

Is self-reported intellectual humility vulnerable to social desirability bias? Evidence from traditional and item-specific approaches

Khant Si Thu, and Yusuke Takahashi (Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University)

Keywords: intellectual humility, social desirability bias, self-report measurement

Research Overview

Self-report measures of intellectual humility may be susceptible to social desirability bias. This study examines that possibility among Japanese adults by comparing associations of intellectual humility with a traditional social desirability scale and item-specific ratings of how socially desirable intellectual humility items are perceived to be.

Purpose of study

Intellectual Humility (IH) is the disposition to recognize and acknowledge the limits of one's knowledge (Porter et al., 2022). Research on IH has grown because it may be relevant to important social and educational outcomes, including lower levels of polarization and myside bias (Bowes et al., 2021). However, because IH is often assessed through self-report questionnaires, its measurement may be affected by social desirability bias. Self-report measures have clear advantages in psychological research. They are inexpensive, easy to administer, and allow participants to report general tendencies across everyday contexts that may be difficult to capture with performance-based measures (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). At the same time, self-reports may be influenced by respondents' tendency to present themselves in a favorable light. Traditionally, researchers have dealt with social desirability (SD) bias in self-report measures by using SD scales designed to measure participants' general tendency to present themselves in a positive light and by examining whether the target measure is correlated with such scales. However, Lanz et al. (2021) have argued that traditional SD scales conflate "faking good" (presenting oneself favorably) with "being good" (actually possessing socially valued traits).

This distinction is especially important for IH, because intellectually humble behaviors may themselves be viewed as socially desirable. The present study therefore examines whether scores on a self-report IH scale are associated with two forms of social desirability: a traditional person-level social desirability scale and item-specific ratings of the desirability of the IH items themselves. By comparing these two approaches, the study aims to clarify whether observed associations between IH and social desirability are more consistent with response bias, socially desirable item content, or both.

Research Methods

A sample of 400 Japanese adults aged 18–50 will be recruited through CrowdWorks, an online crowdsourcing platform in Japan. Participants will complete an online questionnaire administered through Qualtrics. After providing informed consent, participants will respond to three main measures, followed by demographic questions.

1. Intellectual Humility

IH will be assessed using a Japanese version of the six-item General Intellectual Humility Scale (Leary et al., 2017). An example item is, “I question my own opinions, positions, and viewpoints because they could be wrong.”

2. Social Desirability

Traditional social desirability will be measured using a shortened 12-item Japanese version of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991). The shortened Japanese version has demonstrated sufficient validity and will be used to reduce participant burden (Fujioka & Wakita, 2023). An example item is, “I sometimes tell lies if I have to” (reverse coded).

3. Item-specific social desirability of the intellectual humility scale

Item-specific social desirability will be assessed by presenting the same IH items with modified instructions. Instead of rating how well each statement describes themselves, participants will rate how socially desirable it would be for another person to show each characteristic. This measure is intended to capture the perceived desirability of the specific IH item content. The order of the IH self-report and item-specific desirability blocks will be randomized to reduce order effects.

Expected Results and Discussion

After examining the internal consistency of each scale, the main analyses will examine correlations among IH scores, BIDR scores, and item-specific social desirability ratings of the IH items. A positive association between IH and BIDR would suggest that higher self-reported IH is related to a general tendency toward socially desirable responding. A positive association between IH and item-specific desirability ratings would suggest that people who perceive IH behaviors as more socially desirable also tend to report higher IH. If IH is associated with both indicators, this would provide evidence that self-reported IH may be susceptible to social desirability concerns. If IH is not clearly associated with either indicator, the study would provide limited evidence of social desirability concerns in this design, though it would not prove that IH self-reports are entirely free from bias. If IH is associated with one indicator but not the other, the findings would suggest that traditional and item-specific approaches capture different aspects of social desirability. By distinguishing traditional social desirability from the perceived desirability of specific IH items, this study contributes to research on the measurement of intellectual humility and to broader discussions about how self-report scales should be evaluated when they assess socially valued psychological characteristics.