



## Social desirability, personality questionnaires, and the “better than average” effect

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### ABSTRACT

It is well established that respondents are much more likely to rate themselves highly on personality questionnaire items with high social desirability (SD) than on items with low SD. However, conflicting explanations have been offered for this phenomenon. In the present study, 286 participants were randomly assigned to four groups that rated 119 items from two well-known personality questionnaires. One group of participants rated themselves, a second group rated their family and friends, a third rated “people in general,” and a fourth rated the items’ SD. It was found that mean SD ratings of personality items were highly correlated with mean self-ratings and with mean ratings of family and friends for the same items (all  $r$ s > .800), but not with mean ratings of “people in general.” In other words, participants strongly tended to rate themselves, their family, and their friends as high on socially desirable qualities, but this tendency did not extend to ratings of people in general. These results support the conclusion that respondents’ personality ratings of themselves, their family and friends, but not of people in general, are influenced by the form of self-serving bias known as the “better than average effect.”

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### 1. Introduction

More than 55 years ago, Edwards (1953) discovered that the endorsement rate of a personality questionnaire item can be predicted with impressive accuracy ( $r > .80$ ) from the item’s social desirability (SD). That is, the more the item is seen as describing a socially desirable quality, the more likely respondents are to endorse the item as true of themselves. In the half century following Edwards’ study, this finding has been replicated numerous times in both the United States and other countries using a variety of personality questionnaires (e.g., Edwards, 1957, 1966; Edwards, Edwards, & Clark, 1988; Farley-Icard, 2007; Fioravanti, Gough, & Frere, 1981; Hanley, 1956; Iwawaki, Fukuhara, & Hidano, 1966; Smith, Smith, & Seymour, 1993).

It is now widely accepted among psychometricians that the SD and True of Self (TOS) ratings of most personality questionnaire items are highly correlated with each other (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). However, the explanation for this relationship remains unclear: Why do respondents tend to rate themselves more highly on personality items with high SD than on items with low SD?

#### 1.1. Competing explanations

Edwards himself (1953; see also Edwards, 1990) suggested two competing explanations. First, he proposed an apparently simple

explanation that may be called the “virtue is over-reported” hypothesis: that individuals tend to over-report their socially desirable characteristics on personality questionnaires, presenting themselves in an exaggeratedly positive light. Second, Edwards offered a somewhat less obvious explanation, proposing what may be called the “virtue is common” hypothesis: that common personality characteristics within a social group come to be regarded as socially desirable by the group’s members, and unusual characteristics as socially undesirable. In other words, the group members make an ethno-centric assumption that their personality characteristics are the “best” ones. Thus, frequently endorsed personality items can be expected to have high SD.

#### 1.2. Virtue is common

At first glance, Edwards’ “virtue is common” hypothesis might seem inconsistent with the types of individual and collective behavior that are regularly encountered in newspapers and history books: If common personality characteristics come to be regarded as virtuous, then virtue should be extremely widespread and the world should be populated with saints and heroes, which does not appear to be the case. Nevertheless, Edwards’ (1959, 1990) subsequent research convinced him that the “virtue is common” hypothesis provided the best explanation of the relationship between SD and TOS ratings. Edwards (1959) asked 168 college students each to select five other individuals whom they knew well and to rate them on a 128-item personality questionnaire. From these ratings he calculated the True-of-Others (TOO) value for each checklist item – that is, the proportion of individuals who were

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rated as having the personality characteristic described in the item. Edwards found that the items' TOO values, based on ratings of individuals by their acquaintances, were highly correlated with SD ( $r > .80$ ). Thus, socially desirable personality characteristics appeared to be more common than undesirable ones, whether individuals were rating themselves or other people. Based on these findings, Edwards concluded that desirable personality characteristics are genuinely much more common than undesirable ones. The findings of Edwards (1959) have been independently replicated at least twice. Smith et al. (1993) reported a correlation of .81 between TOO values and SD in a sample of Turkish college students, and Farley-Icard (2007) a correlation of .876 in a US undergraduate sample. Thus both replications found, as Edwards (1959) did, that the personality characteristics that individuals attribute to other people are socially desirable ones.

