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Published online: 15 Jun 2020.

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Value priorities, impression management and self-deceptive enhancement: Once again, much substance and a little bit of style

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ABSTRACT

The connection between self-reported personal values and socially desirable responding in social psychology has been backed up by little empirical evidence. This study expands upon the pioneering work carried out by Schwartz and colleagues by analyzing the relationship between values and social desirability through the use of different self-report measures of values and by considering the multidimensional nature of social desirability. The study involved 224 Italian respondents (63.4% female, mean age = 22.39, SD = 2.47) who completed a questionnaire. Results confirmed Schwartz et al.'s previous findings supporting the substantive hypothesis. Specifically, impression management was more related to values highlighting the importance of social harmony (i.e., conservation and self-transcendence) rather than to those characterized by a personal focus (i.e., openness to change and self-enhancement). However, a different pattern of connection was found for self-deceptive enhancement. This study addresses how to deal with social desirability in research into personal values.

Shalom Schwartz's contribution to the field of psychosocial sciences led to a widely accepted definition of values. In the context of his Theory of Basic Human Values, Schwartz (1992, 2003) defined values as desirable and trans-situational goals that act as guiding principles in peoples' lives. He (1992) theorized ten motivationally distinct value types: universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction (Table 1). In Schwartz's (1992) model, these values are arranged in a circular pattern: values characterized by similar motivational goals appear next to each other, while those with different motivational goals are situated in opposing positions. In addition, the values are organized along two bipolar higher-order dimensions. The first dimension contrasts openness to change (hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction), which is characterized by emphasis on change and independence, with conservation (tradition, conformity, and security), which is characterized by self-restraint, preserving traditional practices, and safeguarding stability. The second dimension contrasts self-enhancement (power and achievement), where people prioritize their personal interests even at the expense of others, with self-transcendence (benevolence and universalism), where people transcend selfish concerns to promote the welfare of others.

As values predict human behavior in many different life situations (e.g., Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Danioni & Barni, 2017; Schwartz, 2010), understanding whether and to what extent we can rely on their assessment becomes extremely relevant. Hence, this study aims to investigate the existing relationship between personal values, as theorized by Schwartz (1992), and socially desirable responding. More specifically, the study considers the multidimensional nature of social desirability, as characterized by Impression Management (IM) and Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) (Paulhus, 2002). As previous research has clearly emphasized the ways in which IM and SDE are markedly

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Table 1. The ten values types based on Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic human values.

Value type	Description
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
Self-direction	Independent thought and action: choosing, creating, exploring
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare of all people and nature
Benevolence	Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact
Tradition	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture and religion provide the self
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and to violate social expectations or norms
Security	Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of the self

different from one another, we expected to see a different relationship between each of these dimensions and personal values (see the section "Our Study" for more information on this).

Indeed, in the field of social psychology, it is widely recognized that value measurement is still an open question; this measurement process contains several challenges that researchers need to address (Maio, 2017). Among these challenges, social desirability deserves particular attention in the study of values, as it is one of the most common and pervasive sources of bias affecting self-reported outcomes, even able to suppress or inflate associations among variables (King & Bruner, 2000). Thus, social desirability may pose a threat to the validity of research findings due to its potential to distort respondents' answers (Paulhus, 1991; Peltier & Walsh, 1990). This issue becomes even more complex in regard to values, as some authors assume that values are intrinsically characterized by social desirability (Fisher & Katz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 1997; Verkasalo & Lindeman, 1994), while others tend to control for this bias by removing variance associated with social desirability (e.g., Guerra et al., 2012; Sanderson et al., 2019; Saroglou & Galand, 2004).

Social desirability: a multidimensional concept

Social desirability is traditionally defined as the tendency to respond in a way that the respondent believes useful in gaining approval or avoiding the disapproval of others (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Paulhus, 2002). This is only one type of response bias (among others is the response set, that is, the tendency to answer the item without considering its content), but it is that most frequently studied among those response biases which affect self-reported variables such as personality (e.g., Mick, 1996), ideals (Verkasalo & Lindeman, 1994) and values (e.g., Goldsmith et al., 1987; Schwartz et al., 1997).

