



Socially desirable responding suppresses the association between self-assessed intelligence and task-based intelligence

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Self-assessed intelligence
Emotional intelligence
Response bias hypothesis
Socially desirable responding

ABSTRACT

The response bias hypothesis specifies that the predictive capacity of a predictor should be enhanced by controlling for the effects of bias on the predictor variable, in particular, socially desirable responding (SDR) bias. To-date, the vast majority of the SDR research in the area, which is principally personality related, has failed to support the response bias hypothesis, as SDR suppressor effects have not been observed. Consequently, it has been contended that SDR is not a problem for self-report measurement, that SDR measures may themselves be indicators of trait variance, and that it was likely impossible to determine whether an elevated SDR score reflected a trait or response bias. However, in contrast to personality, intelligence is an area within which comparisons between subjective scores (self-reported) and objective scores (task-based) can be made. Consequently, the purpose of this investigation was to test the response bias hypothesis ($N = 253$) with self-report measures of intellectual and emotional intelligence (SRIQ and SREI) and task-based measures of intellectual and emotional intelligence (TBIQ and TBEI), in conjunction with a multi-dimensional measure of SDR (Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding; BIDR). The percentage of variance accounted for in TBIQ by SRIQ, and in TBEI by SREI, increased by 1% and 2.1%, respectively, when SDR was included in the model. The 1% to 2.1% increases in criterion (concurrent) validity were interpreted as practically significant, based on previously published simulation work. Finally, it was concluded that self-report measures may be non-negligibly influenced by individual differences in SDR, and that the BIDR may possess some validity as an indicator of individual differences in socially desirable responding.

1. Introduction

Researchers and practitioners alike continue to express concerns about the possibility that self-report measures may be affected adversely by socially desirable responding (SDR; Tracey, 2016). However, the empirical literature in the area is decidedly mixed: Some have argued that SDR is a problem to be considered seriously (e.g., Holden, 2007), while others have contended that it is probably not (e.g., Spector, 2006). Even more fundamentally, it has been contended that typical measures of SDR are likely invalid indicators of socially desirable responding, as responders may actually possess the socially attractive qualities implied by their high SDR scores (McCrae & Costa Jr, 1983). More recently, Paunonen and LeBel (2012) suggested that it was likely impossible to determine whether an elevated SDR score reflected a genuinely high level of the trait or an inflated score due to response bias.

Although Paunonen and LeBel's (2012) contention is generally justifiable, a well-established area within which comparisons between

subjective scores (self-reported) and objective scores (task-based) can be made is intelligence. To my knowledge, such research has not yet been conducted at the true score level, in conjunction with a multi-dimensional measure of SDR. Consequently, the primary purpose of this investigation was to estimate the true score associations between self-reported intelligence, task-based intelligence, and SDR. An observed increase in the association between self-reported intelligence and task-based intelligence, controlling for the effects of SDR on self-reported intelligence, was considered supportive of the contention that self-report measures may be genuinely influenced by SDR, and that the measurement of SDR may possess validity as an indicator of socially desirable responding, rather than represent substantive trait variance.

2. Socially desirable responding: problem or not?

Socially desirable responding (SDR) is the tendency to modulate responses to questions in order to look good and/or avoid looking bad (Edwards, 1957). Given that most self-report measures in psychology

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tend to be associated with a substantial amount of face validity (Burger, 2008), it is reasonable to expect that respondents would be able to discern the scoring direction of an item and respond in a manner to suit their goals (Cattell & Warburton, 1967). In both low-stakes and high-stakes psychological testing, long-standing concerns have been raised about the possibility that self-reported test scores may be contaminated by SDR (Paulhus, 1991). However, whether SDR is in fact a problem for self-report measurement remains a contested issue (Tracey, 2016).

A substantial amount of empirical research supports the notion that many self-report measures are meaningfully susceptible to SDR, at least when examined experimentally. Most experimental studies have employed a between-subjects design, such that they compare the self-report scores of job applicants (or participants instructed to try to get a job) against incumbents (or a control group). Based on a meta-analysis of Big Five dimensions, Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, and Smith (2006) reported that job applicants score as much as approximately half of a standard deviation more attractively than incumbents (e.g., Conscientiousness $d = 0.45$). Correspondingly, Alliger and Dwight (2000) reported a meta-analytic effect size closer to a full standard deviation for integrity tests. At least superficially, the experimental research should be regarded as fairly incontrovertible evidence that SDR is a problem for the measurement of dimensions via self-report, particularly those items associated with an appreciable degree of perceived social value. However, several arguments have been articulated to negate the implications of the experimental work, including the possibility that all testees engage in approximately the same amount of SDR, thus preserving the rank-order of test scores (Lautenschlager, 1994). However, perhaps the most compelling counter-argument is based on the results, or lack thereof, derived from the correlational SDR research.

