



# Acquiescence response styles: A multilevel model explaining individual-level and country-level differences



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## ABSTRACT

Acquiescence has been found to distort the psychometric quality of questionnaire data. Previous research has identified various determinants of acquiescence at both the individual and the country level. We aimed to synthesize the scattered body of knowledge by concurrently testing a multilevel model encompassing a set of presumed predictors of acquiescence. Based on a representative sample comprising almost 40,000 respondents from 20 European countries, we analyzed the effects of the country-level indicators economic wealth, corruption level, and collectivism and the individual-level indicators age, gender, educational attainment, and conservatism. Results revealed that 15% of the variance in acquiescence was due to country-level variations in corruption levels and collectivism. Differences among individuals within countries could be partially explained by conservatism and educational attainment.

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## 1. Introduction

Acquiescence—that is, the tendency to respond to descriptions of conceptually distinct attributes or attitudes with agreement/affirmation (agreement acquiescence) or disagreement/opposition (counter-acquiescence) regardless of their content—has been widely recognized as a threat to the validity of questionnaire-based data (e.g., Rammstedt, Goldberg, & Borg, 2010; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). Specifically, acquiescence can affect mean levels in item responding, thereby yielding misleading mean differences. For example, Van Vlimmeren, Moors, and Gelissen (2015) showed that country-level differences in trust in NATO differed substantially before and after controlling for acquiescence. Such effects of acquiescence on mean-level differences can occur if acquiescence differentially affects item responding across countries. Moreover, acquiescence may blur the intended factorial structure of a questionnaire by biasing item variances and covariances (Rammstedt et al., 2010). Finally, it has been shown that acquiescence can substantially bias the associations between personality items and behavioral criteria, thereby attenuating predictive validity (Danner, Aichholzer, & Rammstedt, 2015).

Given the threats that acquiescence poses to the validity of questionnaire-based data, the overall aim of the study reported here was to summarize and integrate the available body of knowledge with regard to central socio-demographic and social indicators into one single conceptual model encompassing the presumed determinants of acquiescence.

In what follows, we begin by summarizing the reported evidence on individual-level determinants and then address country-level predictors.

### 1.1. Individual-level predictors of acquiescent responding

Numerous studies have revealed that individuals differ systematically in their tendency to acquiesce. However, the empirical evidence is not univocal. While some studies have suggested that age is positively related to acquiescence (e.g., Meisenberg & Williams, 2008; Weijters, Geuens, & Schillewaert, 2010), others have failed to find evidence in support of this notion (e.g., Eid & Rauber, 2000). Findings with regard to possible effects of gender on acquiescent responding are even more heterogeneous. Some studies have suggested that women show, on average, a higher tendency toward acquiescent responding than men (e.g., Weijters et al., 2010), whereas others have found no gender effect (e.g., Marin, Gamba, & Marin, 1992). However, a broad consensus exists that educational attainment is a source of systematic differences in the tendency to acquiesce. Results of several studies have indicated that acquiescence appears to be more frequent among persons with a lower level of educational attainment (e.g., Narayan & Krosnick, 1996; Rammstedt et al., 2010; Rammstedt & Kemper, 2011). It has been suggested that persons with relatively low education have less clear self-concepts, smaller vocabularies, and less developed verbal comprehension skills than more highly educated persons. This may make them relatively uncertain when it comes to responding to questionnaire items, and may thus leave more room for the influence of systematic response biases (e.g., Goldberg, 1963). For some countries (e.g., Germany), this inverse effect of education on acquiescence has been widely replicated. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that this effect can be replicated in several other countries, albeit with some exceptions (Danner et al.,

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2015; Rammstedt, Kemper, & Borg, 2013). However, results do not indicate a simple generalizability of the inverse effect of education on acquiescence across all countries (Meisenberg & Williams, 2008; Rammstedt et al., 2013). Rather, countries appear to differ systematically in this regard. Moreover, Smith and Fischer (2008) were able to show that individual-level interdependence, used as a proxy for a collectivistic cultural orientation, was positively related to acquiescence. Taken together, the literature on individual-level determinants of acquiescence partially supports the role of age, gender, level of educational attainment, and degree of conservatism in acquiescent responding.

### 1.2. Country-level predictors of acquiescent responding

In addition to individual differences in acquiescent responding, recent research has identified cross-national differences in the tendency to acquiesce, as reflected by mean-level differences (e.g., Javeline, 1999; Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005). For example, Van Herk, Poortinga, and Verhallen (2004) investigated acquiescent response tendencies in six European countries. The results revealed that respondents in the Mediterranean countries scored higher on acquiescence than those in the Northwestern European countries. A worldwide investigation of acquiescence was conducted by Meisenberg and Williams (2008). Based on the World Value Survey conducted in 80 countries, they showed that response styles were most prevalent in less developed countries and that—at the country level—acquiescence could best be explained by the country's corruption level. The authors interpreted their findings by suggesting that people who live in corrupt societies tend to be subservient to powerful others—a tendency that carries over into their survey responses. A similar effect was reported by Smith (2004), suggesting that acquiescence is significantly less pronounced in certain European countries than in countries with lower levels of economic development such as Panama, Nigeria, or the Philippines.

