



Probing item social desirability by correlating personality items with Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR): A validity examination

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ABSTRACT

Researchers often include a social desirability measure in personality measures, commonly the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR), and correlate it with personality items to probe for social desirability of the items. A strong correlation between BIDR scores and a personality item would indicate high item social desirability. The current research assesses the validity of this practice. Results showed that these correlations have high validity only when BIDR scores are calculated as a continuous variable rather than as dichotomized item scores. In addition, self-deception scores have higher validity for detecting item social desirability than do impression management scores. The current research supported the use of the self-deception scores, in particular, to detect highly desirable or undesirable items.

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1. Introduction

It has long been known that some people tend to exaggerate their positive attributes and minimize their negative attributes when completing a personality survey. These behaviors, known as social desirability responding, refer to respondents' tendency to report themselves in an overly positive manner, usually with respect to social norms (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Applied researchers often do not want personality scores being affected by participants' response bias, such as social desirability (Paunonen & LeBel, 2012). One common method used to identify highly desirable or undesirable items is to correlate item scores with social desirability ratings. Items that correlate strongly with social desirability are then eliminated (e.g., Personality Research Form; Jackson, 1974; see also Hinkin, 1995, for a similar recommendation).

This correlational method, however, is based on a central assumption that the social desirability measure has high validity in detecting the response style that it is supposed to. Recently, this assumption has been challenged. Some researchers have argued that social desirability scales inadequately measure social desirability responding (e.g., Holden, 2008; Uziel, 2010a). If a social desirability scale is invalid, it would be inappropriate to probe the social desirability of an item with the scale. Therefore, a major goal of the current research is to examine the validity of using one of the most common social desirability measures, namely the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR), to probe the social desirability of a personality item.

2. Questioning validity

Researchers have questioned the validity of social desirability scales as a measure of response styles. Some research examines the correlation between social desirability and self-ratings of personality and between social desirability and other ratings of personality. A highly cited meta-analytic article by Ones, Viswesvaran, and Reiss (1996) finds that social desirability correlates significantly with self-ratings of the following personality traits: emotional stability (.27), followed by conscientiousness (.15), agreeableness (.11) and extraversion (.04). Interestingly, social desirability correlated significantly, but much lower, with other-ratings of emotional stability (.14), conscientiousness (.10), and extraversion (.05). Moreover, social desirability did not correlate significantly with self-ratings or other-ratings of openness to experience. The fact that social desirability correlates with other-ratings of some personality facets implies that social desirability may be a substantive construct rather than a response style. Although discovering the true nature of social desirability is not a major focus of the current work, these results suggest that social desirability may reflect some aspects of true personality, rendering the use of social desirability scales to probe stylistic response styles inappropriate.

A number of studies have found that social desirability fails to moderate criterion-related validities of personality (see Paunonen & LeBel, 2012, for a brief review). In their meta-analytic study, Ones et al. (1996) partialled out the effect of social desirability from the correlation between personality and supervisory ratings of job performance, and showed that social desirability does not suppress this correlation. Indeed, the correlation between personality and job performance was the same before and after the partial

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correlation. Li and Bagger (2007) conducted another meta-analysis that separated the effect of the two distinct components of social desirability (namely impression management and self-deception) on criterion-related validity. Impression management (IM) was conceptualized as participants' conscious effort to deceive, whereas self-deception (SDE) was regarded as respondents' deception of themselves regarding their positive attributes (Paulhus, 1991). Li and Bagger (2007) also partialled out the effect of the two components on criterion-related validity of personality on job performance, and again found no evidence that either of the two components suppressed criterion-related validity.

Another method to test the validity of social desirability measures is through a faking manipulation (Holden, 2008). Participants were told to provide fake survey responses in the faking condition. Researchers predicted substantial differences in the means of social desirability scores between the faking condition and a neutral (i.e., control) condition. They found that in general, social desirability inventories are much more effective in detecting faking negative qualities than faking positive qualities. In addition, when social desirability such as IM was used as a moderator, it did not moderate the relationship between personality and a criterion. Holden (2008) concluded "social desirability responding scales... are imperfect proxies of faking" (p. 320).

