



# Self-report based General Factor of Personality as socially-desirable responding, positive self-evaluation, and social-effectiveness



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## ABSTRACT

We tested the contribution of three potential sources of variance in self-reported based General Factor of Personality (GFP) scores, namely socially-desirable response bias, positive self-evaluation, and social-effectiveness. Measures of socially-desirable response bias, positive self-evaluation, along with a rater-based measure of social effectiveness were used to predict three separate self-report based GFPs and a composite GFP based upon the three measures. Regression analyses and relative weight analyses showed that each of the potential sources of variance played a role in the GFP, with social effectiveness often explaining the largest proportion of variance. The results add to our understanding of the GFP and suggest that a proper view is that variance in self-report GFPs has at least three interrelated facets.

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## 1. Introduction

Personality traits systematically covary (Figueredo, Vásquez, Brumbach, & Schneider, 2004; Loehlin & Horn, 2012; Rushton & Irwing, 2011; Musek, 2007; Van der Linden, Te Nijenhuis & Bakker, 2010), such that socially valued characteristics form a common factor frequently referred to as the General Factor of Personality or GFP. However, there are numerous opinions as to the source of the covariance. Recently Davies, Connelly, Ones, and Birkland (2015) reiterated the views of the nature of the GFP derived from self-report measures, fitting the views into three categories. The GFP may be (1) the result of a socially-desirable response bias, (2) a stable self-evaluative trait, or (3) it may represent something akin to social-effectiveness; the ability to maximize one's chances to reach social goals. Henceforth the three explanations for the GFP and related research results for each are described.

### 1.1. The GFP as a socially-desirable response bias

The view that the GFP arises from socially-desirable responding (i.e., responding to items based on the degree to which the answers are perceived as acceptable to others) is supported by several studies showing a positive association between socially-desirable responding

and the GFP (Bäckström, 2007; Dunkel, Kim, & Papini, 2012; Dunkel & Van der Linden, 2014; Erdle & Rushton, 2011; Rushton & Erdle, 2010). Nevertheless, there is also ample evidence that the GFP reflects more than just systematic measurement error. Scales designed to measure socially-desirable responding are known to also tap the other two possible sources the GFP listed by Davies et al. (2015) and He & Van de Vijver (2015). For example, an item from the commonly used Crowne and Marlowe (1960) measure of socially-desirable responding is, "I am always careful about my manner of dress." An affirmative answer to this item was initially thought to reflect socially-desirable responding because no one is *always* careful about his or her attire. However, an affirmative response could also be given by someone who honestly believes he or she is *always* careful (or may forget or discard the times they wear a ratty t-shirt and torn jeans or believe their ratty t-shirt and torn jeans are at the height of fashion). The source of this affirmative response seems to emanate from a positive self-evaluation. Likewise, an affirmative response could be given by someone who is honestly dapper and is almost *always* careful about his or her manner of dress. The source of this affirmative response may be more closely tied to social-effectiveness; knowing how to properly dress for the social occasion.

Attempting to uncover a GFP using ipsative type items or items devoid of socially-desirability has yielded mixed results (Bäckström, Björklund, & Larsson, 2009; Irwing, 2013). Nonetheless, controlling for socially-desirable responding appears to attenuate, but not eliminate Big Five trait intercorrelations (Rushton & Erdle, 2010). Additionally, controlling for socially-desirable responding does not eliminate the

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association between the GFP and criterion variables (e.g. Dunkel & Van der Linden, 2014; Rushton et al., 2009), and in some cases socially-desirable responding has even acted as a suppressor and controlling for it has actually increased the strength of the relationship between the GFP and criterion variables (e.g. Dunkel, Van der Linden, Beaver, & Woodley, 2014; Dunkel et al., 2012; Rushton et al., 2009).

### 1.2. The GFP as a self-evaluative trait

Of special note to Davies et al. (2015) is the separation of response bias into what Paulhus (1986) refers to as impression management (i.e., socially-desirable responding) and self-deceptive enhancement. Dissimilar to impression management which is more context dependent, self-deceptive enhancement may, along with self-esteem, reflect a stable self-evaluative trait which is the general tendency to perceive one's self positively. Thus, while individual differences in the desire to present one's self in a positive light may lead to correlations among socially valued personality traits, a GFP may also emerge in self-report measures merely due to a difference in individual's propensity to hold an inflated view of the self.

Indeed, it is quite clear that the GFP overlaps with self-esteem (Şimşek, 2012). For example, with a sample of well half a million on-line participants Erdle, Irwing, Rushton, and Park (2010) found that the GFP shared 67% of its variance with a single item measure of self-esteem. Yet, a subsequent reanalysis of the same data together with analyses of new data showed that when self-esteem was partialled out of the intercorrelations among the Big Five traits, factor analyses still resulted in the extraction of a substantial general factor (Erdle & Rushton, 2011). These findings indicate that while self-esteem is indeed associated with the GFP, it does not appear that self-esteem is the lone source of the GFP (for an alternative interpretation see Şimşek, 2012).

