Validity of the SDS-17 measure of social desirability in the American context

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Abstract

In Germany, Stober et al. (1999, 2001) presented evidence for the validity of the SDS-17, a new measure of social desirability bias. In the current investigation, three experiments ($n = 800$) assessed the SDS-17's validity in the US environment. In all conditions SDS-17 scores correlated highly with Marlowe–Crowne scores. In Study 1, a group administration of a paper and pencil booklet, SDS-17 scores of 327 college students were higher under Fake Good than Standard conditions, and both were higher than scores in the Honest condition. Study 2, an online survey of a demographically diverse adult sample ($n = 257$), showed that the increase in SDS-17 scores under Fake Good conditions occurs also in a Web survey and that SDS-17 scores were unrelated to one's demographic profile. Study 3, a group administration to 216 college students, revealed again that scores under Fake Good were higher than those under Standard administration and that SDS-17 scores correlated more highly with the Impression Management than with the Self-Deception subscales of the BIDR. The SDS-17 appeared valid for the US environment as a measure of socially desirable responding. The evidence, however, encourages its further assessment as an index of social desirability *bias* per se.
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1. Introduction

Behavioral scientists (e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Edwards, 1957) have long been concerned with *social desirability bias* (SDB), defined as *distorting* one's self-presentation to make a favorable impression upon others. It continues to be seen in various quarters, for example, consumer psychology (e.g., Fisher, 2000), as a source of contamination that should be controlled in self-report measures. It has been well established (e.g., Barger, 2002; Ellingson, Sackett, & Hough, 1999; Helmes & Holden, 2003), though, that SDB may be but a component of the more general multidimensional phenomenon of *socially desirable responding* (SDR), defined as *presenting* oneself as having characteristics appreciated by others. Beyond reflecting just SDB, SDR may represent the internalization of cultural values (Fisher & Katz, 2000), the expression of ongoing personality traits like emotional stability and conscientiousness (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996), or an overly favorable but honest self-evaluation devised to maintain self-esteem (Paulhus, 1984), among other factors.

Attempts to unravel the role of SDB face the problem that there is no consensually agreed-upon measure of SDB. One of the closest constructs is the Impression Management dimension of Paulhus's Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1984, 1994, 2002); this refers to the enhanced positivity of one's self-presentation resulting from situational demands or temporary inclinations to describe oneself to others in favorable terms. The conceptual basis for this measure, though, has been questioned (e.g., Helmes & Holden, 2003; Kroner & Weekes, 1996; Pauls & Crost, 2004). A new measure of SDB with demonstrated construct validity could be helpful in clarifying the nature and impacts of SDB.

In Germany, Stober (1999, 2001) proposed a new measure of social desirability bias. It was intended to overcome particular limitations of the most used index of SDR (e.g., Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002), the Marlowe–Crowne Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) and its shorter subscales (e.g., Barger, 2002). Initial validation studies (Stober, 1999, 2001) and applications (Stober & Wolfradt, 2001) were strongly supportive. However, as is true for psychological measures in general (e.g., Van de Vijver, 2003), the validity of SDR measures may not be directly generalizable across cultures (e.g., Johnson & Van de Vijver, 2003). The purpose of this series of studies was to assess the reliability and validity of the SDS-17 in the United States context.

1.1. SDS-17 development

As conceived by Stober (1999, 2001), "social desirability" is a readiness to give biased, distorted self-descriptions that portray oneself in a manner that can make a favorable impression on others. The SDS-17 is composed of 16 true–false items, e.g., "I will never live off other people," "I sometimes litter." It is a balanced index in that one's score is increased by a true response on nine items, and by a false response on seven items. Its statements were intended to have contemporary referents and phrasing. Stober observed that various items on the original and shortened forms of the Marlowe–Crowne (MC) are dated (e.g., "My table manners at home are as good as when I eat