

The conceptual link between social desirability and cultural normativity

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Psychologists have a recurrent concern that socially desirable responding (SDR) is a form of response distortion that compromises the validity of self-report measures, especially in high-stakes situations where participants are motivated to make a good impression. Psychologists have used various strategies to minimise SDR or its impact, for example, forced choice responding, ipsatization, and direct measures of social desirability. However, empirical evidence suggests that SDR is a robust phenomenon existing in many cultures and a substantive variable with meaningful associations with other psychological variables and outcomes. Here, we review evidence of the occurrence of SDR across cultures and tie SDR to the study of cultural normativity and cultural consonance in anthropology. We suggest that cultural normativity is an important component of SDR, which may partly explain the adaptiveness of SDR and its association with positive outcomes.

Keywords: Social Desirability Response Set; Normativity; Cultural Consonance; Person-Group Congruence; Validity; Response Sets; Self-Report; Response Bias.

One usually makes an important assumption when collecting people's accounts about themselves using interviews or questionnaires. The assumption is that an item or question will stimulate in the respondent an introspective discovery process that will culminate in a true and accurate self-report. When this actually does occur, the respondent is providing just what the researcher thinks is being provided. All is well.

Social-desirability responding (SDR) is something else. Here, the respondent gives the socially desirable answer rather than the accurate one. To be fair, things could be worse. A response that is, in fact, socially desirable makes clear that the respondent knows the language in which the question/item was framed. It indicates that the respondent is probably paying attention rather than responding randomly or carelessly. Obviously, SDR is not the strategy that allows for the fastest response to a set of items. Moreover, if the desirable answer would be to disagree, a "disagree" response cannot be due to yeasaying (one form of acquiescence); if the desirable answer is to agree, an "agree" response cannot be due to "naysaying" (the other form of acquiescence). Thus, the evident presence of *high* SDR rules out some other key response biases. This also means, however, that the *low* end of the

SDR continuum has some ambiguity of interpretation. Very *low* levels of SDR could be interpreted as low fluency in the language of the question/item, or as illiteracy, random or careless responding, one or the other form of acquiescence, or perhaps a moderacy (middle) response style.

Psychologists are naturally concerned that individual differences in SDR will distort the response distribution, making scores ambiguously interpretable, because of a looming rival hypothesis that even if some responses are accurate, others are merely socially desirable. Such distortion might compromise the validity of self-report measures, especially in high-stakes situations where participants would be motivated to make a good impression. To deal with this problem, test developers have created so-called validity scales, some of them embedded within longer inventories (e.g., L, F and K on the MMPI), others presented as stand-alone indices of the tendency to (merely) give the socially desirable response (see Paulhus, 1991, for a review). The goal is to either (a) identify and cull respondents with extreme levels of SDR or (b) statistically control for SDR.

Unfortunately, numerous anomalies have arisen for the methodological paradigm of purportedly capturing pure

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SDR in a distinct score. The biggest anomaly is that use of these SDR indices generally fails to improve prediction and can even weaken prediction (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996). An essential problem seems to be that these validity scores are, as a rule, about as ambiguously interpretable as any item/question with a strong evaluative valence. Their items probably succeed in inducing considerably higher degrees of SDR than a normal item/question would, but they can also catch in their net people with highly desirable qualities who happen to be describing themselves quite honestly and accurately. As a result of such anomalies, use of SDR-indices has been frequent for some six decades, while never becoming standard in assessment contexts.

Indeed, personality researchers as early as the 1960s concluded that SDR is not cause for concern in personality assessment. SDR correlates with conscientiousness and emotional stability, and partialing out SDR weakens (rather than strengthens) the relationship between these traits and outcomes like job performance (Ones et al., 1996). The fact that SDR does not behave as a suppressor variable suggests that controlling for SDR removes some true variance from measures of personality (Smith & Ellingson, 2002). As a consequence, the view that SDR is meaningful as more than a response style has gained traction in the literature. After a brief review of evidence suggesting that SDR has substantive meaning, we propose that the substantive element of SDR is due to SDR in part being a measure of cultural knowledge: In order for an individual to give the socially desirable response, the individual must have some knowledge of what would be a desirable response in the corresponding cultural context. To define SDR as more than just (the obvious) giving the socially desirable response, SDR involves implicit reference to culturally shared norms and standards and “*truing*” the response to that rather summarising observations in a more impartial manner.

