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Interactions between motivation to fake and personality item characteristics: Clarifying the process

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ABSTRACT

Using a think aloud protocol, the interaction between motivation to fake and personality item characteristics (social desirability and face validity) on both response processes and self-ratings were studied under three instructional sets. The first study compared respond honestly to a fake-good instructional set, and results indicated that motivation to fake and item characteristics have interactive effects on both response processes and self-ratings. The second study replicated the first study using an applicant instructional set and results indicated that applicant response processes and self-ratings were more similar to the respond honestly instructional set than fake-good instructional set from study 1. However, there were meaningful differences between the applicant and respond honestly instructional sets. Results were discussed in relation to process models of faking, importance of considering item characteristics in all faking research, and practical implications related to the predictive accuracy of personality scales and detection of faking.

1. Introduction

Faking as it relates to personality assessment remains a popular research issue, especially in the domain of personnel selection (Holladay, David, & Johnson, 2013; Landers, Sackett, & Tuzinski, 2011; Morgeson et al., 2007; Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007). Faking research has examined the extent to which faking affects the reliability, predictive validity, construct validity, and utility of personality test scores (Bradley & Hauenstein, 2006; Donovan, Dwight, & Schneider, 2013; Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007; Holden, 2008; Hough, Eaton, Dunnette, Kamp, & McCloy, 1990; Kilcullen & White, 1998; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996; Schmit & Ryan, 1993; Zickar & Robie, 1999). In addition, researchers also have focused on social desirability, addressing such issues as the construct representation of social desirability, potential effects of socially desirable responding on the construct validity of other trait dimensions, and the extent to which scores on measures of social desirability accurately identify dissimulating test takers (Christiansen, 1998; Connelly & Chang, 2015; Ellingson, Heggestad, & Makarius, 2012; Ellingson, Sackett, & Hough, 1999; Smith & Ellingson, 2002; Snell & Sydell, 1999).

However, the underlying cognitive processes associated with honest responding and intentional faking are not well understood (Griffith & Peterson, 2011) as few studies are designed to address the intrapsychic question "what *does* go on in the participant's mind in the time between reading a questionnaire item and arriving at a response?" (Kuncel & Kuncel, 1995, p. 183). The traditional focus of faking research is on modeling *responses* to test items which are fundamentally different than modeling the *processes* that lead to such responses. In the current research, motivation to fake was manipulated using instructional sets and a think-aloud protocol (while responding to items) was used to study underlying cognitive processes. Utterances were coded into categories of responses and these response patterns were examined in relation to respondents' self-ratings. In the first study, we contrasted honest versus fake good instructional sets; in the second study, we used a job applicant instructional set to contrast to the honest and fake-good instructional sets used in study one. We also examined the extent to which two item characteristics, item social desirability and item face validity, interact with motivation to fake in both studies.

Although it is well-established that honest versus a fake-good instructional set produces large differences in self-ratings, there is also concerns about the generalizability of fake-good

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instructional sets to applied contexts (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999), and study 2 is conducted in part to address the generalizability issue. However, because so little research has been done on thought processes, it also important to establish how thought processes differ as a function of intending to respond honestly versus maximization of a good impression, especially in relation to differing of item characteristics. Furthermore, the first study is important because it establishes two baselines from which to contrast thought processes under the applicant instructional set. It is difficult to interpret differences between individuals attempting to respond honestly versus individuals applying for a job without also knowing how the thought processes differ between job applicants and individuals attempting to maximize impression management.

2. Intrapsychic processes

According to Griffith and McDaniel (2006), reading a 20-item personality scale takes about 1.5 min, but the average administration time is about 10–15 min. Clearly, respondents engage in meaningful levels of social cognitive processes prior to responding. Vasilopoulos, Reilly, and Leaman (2000) reviewed three social cognitive models of faking. In the self-schema model (McDaniel & Timm, 1990), a respondent accesses his/her self-schema, just as done when attempting to respond honestly, but then modestly exaggerates self-ratings of positive characteristics and modestly downplays self-ratings ratings of negative characteristics in an attempt to appear more socially desirable. In the adopted schema model (Furnham, 1990; Holden, 1998; Holden & Hibbs, 1995; Jansen, König, Kleinmann, & Melchers, 2012; Mahar, Cologon, & Duck, 1995), also known as role faking, a respondent accesses a schema that more precisely fits the given context, e.g., applying for a retail sales job, and then responds in a manner that appears socially desirable in that context. Finally, in the semantic-exercise model (Holtgraves, 2004; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977), the respondent answers each item solely based on perceived item social desirability, without accessing any schema or self-referencing information.

