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DETECTING SOCIALLY DESIRABLE RESPONSES IN PERSONALITY INVENTORY

by

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MENGESAN RESPONS IDAMAN SECARA SOSIAL DALAM INVENTORI PERSONALITI

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Abstrak

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengesan respon idaman sosial daripada respon-respon yang berbeza. Selain itu, kajian ini juga memeriksa item dan dimensi-dimensi personaliti yang mudah terjejas kepada kebolehinginan sosial. Dalam kajian eksperimental ini, 521 pelajar sekolah diuji dengan borang soal-selidik *International Personality Item Pool (IPIP*) sebanyak dua kali di bawah arahan menjawab secara jujur dan dengan kebolehinginan sosial. Respon-respon dari pentadbiran pertama diklasifikasikan sebagai kumpulan jujur dan respon-respon dari pentadbiran kedua dikategorikan sebagai kumpulan kebolehinginan sosial. Kepincangan skor respon dari min dan analisis keserasian digunakan untuk mengesan respon idaman sosial. Keberbezaan fungsi ujian diaplikasikan dalam mengenal pasti item-item yang cenderung untuk kebolehinginan sosial. Analisa diteruskan dengan keberbezaan fungsi ujian untuk memeriksa kesan keberbezaan fungsi item pada keseluruhan ujian dan pada dimensi-dimensi personaliti yang ditaksir. Keberbezaan fungsi langkah diaplikasikan untuk mengenal pasti kategori respon yang menyumbang kepada keberbezaan fungsi item. Kajian ini juga menjalankan analisa faktor dan lengkuk fungsi informasi ujian untuk memeriksa dimensi-dimensi personaliti yang rentan untuk kebolehinginan sosial. Kumpulan kebolehinginan sosial melaporkan taburan skor yang tinggi pada dua sisihan piawai di atas min. Bersamaan dengan itu, kumpulan kebolehinginan sosial menggambarkan peratusan respon yang tidak padan dengan modal Rasch pada nilai 2.0 logits lebih tinggi

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berbanding kumpulan jujur. Perbandingan struktur-struktur faktor melaporkan perbezaan di antara kumpulan jujur dan kebolehinginan sosial. Lengkuk fungsi informasi ujian bagi dimensi keterbukaan menggambarkan perbezaan maklumat di antara kumpulan jujur dan kebolehinginan sosial. Enam item dikesan untuk keberbezaan fungsi item dan tiga daripada item tersebut mewakili dimensi keterbukaan. Kehadiran keberbezaan fungsi item meyebabkan perubahan dalam ujian personaliti dan dalam dimensi keterbukaan. Analisis keberbezaan fungsi langkah melaporkan kategori-kategori respon berfungsi secara berbeza mengikut item. Kajian menyimpulkan bahawa, sisihan skor yang besar dan respon yang tidak padan dalam inventori personaliti sebagai petunjuk kepada respon kebolehinginan sosial. Sementara itu, parameter kesukaran item yang rendah dan pemilihan kategori respon menggambarkan tanda-tanda kebolehinginan sosial. Lantarannya, proses penyaringan individu yang berpotensi menjawab dengan kebolehinginan sosial serta penyingkiran item-item yang cenderung ke arah kebolehinginan sosial mampu mengatasi masalah kebolehinginan sosial dalam ujian yang berkepentingan tinggi.

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DETECTING SOCIALLY DESIRABLE RESPONSES IN PERSONALITY INVENTORY

Abstract

This study attempted to detect the socially desirable responses within differential responses. Besides, this study also examined items and personality dimensions that are vulnerable to social desirability. In the experimental design, a sample of 521 students was tested twice with the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) under honest and socially desirable instructions. Responses from the first administration were classified as honest group responses and those from the second administration were grouped as socially desirable responses. The mean dispersion and fit analysis were applied in detecting socially desirable responses. Differential Item Functioning (DIF) was used in identifying items that are prone to social desirability followed by Differential Test Functioning (DTF) which examines the DIF effects to the test and to each personality dimension assessed. Differential Step Functioning (DSF) was applied to determine the contributing steps in polytomous responses to DIF. Factor analysis and item information function curves were used to examine the personality dimensions that are susceptible to social desirability. The socially desirable group reported a distinctively higher score distribution at two standard deviations above the mean. Correspondingly, the socially desirable group has a higher percentage of non-fitting responses with values more than 2.0 logits. Differences of factor structures of IPIP dimensions were found between the honest and socially desirable response groups. Test information function for the Openness dimension illustrated a differential information function between the honest and socially desirable groups. Six items were flagged for Differential Item Functioning

