



The general factor of personality is very robust under faking conditions

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the general factor of personality (GFP) under faking (good and bad) conditions is examined across four independent archival samples. In each sample, participants were randomly assigned to complete a personality measure under honest, fake-bad, or fake-good instructions. The factor structure of the GFP was examined for each condition and, across all four samples, the GFP was most robust under the fake-bad instructions (highest factor loadings and accounted for most of the variance), followed by the fake-good conditions, and the GFP was the weakest in the honest or standard instruction situations. Because the structure and composition of the GFP changes under different test-taking instructions, these results suggest that researchers interested in studying the GFP must consider the impact of test-taking conditions.

1. Introduction

The general factor of personality (GFP) has been described as a superordinate personality factor similar to the general intelligence factor, *g*. Proponents of the GFP have argued that the factor reflects socially effective behaviour (Dunkel, van der Linden, Beaver, & Woodley, 2014; Rushton, Bons, & Hur, 2008) and in some respects, reflects the “best” of people’s character. In contrast, concerns have been raised suggesting that the GFP does not explain systematic variance in personality or is not the higher order personality factor described (Holden & Marjanovic, 2012). Some have suggested that the GFP occurs because of common variance from response styles, such as social desirability or impression management. For example, the GFP correlates significantly with social desirability measures (Bäckström, Björklund, & Larsson, 2009; Schermer, Carswell, & Jackson, 2012; Schermer & MacDougall, 2013; Schermer & Vernon, 2010) but these results have been countered with the suggestion that the correlations with social desirability reflect the actual character of those individuals scoring highly on the GFP (van der Linden, Bakker, & Serlie, 2011). Recently Schermer and Goffin (2018) reported that the GFP correlated with self-report faking and questioned what the GFP may be like when test takers completed personality measures under faking conditions (both good and bad), compared to the GFP extracted from those completing the measure honestly. The present study addresses that question.

Although a GFP has been found in various measures of personality (e.g., Rushton & Irwing, 2009; Veselka et al., 2009), what is commonly

known as *the* GFP is typically the first unrotated principal axis factor extracted from measures of the Big Five personality traits (van der Linden et al., 2017). Although loadings vary across samples, typically the values are approximately 0.50 for extraversion and agreeableness, 0.40 for conscientiousness and (negative) neuroticism, and 0.30 or less for openness to experience (see for example, Dunkel & van der Linden, 2014). How the GFP appears when respondents have faked on a personality measure has not been previously articulated and is the focus of the present study.

What has been previously addressed, is whether the GFP, such as the scale loadings and average values, change because of possible response situations. In a reanalysis of twin data, Rushton and Erdle (2010) demonstrated that after controlling for lie scores, GFP loadings remained fairly stable (a slight drop for openness and extraversion, conscientiousness increased, agreeableness remained stable, and emotional stability remained low). In an examination of GFP scores, van der Linden et al. (2011) reported that factor mean scores were higher in a group of job applicants than in an assessment group. The authors stated that these mean differences were due to socially desirable responding but did not explicitly measure social desirability. Of interest, van der Linden et al. (2011) further reported that the GFP did not differ with respect to percentage of variance accounted for or in terms of factor loadings between the two groups, suggesting a mean shift but not a change in variance. Although these studies demonstrate that social desirability, or at least the pressure of presenting better on a personality measure because the individual is a job applicant, and lying may affect

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the nature of the GFP, the studies do not address how purposely faking influences the GFP.

Using archival data from four studies, the present research examines how the GFP may change when participants are instructed to complete a personality measure honestly versus being instructed to fake-good or to fake-bad. Because Schermer and Goffin (2018) found that GFP scores correlated with self-report faking (positively with faking good and negatively with faking bad) and because Rushton and Erdle (2010) found that the GFP loadings changed when variance due to lying was statistically controlled, it is hypothesized that the GFP will differ when the faking GFPs are compared to the honest GFPs. Below, the method and results for the four archival samples are described and are followed by a general discussion.

2. Sample 1 method and results

Data for Sample 1 were from Holden and Evoy (2005). In their study, groups of 78–80 students were randomly assigned to complete the NEO PI-R (Costa and McCrae, 1992) under one of three conditions: honestly; to fake-good (present themselves in a positive manner); or to fake-bad (present themselves in a negative manner). Listed in Tables 1 and 2 are the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among the five scales for the three testing conditions. The mean inter-scale absolute correlation for the honest condition was 0.25 which is slightly lower than the fake-good ($M = 0.29$) and considerably lower than the fake-bad condition ($M = 0.48$), suggesting that the instructions to fake-bad resulted in the most homogeneous responding.

