The Influence of Impression-Management Set on Measures of Self-Consciousness

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The susceptibility of the Self-Consciousness Questionnaire (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) to social desirability influences was investigated by experimental manipulation of impression-set. Subjects completed the SCQ under one of three instructional conditions: responding honestly, responding to create a good impression, and responding to create a bad impression. Impression-set had no significant effect on private self-consciousness scores but had significant effects on public self-consciousness scores for males and on social anxiety scores for both males and females. However, the size of these effects was not large given that experimental manipulations of impression-set maximize social desirability effects. Comparisons of effect-sizes with previous findings that used different personality measures indicated that the present effects on SCQ scores were among the smallest.

Recent research in personality and social psychology has seen an increasing interest in the role of the self as a cognitive structure extensively involved in information processing and judgment (Markus & Smith, 1981; Suls, 1982). One particularly fruitful line of inquiry has dealt with the effects of directing attention to the self. Devices such as mirrors and television cameras have been used to investigate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of increased self-attention. Similarly, the extent to which people habitually focus on themselves has been found to be an important factor in such phenomena as compliance, angry aggression, attitude change, and reactance (for reviews, see Buss, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1981).

Habitual self-focus is measured with the Self-Consciousness Questionnaire (SCQ) (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), a self-report inventory composed of three subscales: private self-consciousness (private SC), public self-consciousness (public SC), and social anxiety (SA).

*Private SC* is exemplified by endorsement of statements such as “I’m generally attentive to my inner feelings” and refers to the tendency to be aware of the covert, private aspects of the self. High private SC scorers are particularly attentive to and knowledgeable about their feelings, attitudes, dispositions, and other private self-attributes (Scheier, 1976, 1980; Scheier, Carver, & Gibbons, 1979).

*Public SC*, as exemplified by self-descriptions such as “I’m concerned about what other people think of me,” refers to the tendency to be aware of the overt, publicly displayed aspects of the self. High public SC scorers are particularly concerned with
how other people view them and react to them (Fenigstein, 1979; Scheier, 1980).

Social anxiety is related to public SC but measures primarily negative emotional reactions to the presence of others, as suggested by items such as "I get embarrassed easily."

Fenigstein et al. (1975) report that the self-descriptions load above 0.40 on their appropriate factors (principal-component analysis with varimax rotation) and that scale intercorrelations are lower than 0.30. Test-retest reliabilities of the subscales are greater than 0.70. Apart from the original Fenigstein et al. study there have been few attempts at dealing specifically with validities, reliabilities, and other psychometric properties of the SCQ (Carver & Glass, 1976; Davies, 1982; Turner Scheier, Carver, & Ickes, 1978) even though use of the SCQ is becoming widespread.

The particular focus of this study is on the influences of social desirability and impression-management response biases on the SCQ. Previous work by Turner et al. (1978) found that Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scores were unrelated to scores on the self-consciousness scales (with the exception of social anxiety in one of two samples). However, there are a number of reasons for examining social desirability effects more closely.

First, many of the paradigms where self-consciousness has been investigated involve behaviors that can be strongly affected by impression management, such as attitude change, attribution of responsibility, conformity, and reactance. The influence of public SC in these phenomena is similar to the influence of a possible social desirability motive.

Second, investigating social desirability response biases through correlations with scales such as the Marlowe-Crowne or Edwards (1957) may not be the most reliable approach. These self-report instruments are themselves open to social desirability and similar response biases owing to the relatively transparent quality of their items. Furnham and Henderson (1982), for example, found a significant effect of faking instructions on social desirability scores of the Edwards scale. Estimating the social desirability component of a given scale from its correlation with a social desirability scale may therefore conflate response biases. By contrast, experimental manipulation of impression-set can serve to isolate such biases more clearly (Farley & Goh, 1976).

In the present experiment, the effects of socially desirable responding on the SCQ were investigated by instructional-set manipulations. Respondents filled in the SCQ answering honestly, presenting a good impression, or presenting a bad impression of themselves.

METHOD

Subjects were 65 male and 75 female college students aged between 18 and 37 and drawn from a variety of courses. No subject had any previous experience with the SCQ.

The SCQ was administered in group testing. The SCQ comprises 23 statements,