



Measurement issues associated with conditional reasoning tests: An examination of faking

Jennifer L. Bowler*, Mark C. Bowler, John G. Cope

Department of Psychology, East Carolina University, 104 Rawl, Greenville, NC 27858, USA

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ABSTRACT

Conditional reasoning (CR) is a new item format that measures personality by indirectly assessing reliance upon the cognitive biases associated with specific traits (James et al., 2005). Previous research suggests that, relative to self-report measures, responses on CR-based measures are more difficult to distort (LeBreton, Barksdale, Robin, & James, 2007). The issue of response distortion in the context of CR-based measures was evaluated in two studies. Study 1 (within-subjects) and Study 2 (between-subjects) both investigated whether responses on a CR-based test of addiction could be faked when indirect assessment was upheld. Results of both studies indicated that, unlike a self-report measure of a similar construct, the CR-based measure was unaffected by response distortion.

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1. Introduction

The propensity for individuals to provide socially desirable responses to personality tests is well-documented (e.g., van Hooft & Born, 2012; Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999). Unfortunately, this tendency complicates the pursuit of accurate personality assessment. The recently developed conditional reasoning (CR) item format bypasses this issue by focusing on the evaluation of implicit cognitions. Rather than assessing the explicit cognitions traditionally measured via self-report items (e.g., “I do more than what is expected of me”), CR-based items evaluate an individual’s reliance upon specific cognitive biases and justifications associated with particular latent motives via inductive reasoning problems (James, 1998; James, McIntyre, Glisson, Bowler, & Mitchell, 2004). In this respect CR-based tests are qualitatively different from traditional self-report measures; whereas self-report measures assess explicit (i.e., conscious) assertions, CR measures pinpoint implicit (i.e., unconscious) cognitions.

In addition to engendering strong criterion-related validities (James et al., 2005), the indirect nature of the CR methodology inhibits response distortion efforts. As noted by LeBreton et al. (2007), individuals appear to be unable to distort their responses when they view a CR-based assessment of aggression as a reasoning test rather than a personality measure. The authors concluded that this test was highly resistant to response distortion so long as

indirect measurement (i.e., presenting the measure as a reasoning test) was upheld. The present article extends LeBreton et al.’s (2007) findings by evaluating the fakability of an additional CR measure of addiction proneness. Specifically, we attempt to answer the following question: To what degree can respondents fake their scores when the purpose of assessment is withheld? The current article describes two novel studies that were specifically designed to address this question.

1.1. The use of conditional reasoning to measure implicit cognitions

All individuals harbor latent dispositional biases (e.g., assumptions, inferences, and implicit theories) that are relatively automatic and subliminal in nature (James & Mazerolle, 2002). The assessment of these implicit cognitions is complex and necessitates an indirect measurement approach (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). The CR methodology was specifically developed with this aim in mind (James et al., 2005) and is founded upon the premise of differential framing. Specifically, as individuals favor a particular set of behaviors in response to evocative environmental stimuli, they develop an elaborate set of rationalizations (termed justification mechanisms or JMs) to validate these preferred responses (James, 1998). Moreover, in the interest of ego-protection and positive self-regard, people wish to view their behaviors as rational and situationally appropriate (James & Mazerolle, 2002). The utilization of these JMs accomplishes this feat by reframing unusual behavior as a rational alternative that others would similarly choose (James et al., 2004). These implicit, unconscious biases shape reasoning processes so as to enhance the rational appeal of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 252 328 6474.

E-mail addresses: bowlerj@ecu.edu (J.L. Bowler), bowlerm@ecu.edu (M.C. Bowler), copej@ecu.edu (J.G. Cope).

one's desired behaviors, and consistent use of certain rationalizations is reflective of underlying personality characteristics.

Conditional reasoning measures present individuals with a set of inductive reasoning problems and respondents are asked to select the most logical explanation for each one. The degree to which each individual considers particular personality-driven responses to be logically appealing is contingent upon the strength of his or her latent motives (James, 1998). This methodology has proved effective in identifying aggressive individuals and their interpersonal impact by assessing these predominant reasoning strategies (e.g., Bowler, Woehr, Bowler, Wuensch, & McIntyre, 2011; Bowler, Woehr, Rentsch, & Bowler, 2010; James & LeBreton, 2010). Furthermore, the advent of CR-based measures has advanced the study of individual differences by allowing underlying proclivities to be objectively assessed, unencumbered by natural self-presentation tendencies and response distortion hindrances that typically impede and potentially invalidate personality measurement efforts (James, 1998). Whereas self-report measures ask individuals to assign meaning to a set of subjective descriptive statements, CR measures ask respondents to select the most logical answer to a series of reasoning problems. Idiosyncratic biases, evidenced by self-presentation tactics and the provision of socially desirable responses, are not introduced into the measurement process because respondents are unaware of the purpose of assessment. Thus, CR tests are less susceptible to the distortion often engendered by traditional self-report instruments (LeBreton et al., 2007).

