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Social Desirability in light of Rational Choice Theory

Structure

Abstract

Social desirability (SD) is often mentioned as cause of unexpected results. It describes the tendency of respondents to present semself in front of interviewers, third party or a fictitious public in a "good light", especially when sensitive questions are asked. Despite of now almost 60 years of research, there is no reliable knowledge whether SD is a strong problem in survey research. There are a huge number of studies but most of them deal only with one posible cause of SD bias, without taking into account other important factors. Further, different studies use very different dimensions and/or different operationalizations of SD bias. As a consequence in the first part of this thesis a systematic discussion is presented of the terms, operationalization and theoretical approaches used to analyse SD and SD bias. Because most theretical arguments are based or can be based on rational choice theory I concentrate in this thesis on SD in the context of rational choice approach.

Upon closer examination of the content it is clear that the phenomenon of SD includes a number of different dimensions that must be taken into account. In studies on SD bias the perspective of social desirability change depending on which aspect is considered. In order to ensure comparability of research results, however, it is necessary to classify empirical studies with respect to these dimensions of SD.

Under which conditions occurs socially desirable response behavior? In the German context, the theoretical discussion was strongly influenced by Hartmut Esser's work that is developed further by Volker Stocké. To their approaches the need for social approval may lead to a response bias, if the respondents perceive a social norm and is not interviewed in a completely anonymous situation. It was shown that the various theoretical approaches have weaknesses that need to be considered in the implementation and interpretation of results. But in empirical research imprecise use of concepts and theoretical gaps occurs.

More empirically the scales used to cope with SD have shown unsystematic results in factor analysis. It is obvously that different dimension of SD must be taken into account. Otherwise there is no way to prove whether various measurement instruments are functionally equivalent. To get more insight into this problem in the empirical part of this thesis the results of three empirical studies are presendet. First it will be shown using factor analysis that the so called "lie scales" do not confirm the theoretical expectations.

Despite their weaknesses the "lie scales" are often used in population surveys. Because of this in a second study the power of these scales to expleain prejudice items are analyzed. The results are disappointing and seems to be more or less arbitrary. The conclusion is that SD scales shoud not be used as a singular factor to controll for SD-bias.

Therefore in a third study it is investigated whether the more complex models of Stocké and Skarbek- Kozietulska et al. and a combination of these models can explain better answers on prejudices. The data are based on a student sample. The findings indicate that none of the models

achieved stability in explaining prejudices. It is shown that the results are very sensitive to small changes in operationalization.

In the concluding chapter it is noted that the unregular pattern of results in research on SD bias is due to unclear theoretical concepts and weak operationalization. Further, it becomes clear that a large number of additional measures are necessary if one want to controll for SD-bias. Because it is an open question under which conditions SD bias is a serious problem is is not recommended yet to apply such complex measures. There may be more harm than gain. In order to investigate interactions both of determinants and consequences of SD bias systematicically, a large research program is necessary.