When driven by social desirability concerns, respondents tend to hide their true feelings. This then influences the validity of their responses (Roccato, 2003). In general, women, older people and those with a low level of education display higher levels of socially desirable responding than do younger people and those with a higher level of education (e.g., Bobbio & Manganelli, 2011; Dalton & Ortegren, 2011; Heerwig & McCabe, 2009; Soubelet & Salthouse, 2011).

Despite early research conceptualized social desirability as a single concept (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Ones et al., 1996), researchers nowadays are consistent in differentiating two distinct dimensions of social desirability: impression management (IM) and self-deceptive enhancement (SDE) (e.g., Paulhus, 1984, 2002). The literature dealing with these dimensions of socially desirable responding is extensive and has captured the attention of various fields of psychology, from personality (e.g., Holtgraves, 2004) to marketing research (e.g., Fisher, 2000). IM is defined as a conscious representation of a positive public image. More specifically, IM is a deliberate attempt to distort responses through false responding or hedging in order to create a favorable impression on others. Other people's impressions are the main concern here; IM has in fact been defined as a "communal bias", characterized by a focus on others and forming connections with them (Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus &

John, 1998). In contrast, SDE is a style of responding that provides honest but positively biased responses to protect a positive image, which allows the respondents to see themselves in a positive light. Indeed, SDE is defined as an "agentic bias", highly characterized by a focus on the self (Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus & John, 1998). In this case, respondents truly believe their self-reporting, although their perception may be biased. More in general, at high levels of SDE, respondents show an amplified belief in the fact that they possess a number of positive qualities: they ignore minor criticisms, exhibit a high illusion of control of circumstances, and are, generally speaking, well-adjusted (Paulhus, 1991). SDE is positively correlated to overconfidence and self-esteem (Bobbio & Manganelli, 2011; Paulhus, 2002). The two dimensions of social desirability do not correlate with each other, which is thus seen as evidence of their discriminant validity (Paulhus, 1991).

Values and social desirability

Personal values are both "desired", i.e., something that people want in their lives, and "desirable", i.e., what people "should" strive for (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). It is because of the "desirable" component that values may be particularly affected by social desirability. Indeed, "concern with socially desirable responding may be especially warranted in the case of values scales, because people's values are, by definition, the goals they consider socially desirable" (Schwartz et al., 1997, p. 4). Values therefore inevitably contain an element of social desirability, which must be taken into consideration (Fisher & Katz, 2000). The associations of value priorities with socially desirable responding were a relevant issue for Schwartz et al. (1997), who measured these associations using the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS). The authors tested two alternative hypotheses: the substantive (or trait) hypothesis and the stylistic hypothesis.

The substantive (or trait) hypothesis asserts that the link between values and social desirability reflects important individual differences and is not indicative of response distortion. A large body of research in personality supports this hypothesis, and in fact treats social desirability as a substantive trait (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1983; Smith & Ellingson, 2002). In regard to values, the relationship may vary as a function of the value content, although this connection may be either positive or negative. Persons who score higher on a socially desirable responding scale are those who seek approval by engaging in widely accepted behaviors and aim at avoiding disapproval; these are conventional, predictable respondents (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). Respondents scoring high on socially desirable responding are expected to show higher scores on values related to the conservation and self-transcendence domains, as they emphasize social harmony, and lower scores on values related to openness to change and self-enhancement,[1] which are instead characterized by a personal focus. In contrast, the stylistic hypothesis states that social desirability systematically distorts the ratings of values, despite their content, as all values are defined as desirable.

In both the studies presented in Schwartz et al.'s (1997) work – the first carried out on a sample of 207 Israeli respondents, and the second on 131 Finnish social work students – the researchers found support for the substantive hypothesis. However, the stylistic hypothesis was only partially supported. Indeed, only a weak correlation was found between social desirability and the mean importance attributed to all values.

