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Egoistic and moralistic bias in real-life inventory responses

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ABSTRACT

Response-faking tendencies can be divided into moralistic and egoistic bias according to the contents of the issue faked (Paulhus & John, 1998). Our hypothesis was that in a work-related selection context faking would occur on the egoistic sub-scales, as these are related to competence and talent, which are issues relevant in selection. To minimize the amount of conscious faking, half of 466 real-life applicants were warned about the presence of a socially desirable responding sub-scale in the Personality Research Form (PRF). Half of the respondents (control group) received standard instructions. Of all the PRF sub-scales, only the ones measuring either egoistic or moralistic traits were studied. The hypothesis was not supported: the warning affected not only some of the egoistic sub-scales, but also some of the moralistic sub-scales.

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1. Introduction

The assessment of personality in industrial/occupational psychology is widely based on inventories. However, inventories are vulnerable to socially desirable responding (Piedmont, McCrae, Riemann, & Angleitner, 2000). Socially desirable responding means the tendency to give answers that make the respondent look good (Paulhus, 1991). Socially desirable responding consists of two primary factors: the unconscious side of faking called Self-Deceptive Enhancement (an honest but overly positive self-presentation) and conscious distortion called Impression Management (self-presentation tailored to an audience) (Paulhus, 1984).

Individuals applying for a job, in particular, tend to present themselves in a positive light in personality measures (Barrick & Mount, 1996; Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006; Reid-Seiser & Fritzsche, 2001; Rosse, Stecher, Miller & Levin, 1998). As Hough, Eaton, Dunnette, Kamp, and McCloy (1990) point out, faking is one of the main arguments against the use of personality measures. All personality measures are fakable, some more than others (McFarland & Ryan, 2000), and all personality measures can be faked if the instructions especially encourage it (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999). The higher the socially desirable responding score the person has, the more elevated will his or her scores be on a personality measure (Marshall, de Fruyt, Rolland, & Bagby, 2005). To ensure the feasibility of inventories in assessment, it is essential to be aware of the mechanisms affecting

faking – especially in real-life selection contexts. The present study found how warning applicants about controlling for socially desirable responding affects inventory results, especially the egoistic and moralistic biases, in a real-life student selection situation.

Significant individual differences have been detected in the amount of socially desirable responding (Rosse et al., 1998; Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999). To control for these individual differences, many personality inventories contain sub-scales to measure socially desirable responding. Social desirability scales seem to capture faking very well (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998), and professionals use these scores as a sign of unusual response set or response distortion (Cronbach, 1990). In personnel selection it is common to adjust or correct inventory scores for faking, and 69% of experienced personality test users favour the use of faking corrections (Goffin & Christiansen, 2003). Some studies, however, suggest that socially desirable responding should not be controlled for at all, as doing this does not necessarily increase the validity of personality scales and, moreover, high scores on a socially desirable responding scale may actually be more a function of personality differences than the motivation to fake (e.g. Ellingson, Sackett, & Hough, 1999; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996; Pauls & Stemmler, 2003; Reid-Seiser & Fritzsche, 2001). On the other hand, some studies have found that faking among job applicants has significant effect on who is hired (Rosse et al., 1998) and that the criterion-related validity of a personality measure decreases when respondents have high test-taking motivation, as is the case in real-life job application contexts (Schmit & Ryan, 1992). Also Konstabel, Aavik, and Allik (2006) have found that inter-rater agreement on personality traits improves

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significantly when both self-ratings and peer-ratings are controlled for faking. However, Paulhus (1984) has pointed out that it is essential that the socially desirable responding controlled for in inventories is the conscious sub-type, i.e. Impression Management. Controlling for Self-Deceptive Enhancement will actually lower the predictive validity of a personality measure. This element of socially desirable responding is linked to content variance in a personality measure and should therefore not be controlled for (Paulhus, 1991).

Paulhus and John (1998) have proposed that both Impression Management and Self-Deception can be divided in two sub-types. Their taxonomy is a cross-tabulation of the degree of awareness (conscious vs. unconscious distortion) and content (agentic/egoistic vs. communal/moralistic content). This latter dimension, content, consists of two “meta-factors”, or constellations of values, motives and biases. They are called Alpha (egoistic) and Gamma (moralistic), and they can be distinguished in terms of personality content (Paulhus & John, 1998). Egoistic content is associated with issues such as being a strong and competent person, while moralistic content refers to traits related to being a nice person and a good citizen. Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management styles are associated with both of these factors. From the content perspective, conscious Impression Management can be divided into two different styles: Agency Management and Communion Management, whereas the unconscious side of faking is divided into Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Self-Deceptive Denial. Both Agency Management and Self-Deceptive Enhancement reflect an egoistic bias, a tendency to exaggerate one's social and intellectual status, while Communion Management and Self-Deceptive Denial reflect a moralistic bias, a tendency to deny socially-deviant impulses and claim sanctimonious, “saint-like” attributes (Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus & John, 1998).

