



Impression managers: Nice guys or serious criminals? ☆

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ABSTRACT

High scores on measures of impression management are traditionally thought to signal dissimulation. Some have argued, however, that impression managers (IM) are as agreeable, self-controlled and interpersonally sensitive as they profess to be. We test this claim in a sample of recently incarcerated male offenders ($N = 11,370$) by relating attitudes and convictions to impression management scores. Data indicate that although offenders with high IM scores are less likely to project antisocial attitudes, they are more likely than those scoring low to be convicted of the most morally reprehensible crimes (homicide, sexual assault, pedophilia, and incest), and are more likely to receive longer sentences. The data suggest that high impression managers want to convey a virtuous persona, but their behavior indicates otherwise.

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1. Introduction

Research in personality and social psychology relies heavily on self-reports of feelings, thoughts, and behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007), despite evidence that self-reports often are inaccurate (e.g., John & Robins, 1994; Schwarz, 1999). One factor that contributes to the inaccuracy of self-report is the motivation to present a socially desirable image of one's self: many individuals are quick to claim desirable characteristics but reluctant to admit those that are undesirable (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). For more than 60 years, psychologists have attempted to index the extent to which the self-reports of individuals are biased by social desirability concerns. Since the first measures of social desirability were introduced, psychologists have debated what these instruments really measure (Block, 1965; Edwards, 1953; Meehl & Hathaway, 1946). One of the central debates in this regard concerns the extent to which social desirability measures are confounded with adjustment: people who score high on measures of social desirability tend to report being well-adjusted. This begs the question: Are those scoring high on social desirability exaggerating their adjustment or are these social desirability measures tapping into traits that are associated with adjustment?

Continuing this long-standing debate, a number of researchers have argued recently that current instruments used to assess impression management – an aspect of social desirability – lack

validity insofar as they may measure traits such as self-control, agreeableness, or interpersonal sensitivity (Mills & Kroner, 2006; Uziel, 2010a, 2010b). They suggest that those scoring high on impression management are as well behaved as they say they are: they tend to be nice people who get along well with others, practice great self-control, and are conventional. On the other hand, this may simply be the impression that they are trying to create. In this paper, we consider these two opposing positions in a sample of recently convicted offenders serving time in federal penitentiaries.

1.1. Assessing social desirability response bias

Concerned that early measures of social desirability may in fact be measuring adjustment, Crowne and Marlowe (1964) developed an instrument to assess social desirability with items addressing desirable but improbable behaviors which were not obviously tied to psychopathology or wellbeing (e.g., “I’m always willing to admit it when I make a mistake”, “My table manners at home are as good as when I eat in a restaurant”, and “I have never intensely disliked anyone”). On the assumption that few people always (never) engage in the desirable (undesirable) behavior described, high scores were taken as evidence of an individual's willingness to supplant accuracy for social approval.

Although widely used, the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (M–C SDS) has been criticized for its inability to distinguish between distinct social desirability biases. Factor analyses of the M–C SDS and other social desirability instruments consistently reveal more than one interpretable factor, suggesting that social desirability is not a unidimensional construct (e.g., Holden & Fekken, 1989; Kroner & Weekes, 1996; Paulhus, 1984; Wiggins,

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1964). Sackeim and Gur (1979) attempted to discern these two styles of self-presentation, labeling them *other-deception* (conscious falsehood or lying) and *self-deception* (true misperception of oneself as being better behaved than one actually is). Their self-deception scale consisted of items that were judged to be universally true but psychologically threatening (e.g., making a fool of oneself, enjoying one's bowel movements; Sackeim & Gur, 1979), whereas the other-deception questionnaire consisted of items from various other lie scales (e.g., MMPI Lie scale).

Building upon the work of Sackeim and Gur (1979), Paulhus (1984) developed and validated an instrument, known as the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR), distinguishing the two social desirability motivations. Rather than using the "self" and "other" distinction suggested by Sackeim and Gur (1979), Paulhus (1991) suggested that the self-deception aspect reflected exaggerated claims of positive cognitive attributes and behavior (i.e., ego enhancement), whereas the other-deception aspect reflected a deliberate effort to distort self-descriptions to create a favorable impression (i.e., impression management). In later work, Paulhus and John (1998) suggested that the first aspect (ego enhancement) reflects overconfidence in one's abilities (e.g., perceiving oneself to possess a superior intellect, ability or prowess) whereas the second aspect (impression management) reflects a desire to appear good in a moral sense, which includes being nice, conventional, and willing to get along with others. The gamut of social desirability measures has been characterized in terms of each measure's relative weighting on these two factors (Paulhus, 2002). For instance, the original MMPI Lie scale (Meehl & Hathaway, 1946) loads primarily on the impression management factor, whereas Edwards' (1957) SD scale loads primarily on the ego enhancement factor; the M-C SDS loads on both, but to a greater extent on the impression management factor (Paulhus, 1991).