More recently, a growing number of studies have focused on the role of social desirability, examining it from different perspectives. Most of these studies pose social desirability as a possible threat to the validity of values measures, and therefore they control for this bias in their analyzes (e.g., Guerra et al., 2012; Saroglou & Galand, 2004). Accordingly, further developments in the literature dealing with values assessment have proposed new self-report instruments (e.g., the Portrait Values Questionnaire, PVQ; Schwartz et al., 2001) as well as indirect methods to reduce the influence of socially desirable responding (Danioni et al., 2020; Dentale et al., 2018).

In contrast, Bobbio and Manganelli (2011) asserted that the relationship between social desirability and values should not be considered wholly as an error phenomenon, but as evidence that those values related to social desirability are relevant in the social context in which a person was raised and/or lives.

Indeed, the character of the relationship between values and social desirability may vary according to context. For example, if a person lives in a family or in a wider environment where power and achievement are relevant values, he/she will be more likely to consider these values as socially desirable. According to a longitudinal study carried out by He and Van de Vijver (2015), respondents show similar levels of self-presentation style across different personality traits and values and over time; interestingly, the authors found that score correction for self-presentation strategies did not affect the variables.

Along these same lines, Fisher and Katz (2000) claimed that social desirability should not be viewed as a form of contamination in the process of value measurement, as it reflects the relative importance of a specific value within a culture: "significant associations between measures of social desirability responding and value self-reports are evidence of measure validity" (Fisher & Katz, 2000, p. 105). According to these researchers, several strategies may be adopted to overcome this unavoidable association, ranging from consciously ignoring it to reducing its influence. A researcher may choose to use either an "a priori" (e.g., increasing response anonymity) or an "a posteriori" approach (e.g., using a statistical control technique such as the regression method), depending on the aims of the study.

From this brief review it seems clear not only that the relationship between values and social desirability must be considered more in depth, but that the results found by Schwartz et al. (1997) necessitate further corroboration. This is due to the emergence of a multidimensional approach to social desirability and to the recent developments in self-report instruments for measuring values. Schwartz et al. (1997) were aware that the Marlowe-Crowne Scale they used in their study gave more weight to the IM component than to the SDE. Indeed, at this point the question of whether or not the effects of social desirability on values vary if we consider IM or SDE in the analysis has been left mostly unanswered; this is the main focus of our current study. Despite the fact that the former has been of greater concern to researchers (De Vries et al., 2014), SDE deserves specific attention as well (Verkasalo & Lindeman, 1994). Previous research on topics other than values has shown differing patterns of relationships among variables depending on the dimension of social desirability considered (e.g., Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). For example, respondents who score highly on self-deception are also those who have a more positively-biased view of themselves, are more achievement-oriented, and who value individualism (Barrick & Mount, 1996; Verkasalo & Lindeman, 1994). When considering values, which are characterized by both strong affective and cognitive components, SDE, which is a less deliberate distortion of the responses given by a respondent, may influence respondents' answers. For example, the importance assigned to self-transcendence values is enhanced by affective support, namely a positive feeling that fosters their relevance (Maio & Olson, 1998). Moreover, as values are personally important, they may be linked to this strategy of defensiveness toward the self (Paulhus, 1984).

Our study

The aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between values, IM and SDE; our specific hypotheses (H1 – H5) were rooted in Schwartz et al. (1997) pioneering work and on the theoretical nature of personal values. In line with the above-mentioned work carried out by Schwartz et al. (1997), we aimed to re-test the substantive hypothesis, which we divided into 4 separate and focused hypotheses (H1-H4), and one stylistic hypothesis (H5). To do so, we used two different measures of values: SVS (Schwartz, 1992) and PVQ (Schwartz et al., 2001). The latter is a more concrete and less cognitively complex instrument than the former; the two differ greatly in terms of their formats and the type of questions posed to respondents (see the section Measures for more details).

