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A Plea for Process in Personality Prevarication

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Abstract

We make a series recommendations for focusing research on personality test faking. Overall we suggest that a focus on the response process test takers go through will accelerate our understanding of faking behavior. We argue that the decision making process for faking must be simple and dependent on a modest set of decision rules or heuristics. The set of heuristics used by any given test taker will, in turn, be the result of test taker goals and situational press. By focusing in on what the test taker is doing we will avoid adopting the wrong frame of reference and, hopefully, make ever more rapid progress.

Understanding the Processes in Personality Prevarication

It is an exciting time to conduct research on deception in personality assessment because of a flurry of new ideas. Interest in personality was been stimulated by the adoption of the five-factor model of personality structure, the comparatively recent conclusion that personality assessments do in fact predict work outcomes (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993), and a broader literature that has demonstrated relations between personality traits and critical life outcomes including divorce, occupational attainment, and longevity (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007).

The renewed use of personality assessments for personnel selection has also stimulated renewed concern about the effects of what is variously called deception, lying, or faking. Necessity is the mother of invention, and here we make a plea for focusing our efforts more deeply on the processes by which people make responses to personality test items. We believe this approach is likely to accelerate our understanding of item responding by: 1. yielding the basic heuristics that people use, 2. identify how people chose them given their goals and the situation factors, and 3. keep us out of trouble by avoiding poor assumptions about the test taker frame of reference. Such knowledge should ultimately lead to effective methods for dealing with response prevarication, when appropriate. In the sections that follow we make a series of assertions that we hope will stimulate thinking.

The Response Process Cannot be Very Complicated

Although this may appear to be a heretical claim, the extensive literature in judgment and decision making demonstrates that most people are not highly complex decision makers.

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When it comes time to pick “agree” or “strongly agree,” people may be error prone, distracted, occasionally biased, inconsistent in their decision rules over time, just plain messy, but not all that complicated. So although item responding may be chaotic, it is likely that the processes people go through when making decisions about items are not wildly complex. Instead we suggest that they are likely to be very simple heuristics some of which are largely automatic.

We believe this because most of us cannot manage more than a handful of pieces of information at a time (e.g., Cooksey, 1996) and although people can make use of nonlinear rules, they tend to be less cognitively demanding conjunctive or disjunctive rules (e.g., Einhorn, 1971). However, people do not appear to make much use of complex interactions that would make understanding their response process difficult (Goldberg, 1968, 1991). Instead people prefer, and are likely to use, a relatively small number of heuristics or schema-based comparisons (e.g., Gigerenzer, Todd, et al., 1999) to make their personality test responses.

This literature suggests that we might be able to statically model the decision process and create relatively accurate representations (Goldberg, 1970) of how different features of items, instructions, goals, and situational contexts influence item responding. This approach, paired with talk-aloud protocol studies, should yield a manageable set of item-response decision heuristics. These heuristics would be useful for developing methods for controlling or detecting distorted responses. Understanding this process from the respondent's frame of reference will help keep us out of trouble, if only because test takers don't necessarily think like we do.

Most Test Takers Don't Think Like Psychometricians

Historically some researchers adopted a view of test responding that resembled the rational man in economics. Test takers were assumed to have the following thoughts. Since personnel selection occurs in a top-down manner and obtaining a job offer is of economic value, then the goal of maximizing the desirability of my test scores will yield the highest chance to obtain a job offer. As a result, social desirability should be linearly related to test scores and can be used as an index of test faking because test takers will produce endorsements that attempt to maximize the desirability of their final total scores. In fact, most test takers do not think this way.

Score maximization does not appear to be most respondents' objective. Studies have revealed that most test takers do not and often do not intend to produce responses that maximize their scores even when instructed to do so. This holds true even when responding to items for highly desirable characteristics (e.g., Kim, 2006; Kuncel & Tellegen, 2009). Even in real-world settings where a simple strategy that results in perfect scores is available, only about 7% make exclusive use of such a strategy (Landers, Sackett, & Tuzinski, in press). Although a number of explanations might account for this effect, it is clear that total score maximization, in the test theory sense, is rarely a sole objective.

When college students are asked to respond especially desirably to test items, most of them, of course, can do that. When real applicants' patterns of responses are examined, they often look more like those from those in honest than in directed-faking conditions. Why is that? Research to date indicates a number of reasons, including a desire to be honest, a fear of being caught, and a lack of knowledge about what else to do. But, we suggest that the biggest reason may be what social psychologists first called the False-Consensus Effect (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). This idea warrants more attention in faking research. People tend to judge that others will respond as they do, which is the reason why honesty/integrity measures have turned out to be useful tools in personnel selection.

