



Faking amorality: An ability elusive to both measures of substance and style



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ABSTRACT

Much controversy exists regarding the phenomenon of faking questionnaires. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to investigate the contribution of personality, intelligence and the social desirability scale (SDS) in detecting faking, where the possible interfering variables of gender and prior knowledge of psychology are explored. The sample consists of two independent groups: (1) undergraduate psychology students and (2) high-school students. The results indicate that score changes under instruction to fake good occur in both desirable and undesirable directions, as well as that different variables predict successful and unsuccessful faking. Personality dimensions, intelligence, and SDS are also pointed to as having a weak effect on the ability to fake (related more to faking transparent items), as well as that failure to fake is found to be linked to low intelligence scores. The most significant variables to predict successful faking on virtually all amorality scales were found to be “psychology student” and “male”. These final results demand further empirical evidence and review as they are not sufficiently representative in the literature thus far.

1. Introduction

The ability to fake questionnaires is of serious concern for psychological assessment. Respondents are not only able to fake questionnaires, but broader individual differences do exist in their faking ability, leading to a disturbance in the range-order, majorly located at the top of score distribution (Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998), thereby selecting candidates whose true performance scores are lower than those potentially rejected (Muller-Hanson, Heggstad, & Thornton, 2003). Although variables that may be used in the prediction of the ability to fake have been widely studied, the results of such research diverge substantially. One reason for the disparity is the confusion arising from differing research terminology, equating faking and scores on socially desirable scales (hereafter SDS - see Griffith & Peterson, 2008). The SDS known as *measure of style* purports to assess dishonesty and, according to some authors (e.g., see Lambert, Arbuckle, & Holden, 2016; MacNeil & Holden, 2006), to be an effective tool in detecting faking. In our study, the *response style* measure comes under question as an effective tool in detecting faking. The impact of *measures of substance* (personality and intelligence) in predicting the ability to fake are studied as well. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no research yet exists in the literature that compares the contribution of variables known to be related with faking (personality, intelligence, SDS) against the ability to fake, including those variables assumed to be associated with the ability (gender and knowledge of psychology). The term *faking*

in this paper refers singularly to a response style motivated to misrepresent scores on self-reports; therefore, this research measures faking as a magnitude of score change under the instruction to fake good. Moreover, the strategy used in answering while faking will also be analyzed. The results of Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) showing respondents do not necessarily select the most extreme responses (totally agree/totally disagree) while faking will therefore also be examined.

1.1. SDS and faking

While there are a number of authors still supporting SDS as a functional method to detect dishonest participants (Kam, 2013; Lambert et al., 2016; MacNeil & Holden, 2006), a significant body of evidence has accumulated to suggest that SDS scores reflect individual differences in personality rather than simply answering style (McCrae & Costa, 1983; Mersman & Shultz, 1998; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996; Piedmont, McCrae, Riemann, & Angleitner, 2000). Partializing out the variance of SDS from personality measures does not increase, but rather compromises the predictive power of the questionnaires (McCrae & Costa, 1983; Piedmont et al., 2000). Furthermore, one meta-analysis' results have found SDS to correlate with emotional stability and conscientiousness measured by self and peer-report (Ones et al., 1996). Kurtz, Tarquini, and Iobst (2008), utilizing two sources of ratings (roommate and parent), indicated that SDS substantially correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

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Holden and Passey (2010) have reported on similar results from other previous studies, criticizing the significant but low correlations between self-reports and peer-ratings as insufficient to support an exclusively substantive interpretation of SDS. Therefore, although SDS may still be in use and seen as a valid measurement of response bias, further empirical evidence on their validity is needed.

1.2. Personality and faking

Contrary to correlation findings between SDS and personality scores, fake-good studies indicate that socially desirable responses (SDR), measured as the intensity of answer distortions, are related to less desirable personality dimensions. McFarland and Ryan (2000) found those participants scoring low on integrity and conscientiousness, but high on neuroticism, to be most successful at faking. Some studies have revealed that respondents scoring higher on dimensions of psychopathy are better at faking good (Book, Holden, Starzyk, Wasylkiw, & Edwards, 2006; MacNeil & Holden, 2006). Adolescent offenders instructed to fake such measures were also able to change their initial scores substantially (Rogers et al., 2002).

