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NATURAL DESCRIPTORS – A STUDY ON SOCIAL DESIRABILITY AND SOCIAL UTILITY

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ABSTRACT

Personality is the subject of multiple investigations. In recruitment in particular, it is one of the main elements on which job candidates are evaluated. But the evaluation, the attribution of value, consists in judging the utility and social desirability of the subject matter. This article aims to take the 88 personological descriptors obtained by Mazilescu and Gangloff (1) from the self and hetero-spontaneous descriptions and examine the utility and desirability by applying the procedure described by Le Barbenchon, Cambon and Lavigne (2).

The results show that all descriptors are loaded with social utility and desirability, either positive or negative. Differences were also observed between utility and desirability, neutral judgments being more frequent for utility than for desirability, which means a greater polarization for desirability than for utility, thus confirming the independence of the two dimensions.

Key words: natural descriptors, social value, social, desirability, social utility

1. INTRODUCTION

In the organizational environment, in recruitment, evaluating the candidates entails evaluating their personality. But to evaluate means to measure a value, i.e. to measure a social desirability and a social utility (3-6). The desirability would refer to the agreeable, attractive nature of each characteristic of the evaluated object, and the utility of the power that each of these characteristics might have either to allow the object to realize its objectives (thus Peeters (7) speaks about "profitability for the self"), or to allow the society, taken as a whole, to realize its objectives (thus Beauvois (3), speaks about "social utility"). Another way of saying: this desirability would respond to the emotional or motivational register, the utility of the ability to promote oneself within the social system in which the evaluation takes place (3).

Initially, the works of Cambon (8) have focused on the analysis of the occupations. His results showed that regardless of the status or gender of participants, the production occupations are perceived as more socially useful than the occupations of maintenance, as the maintenance occupations are perceived more desirable than production occupations. Another result of its work comes to clarify that the activation of emotional processing mode promotes the use of desirable adjectives, while the evaluative treatment promotes the use of adjectives that reflect utility. Regarding the evaluation of traits in the workplace, masculine traits are better valued to the detriment of feminine traits (8).

Other results of Cambon show that: the persons that are being socially valued are described more in terms of social utility than the persons with low status; the portrayals associated with a high financial value are described more in terms of social utility, as the portrayals associated with a low financial value are described more in terms of social desirability (9-10).

Le Barbenchon & Milhabet (2005) have shown that optimistic individuals have been seen as more socially useful than non optimistic persons. From this result, they draw the conclusion that the optimistic response is preferentially associated with the persons' social utility rather than their desirability (11).

While studying the social value of people, Dubois & Aubert (2010) found that the two dimensions of the value function as relevant assessment criteria for different areas include: social utility is used to judge the social value and desirability is used to assess social relationships (12).

In his work on the utility and desirability of normative information about subordinates and colleagues Gangloff (2010) founded that social desirability and utility are two dimensions of value that are not always linked and that judgments differ depending on the status of future collaborator (subordinate or even) and according to the norm that information refers (internality, belief in just world, allegiance) (13).

The recruitment process entails the examination of the candidates' personality from these two perspective: that of social desirability and of social utility. Our objective was to approach this type of evaluation starting from the 88 personality descriptors.

2. METHOD

This study measures the utility and the desirability of 88 descriptors, using the 4 evaluation scales in 7 steps of Le Barbenchon, Cambon et Lavigne (2): 2 utility scales and 2 desirability scales. Utility is measured by estimating the capacity of an individual to succeed in their professional life and the wages level; while desirability is measured by estimating the capacity to be loved and to have numerous friends. For example:

A person xxx... is more likely a person who:

Does not have anything to succeed in their professional life

Has everything to succeed in their professional life



Since using the 88 descriptors in one questionnaire, on one population, is difficult, these descriptors have been grouped randomly into 9 questionnaires, each of them with an even number of positive and negative descriptors. These questionnaires have been then distributed to 270 subjects (116 male and 154 female) students of a Romanian technical university.

Starting with the answers received, 2 hierarchies (one for utility, the other for desirability) have been built, which have led to 3 utility levels (+ utility, 0 utility and - utility) and to 3 desirability levels (+ desirability, 0 desirability and - desirability).