Some researchers have argued that social desirability may represent a socially relevant construct rather than a trivial construct that represents only response styles. Holden and Fekken (1989) found, with factor analytic techniques, that social desirability measures capture some variance related to interpersonal sensitivity such as considerateness, social sensitivity, and tolerance of others. In a noteworthy conceptualization of IM, Uziel (2010a, 2010b) reframed IM as interpersonally-related self-control rather than as defensive self-presentation bias. With two empirical studies (Uziel, 2010b), the researcher was able to show that individuals with high scores in IM show better performance on creativity and self-control in a public social setting than in a private setting. Uziel thus argued that IM is related to adaptive social behaviors rather than a simple self-presentation bias. Individuals high in IM show higher adjustment and higher motivation to succeed in a social setting than do individuals low in IM.

Overall, these findings suggest that social desirability may not represent a construct that adequately captures what it is supposed to measure. This shortcoming is evidenced by a number of findings that I have reviewed: (i) social desirability correlates significantly even with observers' ratings of personality measures, (ii) social desirability failed to moderate criterion-related validity, (iii) social desirability is an imperfect proxy of faking; and (iv) social desirability captures some variance related to socially important qualities. If this is the case, then using a common social desirability measure like the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) to probe the social desirability of personality items will not be appropriate, because the scale may not be sensitive to respondents who distort their ratings.

3. The current research

The purpose of the current research is to evaluate the use of BIDR in probing the social desirability ratings of personality items. To recall, social desirability is often defined as "the tendency of individuals to present themselves favorably with respect to current social norms and standards" (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Social desirability ratings of personality items were derived from two methods in the current study. In the first method, BIDR scores were correlated with ratings of personality items. A strong positive correlation signifies a socially desirable item, and vice versa. This method is an *indirect* way to gauge item desirability, because participants did not directly rate an item's social desirability. Instead,

it is based on two assumptions: first, the BIDR is a valid measure of social desirability; and second, participants who present themselves over-favorably will distort ratings on both personality items and social desirability items. In the second method, I based on the definition of social desirability and asked judges to directly provide ratings of item social desirability, in reference to the society norms. The second method is a more *direct* way to obtain a social desirability index for an item. Converging results between the two methods will attest to the convergent validity for the first method (i.e., using BIDR to probe social desirability).

4. Methods

4.1. The first group of participants

The data came from two groups of respondents. The first group of respondents was 1254 introductory psychology students (380 males, 873 females, and one unidentified) who participated into a mass testing survey online for a course credit at a large Canadian university. The mean age of participants was 18.32 ($SD = 1.58$) for male and 18.41 ($SD = 2.51$) for female. The mass testing data were archive data that has been used by myself and other researchers in the psychology department for purposes unrelated to the present research. This group of participants completed the following measures.

4.1.1. Personality

Big Five personality measure (NEO domain) from International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) contains five personality factors, namely Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Goldberg et al., 2006). Each factor was measured with 10 items, half of which were reversed-keyed. This scale was selected because of its popularity in personality measurement.

4.1.2. Social desirability

Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) – Version 6 (Paulhus, 1991) is one of the most common measures of social desirability, and this scale measures two subcomponents – IM and SDE. Sample items are "I never take things that don't belong to me" for IM and "My first impression of people usually turn out to be right" for SDE. The original version has 40 items (20 items each for IM and SDE). Two items were excluded from the BIDR: "I never read sexy books or magazines," (an IM item) and "I have sometimes doubted my abilities as a lover" (a reverse-keyed SDE item). This is because the ethics board considered their content to be too invasive, and these items could potentially make participants feel uncomfortable. The exclusion of the 2 items (out of a total of 40) will likely not compromise the results. In this measure, half of the items assess IM and half assess SDE. I correlate the social desirability scores with the scores of each personality item.

Items from the two measures, IPIP Personality and BIDR, were scrambled, mixed together and presented to the participants using five-point Likert scales, 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The internal consistencies of the scales are shown in Table 1.

4.2. The second group of participants

The second, separate group of respondents directly rated the social desirability of the items from IPIP personality. Eight introductory psychology participants (five females and three males; $M_{age} = 18.50$; $SD_{age} = 0.53$) completed an online survey independently for a course credit. Participants were instructed to judge each item in reference to the standard of the society. Typical desirable and undesirable examples were provided at the beginning of

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