



A general response style factor: Evidence from a multi-ethnic study in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In a cross-cultural study we addressed commonalities and differences of acquiescence, extremity, midpoint responding, and socially desirable responding that can be taken to constitute a single underlying response style. Participants were 548 Dutch nationals and 1116 first- and second-generation immigrants of Western and Non-Western origins in the Netherlands. Self-report measures of the four response styles, and personality traits were administered. Conventional, indirect measures of acquiescence, extremity, and midpoint responding were also calculated. A multigroup confirmatory factor analysis showed support for a general response style factor with positive loadings of extremity and socially desirable responding, and negative loadings of acquiescence and midpoint responding. The response style factor was strongly associated with personality (notably the “Big One” factor). Furthermore, acquiescence and impression management were related to agreeableness, extremity and midpoint responding to extraversion, and self-deceptive enhancement to neuroticism. These findings support a view that there is a general response style factor and that, in addition, each response style has some unique meaning. The ethnic groups differed significantly on response style use, with Non-Western immigrants showing higher acquiescence and midpoint responding than the other groups. The general response style factor can be interpreted as a communication filter that moderates self-reports. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

We are interested in response styles, defined as the systematic tendency to respond to questions on some basis other than the target construct (Paulhus, 1991). The most studied response styles include acquiescence (ARS: the tendency to agree regardless of item content), extremity (ERS: the tendency to overuse the end points of a scale), midpoint responding (MRS: the tendency to overuse the middle point of a scale), and socially desirable responding (SDR: the tendency to answer questions in a way that makes oneself look good). Although conceptually related, these four response styles are seldom studied simultaneously. Little is known about their similarities and differences. Moreover, the psychological meaning of response styles is not clear. Two interpretations can be found in the literature. The first, conventional perspective holds that response styles are nuisance factors and should be avoided as much as possible (Hui & Triandis, 1989). The alternative view interprets response styles as communication

styles, indicating that they have a substantive meaning and that they reflect culture-moderated communication filters (Smith, 2004). Such a filter could moderate or amplify responses, as usually found in East Asia and Latin America, respectively. Moreover, response styles are found to be closely related to personality traits (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh & Thomas, *in press*). Unlike previous investigations that have focused on specific response styles, we aim to integrate the four response styles and study their commonalities and differences, the cross-ethnic variations, and the associations with personality traits in a multicultural context.

1.1. The interrelatedness of response styles

The definitions and correlates of ARS, ERS, MRS, and SDR suggest that they are related. ERS, a tendency to be unequivocal with a self-promotion focus, can be viewed as the opposite of MRS, a tendency to be evasive with a prevention focus (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh & Thomas, *in press*). Smith and Fischer (2008) found that ARS was more salient among collectivists and ERS more among individualists. Negative associations between the two can be expected. SDR and ERS have in common that they represent desirable traits related to extraversion and conscientiousness (Austin, Deary, & Egan, 2006; Musek, 2007). We expect that there

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is a single factor underlying these four response styles, with positive loadings of ERS and SDR, and negative loadings of ARS and MRS (Hypothesis 1). We do not expect this first factor to explain all covariation among the indicators, as previous research already suggested that each indicator has some uniqueness (Smith, 2011).

1.2. Cross-ethnic variations of response styles

It has been argued that immigrant groups, compared with the majority group, are under higher pressure not to deviate much from the general norm (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2009). African Americans and Hispanics were found to exhibit higher ARS and ERS than European Americans (e.g., Marin, Gamba, & Marin, 1992). Baron-Epel, Kaplan, Weinstein, and Green (2010) reported higher ARS and ERS in Arabs than Jews in Israel. Morren, Gelissen, and Vermunt (2012) found that first-generation immigrants tended to use more ARS and ERS compared with second-generation immigrants. So, groups with a culture further away from the dominant group tend to show higher levels of ARS and ERS.

We argue that the differences in response style use among minority groups and the majority group may be a function of both perceived cultural distance and prevailing in-group values (Davis, Resnicow, & Couper, 2011). Comparing with the majority group, minority groups may tend to use more moderating communication strategies such as ARS and MRS in order to “fit in” the society. In addition, minority groups with a collectivistic background (typically from Non-Western cultures), who value loyalty to their cultural heritage and espouse allegiance to in-groups, may exhibit more moderating communication styles to demonstrate conformity to in-groups. In general, we expect more ARS and MRS use among minority groups with a larger cultural distance to the majority group and with a collectivistic orientation (Hypothesis 2).