The majority of the correlation research in the area is predicated upon the contention that a self-report measure's criterion-related validity should be enhanced by the inclusion of a measure of SDR to the model (e.g., personality as a predictor of job performance). In statistical terms, such an effect is known as suppression (Horst, 1941). Based on an extensive review of the personality literature, Ones, Viswesvaran, and Reiss (1996) created a meta-analytically derived true score correlation matrix between the Big Five dimensions of personality, SDR, and job performance. Ones et al. (1996) failed to find evidence to suggest that SDR operated as a suppressor with respect to the criterion-related validity for any of the Big Five dimensions. For example, the following zero-order true score correlations were reported by Ones et al. (1996): Conscientiousness and job performance, $r = 0.23$; Conscientiousness and SDR, $r = 0.20$; and SDR and job performance, $r = 0.01$. The corresponding semi-partial correlation between Conscientiousness and job performance, controlling for the effects SDR on Conscientiousness, was reported at $r = 0.23$, i.e., unchanged from the zero-order correlation. As similar effects were reported for the other Big Five dimensions, Ones et al. (1996) concluded that "...attempts to control for social desirability are unwarranted" (p. 669).

More recently, McGrath, Mitchell, Kim, and Hough (2010) conducted a meta-analysis based on studies that evaluated directly the response bias hypothesis via correlational techniques, rather than create a meta-analytically derived correlation matrix (as per Ones et al., 1996). McGrath et al. (2010) used the term 'response bias hypothesis' to represent the notion that the predictive capacity of a substantive predictor should be enhanced by the inclusion of a valid indicator of bias to the analysis (a suppressor effect). Based on the analysis of 41 previously published studies, McGrath et al. (2010) concluded that clear evidence for the response bias hypothesis remained elusive, as there was little evidence to suggest consistent suppressor effects across a number of criterion-validity categories.

For example, based on the 10 studies that included self-reported personality ratings, spouse/informant personality ratings, and SDR, McGrath et al. (2010) found that only two of the 10 studies reported larger semi-partial correlations than corresponding zero-order

correlations. McGrath et al. (2010) acknowledged the possibility that the absence of effects may have been the consequence of SDR measures with poor validity. It is noteworthy that many of the studies used the Marlowe-Crowne Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), or relatively under-researched validity scales unique to a particular inventory, as an indicator of SDR. However, one study included in the analysis reviewed above used a multi-dimensional measure of SDR – the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991). Furthermore, the one study that used the BIDR reported larger semi-partial correlations, in comparison to zero-order correlations (Lee & Klein, 2002), which may be regarded as supportive of the response bias hypothesis. Such an effect is consistent with the observation that the BIDR scale scores tend to be associated with greater validity as indicators of SDR, in comparison to other measures (e.g., Reid-Seiser & Fritzsche, 2001). Consequently, how SDR is measured may be considered an important consideration in the evaluation of the response bias hypothesis.

3. Socially desirable responding: measurement issues

Several measures of SDR have been published (Paulhus, 1991; Stöber, 2001; Vecchione, Alessandri, & Barbaranelli, 2013). The Ones et al. (1996) and McGrath et al. (2010) meta-analyses were composed primarily of studies that used various versions of the Marlowe-Crowne Scale. The Marlowe-Crowne Scale has been evaluated critically on a number of grounds, including a relative lack of a theoretical underpinning (Paulhus, 1991), low internal consistency reliability (Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002; Loo & Loewen, 2004), and an unclear factor structure (Barger, 2002; Leite & Beretvas, 2005). Additionally, the Marlowe-Crowne Scale was designed to measure a single dimension of SDR. By contrast, more sophisticated approaches to the measurement of SDR recognize its multi-dimensional nature (Bensch, Paulhus, Stankov, & Ziegler, 2017; Gignac, 2013). Consequently, researchers have been urged to consider the application of multidimensional measures of SDR in their research (Tracey, 2016).

A popular multidimensional approach to the measurement of SDR is the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991). The BIDR was designed to measure two relatively orthogonal dimensions of SDR: self-deceptive enhancement (SDE) and impression management (IM). The latent variable correlation between SDE and IM has been reported to range between $r \approx 0.15$ to 0.40 (Gignac, Karatamoglou, Wee, & Palacios, 2014; Paulhus, 1998), which suggests that total BIDR scores are insufficiently homogeneous to be interpreted. Paulhus (1984) found that the Marlowe-Crowne Scale related mostly to IM, although not exclusively so.

Theoretically, Paulhus and John (1998) proposed that SDE was consistent with an egoistic socially desirable responding mechanism. Paulhus (2002) described egoistic bias as the tendency to overestimate one's abilities and to give the impression of being someone who can accomplish great achievements that are beyond the reach of others. From a values perspective, SDE is closely aligned with agency – a meta-concept pertinent to the advancement of the self in social rankings (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008). Correspondingly, the SDE subscale within the BIDR measures the degree to which people report the possession of unrealistic and/or socially valued abilities (e.g., 'My first impressions of people usually turn out to be right', 'I never regret my decisions'; Paulhus, 1998). Empirically, SDE has been shown to correlate positively with over-claiming, narcissism and hindsight bias (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008). Additionally, those who score high on SDE tend to claim abilities that are less likely to be corroborated by external raters (Paulhus, 1998).

Paulhus and John (1998) proposed that IM, in contrast to SDE, was more consistent with a moralistic bias socially desirable responding mechanism. Paulhus (2002) described moralistic bias as the tendency to deny impulses that are moderately deviant socially and to claim inordinately consistent altruistic behaviours. From a values perspective, IM is considered more closely aligned with communion – a meta-

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