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Dishonest responding or true virtue? A behavioral test of impression management ☆,☆☆

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ABSTRACT

Impression management or social desirability scales have been used widely to assess and control for self-favoring biases in self-reports, both in low and high demand situations. Recently, however, substantive interpretations of impression management scores have surfaced, including the simple but troubling proposition that high scores in impression management scales actually reflect honesty rather than dishonest responding. In line with findings indicating that respondents answer to personality questionnaires rather accurately in typical low demand situations, we herein suggest that high impression management scores indeed reflect true virtues rather than dishonesty under such conditions. We found support for this idea by replicating previous correlations between impression management scores and virtue-related basic personality traits (including honesty–humility), and additionally provided conclusive behavioral evidence: We linked scores on an impression management scale administered under typical low demand condition to behavior in an incentivized, anonymous cheating task. The results clearly indicate that low scores in impression management are associated with more cheating. That is, high – and not low – scores on the impression management scale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding are aligned with more virtuous, honest behavior.

1. Introduction

On countless occasions, researchers across disciplines and practitioners from various applied fields rely on self-report questionnaires to assess peoples' traits, states, thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Whereas this practice is generally well-accepted, doubts remain regarding an unconditional interpretation of questionnaire-based test scores. Among other things, it has been argued that socially desirable responding affects self-reports in questionnaires, and, in turn, the validity of their interpretation (e.g. Ben-Porath, 2013; Paulhus, 1991). For instance, this implies that people who tend to present themselves in an overly positive light may receive higher test scores concerning positively connoted constructs (e.g. conscientiousness) – not only as compared to their "true" level, but also as compared to others who try to provide accurate self-descriptions and who actually have similar or even higher levels of the respective construct (e.g. more conscientiousness). Consequently, it has been suggested to assess and ultimately control for socially desirable responding, defined as "the tendency to give overly positive self-descriptions" (Paulhus, 2002, p. 50).

One early and straightforward approach has revolved around the use of scales intended to measure such response tendencies, i.e. self-favoring biases in self-reports. Among these scales, that have been (and are still sometimes) referred to as impression management, lie, or social desirability scales, the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR, later labeled Paulhus Deception Scales; Paulhus, 2002) has been used frequently. The key idea behind the BIDR is that there are two different types of socially desirable responding, captured by two subscales, named Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) and Impression Management (IM). Originally, SDE was understood to capture rather unconscious self-distortions, whereas IM was understood to capture more conscious self-distortions. However, several research findings have suggested that this distinction (unconscious vs. conscious) was premature as, for instance, SDE test scores were also susceptible

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to faking instructions and, in turn, cannot be considered a result of unconscious processes alone (e.g. Pauls & Crost, 2004). Also, there are substantial correlations between SDE and IM, respectively, and personality traits (e.g. Lönnqvist, Paunonen, Tuulio-Henriksson, Lönnqvist, & Verkasalo, 2007). In light of these and other findings, the interpretation of SDE and IM has been adapted over the years. For instance, Paulhus (2002) related SDE to an egoistic bias, particularly referring to "a self-deceptive tendency to exaggerate one's social and intellectual status" (p. 63), and IM to a moralistic bias, particularly referring to "a self-deceptive tendency to deny socially-deviant impulses and claim sanctimonious, "saint-like" attributes" (p. 64). However, despite this more nuanced view on SDE and IM suggesting that both can be considered as a tendency to exaggerate one's responses in a desirable manner, many researchers and practitioners have focused exclusively on IM (and similar questionnaires) when attempting to control for socially desirable responding.

In IM and similar measures, respondents self-report on items that refer either to presumably rare but socially desirable attributes (e.g. "I never swear.") or to (reverse coded) presumably frequent but socially undesirable attributes (e.g. "I sometimes litter."). The key idea behind these scales is that respondents motivated to present themselves in a better-than-justified light will agree to the former and disagree with the latter. In other words, it is assumed that respondents with higher scores presumably underclaim undesirable and overclaim desirable attributes. Correspondingly, higher scores have been suggested to reflect a more pronounced tendency towards socially desirable responding. In line with this idea, researchers and practitioners have treated high scores in IM and similar measures as problematic. In particular, it has been implied that once an individual has high scores in such measures, scores on any other self-report measure (e.g. assessing conscientiousness) may also be biased by socially desirable responding.

