



Relationship between attributional style and Lie scores in an occupational sample motivated to fake good

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Summary—The success of the Seligman Attributional Style Questionnaire (SASQ) in predicting productivity in motivationally challenging occupations has been confirmed in both the U.S.A. and the U.K. However, the vulnerability of the SASQ to faking, motivated by attempts at impression management, in occupationally-relevant samples has not been investigated. SASQ factors and EPQ Lie scores were studied in incumbent salesmen and normal volunteers. The results show that positive attributional style (CoPos) and Lie scores were higher, and negative attributional style (CoNeg) was lower, in job incumbents; Lie scores were found to depress CoNeg scores but had no effect on CoPos scores. The relevance of these results to the validity of the SASQ in occupational settings in the U.K. is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The validity of psychological tests can be undermined by various forms of response bias (Furnham, 1986); this problem is particularly acute in the occupational field, especially personnel selection, where there exists a strong motivation to dissimulate. Indeed, to some extent it is *de rigueur* for successful job applicants/incumbents to engage in some form of impression management.

Experimental studies have revealed the vulnerability of personality instruments to response bias: when instructed to fake good, Ss show elevated Lie scores (Braun & Gomez, 1966; Furnham & Henderson, 1982; Gorman 1968); and when instructed to simulate whole personality profiles, Ss seem able to distort multiple scale scores in desired directions (Borislow, 1958; Bridgman & Hollenbeck, 1961; Krahe, 1989). The transparency of personality instruments (Power & MacRae, 1971), and the potential for response distortion, pervade many widely-used personality measures in the occupational field. For example, Furnham (1991) showed that the 16 PF, Myers-Briggs and the FIRO-B personality measures are sensitive to instructions to fake good and to fake bad. Several studies have demonstrated actual response distortion in applied settings (e.g. Kirchner, 1961, 1962), although the extent of dissimulation would appear to depend upon the motivational characteristics of the specific population under investigation. For example, whereas Burbeck and Furnham (1984) found that candidates to the police service had significantly higher Lie scores than controls, Gudjonsson and Adlam (1983) failed to find elevated Lie scores in police recruits and probationary constables, possibly reflecting a lack of motivation to fake good once selected; however, the Gudjonsson and Adlam study did reveal that senior police officers had lower Lie scores than (age matched) controls, while experienced constables had higher Lie scores compared with the senior police officers, possibly reflecting a greater defensiveness on the part of the latter group.

The above studies highlight the vulnerability of personality instruments to faking, but also show that deliberate cheating is not an inevitable outcome of occupational testing. However, in applied settings, it is important to establish the degree of actual response bias inherent in specific instruments in order for such instruments to be used in an appropriate manner. Previous research suggests that the degree of response distortion observed should be a multiplicative function of (1) test transparency and (2) motivation to cheat. Only where there is motivation to cheat would test transparency be expected to lead to actual faking. Lie scores are particularly suited to providing a valid measure of dissimulation because they are transparent and, for occupational purposes, sensitive to social desirability response set (a powerful component in impression management which underlies most faking in occupational testing).

The vulnerability of the Seligman Attributional Style Questionnaire [SASQ (Peterson, Semmel, Von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky & Seligman, 1982)] to cheating in occupational settings has yet to be established. As the SASQ has been shown to predict sales performance in both the U.S.A. (Seligman & Schulman, 1986) and the U.K. (Corr & Gray, 1995), and is in consequence likely to be increasingly used for occupational selection, it is important to provide an assessment of its vulnerability to faking in occupationally-relevant samples motivated to fake good.

The SASQ measures 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' explanations for favourable (success) and unfavourable (failure) events; it yields two main measures: (1) composite positive attributional style (CoPos) and (2) composite negative attributional style (CoNeg). In the U.S.A. low CoNeg, and the difference between CoNeg and CoPos, is related to sales productivity and resilience (as measured by quitting), but in the U.K. CoPos is more predictive of sales performance. Furnham, Sadka and Brewin (1992), using a different instrument, also report that CoPos and not CoNeg predicts job-related performance in the U.K. The reason for the difference in the predictive power of CoPos and CoNeg in the two cultures is not known. One possibility is that CoPos and CoNeg are differentially sensitive to response bias in the two cultures.