The perceived desirability of the trait provides an additional partial explanation for why score maximization does not occur. The longstanding concept of overall item desirability (Edwards, 1953, Jackson, 1963) simply does not fit the data. Social desirability is best thought of a property of each response option in a given setting. Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) demonstrated that the social desirability of an item (e.g., I am spontaneous, I am impulsive) was dependent both on trait level and context, often resulting in non-linear relations between response options and perceived desirability. For example, most people saw being “extremely” spontaneous as less desirable than being “above average” in spontaneity. However, “average” levels of spontaneity received the highest desirability rating when rated for work. If extreme values are less desirable, not all items will get maximal ratings even when a test taker might be motivated to give that response for personal gain. As a result, scores on social desirability scales (in contrast to the nearly orthogonal Lie scales) do not reflect faking behaviors (Griffith & Peterson, 2008).

When asked about why they don't always use the most extreme response options, even when directed to fake, test takers report that they are concerned about a variety of issues including the undesirability of the extreme response, credibility with those who would see the responses, and negative reactions due to appearing arrogant (e.g., Kim, 2006; Kuncel & Tellegen, 2009). Although talk aloud studies are not without limitations, it appears that test takers do not understand the additive use of personality test items to sum to a total score. Instead their frame of reference more closely resembles a conversation where each item response is a statement made to another person. Clearly, the test taking process is interpersonal and goal driven.

Test Takers Have Goals

A number of investigators have argued that test-taker goals should be an important part of understanding how people might go about responding on a personality test (e.g., Marcus, 2009; Kuncel, Borneman, & Kiger, 2011). Similarly, Ellingson (2011) has proposed an expectancy-theory approach to faking. All suggest some weighting of a limited number of elements to arrive at a response based on a set of overarching goals.

Kuncel, Borneman, and Kiger (2011) suggested a theory that test takers have three major goals when taking a personality assessment- for personnel selection. Test takers are communicating with a prospective employer, and they want to be *impressive*, *credible*, and *true to themselves* while taking the test. We believe that individual differences in preference, the influence of situational factors, and long term goals influence how people chose to differentially weight these three goals and, therefore, select different response heuristics. A strong need for short term employment may largely override being true the self and enhance impressive. A believe that dishonest can be detected or will be punish may enhance credibility goals. The desire for a long term job with harmonious professional friendships will elevate credible and true to the self. On the average, These three goals may not be the end of the story as a broader literature has identified at least 13 interpersonal goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003) and getting along, understanding, communicating, establishing relationships, and other *self-benefits* may be especially important in a hiring context and fits within a socioanalytic framework nicely laid out by Johnson and Hogan (2006).

When considering any of these theories, it will be critical to differentiate between what people are trying to accomplish (goals) versus how they go about accomplishing their goals (processes). The actual decision heuristics used by test takers may look very different from what they “ought” to do from a rational perspective built on classical test theory or IRT. Responding to the items in a psychological measure is not all that different from responding to questions in a personnel interview; in both cases one may want to put one's best foot forward. Very few people have ogives on the brain.

Process Approaches Are Promising

A number of investigators have used a response-process approach to try to develop detection methods or influence response distortion. Each of them has had some early degree of success. Although time will tell if they are actually useful in applied settings, we offer two thought-provoking examples with very different methods.

Kuncel and Borneman (2007) started with the idea that test takers assign different levels of desirability to different response options and reasoned that when confronted with ambiguous items for which there is no agreement on the most desirable levels (e.g., *complex*, *daring*, *reserved*), most respondents will adopt a simple strategy under directed faking conditions in which they pick very high, very low, or average response options. In contrast, responses will be more uniformly distributed under honest conditions. The data bore out this prediction and some items displayed trimodal or bimodal response patterns in directed faking conditions. Test takers were seeking the “right” answer even when it is not clear what that would be and responded using an identifiable strategy. Such strategies might be used to detect unusual patterns of item response in personnel selection contexts.

Komar, Komar, Robie, and Taggar (2010) adopted a resource-allocation model to understand test score faking. This work is similar in its basic assumptions to early work on response processes by Rogers (1974) who adapted a stage model (i.e., stimulus encoding, comprehension, decision) from cognitive ability research. Komar et al. (2010) reported that lower social desirability scores were obtained for low cognitive ability test takers when personality tests were administered under speeded conditions. Although the authors noted the lack of evidence for an effect on criterion related validity and we note the limitations of using social desirability scales in personnel selection, this study suggests that whatever heuristics are used to increase the desirability of one's scores, they can be abandoned when the simple encoding and comprehension of items strains a respondent's information-processing capacity.

Heuristics, Goals, and Contexts: Some General Conclusions

We argue that there is continued value in focusing on the response process itself. How do test takers go about responding to personality test items under various conditions and in various contexts, including when they are attempting to deceive? It is easy to assume that they consider personality tests in a similar way as do psychometricians and yet the evidence to date suggests that this assumption is not correct. Instead test takers often appear to consider responding to be a limited social interaction in which each test item is considered separately. We argue that test takers who are faking must be using a limited number of heuristics and the choices among the heuristics they employ is likely to depend on the test takers goals and the context for testing. Finding these heuristics, and understanding when they tend to be used, is likely to aid in our ability to detect and control test faking, and thus to increase the validity of our measures in personnel-selection contexts.

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