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Do impression management and self-deception distort self-report measures with content of dynamic risk factors in offender samples? A meta-analytic review

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ABSTRACT

Self-report measures provide an important source of information in correctional/forensic settings, yet at the same time the validity of that information is often questioned because self-reports are thought to be highly vulnerable to self-presentation biases. Primary studies in offender samples have provided mixed results with regard to the impact of socially desirable responding on self-reports. The main aim of the current study was therefore to investigate—via a meta-analytic review of published studies—the association between the two dimensions of socially desirable responding, impression management and self-deceptive enhancement, and self-report measures with content of dynamic risk factors using the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) in offender samples. These self-report measures were significantly and negatively related with self-deception ($r = -0.120$, $p < 0.001$; $k = 170$ effect sizes) and impression management ($r = -0.158$, $p < 0.001$; $k = 157$ effect sizes), yet there was evidence of publication bias for the impression management effect with the trim and fill method indicating that the relation is probably even smaller ($r = -0.07$). The magnitude of the effect sizes was small. Moderation analyses suggested that type of dynamic risk factor (e.g., antisocial cognition versus antisocial personality), incentives, and publication year affected the relationship between impression management and self-report measures with content of dynamic risk factors, whereas sample size, setting (e.g., incarcerated, community), and publication year influenced the relation between self-deception and these self-report measures. The results indicate that the use of self-report measures to assess dynamic risk factors in correctional/forensic settings is not inevitably compromised by socially desirable responding, yet caution is warranted for some risk factors (antisocial personality traits), particularly when incentives are at play.

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1. Introduction

The validity of most psychological measures, including self-reports, is based on the key assumption that subjects are accurate and sincere in their answers (Rogers & Bender, 2003). Socially desirable responding, the tendency to give biased, distorted, and/or overly positive self-descriptions that portray oneself in a way that can make a favorable impression on others (Paulhus, 2002), poses a significant threat to the validity of these measures. Socially desirable responding has long been identified as a potential contaminate of self-report information, particularly in forensic settings, where there often is a strong motivation to present oneself in a positive way. Also, it has been suggested that individuals with antisocial personality disorder—a disorder that is overrepresented in forensic settings—are more likely than others to present themselves in a favorable light in the context of clinical or personality assessment (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A positive assessment might lead to favorable outcomes, such as special privileges, entry into a treatment program, parole, or early release (e.g., Benedict & Lanyon, 1992), making a formal assessment of socially desirable responding an important component of a clinical interview or evaluation.

The most common defense against socially desirable response distortion is the use of scales designed to assess the individual's tendency to give overly positive self-descriptions. Scores on these scales have been used to identify suspicious protocols that may be discarded (flagging possible invalid responding), to adjust scores on personality self-reports to account for a desirability response bias (statistical control), to examine convergent and/or divergent validity (score validation), and serve as dependent variables in controlled experiments designed to highlight situations most likely to elicit SDR (outcome assessment) (Vispoel & Kim, 2014; Vispoel & Tao, 2013; also Tan & Grace, 2008).[1]

Over the years, a number of instruments have been developed to detect socially desirable responding, including the Edwards (1957) Social Desirability Scale, the Eysenck Lie scale (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Lie Scale (Hathaway & McKinley, 1951), the Social Desirability Index (SDI; Hofstee, 2003), and the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability scale (MCSDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, 1964). In most of these measures, socially desirable responding was conceptualized as a *unitary* construct. Paulhus (1984, 1991), however, argued that measures of social desirability assess two relatively distinct components or factors which he termed impression management and self-deceptive enhancement. Impression management refers to the deliberate distortion of responses with the aim of making a favorable impression on others. This form of socially desirable responding is sometimes described as lying or faking. Self-deception, on the other hand, refers to the tendency of an "unconscious positive bias in item responses with the aim of protecting positive self-esteem" (Stöber et al., 2002, p. 371) and is closely related to narcissism; it is a deception that is consciously believed and so deeply rooted in a person's belief system that he or she can remain unaware of it and unaffected by situational demands. It is assumed (e.g., Vispoel & Tao, 2013) that impression management typically represents a more serious threat to the validity of questionnaire results than self-deceptive enhancement, because it can represent willful distortion of information.

The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1984, 1988) consists of 20 impression management items (e.g., "I always obey laws, even if I'm unlikely to get caught"), assessing deliberate attempts to impress the test result user, and 20 self-deception items ("Once I've made up my mind, other people can seldom change my opinion"), assessing unrealistic but honestly held positive self-descriptions. Probably because it is designed to tap impression management as well as self-deception, the BIDR is one of the most widely used instruments to detect socially desirable responding (Li & Bagger, 2007). The BIDR shows satisfactory internal consistency, adequate test–retest, and convergent and discriminant validity (Li & Bagger, 2006).

2. The current review

In forensic settings, self-report provides an important source of information yet at the same time the validity of that information has been doubted because of possible respondents engagement in socially desirable responding. In our view, it is especially important to understand whether (and if so, how) socially desirable responding affects self-report measures with content related to dynamic risk factors (i.e., self-reports intended to contribute to the identification of dynamic risk factors), because dynamic risk factors, also commonly known as criminogenic needs, are characteristics statistically related to recidivism that can (in principle) change and when changed, are expected to result in a decrease in recidivism (Andrews et al., 1990; Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Scholars generally agree that accurate identification of dynamic risk factors is essential as they present the best candidates for intervention. Given the importance of dynamic risk factors, it is essential that self-reports used to gather information on these factors are in fact reliable indicators. Primary studies in offender samples have provided mixed results regarding the impact of socially desirable responding on self-reports. Seifert, Boulas, Huss, and Scalora (2015) examined the degree to which institutionalized sex offenders exhibit response bias on two self-report measures of sexual fantasies and found significant negative correlations with the MCSDS ($r = -0.412$ and -0.316), whereas Keown, Gannon, and Ward (2010) did not find a significant correlation between the BIDR impression management scale and self-reported offense-supportive beliefs in a (small) sample of child sex offenders ($r = -0.076$). There are several reviews on the effect of the BIDR on criterion validity in healthy or clinical samples (Huang, 2013; Li & Bagger, 2006; Perinelli & Gremigni, 2016), but none that focus on the relation with self-report measures with content of dynamic risk factors of the BIDR scales in offender samples has been published. We therefore conducted a meta-analysis to examine the impact of BIDR impression management and self-deception on self-report measures used in order to contribute to the identification of dynamic risk factors in offenders. Since one of the difficulties in selecting dynamic risk factors is that many putatively dynamic risk factors have been proposed, we relied on meta-analytic studies to identify the dynamic risk factors that are correlated across

[1] Alternative approaches to self-reports in forensic assessment that try to also address these problems include implicit measures (e.g., Schmidt, Banse, & Imhoff, 2015), phallometry (e.g., Marshall & Fernandez, 2001), crime scene behavior (e.g., Lehmann, Goodwill, Hanson, & Dahle, 2014), startle-eyeblink response (e.g., Patrick, Bradley, & Lang, 1993), or neuroimaging (e.g., Meijer & Verschuere, 2017).