

## **The Social Desirability of Social Value Orientations**

René Bekkers<sup>1</sup> - 07 May, 2001

To what degree are social value orientations as measured by decomposed games vulnerable to social desirability concerns? In contrast to prior research (Platow, 1994), this study, using a large scale survey in The Netherlands (n=450), shows that respondents classified as 'prosocial' agree more often with statements that are commonly regarded as socially desirable than respondents classified as 'individualists' or 'competitors'. However, a more detailed analysis shows that this relation is due to two specific dimensions in the social desirability measure, which consist of two subtly different sets of items describing 'moral' behavior in interpersonal relations. There is no relation with social desirability tendencies in responses to socially desirable statements about personal achievement. Therefore, it is argued that the relation does not reflect a disturbing response tendency, due to a general need for social approval. It is more likely that prosocials are actually more 'moral' in interpersonal relations.

---

### **• INTRODUCTION**

Platow (1994) showed that subjects who complete decomposed games, which are often used to assess social value orientations, are aware that the prosocial alternatives in these games are socially desirable. Therefore, it can be argued that social value orientations may at least partly reflect the need for social approval. I will call this argument 'the social desirability hypothesis'. In contrast with this critical hypothesis, Platow (1994) obtained no significant relation between social value orientation and social desirability scores as measured by the Crowne & Marlowe-scale (1964). However, Platow's study used a relatively small sample of college students (n=59). In the present study, data were

---

<sup>1</sup> ICS/Department of Sociology, Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS, The Netherlands. E-mail: R.Bekkers@fss.uu.nl. This report was written during a research visit to the Department of Social Psychology, Free University, Amsterdam. Thanks are due to Michael Platow for his idea to do a factor analysis.

available on the social value orientations and social desirability scores of 450 respondents in a nationwide computer survey in The Netherlands.

#### • **DATA AND MEASUREMENTS**

The 'Telepanel' is a panel of about 2000 respondents in households in The Netherlands, who participate in regular poll surveys in exchange for a computer, which is also used to collect the poll data. Weekly surveys cover a wide variety of topics. In this study, data of originally separate studies of social value orientations and social desirability are combined. Social motives were assessed in 1994 with six decomposed games in the traditional triple dominance format (see table 1; for more details, see Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin & Joireman, 1997).

Following regular procedures, 74,6% of the participants were classified as prosocial (n=308), 19,9% as individualistic (n=82), and 5,6% as competitive (n=23). Besides this categorical classification, an altruism-parameter was computed. The altruism-parameter is the mean percentage of points given away to the 'unknown other' in the six games (the self/other-ratio, see the last column of table 1). An advantage of this parameter is that it has a ratio-measurement level, while the classification of respondents into individualists, competitors and cooperators or proselfs and prosocials forms only a nominal scale. A drawback of the linear measure, however, is that the qualitative difference between competitors and individualists is lost. Therefore, results for both the 3-category classification as well as for the linear measure of social values are reported.

The data on social desirability (Steinmetz Archive, C0006) were collected by Corrie Vis, Michel Conijn and Juan Felix between October 10 and 12, 1997, three years after the assessment of social motives. The survey contained a dutch translation of the full 33-item Social Desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Respondents indicated agreement or disagreement with items that described socially desirable or undesirable behaviors.

Table 1. Self-other outcome distributions and corresponding altruism-parameters in the Telepanel-data

<b>Game</b>	<b>Alternat ive</b>	<b>Pay-offs for</b>		<b>Sum</b>	<b>Altruism- parameter</b>
		<b>self</b>	<b>other</b>		<b>(other/sum- ratio)</b>
1	A	480	80	560	14,3
	B	540	280	820	34,1
	C	480	480	960	50,0
2	A	560	300	860	34,9
	B	500	500	1000	50,0
	C	500	100	600	16,7
3	A	520	520	1040	50,0
	B	520	120	640	18,7
	C	580	320	900	25,6
4	A	500	100	600	25,6
	B	560	300	860	24,9
	C	490	490	980	50,0
5	A	560	360	860	24,9
	B	500	500	1000	50,0
	C	490	90	580	15,6
6	A	500	500	1000	50,0
	B	500	100	600	25,6
	C	570	300	870	24,5