1.2. Issues with self-report measures of personality

Individuals are naturally inclined to present themselves favorably to others (Goffin & Christiansen, 2003; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008) and most individuals can readily distort their responses on personality measures when motivated to do so (Bing, Whanger, Davison, & VanHook, 2004). Thus, even when one's self-perceptions are fairly accurate, few individuals willingly volunteer truly unflattering information to others. Moreover, explicit measures assume that individuals view themselves accurately, an assumption that is often fundamentally incorrect (Vazire & Carlson, 2011). Thus, both impression management and self-deception may engender response distortion on self-report measures (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996). Such response distortions – whether via impression management or self-deception – compromise test validity and subsequently undermine any diagnoses or predictions formed from resulting scores. Furthermore, these critically informative implicit cognitions are inaccessible via self-report techniques (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Thus, an alternate methodology appears to be warranted, particularly when assessing sensitive constructs such as addiction.

1.2.1. Justification mechanisms for addiction proneness

To circumvent this issue, recent research has identified a unique set of JMs utilized by addiction-prone individuals to rationalize their favored behaviors (Bowler, Bowler, & James, 2011). These implicit cognitions shape reasoning processes by influencing the way addiction-prone individuals perceive, analyze, and interpret situations and subsequently respond to these situations (James & Mazerolle, 2002). Thus, the JMs that addiction-prone individuals endorse qualitatively differ from those used by non-addiction-prone individuals. Addiction-prone individuals employ these JMs in order to enhance the logical appeal of addictive behaviors. Moreover, activation of these JMs creates a context that facilitates self-perceptions of rationality and appropriateness. Consequently, reliance upon a distinctive set of JMs may be used to differentiate addiction-prone individuals from the general population. Subsequently, these biases have been used to develop a CR-based measure that has been shown to relate to addictive behaviors such

as substance abuse (Bowler, Bowler, et al., 2011) and compulsive eating behavior (Bowler, Bowler, & Cope, 2012).

To date, five JMs for addiction proneness have been identified. First and foremost, the *evasion of discomfort bias* frames unpalatable situations as overwhelming or intolerable and justifies activities that distort reality and neutralize apprehension. For instance, an individual using this bias may rationalize substance use after a taxing day at work. Second, the *immediate gratification bias* validates the pursuit of transitory sources of enjoyment based on the pleasure they impart. An example of this is an individual who perpetually makes frivolous purchases despite accruing extreme financial debt. Third, the *negative self-bias* engenders perceptions of inadequacy and unworthiness that prompt individuals to yearn for validation and self-enhancement. This JM is illustrated by individuals who are excessively self-critical and wish to augment their self-perceptions. Fourth, the *self-revision bias* promotes a propensity for activities that transform one's self-perceptions. For example, some individuals justify excessive social drinking due to perceptions that they are more gregarious in the context of inebriation. Lastly, the *displacement of responsibility bias* allows addiction-prone individuals to view their behaviors as involuntary and to cast themselves as powerless to change. Use of this JM is particularly prevalent among individuals with a family history of addictive behavior. Taken together, addiction-prone individuals may utilize any combination of these JMs to justify addictive behavior. In contrast, non-addiction-prone individuals subscribe to a qualitatively different set of assumptions that is inconsistent with the operation of these JMs. For a more detailed description of the JMs for addiction proneness, see Bowler, Bowler, et al. (2011).

1.2.2. Conditional Reasoning Test of Addiction Proneness (CRT-AP)

Utilizing the CR methodology (cf. James & Mazerolle, 2002; James & McIntyre, 2000; James et al., 2004, 2005), the CRT-AP assesses implicit cognitions that justify addictive behavioral patterns (Bowler, Bowler, et al., 2011). CRT-AP items are evocative in nature, as each one is specifically designed to trigger the activation of JMs that rationalize addictive behavior. Each item includes a stem (inductive reasoning problem) followed by four possible response choices (one addiction-prone response, one non-addiction-prone response, and two illogical responses). The illogical responses are nonsensical, easily identified, and are rarely selected. Therefore, the selection of multiple illogical items is considered to be indicative of insincere assessment. Under the operation of cognitive biases, responses that appear rational to addiction-prone individuals appear irrational to non-addiction-prone individuals, whereas responses that appeal to non-addiction-prone individuals are typically regarded as invalid by addiction-prone individuals. Respondents are under the impression that they are solving a reasoning task based on critical intellectual skills; however, in actuality their responses reflect latent dispositional characteristics that cause them to frame information in distinctly different ways. In this respect, the measurement is indirect.

In short, research indicates that individuals can successfully fake their responses on a variety of self-report personality measures at will (e.g., Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999). However, the indirect nature of the CR format has demonstrated resilience to faking (LeBreton et al., 2007). The current article evaluates the fakability of two measures of addiction – a CR-based (implicit) measure and a self-report (explicit) measure – across two studies.

2. Study 1

Study 1 examined these fakability issues using a within-subjects design, in accordance with the procedures of LeBreton et al. (2007). Participants completed the CRT-AP and the Michigan

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