How sensitive is the SASQ to response bias? The SASQ presents Ss with 12 hypothetical situations (e.g. "You do a project which is highly praised"), and Ss are required to generate a cause for each situation before rating the cause on three seven-point scales: (1) internal-external, (2) stable-unstable, and (3) global-specific. The degree to which the test is transparent, and therefore the degree to which its construct validity is undermined by cheating, was tested by Schulman, Seligman and

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for SASQ measures, and Pearson correlations between SASQ factors and (EPQ) Lie scores, and *t* tests between salesmen and normal volunteer samples

Measure	Salesmen (<i>n</i> = 100)				Male volunteers (<i>n</i> = 75)				<i>t</i>
	α	Mean	(SD)	<i>r</i>	α	Mean	(SD)	<i>r</i>	
CoPosaff	0.58	5.60	(0.72)	0.143	0.44	5.08	(0.66)	0.04	4.72
CoPosach	0.64	5.82	(0.81)	-0.054	0.69	4.83	(0.96)	-0.12	7.27
CoPos	0.71	5.72	(0.63)	0.048	0.68	4.96	(0.66)	-0.05	7.35
CoNegaff	0.63	3.81	(0.99)	-0.219*	0.54	4.19	(0.80)	-0.08	2.61
CoNegach	0.56	4.12	(0.96)	-0.171	0.45	4.57	(0.80)	-0.14	3.20
CoNeg	0.75	3.95	(0.88)	-0.251*	0.64	4.38	(0.67)	-0.13	3.36

* $P < 0.05$, two-tailed correlations.

All *t*-tests significant at $P < 0.01$, two-tailed.

CoPos, positive attributional style; CoNeg, negative attributional style; CoPosaff, positive attributional style for interpersonal/affiliative situations; CoPosach, positive attributional style for achievement-related situations; CoNegaff, negative attributional style for interpersonal/affiliative situations; CoNegach, negative attributional style for achievement-related situations.

Amsterdam (1987) in the U.S.A. They studied the effects of motivation to cheat in university students. In general, the data suggested that the SASQ was not transparent and could not be faked, although there was a difference between the control and incentive groups on CoPos in one of the studies. However, it would be inadvisable to translate these results from the U.S. to the U.K. for two reasons: (1) the U.S. data are based on university students motivated to cheat and do not reflect potential cheating in occupationally relevant groups, and (2) in the U.S.A. and U.K. different factors of the SASQ have been found to predict performance.

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between SASQ factors and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire [EPQ (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975)] Lie scores in a sample of job incumbents who have a strong motive to fake good. These data should be able to establish whether the validity of the SASQ is undermined in occupational settings by an unacceptably high level of faking.

METHOD

Subjects

Two samples were used: (1) 100 salesmen who had just been recruited by a large U.K. insurance company (mean age = 31.55 yr, SD = 7.61) and (2) 75 male Ss who had volunteered for a laboratory-based study (relatively representative of the general population; mean age = 27.73 yr, SD = 8.31). The salesmen had been selected on the basis of a sales aptitude test and interview.

Psychometric materials

The SASQ (Peterson *et al.*, 1982) was used to measure attributional style. The six positive and negative situations contain an equal number of interpersonal/affiliative and achievement-related items. The SASQ yields two main measures: (1) composite positive attributional style (CoPos) and (2) composite negative attributional style (CoNeg). Composite measures are the sum (or mean) of scores across the three scales (internal, stable, global) of each of the six situations. CoPos and CoNeg were divided into interpersonal/affiliative situations (CoPosaff and CoNegaff) and achievement-related situations (CoPosach and CoNegach). The Lie scale from the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire [EPQ (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975)] was used to measure dissimulation.