THE SUBSTANTIVE COMPONENT IN SDR

Among the many self-report measures of SDR developed and used to control for SDR, the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991) was among the first to clearly conceptualise the intuitive idea that SDR is not a unitary process. According to Paulhus, SDR can be split into two major aspects. Impression Management (IM) corresponds to a purposeful attempt to present oneself positively. Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE), on the other hand, involves an unconscious tendency to attribute impressive skills, competencies, prowess and even heroism to oneself and to deny that one possesses any of the common foibles. Because IM is presumably conscious, it should be more susceptible to faking. If one accepts the view that IM is conscious and SDE is not, certain consequences then follow. The substantive meaning

in SDR, if any, should be found in the presumably unconscious aspects that are more difficult to purposefully fake, namely SDE in the case of the BIDR.

In practice, it is difficult to distinguish between IM and SDE based on susceptibility to conscious faking. It seems possible to fake good on SDE given the right circumstances, notably, being instructed to present oneself self-confidently (De Vries, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2014; Lonqvist, Verkasalo, & Bezmenova, 2007). However, the possibility of faking does not necessarily negate all valid meaning in SDR. Susceptibility to faking may mean that a construct is one on which real, ordinary behaviour often falls short of a recognised standard, a gap that can be erased by faking. Rank-order individual differences in SDE and IM persist under instructions to fake good despite the change in absolute levels in SDE and IM (Lonqvist et al., 2007). In addition, both IM and SDE were observed to be uncorrelated with the degree to which responses on a measure of *values* changed between standard and “fake good” instruction settings. Even when participants are responding to explicit instructions to fake, SDR measures still capture some true individual variation as the rank ordering of participants between faking and standard conditions was similar (Lonqvist et al., 2007). Moreover, high scores on IM have been actually associated with a higher (rather than lower) discrepancy between actual and ideal personality ratings, contradicting the assumption that IM reflects a tendency to view oneself overly positively (Uziel, 2013). In short, susceptibility to faking need not imply a lack of substantive meaning, and meaning does not seem to be restricted to only one aspect of SDR.

Another indication of substantive meaning is SDR’s favourable pattern of external correlations. SDR is associated with a host of substantive variables including agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty-humility (De Vries et al., 2014). The pattern of relationships suggests that SDR is generally adaptive, unless one assumes that favourable trait scores are not that meaningful either, being just false self-presentation. SDR correlates negatively with measures of antisocial behaviour, including drinking and drug use (Verschuere et al., 2015). Controlling for faking good decreases the association between psychopathology and antisocial behaviour (Verschuere et al., 2015), suggesting that faking good captures true variance in psychopathology and that successfully faking good is a legitimate indicator of lower levels of psychopathology. The IM component of SDR is also correlated with more satisfying marital and interpersonal relationships and a greater resilience to stress (Uziel, 2010), and this component has some consistency between self-report and informant-report data on the same target (Uziel, 2013), which further indicates a substantive component. After all, who wants to defend the interpretation that fakers or liars handle stress better and have better relationships?

IM has adaptive correlates specifically in the domains of morality, dutifulness and communalism and is associated with positive self-presentation only in these domains (Paulhus & John, 1998). For Uziel (2010, 2013). This prompts an interpretation of IM as tapping self-control in social and interpersonal relationships, motivated by the knowledge of what is appropriate and the capacity to follow through. IM correlates with both self and informant reports of social self-control. IM also correlates positively with affiliation and negatively with dominance. This pattern of correlations paints a picture of individuals high in IM as generally reserved but adaptable people and explains the otherwise counter-intuitive correlation between SDR and negative first impressions (e.g., Paulhus, 1991).

Why does IM relate to social self-control? There are several possibilities. High scorers may simply possess (to a large degree) the rare traits captured by the IM scale, or they may aspire to behave in a way that reflects these traits, they may be conscious of their reputation in social situations and allow their responses on the scale to guide their actual behaviour (Uziel, 2013). The fact that the link is with social self-control recalls that “social” component in SDR. For an individual to be able to self-present in a positive light, the individual must know the standards their social group holds for positive and negative characteristics—perhaps a form of social-norm intelligence. This is *social* self-control, coordinated towards organising behaviour in explicit reference to cultural norms. Thus, part of what appears to be SDR could be knowledge of group norms and even congruence with these norms. This phenomenon has a long history in anthropology under the labels cultural normativity and cultural consonance, and a shorter history in psychology under the label person-group congruence.