As faking is, at least in part, conscious, the tendency to socially desirable responding should diminish when test-takers are warned that the inventory contains methods for detecting faking (Paulhus, 1991), such as a hidden sub-scale in a personality inventory measuring socially desirable responding. The fact that the warning is explicit should reduce at least the conscious element of faking – the aspect of faking which personnel professionals are the most interested in. McFarland (2003) found that warning respondents about the inclusion of a socially desirable responding scale reduced personality scale scores, Impression Management scores and self-reported faking. Kluger and Colella (1993) found also that warning reduces the amount of extreme item responses. Some findings suggest that the unconscious side of faking might also react to instructions (Paulhus, 2002; Pauls & Crost, 2004; Reid-Seiser & Fritzsche, 2001).

Faking does not take place evenly across a personality inventory (Butcher, Atlis, & Fang, 2000; Griffin, Hesketh, & Grayson, 2004). Job applicants do not distort their responses on every sub-scale, but are particularly prone to distort their responses on scales that they view as relevant to the job, in expectation that this will increase their chances of getting hired (Birkeland et al., 2006; Kluger & Colella, 1993; Rosse et al., 1998). In real-life settings, respondents tend to inflate their scores mostly on the Conscientiousness and Emotional stability scales (Birkeland et al., 2006).

Since the egoistic side of personality is linked to competence and ability, it can be considered to be job-related. As distortion occurs in particular in job-related sub-scales, in a work-related assessment a warning should logically affect egoistic sub-scales rather than moralistic. Therefore, we expected the warning to diminish scores on egoistic sub-scales, but to have no effect on the results of the moralistic sub-scales. The goal of the present study was to find out whether or not this was the case.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants in the study comprised 466 persons (334 males and 132 females), who were applying for admission to a school for fire and rescue personnel in Finland during 2004–2005. Each participant was applying for one of three alternative training programmes: rescuer (fire-fighter), emergency exchange personnel, or fire and rescue management. Only one female applied for the fire-fighter programme, and in order to avoid distortion in the groups, she was excluded from the data. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 53 with a median age of 25 years (SD 7.4).

2.2. Procedure

The entrance examination included physical and psychological tests. Participants had to pass the physical part of the test before proceeding to the psychological section. The psychological part of the entrance examination consisted of several inventories (including the Personality Research Form, PRF), ability tests, a group discussion exercise, and two interviews. After completing the whole examination, the participants (501) were asked to give their consent for their results to be used in scientific research. Consent was given by 93% of the participants (467).

Half of the participants (208) were given the standard instructions for filling in the PRF (control group). The other half (258) were given additional information: a warning about the presence of a socially desirable responding scale (Desirability) in PRF. They were instructed as follows: ‘This questionnaire gives us many kinds of information. It also shows the level of socially desirable responding, which means the tendency to enhance the impression we give about ourselves. It is therefore recommended that you answer as genuinely and honestly as possible’. While giving this information, the test administrator held the PRF questionnaire in her hand to stress that her message concerned this specific test.

The data were collected during three separate student selection procedures. New students are admitted twice a year, in the spring and in the autumn. Once information about the presence of a socially desirable responding scale has been given to one person or group, controlling its spreading becomes very difficult, especially in such a narrow segment of fire and rescue personnel in a small country. For this reason, the control group (who received no warning) was assembled first, in spring 2004, and the warned group was assembled in autumn 2004 and spring 2005. Although mixing the test and control groups in the same session is recommended for experimental purposes, it was deemed ethical to issue the same instructions to all the participants in a single intake, especially as it was not known how the new instructions would affect the results of the examination.

2.3. Measures

Personality variables. Personality variables were measured with the Finnish version of the Personality Research Form (PRF) (Niitamo, 1997), which is a translation of Jackson's PRF (Jackson, 1999). Only some of the sub-scales of the original PRF are included in the Finnish version (Dominance, Exhibition, Achievement, Succorance, Affiliation, Nurturance, Cognitive structure, Order, Impulsivity, Defence, Aggression, Harmavoidance, Sentience, Desirability), but the construction of the sub-scales is the same as Jackson's version. Each personality sub-scale is measured by 16 items that the respondent is instructed to mark as either True or False. Answers to each scale are tallied to form a raw score (range 0–16).

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