A Study of Social Desirability and Self-Esteem[1]

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The present study explored the relationship between self-esteem and social desirability via negative and positive self-comparisons. Participants completed personality and self-esteem scales and were then divided into public/private reveal groups. Half of each group was led to believe their scores were similar to a positive comparison person (e.g., Kennedy) or a negative comparison person (e.g., Hitler). All students were then given an opportunity to revise their survey responses. Of interest was whether the number of survey items changed would be related to the valence of the comparison and whether comparisons were public or private. Results found no correlation between self-esteem and socially desirable behavior but negative comparisons did produce significantly more socially desirable behavior.

Introduction

Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships is an important aspect in our lives as social beings (Vohs & Heatherton, 2003) as well as a crucial key to our evolutionary growth (Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & van Aken, 2008). Not only do interpersonal ties provide emotional, instrumental, and informational support, they are functional in situations that could be a matter of life and death (Denissen et al., 2008).

According to Leary and Baumeister (2000), self-esteem is a critical and normal function in regulating an individual's level of social inclusion, belongingness, and acceptance. Twenge and Im (2007) states that "the need for social approval indicates a desire to conform, a concern with others' opinions, and an urge to be socially acceptable" (p.173). Additional research has also found a correlation between a person's self esteem and social inclusion (Denissen, et al. 2008).

An individual's feeling of social inclusion is partly due to their experiences with the acceptance and rejection of their socially desirable qualities (Anthony, Holmes, & Wood, 2007). Also, individuals who score higher on social desirability tend to conform their behavior in cultural norms and others' judgments (Horton, Marlowe, & Crowne, 1963). Together, these suggest that social desirability and self-esteem have a cause-and-effect relationship.

Social desirability is the tendency to respond in a manner that makes the respondent look good rather than in an accurate and truthful manner (Holtgraves, 2004). Individuals who present themselves in a socially desirable manner may attempt to appear overly moral, honorable, and virtuous by exaggerating desirable traits and by denying undesirable traits (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Paulhus (1984) believes that social desirability can be considered in two ways, self-deceptive enhancement and impression management. Self-deceptive enhancement is a non-purposeful or automatic way of viewing one's self exceedingly optimistically. On the other hand, impression management is the purposeful tailoring of responses in order to be viewed more positively. In accordance with self-deceptive enhancement, Holtgraves (2004) also suggests that some individuals automatically dismiss their personal convictions and respond in a way that seems most socially desirable.

Research has shown that when a participant is required to answer sensitive questions they are less truthful on their answers when a third party who is likely to disapprove of or punish them is present (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Sexual offenders, for instance, have the tendency to present themselves in a more desirable manner to their counselor, evaluator, or probation/parole officer (Tatman, Swogger, Love, & Cook, 2009). Not only do people make their answers more socially desirable

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when people of importance are around; they tend to do it when people they might not know and normally interact with are present. It is suggested that people misreport their answers because they tend to worry that the person reading the results might disapprove of them (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007).

Self-esteem is defined as "people's evaluations of their own self-worth - that is, the extent to which they view themselves as good, competent, and decent" (Baumeister, 1993). As stated earlier, Leary and Baumeister (2000), suggest that an individual's baseline of self-esteem is, to a certain extent, determined by experiences of being rejected and/or included. Therefore, when an individual is rejected by others, the individual will feel badly about their self (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995) and when accepted the individual will feel good about their self.

Experimental evidence suggests that individuals who claim that their self-esteem is not influenced on the approval-disapproval of others clearly experience negative affect when they are rejected and tend to become more defensive than individuals who admit that social approval-disapprove influence their self-esteem (Leary et al., 2003). It is suggested that individuals who deny the impact of social approval-disapproval on their self-esteem do so to prevent themselves from looking bad to others (Schoeneman, 1981; Wood, 1996).

