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The social desirability of toughmindedness: A study among undergraduates

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Two samples of 50 undergraduates each completed the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R); one under normal test conditions and one under instructions to portray a socially desirable image. Consistent with earlier studies social desirability was associated with lower neuroticism scores. Contrary to earlier studies social desirability was associated with elevated psychoticism scores.

It has long been recognised that personality scales are open to falsification by respondents who wish to portray a socially desirable image of themselves. Lie scales were introduced to personality tests in order to detect this tendency (O'Donovan, 1969). There also seems to have been general consensus regarding the directionality of such distortion.

In the context of Eysenck's three-dimensional model of personality (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) the dimension of neuroticism has emerged as that most susceptible to distortion. A number of early experimental studies concerned with the Eysenckian measures demonstrated that subjects with a high motivation to 'fake good' tended to suppress their neuroticism scores. This relationship was found to hold true among children (Eysenck, Nias & Eysenck, 1971; Eysenck, Syed & Eysenck, 1965; Waters, 1968) as well as among adults (Braun & Gomez, 1966; Cowles, Darling & Skanes, 1992; Farley & Goh, 1976; Gomez & Braun, 1967; Levin & Montag, 1987; Michaelis & Eysenck, 1971; Rump & Court, 1971). The clear message from these studies is that stability is socially desirable.

The situation regarding the dimension of psychoticism is somewhat unclear, although a number of studies demonstrate that subjects with a high motivation to 'fake good' tended to suppress their psychoticism scores. This was the case among children (Granleese, Trew & Turner, 1988; Nias, 1972) as well as among adults (Eysenck, Eysenck & Shaw, 1974; Furnham & Henderson, 1982; McKenzie, 1988). The message may be that tendermindedness is socially desirable.

The aim of the present study is to test the stability of these findings

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among a contemporary group of undergraduates.

METHOD

Two groups of undergraduates, each comprised of 25 males and 25 females, completed the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991) which includes a lie scale as well as measures of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. In the control group the questionnaire was administered according to the standard guidelines and instructions. In the experimental group the following instructions were given:

The following questionnaire is anonymous, please complete your gender details only. One of the attributes of personality being measured is that of social desirability. This refers to an individual's desire to distort self-report questionnaires in a perceived favourable direction. Try to answer the questionnaire so as to make your personality appear in a favourable light.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean scale scores on extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and the lie scale for the two test conditions separately, together with the appropriate statistical test of significance. These data demonstrate that responding in a socially desirable direction generates higher lie scale scores and lower neuroticism scores. There is a trend towards higher psychoticism scores but this is not significant ($F_{1,98} = 3.4, p = .07$). Extraversion scores were unaffected by the different instructions.

Table 4. Personality scores by test condition.

personality scale	control		experimental		F (1.98)	p
	mean	sd	mean	sd		
Extraversion	15.4	4.3	16.5	4.5	1.4	NS
Neuroticism	12.0	5.8	8.6	5.8	8.4	.001
Psychoticism	8.2	4.0	6.6	4.7	3.4	NS
Lie scale	5.9	3.5	11.7	5.4	41.1	.001

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, this new study among undergraduate students confirms the consensus of research findings going back to the 1960s that individuals

who wish to portray a socially desirable image of themselves suppress their neuroticism scores. In today's young society stability remains socially desirable.

On the other hand, this new study contradicts the more general finding from previous studies that individuals who wish to portray a socially desirable image of themselves suppress their psychoticism scores. On the contrary, social desirability does not affect psychoticism scores. In today's young society neither tendermindedness nor toughmindedness emerges as socially desirable or socially undesirable.

The changing value of toughmindedness among undergraduates in England today may well reflect the changing social and political ethos of the late 1980's and early 1990's. The present study now deserves replication on other university campuses.

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