Confirming the distinctiveness of the two aspects of social desirability, research suggests that they predict different attitudes and (self-reported) behaviors. For instance, research has shown that people scoring high on self-deceptive enhancement (SDE) tend to over-claim (i.e., claim familiarity with non-existent objects or topics; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003); they also score high on measures of narcissism, exaggerated adjustment, self-esteem, and adjustment measures (e.g., Lanyon & Carle, 2007; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Paulhus & Reid, 1991). On the other hand, people who score high on measures of impression management report fewer behaviors that might be regarded as deviant (e.g., nose-picking, nail-biting, eating junk food; Joubert, 1995) or sensitive (e.g., alcohol use, sexual activity; Davis, Thake, & Vilhena, 2010; Meston, Heiman, Trapnell & Paulhus, 1998; Richards & Pai, 2003) and score high on measures of exaggerated virtue (Lanyon & Carle, 2007). Instructions to make a good impression (as if in a job interview) have a significant effect on impression management scores, but not on self-deceptive enhancement scores (Paulhus, Bruce, & Trapnell, 1995). In sum, the BIDR's Impression Management and Self-deceptive Enhancement scales have accumulated considerable empirical support as measures of distinct aspects of social desirability.

1.2. Impression management: substance or style?

Although many researchers accept that data from individuals scoring high on impression management should be regarded with skepticism, this view is not unchallenged. Some researchers have suggested that scores on measures of impression management do not reflect bias, but rather should be interpreted at face-value – those scoring high on these measures may really be as well-behaved as they claim (e.g., Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, & Gallagher, 1991; Lane, Merikangas, Schwartz, Huang, & Prusoff, 1990; Mills & Kroner, 2006; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996). Uziel (2010b),

for instance, has found that high impression managers displayed more creativity, pleasantness, and self-control in a social setting relative to a private setting, suggesting that impression management is not necessarily a measure of response bias.

Evidence that impression managers act differently in social settings than they do in private settings does not discount the possibility that impression managers may also provide biased self-report data. Two independent studies indicate that impression management (IM) scores account for some of the inaccuracy of self-report. Paulhus and John (1998) and Pauls and Stemmler (2003) collected self-ratings of personality to compare with ratings by knowledgeable peers (e.g., friends and family). Both studies found that differences between self-ratings and peer-ratings (i.e., residuals) on the interpersonal traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness were correlated positively with impression management scores. This suggests that impression managers were exaggerating how likeable and dependable they were (relative to how their peers perceived them).

Despite evidence that impression management scores are sensitive to situational demands, there is also evidence that scores on impression management (and self-deceptive enhancement) tend to be quite consistent over time. Lönnqvist, Paunonen, Tuulio-Henriksson, Lönnqvist, and Verkasalo (2007) have reported test-retest correlations of .68 in two samples of military officer-trainees over a period of 2–3 years. Interestingly, they also demonstrated with these samples that scores on IM were significantly higher when participants completed the questionnaire as part of an application package for admission to the prestigious officer training program (a context with a strong motivation to impress) than when they completed it a second time years after they had completed the training. Thus, there is a dispositional quality to IM, but like other motives, scores are responsive to situational press.

1.3. The present study

Given the ongoing concern about the meaning of high scores on measures of impression management, we sought to further validate the BIDR against actual behavior with real-life consequences, as opposed to self-reports of behavior and lab-based behaviors that may have limited generalizability beyond the laboratory. We selected a prison context for our study because this is a context where both efforts to make a positive impression and the actions purportedly associated with impression management are important and consequential (Schretlen & Arkowitz, 1990). Offenders might be highly motivated to make a good impression on staff because they may perceive that benefits accrue to those who appear to be cooperative, agreeable and virtuous. Prisoners who are (or at least appear to be) well-behaved and easy to manage may be rewarded with perks, including reassignment to lower security facilities, approval for private family visits, work release programming, and escorted or unescorted temporary absences.

One way that recently incarcerated prisoners can help set the tone of their relationship with staff is by projecting prosocial attitudes and disavowing antisocial attitudes. Those offenders motivated to present a good impression of themselves should strive to convince staff that they have favorable attitudes towards (for example) the justice system, the less fortunate, the value of work, and the possibility of rehabilitation. Indeed, prior research with offenders indicates that those scoring high on IM tend to report fewer antisocial attitudes (e.g., Mills & Kroner, 2005; Mills & Kroner, 2006). A positive correlation between IM and prosocial attitudes is consistent with a self-presentation interpretation, but it is also consistent with the competing interpretation of IM as a measure of genuine agreeableness: nice people tend to possess prosocial attitudes.

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