Substantive hypothesis

Based on the substantive hypothesis and on the 1997 results by Schwartz et al., we expected the values-social desirability relationship to vary as a function of the value content. Following the substantive hypothesis, we predicted that conservation (conformity, tradition, and security) and self-transcendence

(universalism and benevolence) were positively related to IM (H1). These values, which are characterized by a social focus (Schwartz, 2012) and which push to consider interpersonal relationships and "the others" as relevant, may be related to the intention to be viewed more favorably by others. Moreover, no relationship – or a negative relationship – was expected in regard to openness to change (hedonism, stimulation, and self-direction) or for self-enhancement (power and achievement), both of which are values that regulate how one expresses personal interests and characteristics (Schwartz, 2012), and IM (H2). By expanding the original substantive hypothesis, which considered only IM, in the current study we predicted the opposite pattern of relations for SDE: at high levels of SDE, respondents should be more achievement-oriented (Barrick & Mount, 1996; Paulhus, 1991), leading to a positive relationship with values characterized by personal focus, namely self-enhancement and openness to change (H3), and to a lack of – or a negative relationship to – conservation and self-transcendence (H4).

Stylistic hypothesis

Based on the earlier literature on this topic (Schwartz et al., 1997), we expected to find less support for the stylistic hypothesis, which signals a weak but significant connection between a total score made up of all ten values and both dimensions of social desirability. Indeed, this hypothesis claims that, since values are desirable by definition, the social desirability – independently of whether it is IM or SDE – systematically distorts all values ratings (H5).

Finally, we used two different measures of values, namely the Schwartz Value Survey and the Portrait Values Questionnaire, in order to explore which of the two is more strongly related to social desirability. They assess the same constructs but propose a different task to the respondents to do so.

Method

Participants

Participants were 224 Italian young adults (63.4% female) aged 18 to 29 years (M = 22.39, SD = 2.47). The a priori power analysis, with alpha =.05, power = .95 and a medium effect size (ES) of .30, showed that the sample size was appropriate for the analysis (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2009).

Most participants were unmarried (96%), a minority were cohabiting (3.1%) or married (0.9%). 83.5% of participants had one or more siblings (M = 1.42, SD = .74, range: 1–4), while 16.5% of participants were only-children. All participants were born in Italy and living in Italy at the time of the data collection.

Regarding participants' education level, 0.9% had completed middle school, and 64.3% secondary school. 23.6% of participants had completed an undergraduate degree, whereas 8.5% had a Master's degree; 2.7% had a Ph.D. or a post-graduate professional certification. Most participants were students (83.5%), while others were part-time (4%) or full time (10.7%) members of the workforce. A small percentage was in search of employment (.5 %) or rated "other" (1.3%) as a response to this question.

Measures

Socio-demographic information
Respondents were asked to provide some socio-demographic data (age, gender, educational level, occupation) and information about family characteristics (marital status, number of siblings).

Personal values
In order to assess personal values, we used the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992) and the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz et al., 2001; Italian validation by Capanna et al., 2005). The SVS was the first instrument Schwartz (1992) developed to measure human values and includes 58 single-value items (e.g., WISDOM, AN EXCITING LIFE, FAMILY SECURITY) which represent the

10 value types. Each value is followed by a brief explanation in brackets which is intended to clarify and narrow the meaning of that specific value: for example, WISDOM (a mature understanding of life). Respondents are asked to rate the importance of each of the 58 values presented as "a guiding principle in my life," on a 9-point scale, from −1 (*opposed to my values*) to 7 (*of supreme importance*). This judgment task requires participants to think about and evaluate abstract concepts. For this study, the scale was back-translated from the original English version. The scores were calculated by averaging the items for each of the ten value types: the higher the score assigned, the higher the importance given to the corresponding value. Cronbach's alpha coefficients computed on the present sample were all acceptable, ranging from .61 for tradition to .80 for stimulation and universalism.

The PVQ measures the importance respondents give to the same value types. The PVQ is comprised of 40 verbal portraits of a person and his/her objectives or aspirations; these verbal portraits reflect the importance of a value. We formulated the questions such that they referred to both male and female genders. For example, "Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/she likes to do things in his/her own original way" describes a person for whom self-direction is important. Respondents' values were inferred from their self-reported similarity (from 1 = *not like me at all* to 6 = *very much like me*) to people described in terms of their goals and aspirations. Once again, the scores were calculated by averaging the items for each value type. Cronbach's alpha coefficients computed on the present sample were almost all acceptable, ranging from .53 for tradition (this being the only score out of ten being below the acceptable cut off of .60) to .82 for achievement.

