Don't people fake their test results?

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This is a question we are often asked when we tell people that we are occupational test developers. Also referred to as impression management or socially desirable responding, faking is a common concern expressed by laymen about personality testing. Since this is a question that often arises, we thought that it might be interesting to collect theoretical findings and practical information that could be useful in answering this for test users, trainers, sales associates, or simply to aid in informal conversations about personality testing.

Studies investigating faking in personality questionnaires

Most studies that have investigated faking in personality assessments have found that such assessments can be faked. However, most of these results have been found under experimental conditions where one group of test takers is told to fake, whilst the other is not.

The research results investigating the impact of faking in an actual application are mixed. A review of the extant literature by Ones and Viswesvaran (1998) found that social desirability is not much of a concern in personality and integrity testing for personnel selection. In particular, based on meta-analytically derived evidence, it appears that social desirability influences do not destroy the validity of a personality measure. On the other hand, a study by Brikeland et al. (2006) meta-analysed results for 33 studies comparing job applicant and non-applicant personality. Across all job types, they found that applicants scored significantly higher than non-applicants on extraversion (d=.11), emotional stability (d=.44), conscientiousness (d=.45), and openness (d=.13). However, for certain jobs (e.g., sales), the rank ordering of mean differences changed substantially, suggesting that job applicants distort responses on personality dimensions when viewed as particularly job relevant.

In an attempt to measure the actual impact of faking in a real life example, a study by Hogan et al (2007) used real job applicants who had completed a 5-factor model personality measure as part of the job application process. The job applicants were rejected; 6 months later they (n = 5.266) reapplied for the same job and completed the same personality measure. Results indicated that 5.2% or less changed their scores on any scale on the 2nd occasion; moreover, scale scores were as likely to change in the negative direction as the positive. Construct validity of the personality scales remained intact across the two administrations. These results suggest that faking on personality measures is not a significant problem in real world selection settings.

Overall, the research results are mixed regarding the degree to which people fake in personality testing. However, as stated above much of this research has been conducted in an experimental condition where one group of test takers is told to fake and the other is not. The studies that use real life examples seem to agree that faking is not as prevalent.

Are ipsative measures more fake resistant than normative measures?

Although the research related to faking on personality tests is mixed, the research that has compared forced choice (ipsative) and normative questionnaire formats is clear. The studies in this area have consistently found that ipsative tests are less susceptible to faking than their normative counterparts. A study by Jackson et al. (2000) evaluated the effects of faking on self-reported counterproductive behaviour of integrity-related personality items administered in normative and ipsative formats. They found that respondents instructed to respond as if applying for a job scored higher than when given standard or "straight-take" instructions. The size of the mean shift was nearly a full standard deviation for the normative integrity measure, but less than one third of a standard deviation for the same items presented in an ipsative

format. The correlation between the personality questionnaire administered in the normative condition and self-reported workplace delinquency was much lower in the job applicant condition than in the straight-take condition, whereas the same items administered in the ipsative condition maintained their substantial correlations with workplace delinquency.

Another study by Martin et al. (2002) investigated whether respondents were able to fake their answers on personality questionnaires when so instructed and whether they were able to fake equally well on normative and ipsative type scales. There was no difference in the degree of faking on the ipsative form between the honest and faking group, while on the normative form there was significantly more faking in the faking group than in the honest group.

The effects of motivated distortion on ipsative and normative inventories were also examined in a study by Christiansen et al. (2005). They examined the effects of distortion on the construct validity of the two normative and ipsative formats. The results showed that both types of formats were susceptible to motivated distortion. However, the ipsative items were better indicators of personality and less related to socially desirable responses when participants were asked to respond as if applying for a job. The study also considered the criterion-related validity of the inventories in terms of predicting supervisors' ratings of job performance, finding that distortion had a more deleterious effect on the validity of the normative inventory with some enhancement of the validity of the ipsative inventory being observed.

In summary, these results clearly illustrate that ipsative questionnaire formats are far less susceptible to faking than normative formats. Although the consequences of faking seem to be much higher for normative tests, there is still the possibility that test takers could fake with ipsative formats. Therefore, we will continue by discussing some common ways of controlling faking personality questionnaires and the validity and practicality of these methods.

Possibilities for controlling faking

Having recognised the possibility of faking in personality questionnaires, some tests now include a social desirability scale or lying scales in order to identify dishonest respondents. According to Zickar and Drasgow (1996) these approaches have had limited success, because they can result in being extremely costly or embarrassing for test administrators due to a high level of false positives found in these scales (labelling test takers as cheaters, when in fact they are not). Test administrators that use these scales in their selection programmes can find themselves in difficult legal and ethical situations which can result in law suits, or negative image campaigns that most test users wish to avoid.

Another approach used by test companies to limit faking in personality questionnaires, is the inclusion of a consistency scale. Here the idea is that evidence that someone is faking can be detected in the consistency of the test takers' responses. The problem with this theory is that it assumes that a person who is faking will not fake throughout the test. This is not necessarily accurate in that someone who is answering in a socially desirable way will usually do this consistently throughout the test.

A further approach suggested to control faking is to limit the amount of time used in a personality test. This hypothesis is based on the idea that people who are faking will usually take a longer time to respond than those who are answering honestly. Although there is some research that supports this hypothesis, Holden et al. (2001) did not find any support for this in 3 assessment simulations involving 540 university undergraduates. A further complication to the use of time as a control for faking is that there are also personality characteristics such as risk-taking behaviour, that have been found to be related to the answering time to a personality questionnaire (Makransky, 2007). Additionally reading ability or test takers that are not fluent in the language may take longer on tests. Therefore identifying slow test takers as possible fakers could result in discrimination of specific groups. In conclusion, there seem to be several methods to control faking in a personality questionnaire. These approaches lack evidence for validity and consistency, however, and are extremely problematic in that they can result in serious legal and ethical problems when they are incorrect.

Master Management's perspective

Understanding the full impact of the possible problems relating to test taker faking, our approach at Master Management has been to use an ipsative format to limit the MPP's susceptibility to faking. As mentioned above, the risk of faking an ipsative test is fairly low compared to a normative test. In addition the effects of faking in real life selection situations do not seem to be as large as in experimental settings. Social desirability or consistency scales are not used in the MPP because the lack of validity and the possible negative

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legal and ethical consequences associated with such scales outweigh the limited benefits the scales can provide.

Since it is not completely possible to exclude faking in the test, the focus is then to detect any manipulation and inconsistencies during the feedback interview. Thus, Master Management suggests that test users consider the following general guidelines during the interview:

- Implement structured interviews and the use of a job profile tool.

- Use historical and confrontational questioning; always ask for real life examples.

- Maintain a neutral approach at all times.

- Utilise a thorough and ethical introduction stating the purpose of the test.

- Spend enough time with each candidate.

- Use two interviewers if possible.

- Keep the result of the job profile confidential during the interview.

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