In addition, there is a broad consensus that response styles are systematically related to cultural variables (Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 1994) and that they tend to be more pronounced in traditional cultures (Javeline, 1999). Specifically, several studies have suggested that the prevalence of acquiescence differs across countries and depends on cultural orientations. For example, a study by Johnson et al. (2005) indicated that collectivistic cultures were especially prone to acquiescent responding. The authors hypothesized that members of collectivistic nations experienced greater cultural pressure to acquiesce (Smith & Fischer, 2008). Support for this association was also provided by Harzing (2006), who investigated 26 countries from all major cultural clusters in the world. However, Grimm and Church (1999) could not confirm the effect of collectivism on acquiescence response style.

In sum, the results of cross-national comparative research suggest that there are systematic differences between countries with regard to the mean tendency to acquiesce and that these differences are a function of the country's social and economic situation and its cultural orientations—in particular, the degree to which collectivistic values are endorsed. Thus, we expect that individual differences at the country level can be explained by these variables.

### 1.3. Assessing acquiescent responding

Even though the nature of, and the reasons for, acquiescence are still unclear, different approaches are used to investigate a person's tendency toward acquiescence. Some studies—especially those that use only positively keyed items—use the percentage or ratio of items agreed with (e.g. Harzing, 2006). For this approach, too, different methods of including and weighting the responses are employed across studies. Instead of using only positively keyed items, recent studies (e.g. Johnson et al., 2005, Rammstedt & Kemper, 2011; Rammstedt & Farmer, 2013; Rammstedt et al., 2010, 2013; Soto et al., 2008) have used, whenever possible, pairs of positively and negatively coded items assessing the same construct (e.g., *Prefer to be with others* and *Like to be all by oneself*).

Persons with a high tendency toward acquiescence should have comparatively higher mean scores across these item pairs than those with a lower tendency to acquiesce. Even though some studies report only a weak consistency of acquiescence across different scales in general (e.g. Ferrando, Condon, & Chico, 2004), other studies report latent correlations  $r > 0.71$  between acquiescence indicators of such pairs of negatively and positively keyed items (Danner et al., 2015).

### 1.4. The present study

As summarized above, past research has yielded evidence of individual-level determinants (age, gender, and educational attainment) and country-level predictors (economic development, degree of collectivism, corruption level) of the tendency to acquiesce. However, previous studies have yielded inconsistent findings with regard to these characteristics. These inconsistencies may be due to the fact that most of these studies used highly selective samples that were not representative of the respective populations. In addition, to date no study has concurrently and systematically investigated these country-level and individual-level characteristics, taking into account the multilevel interrelationships between them.

The present study aimed to fill this gap by investigating potential determinants of acquiescence by simultaneously analyzing the different country-level and individual-level characteristics and by relying on data that were representative of the population in 20 European countries. Specifically, we investigated the impact on the tendency toward acquiescent responding of the country-level characteristics economic wealth (GDP), corruption level, and level of collectivism in combination with the individual characteristics age, gender, educational level, and degree of conservatism. Individual-level and country-level predictors can be combined in one multilevel model where respondents ( $i$ ) are nested within countries ( $j$ ), and differences in acquiescence at the respondent level are modeled as  $acq_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1(\text{age}) + \beta_2(\text{gender}) + \beta_3(\text{education}) + \beta_4(\text{conservatism}) + \epsilon_{ij}$ , and differences at the country level are modeled as  $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{wealth}) + \gamma_{02}(\text{corruption}) + \gamma_{03}(\text{collectivism}) + \nu_{0j}$ .

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Data source

The present analyses are based on data of the European Social Survey (ESS; [www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data)). The ESS is a cross-national survey that investigates changes in social structure, conditions, and attitudes in Europe. A key aim of the ESS is to implement high quality standards in its methodology. These high quality standards are especially relevant for the translation and adaptation of the questionnaires to guarantee comparability across the different countries. The survey has been conducted every two years since 2001.

To test our conceptual multilevel model, we selected Round 1 of the ESS (European Social Survey Round 1 Data, 2002) as a data source because it included several contrasting item pairs that had already been used in an earlier study as an indicator for acquiescence (Johnson, Mohler, Harkness, & Braun, 2010).

### 2.2. Samples

The 2002 round of the ESS collected data from 22 European countries. For the present analyses, only those countries for which all relevant indicators were available were included. Therefore, Italy and Luxembourg were excluded from our analyses because conservatism was not assessed in these countries. A list of the countries included in our analyses can be found in Table 1. In each country, a sample representative of the population aged 15 years and over was drawn. Design weights provided in the data set were applied to adjust for different selection probabilities. The number of interviews conducted ranged

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