



## Psychometric properties of the Socially Desirable Response Set-5 among incarcerated male and female juvenile offenders



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### ABSTRACT

The main aim of the present study was to examine the psychometric properties of the Socially Desirable Response Set-5 (SDRS-5) among a forensic sample ( $N = 324$ ) of incarcerated male ( $n = 221$ ) and female ( $n = 103$ ) juvenile offenders. The Portuguese validation of the SDRS-5 demonstrated good psychometric properties, namely in terms of its factor structure, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity that overall justifies its use among this population. Findings are discussed in terms of the use of the SDRS-5 with male and female juvenile offenders.

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The self-report questionnaires are often criticized because participants have a tendency to respond in a way that presents a positive image of themselves. A self-report represents a combination of self-disclosure (factual communications about the self) and self-presentation (information about how one wishes to be regarded; Johnson, 1981). Participants may believe that the information they are providing is true (self-deception) or they can falsify it purposely (impression management) to simulate that they are in conformity with socially acceptable values and thus gain social approval or avoid being criticized (Bäckström & Björklund, 2013; van de Mortel, 2008). The validity of self-reports becomes compromised as the amount of self-presentation increases relative to self-disclosure.

Social desirability (SD) confounds research results by creating false relationships or obscuring relationships between variables. Nederhof (1985) estimates that SD could explain between 10% and 75% of participants' response variance. This bias is particularly relevant in personality inventories because it hinders the true measurement of trait-related contents included in the scales (Bäckström & Björklund, 2013). SD responding is in part a respondent and in part an item characteristic, since individuals vary in their tendency to give SD responses and questions differ in their susceptibility to elicit social desirable responses. To evaluate respondent's tendency to give SD responses, a number of instruments have been developed (e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1960;

Jacobson, Brown, & Ariza, 1983). SD scales can be used to detect, minimize, and control for SD responses and their aim is to improve the validity of questionnaire-based research.

The most enduring and popular of these scales is the 33-item Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSDS, Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Its items are relatively subtle indicators of socially desirable responding and they were designed to be free of contaminating effects of psychopathology. Items were chosen that reflected desirable behaviors with a low frequency of occurrence and undesirable behaviors with a high frequency of occurrence (Hays, Hayashi, & Stewart, 1989). Crowne and Marlowe (1960), using a sample of college students, obtained a reliability index of .88 using the Kuder–Richardson formula 20 and a test–retest correlation of .89.

The MCSDS has been found to be significantly correlated with a variety of measures of psychiatric and psychological health. Research consistently demonstrates a negative association between SD and symptoms of poor mental health, a finding that has been interpreted as an evidence of underreporting of undesirable qualities by persons with a high need for approval. Psychological correlates of the MCSDS include the following: emotional problems and depressive symptoms (Klassen, Hornstra, & Anderson, 1975); psychological distress (Ross & Mirowsky, 1984); past suicidal behavior, recent suicidal ideation, and likelihood of future suicide (Strosahl, Chiles, & Linehan, 1984). In terms of sociodemographic correlates of socially desirable responses, the majority of recent studies have not found significant differences in such responses among age groups, educational level or gender (e.g., Andrews & Meyer, 2003; Barger, 2002; Johnson, Fendrich, & Mackesy-Amiti, 2012; Pechorro, Vieira, Poiares, & Marôco, 2012).

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Because of the scale's length, several abbreviated forms of the MCSDS have been developed (Ballard, 1992; Hays et al., 1989; Reynolds, 1982; Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). The most widespread short version is known as a composite subscale or MCSDS-SF (Ballard, 1992), but Hays et al. (1989) developed a measure based on the MCSDS that was even shorter than the MCSDS-SF and nearly as reliable as longer measures, the five-item Socially Desirable Response Set (SDRS-5). The SDRS-5 represents a considerable reduction in respondent burden, being only 15% as long as the original Marlowe–Crowne scale. Completion of the SDRS-5 takes less than 1 min, on average, whereas the full 33-item scale requires about 5–6 min to complete. An advantage of the SDRS-5 relative to many existing measures is the subtle nature of the items. Alpha reliability for the SDRS-5 was .66 and .68 in two different samples and the test–retest reliability was .75, however the authors did not provide information about the factorial structure of the scale.

Due to the diversity of short forms developed from the MCSDS, inconsistent results regarding the psychometric properties of these short forms have been obtained, with some studies reporting good psychometric results (e.g., Andrews & Meyer, 2003; Loo & Thorpe, 2000) and others showing unsatisfactory results (e.g., Barger, 2002; Johnson et al., 2012). Therefore, additional studies concerning the psychometric traits of a promising short measure of socially desirable responding such as the SDRS-5 in a forensic context are necessary in order to guarantee the validity of personality research based on self-report measures, specifically research that deals with psychopathy evaluations, which have substantial legal and health-related implications. For example, a recent meta-analysis (Ray et al., 2013) found a small, yet significant, inverse relation between psychopathy and faking good/social desirability (i.e., the tendency to give overly positive self-descriptions; Paulhus, 1984), possibly indicating that faking good/social desirability lowered psychopathy scores (response bias).