A sufficient amount of research has been conducted to investigate the relation between self-esteem and social desirability. Nurmoja and Bachmann (2008) found that low self-esteem individuals are more inclined to respond socially desirable in order to please the interviewer and were more susceptible to negative feedback. It is speculated that the belief that one is socially acceptable and is valued by others helps buffer individuals with high self-esteem against negative or disapproving feedback (Leary et al., 2003). Campbell (1990) suggests that low self-esteem individuals have less clearly defined, less temporally stable, and less internally consistent self knowledge structures, than those of individuals with higher self-esteem. Thus, individuals with lower self-esteem are more dependent on social environment and have a greater sensitivity to self-

intimidating and anxiety-provoking stimuli (Pullmann & Allik, 2000). Individuals with low trait self esteem may be attuned to others' reactions to them because they are fearful of decreasing their social acceptance (Leary et al., 1995). Baumeister (1982) also found that individuals with low self-esteem feel required to behave in the manner that others expect of them.

In Western culture observable traits such as physical attractiveness, social skills and popularity are valued (Anthony et al., 2007). Internal traits such as loyalty, truthfulness, and kindness are also valued in Western culture but at an intimate level, such as a close friendship or romantic relationship, not in society as a whole (Anthony et al., 2007). Consider the valued traits of Western culture and the role models that our youth emulate today; successful athletics, movie stars, and fashion models. It is due to society's emphasis on the role model's traits that encourage social desirability and the level of self esteem that one may develop (Anthony et al., 2007). Positive role-models have the tendency to reflect an ideal self, showing possible achievements and how to accomplish them whereas negative role models illustrate a to-be-avoided self, being an indicator of negative future events, and are examples of how to avoid these disappointments (Jordan, Kunda, & Lockwood, 2002).

When being compared to a role model, social comparison will be induced within an individual (Thagard & Kunda, 1997). If there is enough similarity between the individual and the role model, the comparison may influence the individual's self-view (Tesser, 1986; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). When a comparison may be negative this will not provoke confidence in one's self-view therefore one will experience a negative impact on one's self-view (Kunda & Lockwood, 1997).

People understand what is valued by others and proceed to adjust their self-knowledge and social value to fit the norm (Anthony et al., 2007). Anthony et. al (2007) found that people with low self-esteem are not necessarily less positive about themselves than people with high self-esteem; they tend to value different traits. For instance, individuals with lower self-esteem value internal traits more whereas people with higher self-esteem

tend to value more observable traits. This study shows that society ultimately controls how people differ in self-esteem and how self-esteem is defined based on popular traits and norms.

The main objective in the present study is to observe a measure of social desirability within individuals when being compared to a positive or negative individual in the presence of others. Due to past research correlating social desirability and self-esteem, it is believed that individuals will react differently in their need to appear socially desirable due to their varying degrees of self-esteem. There are two suggested hypotheses in this study: 1) individuals being compared with negative historical figures will respond more socially desirable in the presence of others 2) individuals with low self-esteem will exhibit the tendency to respond more socially desirable than people with high self-esteem.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-three (52 female, 71 male) college students from a small university in the Pittsburgh area participated in the present experiment. Participants were selected from four general psychology classes and received no credit for their participation.

Design

The experiment was a 2 (low/high self-esteem) x 2 (positive/negative comparison) x 2 (public/private) between-subjects design. The dependent variable was the number of answers changed on the "personality test" once participants were given their second chance to look it over.

Materials

The test used in the present study consisted of the combination of the Five-Factor Model of Personality (FFM) test and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The questions from each measure were interspersed (fully integrated) in the final version of the test instrument. The test contained 53 items total, each with a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Procedure

With the professors' permission, the experimenter asked for participants within four general psychology classes. The participants were told that the purpose to the study was to explore the relationship between current college students' personalities and the personalities of famous historical figures (such as John F. Kennedy). They were also told that they would be completing the Five-Factor Model of Personality (FFM) and were to indicate their name, age, and sex on the test. Participants were not told that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was concealed within the FFM nor were they told of the actual purpose of the study. Participants were asked to be as honest and exact as possible when reporting on the test because their results would be revealed to them in class the following week. The experimenter also informed the participants that their identity would be kept confidential. After the completion and collection of the tests, the experimenter exited the classroom.