Social desirability

To measure socially desirable responding, we used the short version of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR 6), as validated in Italian by Bobbio and Manganelli (2011). Specifically, the scale is a 16-item measurement tool that assesses two dimensions of socially desirable responding. The first dimension, impression management (IM), is a conscious and habitual presentation of a positive public image aimed at being viewed more favorably. An item example for IM is "I always obey laws, even if I am unlikely to get caught". The second dimension, self-deceptive enhancement (SDE), is a positively-biased but subjectively-honest self-description aimed at protecting one's self-esteem. An item example for SDE is "I never regret my decisions". Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with each item on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly in disagreement* to 6 = *strongly in agreement*). The scores were calculated by averaging the items for both SDE and IM. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .68 for IM and .67 for SDE, confirming satisfactory internal consistency of both dimensions.

We presented the three scales in random order across participants to reduce any impact of presentation order on the responses.

Procedure

Participants were students recruited from various universities in northern and central Italy. Contact was made via e-mail: the students were informed as to the main objectives of the study and were told that their participation was free and voluntary. The sample was expanded by asking students to forward the questionnaire to personal acquaintances in the age range required for the study (18–29).

Participants who provided their informed consent were asked to fill in an anonymous online self-report questionnaire of approximately 30 minutes' duration. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Catholic University of Milan and followed the APA standard ethical guidelines for research. The main investigator of this study had previously completed the National Institutes of Health training course "Protecting Human Research Participants" (Certification Number: 2107256).

Data analysis

Preliminary analysis

We described the study variables in terms of means, standard deviations, and ranges. In accordance with the approach employed by Schwartz et al. (1997), values were not centered around the mean to control for response bias (Schwartz, 2003). Indeed, as comprehension of the bias of social desirability in the relationship with values was the main focus of this study, we intentionally did not control for this bias through statistical measures. This approach is also in accordance with recent trends in research which show that score corrections intended to compensate for response styles instead may reduce reliability (e.g., He & Van de Vijver, 2015; He et al., 2017). More specifically for our aim, Fischer (2004) clearly explained how "ipsative scores (...) have various undesirable properties, especially for statistical techniques involving correlations" (p. 278).

Substantive hypothesis

To test the substantive hypothesis (H1-H4), we correlated each of the ten values theorized by Schwartz (separately measured with SVS and PVQ) with both dimensions of socially desirable responding (IM and SDE) by calculating bivariate Pearson correlations between the variables.

Stylistic hypothesis

To test the stylistic hypothesis (H5), we calculated the bivariate Pearson correlations between the mean importance assigned to all ten value types (separately measured with SVS and PVQ) and both dimensions of socially desirable responding (IM and SDE).

Results

Preliminary analysis

Table 2 presents the study variables.

Respondents assigned the greatest importance to values such as benevolence, universalism and self-direction, despite the fact that the value hierarchy varied according to the instruments used to measure values (SVS or PVQ). The least importance was assigned to power, followed by tradition, and finally by stimulation (if we consider the SVS) or by achievement (if we instead consider the PVQ). Respondents

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and ranges of the study variables.

	Values					
	SVS			PVQ		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Universalism	4.58	1.18	1.50– 6.88	4.22	0.85	2.33– 6.00
Benevolence	5.01	1.17	1.80– 7.00	4.32	0.85	2.00– 6.00
Conformity	4.54	1.24	1.25– 7.00	3.90	0.87	1.80– 6.00
Tradition	3.25	1.25	−.20– 6.60	3.28	0.84	1.25– 5.75
Security	4.51	1.24	.60– 7.00	3.75	0.97	1.75– 6.00
Power	2.86	1.29	.40– 6.20	2.62	1.10	1.00– 6.00
Achievement	4.33	1.38	.75– 7.00	3.48	1.02	1.00– 6.00
Hedonism	4.40	1.43	.67– 7.00	3.61	1.09	1.00– 6.00
Stimulation	3.71	1.62	−.33– 7.00	3.56	1.09	1.00– 6.00
Self-direction	5.26	1.06	1.60– 7.00	4.20	0.82	2.00– 6.00
	Socially desirable responding					
	Mean			SD		Range
Impression Management	3.72			.77		2.00–5.38
Self-Deceptive Enhancement	3.46			.66		1.75–5.25

Table 3. Correlations between values and socially desirable responding.