Under a socioanalytic view of faking (e.g., Johnson & Hogan, 2006), faking is indicative of social skills not only because individuals need to know the standards of their group but also because they need to be aware of the reputation they hold in their social group and how to represent themselves in order to maintain it. The socioanalytic approach sees personality testing as an avenue of social interaction in which individuals seek to portray themselves in a manner consistent with their reputation. Interestingly, this applies even when SDR is mentioned using the unlikely virtues, which are statements (like “I have never hated anyone”) so unlikely to be true that endorsing them is interpreted as a desire for positive self-presentation. According to the socioanalytic view, even such a subtle measure of SDR has substantive components. People who have reputations for being tolerant and forgiving recognise that the example statement is relevant to their reputation for tolerance and forgiveness, and so endorse it even when it is literally untrue. In this context, faking can be associated with both empathy and social competence.

While IM reflects social self-control, SDE, the other aspect of SDR, is associated more with achievement and self-esteem, so with claims of being a hero in contrast with IM claims of being a saint (Paulhus & John, 1998). This distinction between SDE and IM may arise out of a deeper regularity across human societies and cultures. Saucier, Thalmayer, and Bel-Bahar (2014) found that, across 12 mutually isolated languages from diverse parts of the globe, every language was richly endowed with both morality terms and competence terms (but was not richly endowed with, for example, terms for every one of the Big Five personality dimensions). IM might be called a façade of morality and SDE a kind of façade (or bravado) with respect to competence.

SDR AND CULTURE

To this point, our review has indicated that SDR is less of a threat than it has sometimes been thought to be. Along with the bad (variance related to faking), there is the good (variance related to virtue and/or cultural knowledge or cultural normativity). We point out what 60 years of discussion about SDR has mainly missed, because data and discussions on SDR have involved a monocultural framework with matters of culture not even considered by the commentators: In good part, SDR is a cultural variable, being strongly affected by an individual’s knowledge of a set of cultural norms. Cultural aspects of SDR deserve a more extensive examination here.

Certain robust tendencies do seem to generalise. Within a culture, if one aggregates both social desirability values and endorsement means, social desirability is strongly but not perfectly correlated with the degree to which an adjective is endorsed in self ratings (r between .86 and .90) and liked others ($r = .91$) (Backstrom & Bjorklund, 2013; Edwards, 1966) even in non-Western samples (Smith, Smith, & Seymour, 1993).

The question of whether the specific characteristics considered to be desirable are cultural universals—the same in any cultural context—is unresolved. Current evidence suggests that some domains are more similar than others across cultures. For example, average value hierarchies tend to be organised similarly in different nations, with benevolence, self-direction, and universalism most valued and power, tradition, and stimulation least valued (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Similarly, ratings of the desirability of single-word person descriptors within one cultural context appear to be very reliable ($\alpha = 0.99$ based on 55 raters in Hampson, Goldberg, and John (1987), suggesting mean inter-rater correlations in the vicinity of .70), and desirability ratings are highly correlated with endorsement in Western and non-Western countries (Smith et al., 1993).

On the other hand, the evidence regarding desirability of behaviours (rather than attributes or values) is less

conclusive. The BIDR (Paulhus, 1991) achieved metric invariance in a comparison between the USA and Singapore (Li & Reb, 2009). But the list of commonly cited socially desirable and undesirable behaviours elicited from a Mexican sample showed limited overlap with the list of behaviours measured in the BIDR (Espinosa & Van de Vijver, 2014). Caution may be necessary when drawing conclusions about SDR based on measures that explicitly mention socially desirable behaviours. The more limited generalizability of how behaviours are valued is consistent with a broad principle recently articulated by D'Andrade (2008) that cultures differ not so much in their values as in what *counts* as an instance of a particular value.

Evidence is also mixed as to whether members of different cultures engage in SDR to the same extent. Some research supports cross-cultural differences. For example, Ross and Mirowsky (1984) argue that SDR can be an adaptive response strategy in certain circumstances, for example, when there are strong norms around a particular issue, and so is learned through socialisation. Members of cultural groups that emphasise face and have extensive systems of kinship are more likely to resort to SDR. However, even members of cultural groups not emphasising face may resort to SDR when they are in high-risk, low-power situations.

Assuming more than one type of SDR, the profile of SDR which is preferentially resorted to may differ. Research suggests that collectivists differ from individualists by scoring higher on the IM subscale of the BIDR and lower on the SDE subscale (Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006) and that traditional cultures differ from less traditional ones, by engaging more readily in SDR (Keillor, Owens, & Pettijohn, 2001). Such findings tend to suggest that research in Western settings may actually underestimate the importance of SDR, the contributions of cultural standards in descriptions of personality, and the centrality of IM (and thus morality) for SDR.

