

Under Time Pressure, People Tell Us What We Want to Hear

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When asked to answer questions quickly and impulsively, people tend to respond with a socially desirable answer rather than an honest one, a set of experiments shows.

[The findings, published in Psychological Science](#), raise questions about a time-honored experimental technique, said John Protzko, a University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) cognitive scientist who co-led the study with colleague Claire Zedelius.

“The method of ‘answer quickly and without thinking’, a long staple in psychological research, may be doing many things, but one thing it does is make people lie to you and tell you what they think you want to hear,” Protzko said. “This may mean we have to revisit the interpretation of a lot of research findings that use the ‘answer quickly’ technique.

“The idea has always been that we have a divided mind — an intuitive, animalistic type and a more rational type,” he continued. “And the more rational type is assumed to always be constraining the lower order mind. If you ask people to answer quickly and without thinking, it’s supposed to give you sort of a secret access to that lower order mind.”

To test this assumption, Protzko, Zedelius, and their UCSB colleague Jonathan Schooler devised a test

of 10 simple yes-or-no questions, such as “I sometimes feel resentful when I don’t get my way,” and “No matter who I’m talking to, I’m always a good listener.” Through a survey, respondents were asked to take fewer than 11 seconds, or alternatively, more than 11 seconds to answer each question. They found that the fast-answering group was more likely to give socially desirable answers, while the slow answerers and the ones who were not given any time constraints (fast or slow) were less likely to do so, Protzko said.

In a subsequent experiment, the researchers set out to learn whether people tend to give socially acceptable responses under time pressure because they view themselves as genuinely virtuous — a phenomenon referred to as the good-true-self bias. The researchers had another group of participants respond to the questions under varying time restrictions. The respondents then participated in a social-judgment task designed to assess the degree to which they ascribe morally good and bad behavior to the true self. Those who scored lower on the good-true-self bias scale (i.e., they thought people were more of a mix of good and bad qualities) should presumably be less prone to give socially desirable responses under time pressure.

However, what the researchers found was that individuals scoring high on the good-true-self measure gave highly socially desirable answers in general, but especially so when they were given ample time to deliberate. In contrast, it was low scorers who adjusted their responses by responding in a more socially desirable way under time pressure.

In other words time pressure does not bring out a person’s good “true self.”

Under time pressure, people may default to their desire to appear virtuous, even if it means misrepresenting themselves, Protzko concluded.

He and his colleagues plan to examine previous studies that used the quick-answer technique to see how much results might be driven by participants giving socially desirable answers.

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