Scores on the five scales were entered into an exploratory principal axis factor (PAF) analysis, for extracting a GFP under each condition. Although the sample sizes were small, Guadagnoli and Velicer (1988) have shown that even smaller sample sizes can produce stable factor solutions. The GFP loadings for the first extracted factor are in Table 2. With respect to percentage of variance accounted for by the GFP, values were higher in the fake-good and very high (approximately half of the variance) in the fake-bad conditions. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values, representing the ratio of the sum of squared correlations to the sum of squared correlations and partial correlations was lowest in the fake-good condition, followed by the honest condition, and was the highest in the fake-bad condition. These results indicate greater

homogeneity of responding in the fake-bad responses and may reflect a similar stereotype of negative responses held by the participants. The GFP loadings also varied across each condition. For example, openness had negligible loadings in the honest condition but became more robust in the faking situations. In general, the results in Table 2 suggest that the fake-bad GFP was the most robust of the three GFPs.

To further investigate how the three GFPs might differ, correlations between the GFP scores and the four validity scales measured by Holden and Evoy (2005) were calculated. As reported in Table 3, the correlations between scores on the GFPs and the HPSI Total (Holden, 1996) and PRF Social Desirability (Jackson, 1984) remained fairly consistent across the three conditions. In contrast, correlations for GFP scores and the two scales from the Paulhus Deception Scales (Paulhus, 1998), Self-deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management were substantially lower with the fake-bad GFP than the honest and fake-good GFPs and significantly lower (based on Fisher Z-tests) for the Self-deceptive Enhancement scale. These results suggest that the fake-bad GFP is quite different than either the honest or fake-good GFPs.

3. Sample 2 method and results

Data for Sample 2 were from an unpublished undergraduate thesis by Racine (2012). The sample consisted of 293 students who were randomly assigned to complete the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) under one of three conditions: honest, fake-good, or fake-bad. For the analyses, the neuroticism scale was reverse keyed to produce an emotional stability scale score. Participants also completed the Honesty scale from the HEXACO PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2009), the Trait Guilt scale from the Guilt Inventory (Jones, Schratte, & Kugler, 2000), the PRF Social Desirability scale (Jackson, 1984), as well as a single compliance question asking the participants the degree to which they complied with the instructions, with responses ranging from 1, did not comply, to 9, complied.

Listed in Tables 4 and 5 are the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among the five NEO-FFI scales for the three instructional conditions. As with the first sample, the pattern of the mean absolute inter-scale correlations was the lowest for the honest condition ($M = 0.20$), followed by the fake-good condition ($M = 0.31$), and highest for the fake-bad condition ($M = 0.50$). These values indicate

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations of the five personality scales for the honest condition (below the diagonal) and the fake good condition (above the diagonal).

	HM (SD)	FGM (SD)	FBM (SD)	N	E	O	A	C
Neuroticism (N)	97.74 (22.20)	59.43 (18.41)	120.30 (23.38)		−0.37	−0.17	−0.22	−0.66
Extraversion (E)	118.44 (17.49)	132.93 (16.05)	82.30 (28.20)	−0.41		0.74	0.07	0.13
Openness (O)	117.69 (17.76)	116.71 (21.47)	102.18 (30.94)	−0.02	0.29		0.19	0.04
Agreeableness (A)	117.59 (17.19)	115.77 (21.20)	95.63 (29.20)	−0.38	0.28	0.02		0.30
Conscientiousness (C)	116.72 (17.52)	146.63 (18.91)	67.44 (26.94)	−0.49	0.24	−0.13	0.24	

HM = Honest mean; FGM = Fake good mean; FBM = Fake bad mean.

Correlations > 0.30 are significant at $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

Table 2

Inter-correlations of the five personality scales for the fake bad condition and factor loadings of the GFP for the three test-taking instruction conditions.

	N	E	O	A	Honest-GFP	Fake-Good GFP	Fake-Bad GFP
Neuroticism (N)					−0.84	−0.62	−0.80
Extraversion (E)	−0.69				0.51	0.73	0.86
Openness (O)	−0.34	0.68			0.07	0.59	0.60
Agreeableness (A)	−0.36	0.38	0.39		0.47	0.30	0.52
Conscientiousness	−0.71	0.51	0.32	0.46	0.53	0.45	0.72
Percent variance accounted					29.63	31.25	50.36
KMO					0.64	0.51	0.67

Correlations > 0.30 are significant at $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

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