Still, other research supports some cross-cultural similarities. For example, despite concerns that individuals from certain nations, for example, Japan, are encouraged to present a different public image than their private selves (suggesting high SDR), Japanese respondents showed no mean differences from Canadian respondents on the two BIDR subscales of SDE and IM (Heine & Lehman, 1995).

ON THE POSSIBLE CENTRALITY OF MORAL ATTRIBUTES TO SDR

An assumption sometimes made—dating back to Edwards (1953)—is that SDR operates across the entire domain of personality and psychopathology: All kinds of traits are more or less equally prone to induce SDR in respondents. There are indications otherwise, however. Smith and Ellingson (2002) examined measurement

invariance for diverse personality variables and desirability scales between job-applicant samples and anonymous college-student samples; the former samples have high incentive for SDR, the latter little. Comparisons indicated that, in general, personality variables measure substance and not style. However, certain scales related to moral attributes (virtuous, moralistic scales) had the largest differences in means between the samples. Moreover, cross-correlations with the method (SDR) variable increased greatly in the applicant group for the same scales, again suggesting a domain in which response style is particularly likely to mix with substance. The same can be inferred from the tendency for SDR scales to emphasize such moral attributes (e.g., IM in the BIDR; Paulhus, 1991). The special proneness of morality-related attributes to SDR is, moreover, indicated by the existence of an industry creating and administering integrity tests. We posit that SDR operates particularly strongly on traits related to morality (or amorality, immorality), in testing situations where something is at stake. The obvious implication would be that one should not trust self-reports particularly of moral “character” traits as being veridical.

On these bases, SDR as related to moral attributes deserves special scrutiny. Up to this point, we have suggested that favourable scores on measures of moral attributes have three interpretations: (a) the absence of certain other response styles such as random responding, (b) substance, that is, veridical responding, meaning the person really has the moral attributes, and (c) SDR or “faking good”, such that the person lacks the moral attributes but is nonetheless claiming them. A close examination of the content of impression-management scales suggests a fourth possible interpretation. SDR on such scales involves agreeing with items indicating that one’s adherence to moral and ethical rules is not just good but perfect; it’s as if one were describing not oneself but one’s “ought self” (Higgins, 1987), a representation of how one “should” be, satisfying all duties and obligations. Agreement essentially makes the assertion that “I have never once done anything wrong or improper”—claiming convergence with a sort of cultural ideal. In other words, the respondents may flip over into describing their values, not their behavioural tendencies.

Consider an example. An interviewer asks you “Are you a dishonest person?”, and you respond “Of course not.” Your answer signals that (a) you were paying attention and understood the question, that (b) you probably are at least usually honest, and that (c) you are faking good, to the extent that you have *ever* talked or behaved dishonestly. But another possibility is that (d) you are signalling that you recognise and adhere to moral-cultural norms, setting them as a standard. This sense of the response might be translated as “sure, I know that’s a bad thing and endeavour not to be that way.” This kind of response signals and represents *cultural normativity*.

CULTURAL NORMATIVITY

We posit that SDR can be interpreted in part as cultural normativity or cultural consonance or, to use a different kind of term, person-group congruence. In this regard, the commission of SDR requires knowledge of cultural norms. In fact, this aspect could even be styled as “social-norm intelligence.” You cannot fake what you do not first know, just as comedic impressionists who “fake” a well-known personage must first know, must have studied, that personage enough to know how to fake correctly. Such impressionists are not proclaiming their nature as liars, their capacity to deceive, so much as demonstrating skill and knowledge. Analogous to failed impressionists, those low on SDR may be those whose knowledge of norms is too inadequate for them to communicate a desirable façade on demand.

If SDR represents, in part, a kind of ability or knowledge, then it becomes sensible that controlling for it would reduce rather than enhance predictive validity. Overall, SDR contains a mixed bag: unfavourable elements (such as faking) balanced by some favourable elements (mixing veridically reported desirable attributes, cultural knowledge, and an absence of certain other response biases). Accepting that cultural normativity is an important component of SDR goes farther towards explaining why SDR can be associated with positive outcomes.