A first exploratory factor analysis on all items revealed 10 factors with Eigenvalue  $> 1$ , which explained 46% of the variance. The scree plot showed a clear bend after the third factor, indicating that the optimal number of dimensions in the social desirability instrument is three. In a second, confirmatory factor analysis, a three factor solution was forced. The analysis showed that a number of items had factor loadings below .30 (items 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 27, 30, and 32) and two items loaded above .30 on more than one factor (items 6 and 28). In a third factor analysis, these items were deleted. The analysis produced three factors, which explained 30.2% of the total variance in the instrument. A reliability analysis of the factors, however, showed that the second factor had a poor reliability coefficient (.29) and could greatly be improved (to .50) by deleting items 16 and 21. The reliability of the first factor was .67, and could not be improved by deleting items. The third factor had a moderate reliability of .45. In a fourth, and final, factor analysis, the three factors explained 33,7% of the total variance. The first factor consisted of 7 items, and explained 14,4% of the variance. Exemplary items of this factor are item 24 ("I would never think of letting someone else be punished for my wrongdoings") and item 33 ("I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings"). This factor was labeled 'management of social relations', because most of the items that loaded high on this factor described 'nice' behaviors in dyadic interaction situations. The second factor consisted of 6 items, and explained 12.0% of the variance. The items that loaded high on this factor described more serious violations of social norms (e.g., item 9 ("If I could get into a movie without paying and be sure I was not seen, I would probably do it") and 15 ("There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone"). This factor was labeled 'profit and control'. Factor 3 explained 7.4% of the variance, and consisted of 4 items describing socially undesirable behaviors in the area of personal achievement (e.g., item 5: "On occasion I have had doubts about my ability to succeed in life", and item 10 "On a few occasions, I have given up doing something because I thought too little of my ability"). The

scores on the three factors were saved as new standardized variables (with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1).

*Table 2. Results from the final factor analysis (Telepanel-data, n=450)*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Factor 1</b>	<b>Factor 2</b>	<b>Factor 3</b>
20. Admit not knowing something	<b>.36024</b>	-.07845	-.06323
24. Let others pay for own wrongdoings	<b>.73005</b>	.01686	.07639
25. Resent being asked to return a favor	<b>.77983</b>	.09709	.10707
26. Irrked when others express different ideas	<b>.55616</b>	.11576	-.09231
29. Never felt the urge to tell someone off	<b>.72026</b>	-.06083	.04230
31. Never been punished without cause	<b>.39758</b>	-.00247	-.16562
33. Never deliberately said something to hurt another	<b>.40381</b>	-.27944	.10275
9. Get into a movie without paying	-.03681	<b>.59765</b>	-.18311
11. Like to gossip	-.08620	<b>.48397</b>	.05433
12. Rebel against authorities when they were right	-.00828	<b>.37560</b>	.27611
14. "Play sick" to get out of something	-.01138	<b>.47633</b>	.22380
15. Take advantage of someone	.03213	<b>.56905</b>	.08690
22. Insist on having things my way	.04187	<b>.43905</b>	.06430
3. Hard to continue work if not encouraged	-.01315	.18879	<b>.53951</b>
5. Doubted abilities to succeed in life	-.00812	-.01487	<b>.71771</b>
10. Given up because abilities were insufficient	.04243	-.00069	<b>.63615</b>
23. Felt like smashing things	-.01500	.29420	<b>.37254</b>
Eigenvalue	2,44	2,03	1,26
Percentage of variance explained	14,4	12,0	7,4
Cronbach's Alpha	.67	.50	.45
Label	'Management of social relations'	'Profit and control'	'Achievement'

Furthermore, a composite social desirability score was computed, because a reliability analysis showed that a scale consisting of all items was moderately reliable, ( $\alpha=.62$ ), and that this figure could be slightly improved (to .64) by deleting items 18 ('I do not find it

particularly difficult to get along with loud mouthed, obnoxious people) and 13 ("Before voting I thoroughly investigate the qualifications of all the candidates").

• **RESULTS**

First, we report on the relation between the altruism parameter inherent in social motives and the social desirability score (see table 3). There was a small, but significantly positive correlation ( $r = .09$ ) between the altruism-parameter inherent in social motives and the social desirability score. Using the three subscales, only the second factor showed substantial and significant correlation coefficients with the altruism parameter inherent in social orientations.

*Table 3. Relations between social motives and social desirability scores (Telepanel data, n=450)*

	<b>Correlation with altruism-parameter</b>	<b>Mean score for prosocials</b>	<b>Mean score for proselvs</b>	<b>T-value (sign.)</b>
Composite social desirability score	* 0.09	1.6280	1.5748	* 2,56 (.011)
1. 'Management of social relations'	~ 0.09	0.1326	-0.1692	** 2.62 (.009)
2. 'Profit and control'	*** 0.18	0.2912	-0.1245	*** 4.36 (.000)
3. 'Achievement'	-0.07	0.0093	0.1638	-1.41 (.160)

When the proself category was broken down into individualists and competitors, the main differences were observed between prosocials and individualists (see table 4). The differences between prosocials and competitors were not substantial for the first and third factor. None of the differences between competitors and individualists was significant. It seems that the pattern of results in table 3 is based on the difference between prosocials and individualists. The difference between prosocials and competitors is less pronounced.