	SVS		PVQ	
	Impression Management	Self-Deceptive Enhancement	Impression Management	Self-Deceptive Enhancement
Universalism	.10	−.02	.27***	−.05
Benevolence	.26***	−.07	.34***	−.06
Conformity	.13	.06	.25***	.06
Tradition	.17*	−.07	.27***	.00
Security	.07	.14*	.13	.12
Power	−.21**	.17*	−.19**	.39***
Achievement	−.15*	.21**	−.27***	.31***
Hedonism	−.15*	.10	−.19**	.15*
Stimulation	−.12	.09	−.05	.04
Self-direction	.01	.06	.03	.21**

*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

also showed quite similar levels of IM and SDE. Correlations between value types measured with the SVS and PVQ ranged from r = .52, *p* < .001 for self-direction and r = .69, *p* < .001 for hedonism.

Substantive hypothesis

Table 3 presents the correlations between both dimensions of socially desirable responding and the importance assigned to each value.

From the correlation analysis it emerged a moderate correlation between benevolence and IM, and a low correlation between tradition and IM; both relations (measured with both SVS and PVQ) were statistically significant and positive, which supported H1. Universalism and conformity measured by using the PVQ showed a low positive and statistically significant relationship with IM (again supporting H1). Power, achievement and hedonism showed a negative and low correlation with IM, but a positive and stronger (when measured with the PVQ) relation with SDE, thus supporting H2 and H3. The sole exception to this last finding was in the case of hedonism, only if the SVS was used. Self-direction (when the PVQ was used) and security (when the SVS was used) showed a positive but low correlation with SDE. This last result was the only exception to the overall support to H4, since the other values included in the self-transcendence and conservation dimensions did not show any relation with SDE.

Stylistic hypothesis

Observed correlations between the mean importance assigned to values measured with IM were: r = .00, *p* = .986 for SVS and IM and r = .13, *p* = .056 for PVQ and IM. Considering SDE led to the following results: r = .10, *p* = .119 for SVS and SDE and r = .20, *p* = .003 for PVQ and SDE. With regards to SDE, we therefore found a statistically significant positive connection only between the PVQ and the SDE measures.

Discussion and conclusions

As stated by Maio (2010), "the abstract nature of values is vital to their conceptualization, but it complicates their assessment" (p. 7). Indeed, values are an abstract and complex concept; this has created numerous difficulties when trying to assess them in a way which is coherent with the theoretical framework. Self-report measures have been recognized as appropriate tools for assessing this specific construct, as values represent subjective motivational goals (Roccas et al., 2017) that they seem to be able to tap. Values are something desirable (Schwartz, 1992); as such, researchers should be aware of the fact that respondents' reports of values can be affected by socially desirable responses

biases in the same way – or even more than – other self-report measures are (e.g., Feather, 1995; Fisher & Katz, 2000).

The aim of this study was to expand the pioneering work carried out by Schwartz et al. (1997), which reflects on the role of socially desirable responding in value measurement. Further corroboration of the results presented more than 20 years ago was felt to be necessary for two reasons. First of all, in order to tap the complexity of a construct such as socially desirable responding, it is not enough to consider respondents' conscious and habitual presentation of a positive public image to be viewed more favorably – impression management (IM). It is also necessary to consider the respondents' tendency to provide honest but positively biased self-reports to protect the self-esteem – self-deceptive enhancement (SDE) (Bobbio & Manganelli, 2011; Paulhus, 2002). It is therefore necessary to examine both dimensions. Secondly, new instruments to assess personal values are now available. Among these, the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz et al., 2001), which is more recent and now more widely used than the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992), deserves particular attention.