Testing procedure

The SASQ and EPQ were administered during the induction period of training. SASQ/EPQ scores played no part in the actual selection process. The entire EPQ was administered but only the Lie scale was used in the present study. Respondents were not informed of the nature of the study and the scores were not disclosed to the company.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the (SASQ) means, standard deviations and α -coefficients for the two samples of Ss along with the Pearson product-moment correlations between SASQ factors and Lie scores for each sample (and *t*-tests for the mean differences between the two samples).

The Lie score mean for the salesmen was significantly higher ($M = 7.30$, $SD = 3.56$) than that for normal volunteers ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 3.47$; $t = 5.53$, $P < 0.001$). Age and Lie scores were uncorrelated with the SASQ factors in the two samples [possibly reflecting restriction of range; there is usually a positive correlation between Lie scores and age (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975)]. The major findings of the study are contained in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Lie scores among the salesmen were much higher than among normal volunteers indicating that the job incumbents were motivated to fake good. This finding is similar to that reported by Burbeck and Furnham (1984), who found elevated Lie scores among candidates for the police service, and is consistent with previous reports showing the sensitivity of Lie scores to deliberate cheating (e.g. Braun & Gomez, 1966; Furnham & Henderson, 1982; Gorman, 1968). These data are also similar to Kirchner's (1961, 1962) finding of social desirability response set in sales populations. The fact the Lie scores were higher

in the salesmen, as compared with the volunteer sample, is not surprising given that testing occurred at induction training during which socially desirable behaviour was expected from trainees.

Given the high level of motivation of salesmen to fake good it was possible to assess the degree to which the Seligman Attributional style Questionnaire was distorted by this type of response bias. The results revealed that in the sample of salesmen the mean for CoNeg was pushed downwards by Lie scores showing that this factor in the SASQ is affected by impression management. There were no effects on CoPos in either sample.

The magnitude of the correlation between Lie scores and CoNeg was relatively low, indicating that CoNeg is not totally saturated with Lie score variance. In terms of practical application, CoNeg may be used in samples motivated to fake good, but preferably with an adjustment to correct for dissimulation. Given that the relationship between attributional style and faking may depend upon the specific motivational characteristics of the population in question, researchers are advised to establish the degree of dissimulation for given populations rather than relying upon global measures of dissimulation (e.g. faking bad for accident insurance claims may have a different impact on CoPos and CoNeg, and their components, than faking good for job selection).

For both affiliative/interpersonal and achievement-related situations, salesmen were higher in CoPos and lower in CoNeg. The higher CoPos mean in the occupational sample is consistent with the commonly held belief that salesmen are more optimistic as compared with the general population and with the finding that, within sales populations, CoPos is positively related to actual sales productivity (Corr & Gray, 1995).

Given that CoPos on average is higher than CoNeg, with a mean value close to the upper limit of the scale, there is more scope for CoNeg scores to be faked downwards than for CoPos scores to be faked upwards. Indeed, CoPos is usually so high that it is difficult to push it much higher without achieving maximum score (or something very close to maximum score). In addition, insurance salespeople possess CoPos scores that are higher than general population norms, so they therefore have an even greater constraint on upward faking. The fact that Lie scores were not related to CoPos in the normal population sample suggests that CoPos is not vulnerable to response bias artefact. However, Schulman *et al.* (1987) did find an effect of motivation to cheat on CoPos in one of the samples studied in student populations, so it would appear that in the U.S.A., or among students, CoPos is vulnerable to cheating.

It is possible that CoPos is predictive in the U.K., and CoNeg in the U.S.A. (see Introduction), simply by virtue of the fact that they are each insensitive to faking in the relevant cultures. But why there should be such a difference is not clear. A comparable study to the one presented here needs to be done in the U.S.A., and one comparable to Schulman *et al.* (1987) in the U.K., for this issue to be clarified. It would also be interesting to investigate the extent to which Ss could fake a desirable profile on the SASQ (cf. Krahe, 1989).

In conclusion, the fact that CoPos, and not CoNeg, predicts actual productivity in the U.K. (Corr & Gray, 1995), but that CoNeg, and not CoPos, is sensitive to faking (present results), shows that the SASQ may be used for personnel selection even when there is a strong motivation to fake good.

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