The current study examines the psychometric properties of the SDRS-5 among a Portuguese sample of incarcerated male and female youthful offenders, including using confirmatory factor analysis to examine its factor structure. To our knowledge this is the first study using confirmatory factor analysis to analyze the factor structure of the SDRS-5. It was predicted that: 1) the presumed one-factor structure of the SDRS-5 would be replicated among the forensic samples of incarcerated male and female youths; 2) the SDRS-5 would show convergent validity with a social desirability measure, and discriminant validity with measures of empathy and psychopathic traits; and 3) no differences would be found among males and females regarding social desirability.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

The sample was recruited from inmates of the eight nation-wide juvenile detention centers managed by the Portuguese Ministry of Justice. A forensic sample of 324 participants ( $N = 324$ ; mean age = 16.64 years;  $SD = 1.36$ ; age range = 12–20 years), subdivided in male participants ( $n = 221$ ; mean age = 16.75 years;  $SD = 1.41$  years; age range = 12–20 years) and female participants ( $n = 103$ ; mean age = 16.41 years;  $SD = 1.19$  years; age range = 14–18 years), agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. They were all detained by the court's decision. Incarceration into juvenile detention centers is the hardest measure a court can decide. Seven of the detention centers are considered low to medium security, and one is considered maximum security (exclusively used for male youths tried as adults).

The participants were white Europeans (males: 54.3%; females: 59.2%), black Africans (males: 20.5%; females: 21.4%), mixed race (males: 18.6%; females: 10.7%), and members of other ethnic minorities (males: 6.8%; females: 8.7%). Most of the participants came from an urban background (males: 92.8%; females: 97.1%). Their criminal

onset (males: mean = 11.33 years,  $SD = 2.24$  years; females: mean = 12.50 years,  $SD = 1.56$  years) and first criminal problems with the law had been early in their lives (males: mean = 12.84 years,  $SD = 1.97$  years; females: mean = 13.27 years,  $SD = 1.55$  years), and most were detained before they were 16 years old (males: mean = 15.46 years,  $SD = 1.31$  years; females: mean = 15.90 years,  $SD = 1.04$  years). Most of the participants were convicted of having committed serious and/or violent crimes (e.g., homicide, robbery, assault).

### 1.2. Measures

The Socially Desirable Response Set-5 (SDRS-5; Hays et al., 1989) is a 5-item self-report measure designed to assess the degree to which self-report responses may be influenced by social desirability, i.e., the tendency to give socially desirable responses. The items were drawn from the Marlowe–Crowne (MC) form A (Reynolds, 1982), an 11-item short form measure developed from the 33-item Marlowe–Crowne Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Ten of the 11 items were used in correlation analyses, and the five items with the highest item-to-total correlations were selected for the SDRS-5 (Hays et al., 1989).

The Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale–Short Form (MCSDS-SF; Ballard, 1992) is a short, dichotomous response 13-item version of the original Marlowe–Crowne scale (MCSDS-SF; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). The MCSDS-SF is recognized as a composite subscale and is probably the most widely used of all the subscales that have been derived from the original MCSDS. A Portuguese validation of the MCSDS-SF, especially translated and adapted for use with adolescents, was used (Pechorro et al., 2012). The internal consistency for the present study, estimated by the Kuder–Richardson coefficient, was .61.

The Basic Empathy Scale (BES; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) is a 20-item self-report measure designed to assess empathy in youths. The BES was developed as a concise and coherent scale with the aim of measuring two distinct factors: affective empathy (11 items), and cognitive empathy (9 items). Each item is scored on a five-point ordinal scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Scores are calculated by reverse-scoring the positively worded items and then summing the items to obtain the total score and the factors scores. Higher scores indicate an increased presence of the associated characteristics. The Portuguese validation of the BES (Pechorro, Ray, Salas-Wright, Marôco, & Gonçalves, 2015) was used. The internal consistency for the current study, estimated by Cronbach's alpha, was .90.

The Antisocial Process Screening Device–Self-Report (APSD-SR; Frick & Hare, 2001; Muñoz & Frick, 2007) is a multidimensional 20-item measure designed to assess psychopathic traits in adolescents. It was modeled after the PCL-Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 2003). Each item is scored on a 3-point ordinal scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *sometimes*, and 2 = *often*). The total score, as well as each dimension score, is obtained by adding the respective items. Most studies (e.g., Frick, Barry, & Bodin, 2000) reported the presence of three main factors: callous–unemotional, narcissism, and impulsivity. Higher scores are indicative of an increased presence of psychopathic traits. The Portuguese validation of the APSD-SR (Pechorro, Hidalgo, Nunes, & Jimenez, in press; Pechorro, Marôco, Poaires, & Vieira, 2013) was used. The internal consistency for the current study, estimated by Cronbach's alpha, was .74.

The Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002) is a 50-item self-report measure designed to assess the core personality traits of the psychopathic personality constellation in youth aged 12 years old and up. Each item is scored on an ordinal 4-point Likert scale (ranging from *does not apply at all* to *applies very well*). The YPI consists of 10 subscales (with 5 items each) designed in line with a three-dimensional conceptualization of the psychopathy construct, namely: the grandiose–manipulative dimension, the callous–unemotional and the impulsive–irresponsible dimension. Higher scores reflect an increased presence of the characteristics associated, namely psychopathic traits. The Portuguese validation of the YPI was

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