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(DIF) and three of the items represented the Openness dimension. In addition, the presence of DIF caused changes in the test and in the Openness dimension for the socially desirable groups. The DSF analysis reported response categories function differently according to the items. The study concluded that high score and non-fitting responses in a personality inventory are indications of socially desirable responding. Meanwhile, low difficulty item parameter and endorsement of response categories are also signs of social desirability. Therefore, screening of the potential socially desirable responding individual and the elimination of items that are prone to social desirability would help to arrest the problem of social desirability in high-stake testing.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

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1.0 Introduction

Chapter one focuses on the background of the study and problem statements which leads to the purpose of this study. Based on the purpose of the study, the research objectives and questions were stipulated. This chapter also reports the significance and limitations of this study. The chapter concludes with the definition of the five personality dimensions.

1.1 Background of the study

Testing and evaluation started as early as 2200 B.C in China in the form of civil service examinations (Aiken & Marnat, 2006). The Chinese civil service examination was used to determine whether government officials were capable in performing their tasks. This Chinese civil examination leads to the development of civil examinations in countries like Britain, France and Germany. Later in the 19th century, psychiatrists and psychologists of mental disorders developed clinical assessment techniques and tests to assess their patients (Aiken & Marnat, 2006). The great impact in the test development was when Alfered Binet constructed the first mental test called the Binet Intelligence Test. The Binet intelligence test was used to predict the scholastic achievement of an individual. The success of measuring intelligence was then applied to the Military through the Army alpha and beta tests. These military tests were constructed to measure the cognitive ability of their

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recruitment candidates (Boyle, Matthews & Saklofske, 2008). Besides cognitive ability, Military test also measures the candidate's personality during the recruitment selection (Boyle et al., 2008). According to Boyle et al. (2008), the psychological testing instruments used in military recruitment gave an insight into the suitability of a recruit together with the cognitive abilities of the recruit and thus facilitated the decision making process of selecting a recruit into the Military. Among the early personality inventories were the Personal Data Sheet and Thurstone Personality Schedule.

Over the years, various personality tests were developed and among them are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), California Psychological Inventory (CPI), Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF) and the Revised NEO personality inventory (NEO-PI-R). Using personality to explain how human behavioural traits react within their working environment results in its importance in predicting about an individual (Detrick, Chibnall & Luebbert, 2004). It gives an idea of how individuals interact with others and their reaction towards things and ideas. The predictive nature of personality testing resulted in its wide application in the industrial, educational and in military context (Horst, 1968). Inference about an individual from the personality inventory provides extra information which would be utilized in the selection of appropriate candidates (Carrigan, 2007). Hence, the personality inventory is relied upon when screening for job applicants in employment selection (Li & Bagger, 2007).

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The study by Detrick et al. (2004) proved that NEO-PI-R has predictive validity with respect to police academic performance. The predictive capacity of personality test emerges as an aid in decision making and has evolved in the Malaysian context. The significance of personality is noted as a component in employment and the educational setting. This is seen in the application of personality elements in the University Science Malaysia (USM) entrance examinations known as the Malaysian University Selection Inventory (MUnSyI) and in the entrance examinations for teacher trainees known as the Malaysian Educators Selection Inventory (MEdSI). In addition, personality elements are included in the recruitment of graduate employees into the Malaysian civil service. Even though the personality test were used under different setting, the purpose was the same; to predict an individual's attributes to aid in decision-making.

