



Not too little, but not too much: The perceived desirability of responses to personality items[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Paradigms typically employed to investigate socially desirable responding in personality assessment implicitly assume linear relationships exist between trait level and desirability but recent research has called this assumption into question. In this study, participants rated the desirability of a hypothetical applicant to one of four jobs on the basis of which five-point Likert-type scale option he/she selected when responding to personality items. Results generally indicated that the most extreme option, on the desirable side of the response scale, was rated as most desirable, but perceived desirability asymptotes with the penultimate option. The middle (neutral) option, however, was consistently regarded as being much less desirable. The occupational context also significantly moderated the patterns of desirability ratings for many items.

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1. Introduction

One commonly cited concern around the use of self-report personality assessments in high-stakes settings, such as personnel selection, is their alleged susceptibility to socially desirable responding, or 'faking' (e.g. Morgeson et al., 2007; Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). Indeed, it is a well-established finding in the personnel selection literature that job applicants tend to score higher than non-applicants on scales measuring personality traits that are typically most predictive of organizationally-relevant criteria (Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006). Socially desirable responding in high-stakes settings has therefore often thought to emerge as a process whereby individuals first identify certain traits as being desirable in relation to the context at hand and, consequently, endorse items measuring these traits in their self-assessments. Some recent research (e.g. Borkenau, Zaltauskas, & Leising, 2009; Kuncel & Tellegen, 2009) suggests, however, that extreme levels of ostensibly 'desirable' personality traits may not be perceived as desirable, thus calling into question the assumption that socially desirable responding will be synonymous with extreme endorsement.

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Researchers have long been aware of the positive association between the perceived social desirability of a self-descriptive statement and the probability of it being endorsed by an individual (e.g. Edwards, 1953). Endorsement of an item by an individual is relatively straightforward when faced with a dichotomous response scale (e.g. True/False, Yes/No). Ordered polytomous response scales (e.g. Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither, Agree, Strongly Agree), which are used in many personality assessments, add an additional layer of complexity, however, in that individuals must also make decisions regarding the extent to which they endorse the item. Nonetheless, traditional statistical conceptualizations of the social desirability of personality items (e.g. those which treat desirability as an inherent property of an item; e.g. Edwards, 1953; Pauls & Crost, 2005), have implicitly assumed that there is a linear relationship between desirability and the response options. Thus, Strongly Agreeing with an item measuring a desirable trait is considered a more socially desirable response than merely Agreeing. By extension, an individual who wants to falsely portray a maximally socially desirable profile would presumably Strongly Agree with all items measuring desirable traits, and Strongly Disagree with all items measuring undesirable traits (Snell, Sydell, & Lueke, 1999).

Two recent papers by Borkenau et al. (2009) and Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) have suggested, however, that such a presumption may be unwarranted. In their social relations study, Borkenau et al. found evidence of non-linear relationships between trait levels and perceived social desirability. Borkenau et al. asked participants to directly indicate the level, on a set of six-point bipolar trait scales, which they felt was most desirable. It was generally the case for

the bipolar scales that one pole was considered distinctly more desirable than the other. Overwhelmingly, however, the *level* of the trait considered most desirable was that captured by the penultimate, and not the extreme, point on the response scale.

Whilst Borkenau et al.'s (2009) study provides evidence of curvilinear relationships between trait levels and desirability, one concern might be that such a pattern is perhaps peculiar to bipolar response scales (see Yorke, 2001 for a critical review of bipolar response scales). Nonetheless, using unipolar adjectival ratings, Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) also found evidence of non-linear relationships between trait level and perceived desirability. In Kuncel and Tellegen's first study, participants were asked to rate how desirable a person would be if he or she was extremely high (top 1%), above average (top 30%), average, below average (bottom 30%), or extremely low (bottom 1%) on each of a set of self-descriptive adjectives (e.g. talkative, conservative). Using these ratings, Kuncel and Tellegen plotted 'desirability functions' (i.e. mean desirability ratings plotted against the five trait levels) for each item. Whilst a large number of the adjectives did exhibit desirability functions that were roughly linear, these adjectives mainly captured the highly evaluative traits Positive and Negative Valence. Such traits are arguably expected to relate linearly to desirability (see also Borkenau et al., 2009). As it happens, however, items capturing these traits are rarely incorporated in questionnaires used in high-stakes selection contexts and therefore these results, while interesting, may not generalize to such settings. By contrast, almost all of the adjectives which assessed personality traits within the Big Five space yielded desirability functions with a turning point (inflection). For some, the turning point was at the center, producing an inverted U-shaped function; that is, it is considered most desirable to be average on that trait and less desirable to be at either extreme. For most adjectives, however, the turning point was at the above average position, indicating that high levels of the trait were more desirable, but only to a point; a result consistent with Borkenau et al.'s findings.