The experimenter assigned participants in each class, as equally as possible, between negative and positive feedback groups. A randomly assigned number between 1-30 was written on the tests assigned to the positive comparison group (John F. Kennedy) whereas a randomly assigned number between 31-60 was marked on the tests of the negative comparison group (Adolf Hitler). The experimenter then randomly assigned the four classes into two reveal groups: public or private.

About one week after data collection, the experimenter returned to the psychology classrooms to return the "scored" tests. After the tests were distributed, the experimenter told the private reveal groups that those with a score from 1 to 30 meant that they were very similar to John F. Kennedy whereas those with a score from 31 to 60 were very similar to Adolf Hitler. In the public condition, before the results were revealed, participants with a score from 1 to 30 were asked to stand up. Once the participants had risen, the class was then informed that the standing individuals compared to John F. Kennedy. Participants were then asked to sit back down. All of the participants with a score from 31 to 60 were then asked to stand up. The experimenter then announced that they scored similarly to Adolf Hitler.

The experimenter told the participants, in both reveal groups, that the results appeared strange in that there were so many close comparisons found.

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They were then asked to review their answers and to make any changes to their test that they deemed necessary to ensure that their original answers were not due to error. They were further informed to put a checkmark on the answer that they wanted to be counted and to raise their hand when they were finished. Once each test was re-collected, the experimenter debriefed the class of the true nature of the study. Participants were then given the opportunity to ask questions.

Results

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was scored as directed and the tests were inspected for any changes on the Likert Scale. The data (number of items changed) were then analyzed via a 2 x 2 [Condition (public or private) x Feedback (positive or negative)] between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Results showed a significant main effect of feedback, $F(1,136) = 3.59$, $p = .06$, in which positive feedback resulted in an average of 1.48 items changed (SD = 1.56) whereas negative feedback resulted in an average of 2.66 items changed (SD = 4.94). There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

An additional correlational analysis was performed. The results indicated no significant correlation between self-esteem scores and number of items changed, $r(121) = 0.108$, $p = .11$. Thus, the study failed to support the hypothesis that individuals with low-esteem will tend to conform their answers in a more socially desirable than persons with higher self-esteem.

Discussion

Self-esteem and socially desirable responding (number of answers changed) did not appear to be related in this study. However, the type of feedback given did have the anticipated effect on the number of items participants changed; negative feedback resulted in more items changed. What was surprising was that the nature of the reveal (public versus private) did not appear to influence response changing behavior whatsoever.

A possible reason for the failure to find an effect of feedback condition (public/private) might be that the participants were not necessarily around

people of importance to them during the experiment. According to Leary and Baumeister (2000) individuals with high self-esteem may be relatively unaffected by disapproval from people who do not really matter to them. Based on the findings of Twenge and Im (2007), the characteristics of current youth culture may have also influenced the results because the "younger generations are less concerned with being polite, conventional, and acceptable to others" (p.185).

In the present study, it was also expected that self-esteem would play a role in socially desirable responding. Unfortunately, it may be that the present design was not sensitive to the influence of self-esteem due to the small number of participants who met the criteria for having low-self esteem (8.9%). This low proportion also suggests the possibility that the self-esteem scale itself might have produced socially desirable responding. Future studies should consider including the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale in order to assess the likelihood of socially desirable behaviors among participants. This would provide some indication as to whether students were responding truthfully on the scales.

Some individuals who received negative feedback may have decided not to change their answers. This could be because their self-esteem is not affected by social appraisal (Deci & Ryan, 1995). It is also possible that participants' motivation might have been low because they were not receiving extra credit for their participation.

Overall, individuals changed more answers when they received negative feedback than when they received positive feedback. However, self-esteem appeared to be unrelated to feedback. Because of the possibility that low self-esteem participants masked their esteem issues by responding to the esteem questions in a socially acceptable manner, a remaining hypothesis emerges. Specifically, low self-esteem individuals may have been more accepting of the negative feedback and did not make changes because they internalized the feedback as true (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Halow, 1993).

Future research should take care to ensure that the public/private manipulation is stronger or more effective than the current study. Such a study would more effectively rule out the influences of

feedback condition on socially desirable responding. In addition, including the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale will be helpful in identifying socially desirable behaviors among participants and the possible effects such behavior can have on research outcomes.

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