### 1.3. The GFP as social-effectiveness

The third view on the nature of the GFP is that it represents something akin to social-effectiveness; the ability to maximize one's chances of reaching social goals. Loehlin (2012), for example, found that personality traits reflecting an element of social-effectiveness had the strongest GFP loadings and it may have evolved to facilitate cooperation (Rushton, Bons, & Hur, 2008). A number of subsequent studies have lent support to the social-effectiveness hypothesis by showing an association between the GFP and a variety of indices of social-effectiveness such as emotional intelligence (Van der Linden, Tsaousis, & Petrides, 2012) and popularity and likeability (Van der Linden, 2011; Van der Linden, Scholte, Cillessen, Te Nijenhuis, & Segers, 2010). The most explicit test of the social-effectiveness hypothesis was conducted by Dunkel and Van der Linden (2014). They examined the relationship between GFPs derived from four separate personality measures (and a composite of the four measures) and multiple measures of both general

and specific social-effectiveness. General social-effectiveness, meaning context general, is measured by items such as, "I have no doubts about my social competence". Specific social-effectiveness was context specific and measured by the exact behaviors the participants would enact when feeling socially rejected (e.g., what is the likelihood that you would attempt to work on improving relationships with people you know?). As predicted, Dunkel and Van der Linden (2014) found strong positive relationships between the GFPs and the measures of social-effectiveness and also found that when multiple measures of socially-desirable response bias were controlled for the GFP-social-effectiveness relationships were only slightly attenuated. However, all of the described studies used self-report to measure not just the GFP, but social-effectiveness as well leaving the results open to explanations alternative to the social-effectiveness hypothesis (e.g., positive self-evaluation).

Recently, more sophisticated research methods have been employed. Van der Linden, Oostrom, Born, Van der Molen and Serlie (2014) had participant's enact behavioral responses to scripted social situations and found that the GFP was associated with higher levels of social knowledge and skills. Likewise, using a quasi-experimental method, Dunkel et al. (2014) found that high-GFP individuals were more likely to utilize the effective tit-for-tat decision strategy in the Prisoner's Dilemma. Important among these studies are ones that show that a GFP based upon a self-report is positively correlated with an interviewer's assessment of quality of the participant's personality (e.g., Dunkel, Nedelec, & Van der Linden, 2015; Van der Linden, Te Nijenhuis, Cremers, Van de Ven & Van der Heijden-Lek, 2014); that is individuals who have a higher GFP based upon self-reports are seen by independent raters as having a more attractive personality. Unlike studies based solely on self-report, rater judgments cannot be a function of socially-desirable response bias or positive self-evaluation.

### 1.4. Testing for sources of variance in the GFP

The purpose of the current investigation is to test the relative importance of the three possible sources of the GFP; namely socially-desirable responding, positive self-evaluation, and social-effectiveness. An important point mentioned by Davies et al. (2015) concerning the GFP is that the three positions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, truly teasing out or separating socially-desirable responding, positive self-evaluation, and social-effectiveness in self-report measures may not be possible (He & Van de Vijver, 2015). Nevertheless, our hypothesis is that a self-report based GFP is not explained by only one of the potential sources variance, but that socially-desirable responding, positive self-evaluation, and social-effectiveness each account for individual differences in the GFP. To test this, we used traditional correlational and hierarchical regression analyses, but also apply Relative Weight Analysis (RWA; Johnson, 2000; LeBreton & Tonidandel, 2008). RWA is a rather novel method that has been developed to calculate the unique

**Table 1**  
Bivariate correlations between study variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Social-effectiveness	–										
2. GFP <sub>NEO-FFI</sub>	.43***	–									
3. GFP <sub>CAQ</sub>	.54***	.57***	–								
4. GFP <sub>AdQ</sub>	.37***	.65***	.67***	–							
5. GFP <sub>Composite</sub>	.53***	.89***	.86***	.90***	–						
6. Sex	.20*	–.07	–.19	–.26*	–.19	–					
7. Ethnicity	.01	–.35***	–.18	–.13	–.26*	–.01	–				
8. Social-desirability	.20	.30***	.46***	.43***	.49***	–.05	–.09	–			
9. Impression management	.20	.18	.31***	.24*	.31***	.08	–.11	.62***	–		
10. Self-deception	.16	.48***	.40***	.48***	.52***	–.17	.05	.44***	.26*	–	
11. Self-esteem	.15	.44***	.43***	.44***	.50***	–.27**	–.07	.28**	.03	.50***	–

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

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