However, the use of personality tests was questioned by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) of the United States over the validity and discriminatory issues in pre-employment (Carrigan, 2007). Doubts arose as many personal disclosures were used in the selection process and whether it contributed to any bias issues. To arrest the problem, American Psychological Association (APA), American Counselling Association (ACA), National Board of Certified Counsellor (NBCC), Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing and National Council on Measurement in Education govern and draw up the guidelines to help professionals administer the tests ethically (Drunmond & Jones, 2006). Drunmond and Jones (2006) added that the guidelines were drawn due to the impact of the personality test on society and decision makings which saw a need for a standard setting procedure in testing and assessment. Ethical measures were

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considered in order to minimize any bias decision from the outcome of the personality testing.

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In psychological testing, the quality of the test and ethical conduct of helping professionals were strictly monitored to reduce the biasness in decisions made. However, the test-taker's attitude and honesty are not being controlled. Studies have shown that, people like to demonstrate good impression in a psychological testing (Dunn, 2009). In cases where the test scores become a determinant for a person's future the individual has the tendency to manipulate and answer dishonestly on the test (Aiken & Marnat, 2006). Fox and Meijer (2008) also pointed out that people often respond untruthfully on personal or sensitive questions in psychological or educational assessments. The problem of untruthful responding in personality testing opens to debate over its use for the selection process (Dilchert, Ones, Viswesvaran, & Deller, 2006). Since personality items have no absolute correct answers, it makes the items easily faked (Horst, 1968). Meantime, the purpose of the test encourages a person's tendency to fake the response (Dunn, 2009). The pressure and personal need of an individual to pursue a better life would motivate the test takers to fake a test. Irrespective of the reasons, all of these would affect the validity and utility of the personality inventory (Charles, 2003).

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1.2 Problem statement

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Personality assessment was used to obtain data about people to reach a conclusion on clinical, legal, educational and guidance, educational and vocational selection and also for research purposes (Holt, 1971). Application of the personality instrument in the working context predicts one's personal attributes which then evaluates over the suitability of the candidate for the specific job (Fitting the bill, 2009). This is because, employee's personality traits are found to impact on their behaviour and performance at their workplace (Nek Kamal bin Yeop Yunus, 1997). The ability of the personality test to predict an applicant's capability and suitability to the workplace has resulted in taking into consideration the results of the tests for the selection procedures of employees (Kumaresan, Aizat Mohd Nasurdin & Ramayah, 2005).

The application of personality in the job screening process is found in the Public Service Department examination while recruiting a grade 41 category officer into the civil service (*Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Awam*, 2005). The personality of a job applicant is appraised to determine the suitability of the candidate concurrently with the position applied by the candidate into civil service (*Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Awam*, 2005). Meanwhile, personal attributes of students are assessed to match the corresponding choice of courses applied for in the university. The university selection tests that include personality elements are used to determine the suitability of students in their selection of course in the university (*Ujian Penetapan Khas*, 2008). University Science Malaysia (USM) conducts a test called the Malaysian University Selection Inventory (MUnSyI) to facilitate the placement of students into different courses of study in the university (*Ujian Penetapan Khas*, 2008). Besides

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MUnSyI, the Malaysian Educators Selection Inventory (MEdSI) is designed spesifically for filtering applicants for the teacher education training program in Malaysia (MEdSI, 2009). Applicants of teacher education programs are required to pass the MEdSI and subsequently called to attend an interview before they are chosen (Arifin Bin Hj Zainal, Asmawati Binti Desa, Hazalizah Binti Hamzah & Nachiappan, 2009). Moreover, the *Maktab Rendah Sains MARA* (MRSM) also sets *Ujian Kecenderungan Kemasukan Maktab* (UKKM) test as pre-requisites for students to be selected into MRSM (*Syarat Kemasukan Ke MRSM*, 2010).

The MUnSyI, MEdSI and UKKM tests are self-reported assessment instruments with the personality element included as a common domain to be assessed. In addition, a reality show called Nescafe Kisck-Start in Malaysia used the LEONARD Personality inventory to help provide additional information when selecting the 16 semi-finalist candidates (Emotional signs, 2004). This indicates the personality features can be used to predict the likelihood of a candidate and provide useful information to be used in the selection process (Fitting the bill, 2009). The predictive feature of personality assessment leads to its applications in various decision making contexts (Kline, 1976).

