compared with other contemporary measures of social desirability, the validity of the OCT in probing item social desirability has not been systematically and empirically assessed. We propose that in order to ensure the OCT's adequacy in gauging item desirability, the item desirability values probed by the OCT must show strong validity evidence and correlate positively with judges' direct ratings of item desirability. Hence, the current study investigates the potential of using the OCT's scores in detecting highly desirable and undesirable items.

### 1.1. Social desirability

Social desirability has been conceptualized as “the tendency of individuals to present themselves favorably with respect to current social norms and standards” (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987, p. 250). Meta-analytic summaries have estimated that under instructions to fake (compared with a no-instruction condition), the mean shift of distorted responses in assessment measures ranges from one-third to

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two-thirds of a standard deviation (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999). Even though researchers often include a social desirability measure in the scale construction and administration stages, the quest to find a valid indicator of self-enhancing responses when using questionnaires and other self-report methods has been disappointing (e.g., Paulhus, 1991, 2002). Nevertheless, the validity of excluding items that correlate strongly with social desirability measures may be different, based on the choice of social desirability method. Two of these methods are the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) and the Over-Claiming Technique (OCT).

### 1.1.1. Detecting item social desirability using the BIDR

The BIDR (Paulhus, 1984, 1991) contains two subscales: (1) self-deception and (2) impression management (Paulhus, 1991, 2002; the self-deception subscale is sometimes separated into self-deceptive enhancement and self-deceptive denial but this is not always done). Kam (2013) identified desirability values of personality items using the BIDR and examined whether these values were consistent with expert judgments. Strong evidence for convergent validity for this method was found, particularly with the use of the self-deception subscale (i.e., respondents' deception of themselves regarding their positive attributes as opposed to participants' conscious efforts to deceive others) from the BIDR (convergent validity coefficient = .91).

Critics, however, have questioned the validity of the BIDR in general (e.g., Kam, 2013; Paulhus, 2002). Respondents would score highly on the BIDR if they claimed that they engage in highly unlikely but socially approved behaviors (e.g., never lying or swearing). Yet, it is possible that their claims are honest and that they do possess these highly desirable attributes; after all, there is no straightforward method used to validate these responses. Furthermore, some respondents may find the BIDR intrusive in its item content (e.g., never reading sexy magazines). Therefore, Paulhus et al. (2003) developed the OCT, which involves objective criteria and contains no intrusive items.

### 1.1.2. Detecting item social desirability using the OCT

The concept of over-claiming has received only scant research attention when it comes to socially desirable responding prior to the systematic research program beginning with Paulhus et al. (2003). The OCT was developed to probe participants' socially desirable responding by measuring their familiarity with a wide variety of knowledge domains, such as historical names and events, books and poems, and social sciences (Paulhus et al., 2003). Eighty percent of the items are factual (e.g., photon) and the remaining 20% are fictitious foil items (e.g., cholarine). Based on the signal detection analysis framework (Swets, 1964), two scores can be calculated using the OCT: (1) accuracy (i.e., claims that factual items are familiar relative to the number of claims that foil items are familiar) and (2) bias (i.e., mean of claims that factual items are familiar and that foil items are familiar). Accuracy is evident when participants claim higher familiarity for factual as opposed to foil items. Bias, which measures participants' self-presentation tendency, is evident in participants who claim higher familiarity for all items regardless of whether they are factual or foil. A more self-enhancing individual is more likely to endorse both foil and factual items (Paulhus et al., 2003).

In redressing the criticisms levied against the BIDR, the OCT items have objective criteria based on real knowledge to determine factual versus foil items. Also, participants are unlikely to find questions regarding their familiarity with places or concepts intrusive. Although the reliability of factual and foil items in published studies usually range from adequate (.70) to high (.90 and above), the nomological network of findings regarding the OCT has been inconsistent. Although the validity of the accuracy index has received wide support and tends to correlate highly with measures

of verbal intelligence and school grades (Ackerman, 2000; Bertsch & Pesta, 2009; Paulhus & Harms, 2004), there is weaker nomological network evidence for the bias index. Moreover, research by Paulhus and Harms (2004) found that verbal intelligence is slightly correlated with bias indices in the Over-Claiming Technique, but the correlations were low ( $r_s =$  approximately .23). In contrast, verbal intelligence was moderately correlated with accuracy in identifying factual versus foil items ( $r_s = .51-.60$ ).

In favor of the bias index, Williams, Paulhus, and Nathanson (2002) observed that participants placed under severe time constraints showed lower bias scores than those not under such constraints. This finding is consistent with the assumption that those under time constraints are less likely to engage in conscious self-presentation bias. OCT bias scores have also been found to correlate weakly with subjective favorable self-perceptions ( $r_s = .29-.47$ ), self-claimed knowledge ( $r = .28$ ), and self-rated psychological adjustment ( $r_s = .14-.25$ ; Paulhus & Harms, 2004; Paulhus et al., 2003; Swami, Papanicolaou, & Furnham, 2011). Moreover, over-claiming on foil items has been found to be correlated with neural changes in the medial prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for controlling social self-monitoring and possibly social desirability response style and self-presentation bias (Amati, Oh, Kwan, Jordan, & Keenan, 2010).

Research has also found that the bias index on the OCT correlates modestly with self-esteem ( $r = .30$ ; Paulhus et al., 2003), presumably because those with overly positive self-perceptions are more likely to score highly on both the OCT and self-esteem. This relationship with self-esteem, however, has not been consistently replicated in subsequent empirical research. For example, Mesmer-Magnus, Viswesvaran, Deshpande, and Joseph (2006) found the correlation to be negative ( $r = -.16$ ). Similarly, the correlations found between the bias index and personality variables have been inconsistent. Some researchers (e.g., Swami et al., 2011; Tonkovic, Galic, & Jerneic, 2011) found that the bias index did not correlate highly with the Big Five personality variables ( $r_s = -.12-.22$ ). One potential explanation for the weak nomological network evidence for the bias index is that the OCT measures non-conscious, agentic self-presentation bias (unconscious egoistic bias; Paulhus, 2006; Paulhus et al., 2003). Based on this argument, people with higher bias index scores should be unlikely to exhibit a high level of self-serving tendencies on conscious, self-report scores. Instead, the bias index scores have been found to correlate with the most likely non-conscious aspect of self-enhancement (i.e., self-deception; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2006; Paulhus et al., 2003).

## 1.2. The current research

The current research examines the validity of using the OCT bias index to gauge item social desirability. The OCT is a popular measure because it is purported to redress some of the shortcomings of the BIDR and is often regarded as a measure of participants' natural tendencies to self-enhance. Intuitively, participants who are highly susceptible to socially desirable response styles should be likely to over-claim the extent of their familiar "knowledge" base. Therefore, the current study evaluates the use of the OCT in the detection of desirable and undesirable scale items.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. First wave of participants

We utilize two waves of participants. The first consisted of 276 introductory psychology students (144 male, 125 female, and 7 unidentified;  $M_{age} = 19.04$ ;  $SD_{age} = 1.59$ ) from a large public

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