Borkenau et al. (2009) and Kuncel and Tellegen's (2009) studies both challenge the assumption that social desirability is linearly related to trait levels. Nonetheless, the adjectival rating method is relatively uncommon in personality questionnaires used in high-stakes settings when compared to the more frequently adopted full-statement rating method. Further, polytomous response scales often utilized in practice tend to comprise subjective anchors (e.g. Strongly Disagree, Strongly Agree), whereas the two studies above employed, respectively, bipolar scales and objective points on a normative continuum to define trait levels. The present study therefore employs a similar methodology to that of Kuncel and Tellegen's (2009) first study but it directly addresses the limitations described above by asking participants to consider points on a subjective Strongly Disagree–Strongly Agree Likert-type scale against full statement personality items. As a second extension of previous studies, participants in this study were also asked to consider the desirability of the different statements, against the context of an individual applying for either a 'general' job or for one of three specific jobs: fire fighter, nurse, or car salesperson. The aim here was to assess the impact of context on the relationship between trait levels and perceived desirability. Potential implications for these methodological innovations are articulated below.

It is not immediately clear what the impact of asking participants to rate the desirability of the Strongly Disagree–Strongly Agree response options will be. On the one hand, this response scale requires individuals to make their own subjective judgments about how the response anchors correspond to different levels of the traits being measured. So whilst it may be true that being more talkative, for example, than 99% of the population is seen as undesirable, it does not necessarily follow that selecting Strongly Agree

in response to a statement measuring talkativeness is akin to claiming to be more talkative than 99% of the population. Expressed another way, the extreme subjective response options (i.e. Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree) may not necessarily be seen to reflect truly extreme levels of the underlying traits. To the extent that this is true, the impact is likely to be that the declines in perceived desirability at the extreme trait levels observed by Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) will not emerge here. On the other hand, Kuncel and Tellegen's second study, in which participants under directed-faking conditions were asked to explain why they did not select the Strongly Agree option for an item, suggested that many people recognized that this option was extreme, often believing it to be undesirable. Furthermore, the response scale used by Borkenau et al. (2009) makes no reference to normative comparisons either, yet they still observed non-linear trait level-desirability relationships. With reasonable arguments on both sides, this element of the study was approached with an exploratory mindset.

Past research has suggested that individuals can adapt their impression management response strategy to suit the context (Furnham, 1990; Krahe, 1989; Mahar, Cologon, & Duck, 1995; Mahar et al., 2006; Pauls & Crost, 2005), indicating that they are sensitive to the varying contextual intricacies. We therefore hypothesize that the occupational context would impact upon the perceived desirability of different levels of some personality traits. To make specific predictions about exactly how the occupational context might impact on the perceived desirability of different trait levels, however, it is important to first consider the content captured by the personality model being explored, which in this case was the HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2001, 2007). One can imagine how the content captured by the HEXACO framework might be of particular relevance to the different occupational contexts under study, namely car salesperson, fire fighter, and nurse. First, being a successful car salesperson will require an incumbent to be comfortable approaching, talking to, and negotiating with strangers, hence higher levels of Extraversion seem likely to be perceived as being especially desirable in this context. Further, high levels of Honesty–Humility might also be regarded as undesirable for this role as being too sincere, modest and avoidant of overt signs of financial success may impinge on one's ability to quickly build credibility with customers. Second, being a successful fire fighter may be seen as requiring an incumbent to face potentially dangerous or traumatic situations whilst maintaining a calm demeanor. For this occupation, low levels of Emotionality as captured within HEXACO by content on fearfulness and anxiety would appear likely to be especially desirable traits for an aspiring fire fighter. Lastly, being a nurse is likely to require an incumbent to be highly sensitive to the needs and ails of others. Consequently, high levels of sentimentality, as captured within the Emotionality factor, and gentleness and patience, as captured within the Agreeableness factor may be perceived as being particularly desirable for aspiring nurses.

Whilst the context is predicted to moderate the perceived desirability of different levels of some personality traits, there are likely to be other personality traits that are of equal relevance or desirability to many jobs. For example, given its job-relevance, one would expect that the perceived desirability of different levels of Conscientiousness is likely to be fairly consistent across all of the occupational contexts considered in this study. Further, Openness is often thought of as the factor that gets manipulated the least in high-stakes situations (though see Birkeland et al., 2006; Griffin, Hesketh, & Grayson, 2004), presumably because it is not seen as being either desirable or undesirable. We therefore expected that the different levels of the Openness trait would be considered equally desirable across all contexts.

To summarize, the aim of this study is to examine the generalizability of the Borkenau et al. (2009) and Kuncel and Tellegen

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