### 1.3. Virtue is over-reported

Although the studies just cited provide consistent support for Edwards' "virtue is common" hypothesis, research from a different area of psychology has provided strong support for his alternate "virtue is over-reported" hypothesis. An extensive psychological literature shows that people generally view themselves and their abilities in an overly positive light – a phenomenon known as the "better-than-average effect," which is considered a subtype of a more general "self-serving bias" (for reviews, see Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; see also Williams & Gilovich, 2008). For example, Alicke and Govorun (2005, p. 87) cite a classic study of approximately one million high school students in which "70% placed themselves above the median in leadership ability, 60% above the median in athletic ability, and 85% rated themselves above the median in their ability to get along well with others."

The psychometric findings of Edwards and his successors in support of the "virtue is common" hypothesis are difficult to reconcile with the findings on the better-than-average effect. However, until now there has been no attempt to integrate the findings from these two lines of research. When Edwards published on SD and questionnaire performance in the *American Psychologist* in the early 1990s (Edwards, 1990, 1991), he approached the issue within the framework of personality measurement and psychometrics and did not cite the then relatively young scientific literature on the better-than-average effect. Conversely, recent reviews on the better-than-average effect (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 2004) have not mentioned Edwards' psychometric work.

### 1.4. Proposed integration

The present study represented an attempt to integrate these two separate and apparently contradictory lines of research. We began with the observation that the better-than-average effect is a robust one, and that Edward's "virtue is over-reported" hypothesis is thus likely to be correct. But why have he and other researchers consistently found a very strong relationship between ratings of other people (TOO) and SD, a finding that cannot be explained by the better-than-average effect and appears to support the "virtue is common" hypothesis?

In response to this apparent paradox, we hypothesized that the three studies that examined the issue have found a strong relationship between TOO and SD because they all instructed respondents to rate the personality characteristics of individuals with whom the raters were likely to have close relationships. Specifically, Edwards (1959, p. 434) and Smith et al. (1993, p. 49) both asked respondents to rate "five individuals whose behavior they had observed frequently and whose personality characteristics they felt they knew quite well." Similarly, Farley-Icard (2007) asked respondents

to rate items according to whether "the trait is true of your friends, family, and other people you know."

As can be seen, these instructions encouraged, but did not absolutely require, that respondents rate their family and close friends. However, research indicates that when individuals describe the persons closest to them, they tend to over-report socially desirable characteristics and under-report socially undesirable ones (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; Martz et al., 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Pettigrew, 1979). Individuals tend to see the undesirable behaviors and characteristics of their friends and ingroups as caused by situational factors, but the desirable behaviors and characteristics as caused by dispositional factors. Thus there is a tendency to attribute overly rosy personality characteristics to the people closest to oneself – a tendency that may account for the high correlation of SD and TOO observed by Edwards (1959) and other researchers (Farley-Icard, 2007; Smith et al., 1993). We speculated, therefore, that a high correlation of SD and TOO might not be found if individuals were asked to rate people with whom they were not close.

In the present study, respondents were asked to respond to personality questionnaire items regarding themselves, their family and friends, and other people in general. We expected that, as in prior studies, personality ratings would be highly correlated with SD when respondents were asked to rate themselves or their families and friends. However, we predicted that personality ratings of other people in general would not be highly correlated with SD. That is, we predicted that socially undesirable behaviors would be reported approximately as often as socially undesirable ones when respondents described people to whom they were not close.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 286 undergraduate students from a university in the southwestern United States. The sample was 61% Mexican–American, 10% Mexican National, 14% other Hispanic or Latin ethnic group, 6% Anglo, 2% African American, 0.6% Asian American, and 6% other ethnic group or combination of ethnic groups. The group was 34% male and 66% female with a mean age of 20.6 years ( $SD = 11.02$ ). The ethnic, gender, and age characteristics of the sample were approximately representative of psychology students within the university. The study was reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board and approved as consistent with ethical standards.

### 2.2. Materials

Participants completed an informed consent form and demographic questionnaire. In addition, they filled out the NEO Five Factor Inventory Short Form (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and 59 randomly selected items from the Schedule for Nonadaptive and Adaptive Personality (SNAP; Clark, 1993).

#### 2.2.1. NEO-FFI

The NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a brief 60-item version of the widely used Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) a self-report questionnaire that assesses the "Big Five" personality factors: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Response options for each item range from 5 ("strongly agree") to 1 ("strongly disagree").

#### 2.2.2. SNAP

The Schedule for Nonadaptive and Adaptive Personality (SNAP; Clark, 1993) is a self-report measure that is used in both clinical

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