The findings of personality assessments in school entrance exams, university placements, job screening and competitions showed its application in high-stake testing. All these indicate the increasing reliance of personality assessments both in school in school and workplace. Therefore, similar to graduates looking for employment, students too face with high-stake tests such as UKKM, MUnSyI and MEdSI that determine their future undertakings in life. In all these tests, personality

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assessment was included to gather information about them for decision making. However, the use of self-reported personality tests in competitive environments is susceptible to biased responding (Hirsh & Peterson, 2008). Moreover, when selections are meant for the best, it could place pressure on the test-taker (Nunnally, 1975). The intention to portray the best of themselves in an impressive way often leads to the manipulation of responses in a test (Lanyon & Goodstein, 1982). The motivation to distort is caused by the intended goal in a person and the implication of the implication of the test to them (Detrick & Chibnall, 2008). It is human nature for individual to portray the best impression of themselves to meet their desired goals (Iddekinge, McFarland & Raymark, 2007). Besides, an individual has the potential towards approval-seeking attitude (Leite & Beretvas, 2005). Individual's approval-seeking attitude is to meet their desired goal and to portray the required characteristics that match the purpose of the test. The approval seeking is manifested by responding to the statements in the personality tests in a socially desirable manner which becomes the concern when the results are used for making important decisions (Arthur, Woehr & Graziano, 2001).

In addition, research showed that self-reported measures often inflate an individual's score compared to rating by others (Yang, Bagby & Ryder, 2000). This is because individuals have the tendency to fake personality tests to avoid any personal disclosures (Dunn, 2009). Therefore, obtaining valid and reliable information about a person depends greatly on the cooperation from the individual (Fox & Meijer, 2008). This is because the test-taking attitude of the job applicants and students affects the actual test performance and influences the validity of selection (McCarthy & Goffin, 2003). Individuals responding in a socially desirable

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manner try to present a good image rather than projecting their actual self (Horst, 1968). The socially desirable responses become a great concern to many as it reduces the validity of the personality measured (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). This raises the question on the accuracy of prediction and becomes a threat to the validity of the personality inventory (Kroner, Mills, Yessine & Hemmati, 2004). Therefore, information obtained on individuals become unreliable and would cause a deserving individual to lose his or her opportunity in employment and education to an unqualified candidate.

1.3 Purpose of the study

Kline (1976) stated that the predictive ability of personality assessments leads to its application in various decision-making contexts. Yet, the accuracy of the personality inventory is doubtful and opened to criticism. Ellingson, Sackett and Hough (1999) mentioned that in a standard selection process, it is difficult to assess an applicant's true scores. In such circumstances, selection is done based on the observed scores which could be the true or faked responses. As stated earlier, an individual's interest in the test and his willingness determine the response patterns in the personality inventory. Therefore, it is essential to examine the score outputs as well as the scoring pattern to determine any aberrant scores. The analyses of score outputs could trace individuals who tend to respond in a socially desirable manner and determine the respondents who tend to fake or respond in a socially desirable way. Meanwhile, score output analyses would also help in extracting items that are prone to faking. The detection of deviant response patterns and items with faking possibilities could be re-evaluated prior to the selection process. Moreover, detection

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of such responses would help to identify only the appropriate candidates in the selection process and reduce wrong decisions. Therefore, this study intended to examine the score dispersion of honest and socially desirable groups from the mean and person fit analysis in detecting the socially desirable responses. Differential item functioning (DIF), item difficulty parameter and differential step functioning (DSF) were used in identifying items that are prone to social desirability. Meanwhile, personality dimensions that are prone to social desirability were examined through factor analysis, test information function and differential test functioning (DTF). This would help to identify honest responses and ensure that right decisions are made about individuals to minimize errors of selecting individuals who provide socially desirable responses.