In measuring respondents' personal values, we found that participants gave the greatest importance to self-transcendence values (universalism and benevolence) – namely, those values focused on the welfare of others – and to self-direction. The least importance was given to self-enhancement values (power and achievement), where people prioritize their personal interests even at the expense of others. This result is in line with the findings of several previous studies which have investigated the value priorities of Italian young adults (see for example, Alfieri et al., 2014; Luengo Kanacri et al., 2012); we found similar (albeit not completely identical) value hierarchies when using either the SVS or the PVQ. However, correlations between values measured with the two scales were all positive, moderate to high, and statistically significant; this then indicates that the two instruments measure values in very similar ways.

Over twenty years after Schwartz et al.'s (1997) work, we found overall support for their substantive hypothesis. Our study found positive statistically significant correlations for universalism, benevolence, conformity and tradition on the one hand and IM on the other. This supports H1. The negative – albeit low – relation of IM to value types that challenge social conventions and harmony (our results highlighted statistically significant correlations for power, achievement, hedonism, but not for self-direction and stimulation) generally supported H2. It is important to note that a completely opposite pattern of relationships was found when analyzing the link between values and SDE. As hypothesized (H3), self-enhancement values (power and achievement), hedonism, and self-direction were positively related to SDE. Finally, it emerged an overall lack of relationship between SDE with conservation and self-transcendence, partly supporting H4. The only exception was the statistically significant but very low positive relationship with security (measured with SVS), which, owing to its small magnitude, cannot be considered as a strong disconfirm of the hypothesis.

In analyzing these results, the redefinition of the Theory of Human Values proposed in 2012 by Schwartz et al., who highlight the fact that some values are characterized more by a social focus while others more by a personal focus, may enable a more complete comprehension. In order to be viewed more favorably, respondents assign importance to those values which are characterized by a social focus, that is, by a concern with outcomes for others or established institutions (conservation and self-transcendence). Our results, which evidence a positive relation between universalism, benevolence, conformity and tradition and IM, confirm this tendency. Considering both those people close to us and the society in which one lives as relevant is therefore something respondents see as integral to being viewed more positively by others. Indeed, literature (Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus & John, 1998) has referred to IM as "communal bias" (that is, focus on others and forming connections with them); this is coherent with conservation and self-transcendence values. To be viewed more favorably, respondents do not consider those values characterized by a personal focus, namely a concern for the self – and, in particular, self-enhancement – as relevant principles in life. Indeed, our results show a negative relation between power, achievement, and hedonism and IM.

The recognition that the pattern of the self-enhancement values-SDE link is the diametrical opposite of that of the self-enhancement values-IM link led us to speculate that individuals with

high scores in SDE actually (and not only superficially) believe in their own overly-positive self-reports, and that they therefore rate as relevant values characterized by a personal focus and vice versa (i.e., individuals giving great importance to personally focused values could give overly-positive but honest self-reports). Indeed, SDE has been shown to be a more "agentic bias", highly characterized by a focus on the self (Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus & John, 1998). This finding is also in line with Verkasalo and Lindeman (1994), who found that those respondents who score higher on SDE are also those who hold individual values. A cultural explanation for this finding may be considered as well; this coincides with findings in available literature, which have shown a significant link between cultural orientation and socially desirable responding (Lalwani et al., 2006). It may be that in a Western, individualist culture such as Italy (Hofstede, 2001), which elicits the positive distinctness of the self, people feel the need to strive for power and achievement. We may therefore speculate that to be considered "worthy" based on cultural expectations, respondents rate these values as important in order to protect a positive view of themselves.