3. RESULTS

Table 1 contains a few examples within the desirability hierarchy:

Table 1. Partial hierarchy of social desirability judgements

Rank	Descriptors	Slope	N	Min	Max	Standard deviation	Mean	Average Z	Desirability
2	optimistic, with a cheerful temperament, who loves life and takes advantage of all its joys	P	30	3,5	7	6,267	0,8976	1,4955	D+
...
44	who adapts its desires to their possibilities	P	30	2	7	4,683	1,0787	0,2487	D0
...
88	arriviste, no scruples, capable of anything to reach their objectives, who manipulates and takes advantage of people	N	30	1	3	1,7	0,7022	-2,099	D-

3.1. Judgements of the globally analysed descriptors

It is noticed that the frequency of positive and negative judgments regarding desirability and utility is identical, but significantly higher than the neutral judgments. (table 2 and 4).

Table 2. Distribution (in %) of desirability and utility judgements, globally analysed

	Positive judgments	Neutral judgments	Negative judgements
Desirability	48,86 %	6,82 %	44,32 %
Utility	43,18 %	17,05 %	39,77 %

Table 3. A comparison of desirability judgements, globally analysed

Desirability	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Positive judgements	$\chi^2 = 31,75$ ($p < 0,05$)	$\chi^2 = 0,22$ (ns)
Neutral judgements		$\chi^2 = 27,50$ ($p < 0,05$)

Table 4. Comparing the utility judgements, globally analysed

Utility	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Positive judgements	$\chi^2 = 11,34$ ($p < 0,05$)	$\chi^2 = 0,14$ (ns)
Neutral judgements		$\chi^2 = 9,09$ ($p < 0,05$)

3.2. Judgements of the descriptors according to their positive and negative slope

3.2.1. Positive slope descriptors

In terms of the positive slope of the personality descriptors, we find a significant prevalence of positive judgements over the neutral and negative ones, both for desirability, as well as utility (tables 5-7). We also notice, in terms of the utility, that neutral judgements are significantly more frequent than negative judgements.

Table 5. Distribution (in %) of the desirability and utility judgements of positive descriptors.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	90,91 %	6,82 %	2,27 %
Utility	77,27 %	20,45 %	2,27 %

Table 6. Comparison of the desirability judgements of positive descriptors.

Desirability	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Positive judgements	$\chi^2 = 72,35$ (p<0,05)	$\chi^2 = 84,32$ (p<0,05)
Neutral judgements		$\chi^2 = 2,28$ (ns)

Table 7. Comparison of the utility judgements of positive descriptors.

Utility	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Positive judgements	$\chi^2 = 33,04$ (p<0,05)	$\chi^2 = 70,72$ (p<0,05)
Neutral judgements		$\chi^2 = 14,55$ (p<0,05)

3.2.2. Negative slope descriptors

In terms of the negative descriptors, we notice a significant prevalence of negative judgements over the neutral or positive ones, both for desirability, as well as utility (table 8).

Table 8. Distribution (in %) of the desirability and utility judgements of negative descriptors.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	6,82 %	6,82 %	86,36 %
Utility	9,09 %	13,64 %	77,27 %

3.3. Descriptor judgements according to their focus point (interaction descriptors vs. self-centred descriptors)

3.3.1. Analysis of the regrouped positive and negative slopes

We notice that, for the interaction descriptors, both for desirability, as well as for utility, the frequency of positive judgements is similar to that of negative judgements, but higher than that of neutral judgements (table 9).

Table 9. Distribution (in %) of the desirability and utility judgments of social interaction descriptors, globally analysed.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	47,62 %	2,38 %	50 %
Utility	40,48 %	14,29 %	45,24 %

Identical results have been obtained for the self-centred descriptors.

3.3.2. Slope-based analysis.

For the positive slope of the social interaction descriptors (table 10) we notice, in terms of desirability, that the positive judgements are more frequent than the neutral or the negative ones. In terms of utility, we have obtained a complete hierarchy that starts with positive judgements, followed by the neutral ones and, finally, the negative ones.

Table 10. Distribution (in %) of the desirability and utility judgements of social interaction descriptors, positive slope.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	90,48 %	4,76 %	4,76 %
Utility	76,19 %	19,05 %	4,76 %

As for the negative slope of the social interaction descriptors (table 11), in terms of desirability, we notice that all differences are significant, with a predominance of negative judgements, followed by the positive and, finally, by the neutral ones. In terms of utility, we have found that the negative judgements are more frequent than the neutral or the positive ones.

Table 11. Distribution (in %) of the desirability and utility judgements of social interaction descriptors, negative slope.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	4,76 %	0,00 %	95,24 %
Utility	4,76 %	9,52 %	85,71 %

In terms of the positive slope of the self-centred descriptors, we notice, both for desirability, as well as for utility, that the positive judgements are the most frequent, followed by the neutral ones and, finally, by the negative ones (table 12).

