



Acquiescence and Dogmatism: Impact and relations across two different item formats



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ABSTRACT

The literature suggests that (a) responses to typical Dogmatism items are non-negligibly impacted by acquiescent responding, and (b) the dimension of Dogmatism is related to Acquiescence conceptualized as an individual-differences variable. In this article we first rigorously assessed these two basic hypotheses by using a recently developed confirmatory factor-analytic model. Second, we assessed the extent to which the impact and relations were consistent across a binary format and a graded format. Finally, the convergent validity of the Acquiescence scores across the two formats was assessed. In both datasets the Dogmatism items were found to be impacted by Acquiescence, and the relation Acquiescence-Dogmatism was strong in the expected direction. Furthermore, the Acquiescence scores were very consistent across the two different formats. The theoretical implications of the results and future lines of research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Acquiescence (ACQ), defined as the tendency to endorse or agree with an item regardless of its content, has been viewed in two opposite ways in personality theory: Firstly, as a nuisance variable that is mostly test dependent and which has no substantive interest (Ray, 1970); secondly, as an individual-differences variable (IDV) that can provide useful information about the respondent (Couch & Keniston, 1960; McGee, 1962). From this second viewpoint, ACQ might have the properties of a personality state or a trait. If the latter were to be the case, then ACQ measures would have a certain degree of internal consistency, stability over time, generalizability across situations and measurement instruments, and convergent validity with respect to other relevant measures (e.g. Ferrando, Condon, & Chico, 2004; McGee, 1962).

In recent decades a certain consensus seems to have been reached regarding the status of ACQ as a variable and its state/trait properties. Acquiescent responding (AR) is regarded as an item \times person process in which certain item characteristics interact with an enduring disposition of the respondent which minimally fulfils the trait requirements (Condon, Ferrando, & Demestre, 2006; Danner, Aichholzer, & Rammstedt, 2015). At the same time, however, ACQ scores usually show a high degree of specificity. So, the consensus is be that ACQ is an IDV that behaves like a ‘weak’ trait and which has both state-like

and trait-like properties (Danner et al., 2015; Ferrando et al., 2004). This variable is also generally thought of as dimensional, and modeled as a bipolar factor with a positive pole of tendency to agree and a negative pole of tendency to dissent (DiStefano, Morgan, & Motl, 2012).

The consensus above leaves many open questions of which this article focuses on two. The first question concerns the relation between ACQ and the content trait that a personality test intends to measure. More in detail, if both content and ACQ are viewed as dimensions and modeled as common factors, then a basic question is whether these factors are correlated (i.e. oblique factors) or not (i.e. orthogonal factors). The second question refers to the impact and consistency of AR across different item response formats. If ACQ is viewed as an IDV, then, a certain amount of across-format consistency is to be expected. However, in the interactive process referred to above, some item characteristics, mainly the item format, are likely to modulate the effects of ACQ on the item responses. This second question appears to have been addressed only partially in the literature, and previous research has only focused on the impact of ACQ on graded-response scales as a function of labeling, number of categories, and the use or not of a midpoint option (Moors, Kieruj, & Vermunt, 2014; Weijters, Cabooter, & Schillewaert, 2010).

Regarding the basic first question above, the factor-analytic approaches proposed to date have modeled ACQ and content as orthogonal factors (Ferrando, Lorenzo, & Chico, 2003; Savalei & Falk, 2014), which is expected to be appropriate for many personality traits. (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1983; Messick & Frederiksen, 1958). However, specific traits such as impulsivity, conscientiousness, conformity, external locus

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of control, open-mindedness, and authoritarianism have been theoretically related to ACQ in the personality literature (e.g. Couch & Keniston, 1960; DiStefano et al., 2012; Gudjonsson & Young, 2011). If this is the case, then, estimating the direction and strength of the relations between ACQ and theoretically related traits is of clear interest (McGee, 1962). This estimation is not feasible with the existing orthogonal FA models mentioned above. However, Ferrando, Morales-Vives, and Lorenzo-Seva (in press) have recently developed a testable oblique FA model that will serve as a basis for the present study.

1.1. Acquiescence and Dogmatism: A review of impact and relations

Rokeach developed his original Dogmatism scales as one-way measures in which all the items measured in the same direction of Dogmatism or closed-mindedness, and, in his opinion, were essentially unaffected by AR (e.g. Rokeach, 1967). The literature review, however, suggests that the impact of AR on Dogmatism scales is generally non-negligible (Lichtenstein, Quinn, & Hover, 1961; McGee, 1962; Peabody, 1966). With regards to the ACQ-Content relation, the bipolar dimension open-mindedness vs. Dogmatism is thought to be related to ACQ in the direction that the more dogmatic the respondent is, the more prone he/she is to engage in AR (Couch & Keniston, 1960; McGee, 1962; Messick & Frederiksen, 1958).