The debate about the validity of each faking model is most commonly tested using response latency measures and subsequent discussion often focuses on the viability of using respondent reaction times to detect faking (e.g. Fine & Pirak, 2016; Shoss & Strube, 2011; Van Hooft & Born, 2012). However, researchers don't always agree on the predicted pattern of response latencies for a given model. For example, Shoss and Strube (2011) argue that relative to responding honestly, semantic processing leads to faster reaction times because there is no retrieval of "schema exemplars" (exemplars are most often thought of as behavioral memories, Klein, Loftus, Trafton, & Fuhrman, 1992) as part of the response process (see Table 1, p. 165). In contrast, Fine and Pirak (2016) argue that relative to honest responding, semantic processing leads to slower reaction times because respondents need time to contemplate item social desirability. Regardless these disagreements, a recognized problem with the response latency approach is that the time it takes a respondent to choose a response option is an interaction of many individual and contextual variables (Holden, Wood, & Tomashewski, 2001), and response latency is unlikely to be a reliable identifier of fakers (Robie et al., 2000; Shoss & Strube, 2011).

Given the first study utilized honest versus fake-good instructional sets, the thought process hypotheses were based the semantic-exercise position that when faking assessments of item social desirability if the primary processing goal. However, the semantic exercise model is not clear on whether assessment of item social desirability results in "shallow" processing or "in-depth" processing, nor do the results of response latency studies provide clarity in that there are findings that faking leads to both quicker (i.e., evidence of shallow processing) or slower (i.e., evidence of elaborative processing) reaction times. We are using the terms shallow and in-depth processing in the classic manner regarding memory traces as described by Craik and Tulving (1975), and we use the label "elaborative processing" as a synonym for in-depth processing. In spite of the conflicting evidence, we believe that when and individual is engaged in maximal impression management, he/she is more likely to engage in elaborative processing.

We base this expectation of greater elaborative processing in part on empirical findings in the faking literature. For example, Van Hooft and Born (2012) used both response latency and eye-tracking measures and found that, relative to a honest instructional set, response latency was slower and eye fixations on the extreme anchors were greater under a fake-good instructional set; Fine and Pirak (2016) found that response latencies for integrity items (both overt and personality-based) were slower under an applicant instructional set than an honest instructional set. More importantly, we base our elaborative processing argument on the broader meaning of semantic analysis. In discussion models of faking, the semantic exercise model is equated with assessment of item social desirability, but semantic analysis is more than the just an assessment of item social desirability. In linguistics, semantic analysis refers to how individuals derive meaning from spoken language including lexical semantics (understanding the meaning of words) and compositional semantics (understanding the larger meaning of phrases). The point being made is that the final assessment of item social desirability is the culmination of both lexical and compositional semantic processing. We predict that motivation to fake will increase the depth of the lexical and compositional processing that precede the final assessment of item social desirability, especially when item characteristics do not readily facilitate shallow, direct assessments of item social desirability.

2.1. Verbal response categories

In terms of measuring thought processes, the challenge was to choose response categories that are meaningful under any motivation to fake instructional set and to identify response categories that are sensitive to depth of processing effects. Based on these constraints and past research using verbalizations of thought processes when responding to personality test items (e.g., Robie, Brown, & Beaty, 2007; Turner & Fisk, 1968), four categories of respondent utterances initially were chosen for the current study, behavioral-oriented processing, semantic analysis of item content, trait-oriented processing and conditional processing.

2.1.1. Behavioral-oriented processing

Turner and Fisk (1968) found that memories for behaviors were a common form of thought processes when responding to personality test items. Our initial plan was to include hypotheses for utterances of memories of past experiences and behaviors. Unexpectedly, memories of behaviors/experiences were rarely mentioned by participants in either study; as such, it was decided not to include the behavioral processing hypotheses. The implication of the near total absence of behavioral-oriented utterances is an issue we will return to in the general discussion.

2.1.2. Semantic analysis of item content

When reading personality items, respondents must first derive semantic meaning of the item, and in the context of responding to personality items semantic meaning is interpreted in relation to social desirability. It is well established that respondents tend to portray themselves in a socially desirable manner, even in the absence of incentive to fake (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Jackson, 1986; Pedregon, Farley, Davis, Wood, & Clark, 2012). As such, as respondents formulate the semantic meaning of items