Table 4. Mean scores for prosocials, individualists, and competitors on the total scale of social desirability and its three subscales (Telepanel data, n=450)

	<b>Prosocials</b>	<b>Individualists</b>	<b>Competitors</b>
Composite social desirability score	1.6280	<sup>a</sup> 1.5732	1.5807
1. 'Management of social relations'	0.1326	<sup>a</sup> -0.2107	-0.0212
2. 'Profit and control'	0.2912	<sup>a</sup> -0.1325	<sup>b</sup> -0.0962
3. 'Achievement'	0.0093	0.1723	0.1336

<sup>a</sup> Significant contrast ( $p < .05$ ) between prosocials and individualists

<sup>b</sup> Significant contrast ( $p < .05$ ) between prosocials and competitors

## • CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

There is a significant but small difference in the general tendency to give socially desirable answers between proselfs and prosocials, and a similarly small but significant positive correlation between the altruism parameter inherent in social motives and need for social approval as measured by the Crowne & Marlowe-scale. A more detailed analysis showed that this correlation is due to differences in answers to items reflecting 'nice' strategies in management of social relations and profiting from others, which form two subscales. There were no differences on a third subscale, consisting of socially desirable statements on personal achievement.

Traditionally, the Crowne & Marlowe instrument that was investigated in this study, is used as a control variable in questionnaires investigating socially desirable behaviors and traits via self-reports. The logic of the instrument is that the items contain extreme descriptions of situations ("I never...", "I always..."), in which nobody can truthfully agree with the socially desirable alternative. This assumption is problematic. As the effects of social value orientations on cooperation in social dilemmas reported in the experimental literature

show, there *are* individual differences in 'moral' interpersonal behavior. Some people will be less likely to agree with statements describing socially undesirable behaviors, simply because they perform these actions less often. Although the instrument only allows for yes/no answers on extreme items, the relatively 'moral' respondents will more often disagree with statements like "I never lie" than the relatively 'immoral' respondents.

In sum, then, we see that especially for items reflecting interpersonal conflict or concern, prosocials reported more norm-conform (and hence, socially desirable) behavior than did proselves. Although it could be that prosocials overestimate their rate of 'moral' interpersonal behavior in order to gain the approval of others (or themselves), the higher social desirability score could also reflect a real tendency to 'moral' behavior in social interaction. With the data at hand, this matter cannot be settled. To test the social desirability hypothesis, an extension of a study by Deutsch & Lamberti (1986) is proposed. In the experiment, social desirability and social motives should be assessed prior to playing a 1 shot prisoner's dilemma game. The field-experiment by Deutsch & Lamberti (1986), investigating helping behavior, showed that subjects low on SD were not affected by the social approval manipulation, while subjects high on SD were. Their conclusion was that the impact of social approval is not uniform across individuals, but varies with their need for social approval. In the experiment proposed here, besides simple main effects of social approval conditions and social value orientations, the following results can be expected. If the social desirability hypothesis is correct, the results from the experiment proposed above should reveal a positive interaction effect between SVO and social approval conditions on cooperation, which is mediated by SD-scores. If the social desirability hypothesis is correct, prosocials will be more responsive to social approval than proselves because they have higher SD-scores. If the correlation of SVO with social desirability items observed in the

present study is due to real differences in 'moral' behavior in interpersonal situations, the SD-scores will have no mediating role.

• **REFERENCES**

Crowne, Douglas P. & Marlowe, David (1964). *The Approval Motive: Studies in Evaluative Dependence*. New York (etc.): Wiley.

Deutsch, Francine M. & Lamberti, Donna M. (1986). Does Social Approval Increase Helping? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 12: 149-157.

Platow, Michael J. (1994). An Evaluation of the Social Desirability of Prosocial Self-Other Allocation Choices. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 134: 61-68.

Steinmetz Archive (1997). *Social Desirability Bias*. [Datafile C0006].

Van Lange, Paul A.M., Otten, Wilma, De Bruin, Ellen M.N. & Joireman, Jeffrey A. (1997). Development of Prosocial, Individualistic and Competitive Orientations: Theory and Preliminary Evidence. *Journal Of Personality and Social Psychology*: 73 (4): 733-746.