According to the findings presented in this study – and in contrast to Schwartz et al.'s (1997) conclusions – no support was found for the stylistic hypothesis in the relationship between all values measured with SVS and IM. This held true also when the PVQ was used. Conversely, SDE was marginally linked to the mean score of all values when measured with PVQ, thus providing only partial support for the stylistic hypothesis (H5). Based on our results, the stylistic hypothesis may be confirmed only with regard to SDE, but not to IM. Respondents scoring high on SDE are those who provide an overly positive view of the self by considering all values as relevant – in other words, by considering themselves as endorsing all values despite their content. However, we note that the correlation score supporting the stylistic hypothesis for SDE was low, and no support was found when considering the SVS. Thus, we are not fully confident in this result. Further research to corroborate this finding should adopt a cross cultural approach; this may help to disentangle the role of the cultural context in shaping this relationship, as the relationship may vary according to the values expectations applied within a particular context.

Based on the results presented, we believe that the major contribution of the current research is to show how differentiating between the facets of socially desirable responding is informative in studying personal values; indeed, SDE also appears to have an impact on values assessment. This aligns values with conclusions of recent trends of research into other issues (e.g., Lalwani et al., 2006; Sanderson et al., 2019), all of which have concluded that SDE has a relevant impact on the outcomes, as does IM. According to Uziel (2014), individuals high in SDE (rather than IM) are those who actually define the self in a highly desirable manner, thus feeling closeness between their actual and ideal selves. Consequently, he argues that SDE needs to be considered as the real social desirability scale. In our study, it is also important to note that very similar results were found when using the SVS or the PVQ, whose scores were also highly correlated between them. In very few cases (e.g., universalism and IM) were the results statistically significant only for one instrument (the PVQ) but not for the other (the SVS). In any case, we never found a result deeply changing based on the instrument used to measure values. It is therefore the inclusion of both facets of socially desirable responding, rather than the self-report instrument used to measure value, that deserves major attention.

All in all, our conclusions lead us to agree with Schwartz et al. (1997), whose results tend to support the substantive, rather than the stylistic, hypothesis. Moreover, we can partially confirm this hypothesis when considering also SDE, despite the fact that the nature of the link is not the same. Indeed, in this case, the pattern of the relationship between values and socially desirable responding is partially reversed. To summarize, the link between values and social desirability varies as a function not only of the value content but also of the specific kind of social desirability bias.

In light of these results, we argue that, if socially desirable responding does not systematically distort all values rating (as proposed by the stylistic hypothesis), then data purification of this bias is probably not the best path to follow. Traditionally, research focused on the influence of socially

desirable responding adopts a form of "secondary prevention" of this bias, measuring the extent to which participants employ a socially desirable response (Grimm, 2010; Roccato, 2008) in order to remove this bias from the data collected when performing the analysis. However, the results of the work by Schwartz et al. (1997) and our own study indicate that it is important to take into account both the nature of the construct considered – namely values, which may be naturally characterized (at least in part) by being desirable (Fisher & Katz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 1997) – and the possible loss of information if social desirability is removed. Thus, the challenge becomes finding a way to avoid data purification and to reflect instead on the wider meaning of the possible influence of this bias included in the data.

The study presented here is not without limitations. Relying on a sample composed mostly of female students reduces our ability to generalize the findings to the broader population; future research should aim to disentangle eventual gender differences in the relation between personal values and social desirability. The concern about the generalizability of the findings is of course also linked to the age range considered – principally young adults. As mentioned above, this study also involves a single-country convenience sample. Moreover, participation was free and voluntary, thus it is likely that there was some self-selection, resulting in participants keen to respond in a socially desirable manner.

Nonetheless, this study analyzes values and social desirability by respecting the composite theoretical nature of the two concepts and empirically showing the complex pattern of their relationships, which vary according to the social desirability dimension considered. In this research field, clarification of the effects of socially desirable responding can be of great help in the never-ending process of understanding and assessing human values.

Note

1. Specifically, Schwartz et al. (1997) predicted the following order of the sizes of the correlations, from the most positive to the most negative: conformity, tradition, security, benevolence, universalism, power, achievement, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/dknv6/.

Open scholarship

This article has earned the <u>Center for Open Science badge</u> for Open Data and Open Materials. The materials and datas are openly accessible at https://osf.io/dknv6/.

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