Table 12. Distribution (in %) of desirability and utility judgements of self-centred descriptors, positive slope.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	91,30 %	8,70 %	0,00 %
Utility	78,26 %	21,74 %	0,00 %

In terms of the negative slope of the self-centred descriptors (table 13), the results are identical, both for desirability, as well as for utility, the negative judgements being more frequent than the neutral or the positive ones.

Table 13. Distribution (in %) of desirability and utility judgements of self-centred descriptors, negative slope.

	Positive judgements	Neutral judgements	Negative judgements
Desirability	8,70 %	13,04 %	78,26 %
Utility	13,04 %	17,39 %	69,57 %

3.4. Comparisons between the desirability and the utility judgements

The only differences between desirability and utility are found in the neutral judgements, these neutral judgements being, in general, more frequent for utility than for desirability.

3.5. Comparisons between the judgements of social interaction descriptors and those of self-centred descriptors

The comparisons between the judgements of social interaction descriptors and the self-centred descriptors (globally analysed) underline one significant difference: the neutral desirability judgements are more frequent for self-centred descriptors than for social interaction descriptors (table 14). No significant difference has been identified for utility.

Table 14. Differences, in terms of desirability, between the social interaction descriptors and the self-centred descriptors.

Desirability	Descript AC (j+)	Descript AC (j0)	Descript AC (j-)
Descript IS (j+)	$\chi^2 = 0,06$ (ns)		
Descript IS (j0)		$\chi^2 = 5,44$ ($p < 0,05$)	
Descript IS (j-)			$\chi^2 = 1,33$ (ns)

NB: Descript AC (j+) = self-centred descriptors positive judgements; Descript AC (j0) = self-centred descriptors neutral judgements; Descript AC (j-) = self-centred descriptors negative judgements. Descript IS (j+) = social interaction descriptors positive judgements.

If we make the same comparisons for the positive slope of the descriptors, we notice that the only difference reported, in terms of desirability and utility, targets the predominance of negative social interaction judgements over the negative self-centred judgements (let us remember that for the positive slope of the self-centred descriptors there has been no negative judgement, neither for desirability, nor for utility).

In terms of the negative slope of descriptors, two significant differences have been found:

- in terms of desirability, the neutral judgements are more frequent for self-centred descriptors than the social interaction descriptors (13.04% to 0%, where $\chi^2 = 13.04$; $p < 0.05$) ;
- in terms of utility, the positive judgements of self-centred descriptors are more numerous than the interaction ones (13.04% to 4.76%, where $\chi^2 = 3.85$; $p < 0.05$).

4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The personological descriptors are basically loaded with a social utility and a social desirability, either positive or negative: the positive and negative judgements prevail over the neutral ones, both for desirability, as well as for utility. These results confirm the social value carried by the personological descriptors used in free descriptions.

The differences reported between utility and desirability, when the neutral judgements are more frequent for utility than for desirability, indicate a greater polarization for desirability than for utility and confirm the independence of the two dimensions.

The slope-focused analyses (positive and negative) indicate, both for desirability, as well as for utility, that:

- on the positive slope, the positive judgements dominate the negative judgements;
- on the negative slope, the negative judgements dominate the positive judgements.

If we analyse the 2 subcategories (social interaction descriptors and self-centred descriptors), we notice that in 2 situations, both for desirability, as well as for utility, the number of positive judgements is comparable to the number of negative judgements, and that the neutral judgements are the least frequent. We also notice that the positive judgements are predominant on the positive slope, and that the negative judgements are predominant on the negative slope.

In spite of all these similarities, there are a couple of differences between the 2 subcategories, in terms of neutral judgements.

- on the one side, for social interaction descriptors, the neutral judgements of utility are more numerous than the neutral judgements of desirability (while for the self-centred descriptors, the neutral utility judgements are identical to the neutral desirability judgements). Therefore, in terms of interaction, desirability seems more important than utility.

- on the other hand, the neutral desirability judgements are more frequent for self-centred descriptors than for social interaction descriptors, which confirms the importance given to desirability in terms of social interaction.

Moreover, in general, this data reflects, at least on an interactional level, a greater polarization for desirability than for utility, thus confirming the observation of Devos-Comby and Devos (14) regarding the independence between desirability and utility.

The fact that this polarization is only noticed here for the social interaction descriptors might help us understand the results of Kim and Rosenberg (15), or those of Fiske, Cuddy, Glick and Xu (16), which report not an independence, but, on the contrary, correlations between the two dimensions: the type of descriptors analysed may determine these differences between the results.

Therefore, it seems opportune to conduct additional complementary studies aiming to extend the analyses on other types of descriptors as well.

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