How can cultural normativity be measured? The Cultural Consensus Model (CCM; Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986) provides a simple means of specifying the degree to which a cultural group shares a central consensus and how well individuals in the group represent the consensus. The method involves working with transposed Q-type data and correlating the responses of each individual with the mean responses of the group. These being a correlation, effects of individual differences in response mean (a very rough index of acquiescence) are removed. The correlation indexes the degree to which the individual approximates the central tendency in the group and so can be labelled cultural normativity. Here, cultural normativity is measured as the individual’s degree of convergence with the consensus response-profile for the population. This closely resembles the convergence of responses with aggregate desirability ratings (i.e., cultural desirability) of the items, it being long established (since Edwards, 1953) that response means tend to track desirability. One tracks real cultural behaviour, the other cultural ideals. We regard the former as requiring a bit more cultural knowledge (e.g., to know it is ideal to be saintly, heroic and courageous but normative to not claim these traits for oneself too vociferously).

Person-group congruence is an application of the cultural-normativity concept in psychology. It uses the same method (involving transposed data) of correlating individual responses with the mean response in the

individual’s group. Congruence can be calculated in a particular domain and becomes an index of the individual’s typicality or representativeness of the group regarding that domain. When calculated from responses on a values survey, the correlations between an individual’s values and the mean values of the group are indices of person-group value congruence (PVC). In samples from Argentina, Bulgaria and Finland, the individual value ratings were uncorrelated with subjective well-being whereas PVC was correlated with subjective well-being, and the relationship was moderated by positive relationships with peers (Sortheix & Lonnqvist, 2015). So it was not the content of an individual’s values per se that was related to positive outcome but the degree to which an individual’s values corresponded with the group norm. One might say that “consensus-scoring” trumped the straightforward scoring method that is usually applied.

Cultural consonance research (e.g., Dengah, 2014; Dressler, 2012; Maltseva, 2014) has used the method laid out by the CCM in various domains of beliefs, values and behaviours and found a general pattern of associations between person-group congruence and positive physical and mental health outcomes, including cardiovascular health and resilience against depression. The pattern of relationships suggests it is more adaptive to be high than low on cultural normativity.

SUBSTANTIVE MEANING AND DIFFERENT MEASURES OF SDR

Psychologists have used various strategies to minimise SDR or its impact, and it is unclear whether all these measures capture the substantive meaning of SDR equally. Besides direct measures of social desirability, more subtle measures exist, including unlikely virtues (Tellegen, 1982 as cited in Johnson & Hogan, 2006) and the overclaiming approach (Randall & Fernandes, 1991; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012a, which is measured as a tendency to claim knowledge of things that do not in truth exist. The correlation between scores on measures of unlikely virtues and observer ratings of an individual’s reputation (Johnson & Horner, 1990, cited in Johnson & Hogan, 2006) provides some evidence of substantive meaning in that particular form of SDR.

It is not desirable that scores reflect an unclear, ambiguous mixture of potentially adaptive or maladaptive genuine attributes and various response sets and biases. Research has generally indicated that such intermixture may not be a major concern, but there is little direct research on where and how to distinguish the substantive meaning in SDR from the stylistic elements. Better ways to separate them are needed. This article has focused on identifying an additional kind of substantive element in SDR—cultural normativity—but ultimately

we need ways of teasing cultural normativity apart from self-reports of objectively-present desirable traits and from faking and other response distortions.

If cultural normativity is indeed part of the substantive element in SDR, this raises questions for future research. How does cultural normativity develop, and is it an automatic process? It is possible that individuals gain competence in cultural normativity as part of the socialisation process. As individuals first learn norms, they may need conscious effort, and gradually the knowledge and the process are automated and become less conscious. Are people who engage in SDR more aware of or sensitive to norms? Sensitivity or awareness are unlikely to explain individual differences in cultural normativity (and SDR) completely as normativity is conceptualised as a skill. Does SDR on questionnaires correspond to normative behaviour? Following a socioanalytic approach, if SDR corresponds somewhat to reputation, it stands to reason that cultural normativity will correspond somewhat with actual behaviour, a matter for empirical test.

CONCLUSION

Strong-construct-validity considerations dictate that scores on psychological measures be clearly rather than ambiguously interpretable, and SDR threatens clear interpretability. Especially in high-stakes assessment situations, it will be important to distinguish the various components and not have a mixed-bag mélange of diverse contributors to the score, so one knows more exactly what is being measured. We have reviewed evidence of the occurrence of SDR across cultures and of its consistent, meaningful associations with adaptive psychological variables. This evidence suggests that the common view—that SDR is merely a nuisance and a threat to validity—may be overstated and that SDR can be interpreted as a substantive variable. In that direction, we have connected SDR to cultural normativity and cultural consonance as conceived in anthropology. If cultural normativity is an important component of SDR, this may partly explain the adaptive aspects of SDR and its association with positive outcomes, inasmuch as normativity is also associated with a host of positive outcomes.

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