1.4 Research Objectives

In personality tests, the rightness of answers differs from one to another (Horst, 1968). This is because, individuals are different and act contradictory at times (Alex, 1975). Besides that the personality test's biased responses of individuals are caused by their intention to gain social approvals (Stocke & Hunkler, 2007). Thus, the social gaining approvals lead to difficulties in assessing an individual's personal attributes rather than thinking on how they should respond (Horst, 1968). In addition to that, personality tests with no correct answers aids in responding items in a socially desirable manner (Horst, 1968). Meantime, the transparency of the item meanings helps to clearly discriminate items which require socially desirable responses (Detrick & Chibnall, 2008). Therefore, it becomes essential to determine whether personality measures functions equivalently across different group of applicants

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(Mitchelson, Wicher, LeBreton & Craig, 2009). Thus, this study was initiated to detect individuals who distort their responses in a socially desirable manner by comparing the different response patterns. This study also focused on identifying items that are prone to socially desirable responses. Finally, this study also attempted to identify dimensions in the personality inventory that are prone to socially desirable responses. Based on the above objectives, these following research questions were proposed.

1.5 Research Questions

1. To what extent do the responses of the group that distorted responses in a socially desirable manner differ from that of the honest group?
2. What are the characteristics of the items that are prone to socially desirable distortions?
3. What are the personality dimensions that are vulnerable to socially desirable responding?

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1.6 Significance of the research

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The application of personality measures is gaining importance in many aspects of our life (Aiken & Marnat, 2006). In tandem with this rapid growth, there are upcoming studies underlying socially desirable response effects on personality tests. Therefore, this study is an initiative to venture and explore the response patterns of individuals to detect those distorted in a socially desirable manner.

The findings from this study would help test-users to be aware of the issue of social desirability and take measures to prevent socially desirable responses. It also notifies the test-users not to rely solely on personality inventory when making inference about an individual. This is due to the vulnerability of the personality inventories.

Study also hopes to open the minds of test-takers to not accept the results of personality inventory per se as it does not measure the overall characteristics of a person. The use of statistical approaches in detecting socially desirable responses would provide evidence that even in personality testing faking can be detected. Therefore, it is hope that the detection of socially desirable responses will help to motivate individuals to provide honest responses in future. In addition, detection of socially desirable responding would help to differentiate between honest and dishonest respondents and ensure a fair chance for all in any selection process.

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1.7 Limitations of the study

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The accuracy of detecting socially desirable responses relies on the cooperation of the respondents. The pilot study conducted revealed that even individuals asked to respond in a socially desirable manner did not respond as instructed. This indicates that respondent participation and willingness to respond is the major limitation of this study. This is because it is difficult to monitor the respondents and direct them to respond in the way needed for the research.

Study also fails to provide an exact scenario that underlines the importance of the necessity for participants to portray their best characteristics. The instructions to respond in a socially desirable manner and scenarios presented when administrating the test may not be sufficiently important to the participants. Therefore, failure in setting the appropriate environment at the experimental design would be another limitation of this study.

The choice of instrument is identified as another limitation of this study. It was difficult to obtain established instruments as they were expensive while some authors were reluctant to grant permission on the use of their inventory. Meanwhile, efforts to obtain locally developed personality instruments were also not successful. Also due to the small sample size, the data analysis using the Item Response Theory (IRT) model is limited to the 1-parameter logistic model which is run with the WINSTEP computer program that is available in the university.

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1.8 Definition of Personality Dimensions

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In this study, the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) inventory was used in studying socially desirable responding. IPIP was developed based on the Big five personality model that comprised of five dimensions. The following are the five dimensions and their definitions adapted from Pervin and John (2001, p. 257).

Openness

Assesses proactive seeking and appreciation of experience for its own sake, toleration for and exploration of the unfamiliar.

Conscientiousness

Assesses the individual's degree of organization, persistence and motivation in goal-directed behaviour.Contrasts dependable, fastidious people with those who are lackadaisical and sloppy.

Extraversion

Assesses quantity and intensity of interpersonal interaction, activity level, need for stimulation and capacity for job.

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