IM and similar measures have been used widely both in high demand situations (such as personnel selection, cf. Goffin & Christiansen, 2003) and low demand situations such as personality research. One prominent example of the latter is the development of new instruments for which it has been a common approach to exclude items that correlate positively with IM or a similar measure (cf. Kam, 2013). This approach is assumed to rid one's instrument of items that are strongly affected by socially desirable responding. In turn, after exclusion, the final instrument is presumed to be less susceptible for socially desirable responding overall. Clearly, this approach can have fundamental consequences for the final instrument. For example, Stokes and Cooper (2001) used this procedure and excluded items that correlated highly positively with IM when adjusting their instrument. After the exclusion of some items, they observed rather unexpected relations between one of their adjusted (post-exclusion) scales and external criteria. In the end, they even dropped this adjusted scale from the final inventory. In other words, the assumption that high scores in IM serve as a sufficiently pure measure of socially desirable responding has strongly affected the development of instruments in personality research and beyond (e.g. Ferris et al., 2005) – even to the extent of dropping an entire subscale.

There are several other examples of how research results and conclusions have been affected by IM or similar measures administered in low demand situations and most share the approach of interpreting high scores in these measures as reflecting socially desirable responding. Examples span across describing gender differences (e.g. Bernardi, 2006), exploring racial identity development (e.g. Abrams & Trusty, 2004), or testing differences between online vs. lab assessments (e.g. Risko, Quilty, & Oakman, 2006).

Importantly, however, one might question whether respondents actually engage in socially desirable responding in low demand situations, i.e. when there is no obvious reason to present oneself in an overly positive light. Indeed, research on basic personality traits in terms of the Big Five has found that in a high demand situation (applicant testing) respondents tend to ascribe themselves higher levels in socially desirable traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotionality stability) as compared to a low demand situation (Detrick, Chibnall, & Call, 2010). Also, findings by Pauls and Crost (2005) comprising both the Big Five traits and the BIDR scales suggested that respondents tend to adapt their self-descriptions to the assumed external demands when faking instructions are introduced – as compared to their response behavior in low demand situations. For example, respondents had higher IM scores when instructed to respond like an applicant whose hiring decision is based on the test results, as compared to their IM scores in a low demand situation. Stated simply, such research findings suggest that socially desirable responding in personality questionnaires occurs in high demand situations in particular, but not, at least not to the same degree, in anonymous, low demand situations. This raises the question what IM and similar questionnaires actually measure when administered in low demand situations.

A potential answer to the question what high scores in IM and similar measures reflect in low demand situations might be found in research suggesting that these measures do not (only) represent response styles, but also carry substantive trait-like information. The key idea behind this is that IM items can be taken literally, thus implying that people respond to IM items in exactly the same way as to any other personality-descriptive items. In this case, IM scales would thus reflect true virtue rather than dishonest responding – at least when strong incentives for impression management are absent (i.e. in low demand situations) – as higher scores are based on stronger agreement with socially desirable attributes. Clearly, this severely questions the practice of using high scores in IM to control for socially desirable responding.

Recently, two approaches have adopted the idea of ascribing substantive interpretations to IM and similar measures. Specifically, Uziel (2010) provided a seminal review of research on IM and similar measures, concluding that high IM scores do not represent social desirability, but interpersonally oriented self-control – a positively valenced trait. Uziel (2014) also showed that self- and peer-reports of IM correlate rather strongly with each other ($r = .44$), further contradicting the view that IM captures a mere response style. Most importantly, across two studies, IM correlated with self- and observer-rated trait self-control ($.26 \leqslant r \leqslant .53$), substantiating that "IM scales measure substantive content associated with self-control aimed at social adaptation" (Uziel, 2014, p. 200).

Another view was taken by De Vries, Zettler, and Hilbig (2014) who also concluded that high scores in IM do not represent a mere response bias, but rather carry trait information of a positive valence. But based on their overall impression of the items, De Vries et al. did not consider self-control as the core construct behind IM scores, but suggested that they are an expression of honesty in particular. For instance, an individual strongly agreeing with an item such as "I always obey laws, even if I'm unlikely to get caught." is assumed to be especially virtuous (rather than overclaiming). Correspondingly, De Vries et al. found that IM scores correlated positively with honesty–humility ($.32 \leqslant r \leqslant .62$) and, to a lesser degree, agreeableness ($.15 \leqslant r \leqslant .35$) and conscientiousness ($.19 \leqslant r \leqslant .35$) as conceptualized in HEXACO Model of Personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007).

Clearly, the approach of De Vries et al. (2014) can be aligned with the view by Uziel (2010, 2014). Both consider high IM scores to be an expression of positively valenced virtue-related traits. Moreover, the HEXACO factors honesty–humility, agreeableness, and conscientiousness all positively correlate with self-control (De Vries & Van Gelder, 2013). The only difference is that De