The two summaries above are mostly based on purely empirical results obtained from separate ACQ scales (see Ferrando et al., 2004). However, some theoretical explanations have also been offered. As far as the impact is concerned, authors such as Peabody (1966) and Ray (1979) noted that the typical item stems in Dogmatism scales are long and relatively complex statements which, in some cases, can also be somewhat ambiguous. It is these that appear to be the item characteristics that are most prone to eliciting AR (Condon et al., 2006). As for the ACQ-Dogmatism relation, Couch and Keniston (1960) believed that acquiescent respondents generally have high levels of diffuse anxiety and that they seek dependency on external figures (or rigid beliefs) for support. Messick and Frederiksen (1958), on the other hand, offered an alternative explanation: that acquiescent respondents tend to lack critical capacity so they stick to rigid beliefs. Overall, we note that the evidence for the two points raised above is not based on rigorous applications, and that the theoretical explanations that support them are only tentative. However, both are submitted to be plausible, and will be taken as the working hypotheses in the present study.

The assumption that Dogmatism scales are prone to be impacted by AR has prompted some authors to develop balanced measures in which some of the items measure in the direction of Dogmatism or closed-mindedness and the others measure in the direction of flexibility or open-mindedness (Altemeyer, 1996; Ray, 1970, 1974, 1979). A scale of this type has been used in the present study.

1.2. Objectives and predictions

This research has two groups of objectives. The objectives in the first group are to assess (a) the impact of ACQ on a Dogmatism measure, and (b) the latent correlation between the dimensions of ACQ and Dogmatism. Given the review above, our prediction regarding the first objective is as follows. The prime determinant of the responses to the Dogmatism items will be the dimension that is to be measured. However, ACQ will have a non-negligible impact on these responses, so an identifiable dimension of ACQ will emerge as a secondary factor. As for as objective (b), we expect the dimension of Dogmatism to be related to the ACQ dimension in the direction that high Dogmatism levels will be associated to greater proneness to engage in AR.

The second group of objectives has two parts. The first part aims to assess the extent to which results (a) and (b) above generalize across two different item response formats. The second part assesses the consistency of the ACQ scores across the two different formats. The two types of format we consider are (a) the binary format and (b) the graded

response format. While the graded format is possibly the most common in personality measurement, the binary format is still popular (Eysenck's scales are a good example) and has non-negligible advantages (e.g. McDonald, 1999). Because the binary format is fully labelled and has no neutral response option, we have used a graded format that is equivalent in these two aspects: a 6-point fully-labelled response format.

We turn now to the predictions in this second group of objectives. If ACQ is mostly related to the direction component of the response (i.e. agree vs. disagree; see Peabody, 1962), then (a) the impact of AR would be expected to be about the same in both formats, and (b) a high degree of across-format consistency would be expected for this dimension. Hypothesis (a) was put forward by Weijters et al. (2010) and the empirical findings appear to support it (Moors et al., 2014; Weijters et al., 2010). So, as a starting point we adopt the parsimonious direction-component hypothesis, and we expect the following results. First, the factor structures and inter-factor correlation will be essentially the same in both formats. Second, the ACQ scores will show a high degree of consistency across the two formats.

1.3. Conceptual description of the model

Ferrando et al. (2003) proposed a factor-analytic (FA) model for controlling and assessing AR in which ACQ was modeled as a second common factor. The model is intended to be used with a balanced scale, and can be identified by assuming that content and ACQ are orthogonal.

The present research uses a recent oblique extension of the model above (Ferrando et al., in press). Identification of this new model requires additional information, which can be obtained from a set of factor-pure item markers (e.g. Comrey & Lee, 1992) that help identify the ACQ factor. Overall, the model can be considered as a restricted (confirmatory) bidimensional FA model, in which the loadings of the markers on the content factor are set to zero, and which provides a directly interpretable solution.

For the model to function appropriately the subset of markers must be well chosen and the scale fully balanced. For the first requirement, suitable markers can be found in specific ACQ scales (Ferrando et al., 2004). As for the second, in a fully-balanced scale, half of the items measure in one direction of the content trait whereas the other half measure in the opposite direction. However, in order to avoid the problems associated with negatively-worded items (e.g. Barnette, 2000) ideally all the items should be directly or positively worded (Hofstee, ten Berge, & Hendriks, 1998). In the application of the model, half of the item scores are reverse-scored before the analysis is carried out, so all the item scores go in the same direction as the trait. With this setting, if the model is correct, all the loadings on the first factor (identified as the content factor) should be positive, and generally larger than those on the second factor. The second factor should be perfectly bipolar, and the negative loadings must coincide with the items that are reverse-scored (because in these items the tendency to agree implies a lower transformed score).

The model is applied in two stages. In the first stage, the items are calibrated by fitting the FA solution described and assessing its appropriateness. In the second stage (scoring) the calibration results (factor loading and inter-factor correlation) are taken as fixed and known, and are used for scoring individuals. If the model is correct, these scores are 'clean' measures of the corresponding dimension. So, the content scores are free of ACQ, and the ACQ scores are pure measures of this dimension. Finally, the reliability for both content and ACQ scores is also estimated. These estimates are relevant for two reasons. First, a minimum amount of reliability is a pre-requisite for any further validity assessment (in our case across-format consistency). Second, in a well-designed scale the reliability of the content scores should be substantially larger than that of the ACQ scores (e.g. Billiet & McClendon, 2000). Further technical details are provided below, and a full methodological discussion can be found in Ferrando et al. (in press).

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