1.3. Response styles and personality traits

There is abundant evidence on the associations of response styles and the Big Five personality traits. For example, ARS and SDR have been found to be related to agreeableness (e.g., Graziano & Tobin, 2002); ERS and reversed MRS are positively related to extraversion (e.g., Austin et al., 2006); and the self-deceptive enhancement dimension of SDR is negatively related to neuroticism (Pauls & Stemmler, 2003). Beyond these specific effects, the “Big One” personality (i.e., general factor of personality) was found to be strongly related to SDR (e.g., Just, 2011), causing controversies in the substantive interpretation of the “Big One” personality. Irwing (2013) critically reviewed the multi-method multi-trait models and cross-validations of the general factor model, supporting that the “Big One” personality is unlikely to be measurement artifact. We apply multiple measures to construct a general response style and expect a strong general effect of this style on the “Big One” factor. In addition, we expect specific associations of specific response styles with specific personality traits.

1.4. The present study

There is a tradition to operationalize response styles as proportions of specific score patterns on usually heterogeneous sets of items, such as the endorsement of either extreme of a Likert scale as ERS (Paulhus, 1991). However, given the evidence that response styles are stable across time and throughout questionnaires (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh & Thomas, in press), it should be possible to assess them directly; for example, one could ask self-reports about the importance of having a strong opinion as measure of ERS. The present study addresses both conventional, indirect and direct self-reports of response styles. We aim to integrate the four response styles into one general response style factor and examine

(1) their interrelatedness in direct and indirect modes; (2) cross-ethnic similarities and differences in response styles; and (3) their associations with personality traits.

We conducted the study in the Netherlands, where immigrants constitute 21% of the total population, from which 45% are of Western origins (e.g., European, North American), and 55% are of Non-Western origins (e.g., Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Antillean). Around 50% are first-generation and 50% are second-generation immigrants (Statistics-Netherlands, 2011). These immigrant groups have different levels of similarity to the Dutch society. Generally, Non-Western immigrants are less similar than Western immigrants to Dutch nationals; first-generation immigrants are less similar compared with second-generation immigrants (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2009).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In this paper use is made of immigrant panel data of the MESS (Measurement and Experimentation in the Social Sciences) project administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands). The immigrant panel is a representative sample of Dutch immigrants and majority group members who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. In the present study, participants were 1664 panel members from five ethnic groups: Dutch nationals, first- and second-generation immigrants of Western and Non-Western origins. The demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Indirect measures of ARS, ERS, and MRS

We extracted indirect measures of ARS, ERS, and MRS from data in the panel archive (<http://www.lissdata.nl/>). ARS was extracted from the scales of *Self-Esteem* and *Survey Attitude*, in total 16 items, both with half positively and half negatively worded items and with 7-point *disagree* to *agree* response options. The ARS score was operationalized as the proportion of the responses of 5 (*somewhat agree*) and 6 (*agree*). Responses of 7 (*strongly agree*) were excluded from the ARS computation due to the fact that such responses may also be triggered by ERS. We avoid the common problem that the correlation between ARS and ERS is overestimated, when the strongly agree responses are used to compute both ARS and ERS.

ERS was constructed from sets of 5-, 6-, and 7-point scales that used various response anchors (e.g., *not at all* to *very much so*, *extremely unimportant* to *extremely important*) other than *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Item contents were heterogeneous, including affects, autobiographical memory, emotion, health, personality and values. The proportion of the two end point responses (e.g., 1 and 5 in the 5-point scale) was taken as the ERS score. We only use the odd-numbered items from the item pool (109 in total) for the indirect ERS.

MRS was constructed from the even-numbered items using 5- and 7-point response scales (85 in total) in the same data pool as ERS. The proportion of the midpoint responses (e.g., 4 in the 7-point scale) was taken as the MRS score. The three indirect measures were constructed in this way to avoid (1) confounding of response styles with the substantive constructs of the data source, and (2) data dependency among the three response styles. The scores of ARS, ERS, and MRS ranged from 0 to 1, with a higher value indicating a higher level of the response style.

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