1.3. Cognitive abilities and faking

Rather than giving a spontaneous honest response, faking respondents must find the correct answer by simultaneously identifying the purpose of the questionnaire and correctly deciphering the item's intended use. Therein, numerous studies have confirmed the assumption that intelligence relates to the ability to fake good (MacCann, 2013; Mersman & Shultz, 1998; Pauls & Crost, 2005; Tett, Freund, Christiansen, Fox, & Coaster, 2012). However, the intensity of such correlations in most cases are less than medium: in MacCann (2013) the highest total sample correlation is 0.28, while Mersman and Shultz (1998) reported significant correlations from 0.11 to 0.26, and Pauls & Crost from 0.16 to .24. In contrast, MacNeil and Holden (2006) have rebutted hypotheses on verbal abilities and faking being linked.

These results cast doubt on intelligence as a core feature of faking, allowing for the assumption that it might share variance with other pertinent variables. As undergraduate students who attended psychology courses were included as a sample within these studies (MacCann, 2013; MacNeil & Holden, 2006; Mersman & Shultz, 1998; Pauls & Crost, 2005), the results may be clouded from prior knowledge interfering with faking questionnaires. Possessing a basic prior knowledge of psychology could therefore be of assistance in recognizing indicators of behavior, thereby improving one's faking skills, where even slight coaching of participants may increase their faking ability (Zickar & Robie, 1999).

1.4. Current study

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to jointly investigate the contribution of personality, intelligence, SDS, gender and knowledge of psychology in detecting the ability to fake, thereby more precisely determining the contribution of single applied variables in detecting said ability.

Gender and knowledge of psychology are included as possibly significant interfering variables. While, gender was found to be unrelated to successful faking in MacNeil and Holden (2006), Book et al. (2006) did pinpoint an interactive effect, indicating a relationship between psychopathy scores and faking ability as being more pronounced in men than in women.

Since amorality may be assumed as a universally undesirable dimension and in order to avoid possible criticism of respondents offering differing opinions on social desirability, it was decided to investigate into the sensitivity of amorality measures to fake good. Relevant criticism itself of what the desirable and undesirable direction of the answers are may be found in the Big Five, whose use in fake good studies

indicates that respondents might have differing ideas of what is desirable and what is not. For instance, numerous studies have found that the sensitivity of the Big Five measures vary according to profession (Pauls & Crost, 2005), such as agreeableness being deflated for sales-position applicants (Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006) when the same dimension is inflated for nurses (Tett et al., 2012) leading to non-uniform SDR directions across different professions.

2. Material and method

2.1. Participants

To better assess the role of "pure" intelligence without prior contamination by knowledge of psychology, the present study was conducted on two independent sample groups: psychology ($N = 105$; 89 females, 16 males) and high-school students ($N = 213$; 113 females, 100 males). The latter, having had no experience with psychology prior to participating, were specifically chosen as to guarantee their unfamiliarity with the subject. The mean age of the high-school group was 17.26 ($SD = 0.66$); ranging from 16 to 19; for the psychology group, 22.16 ($SD = 5.22$); ranging from 19 to 43. As a likely confounding variable, all analyses on the differences between these two groups were controlled for age.

2.2. Measures

Amorality was measured using the AMRL-15 scale (Knezevic, Radovic, & Perunicic, 2008) - a 187 item, self-report scale using a five-point Likert-type answering format (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), measuring three dispositional sources of amoral/antisocial/destructive tendencies operationalized as the basic attitude: "I do not care for others": Lascivia ($\alpha = 0.94$), Frustralia ($\alpha = 0.96$), and Crudelia ($\alpha = 0.97$), including the total score. The scale of Lascivia itself deals with amorality deriving from poorly controlled hedonism and instinctual urges; the scale of Frustralia measures amoral tendencies stemming from a personal sense of dissatisfaction. The most destructive amorality forms are assessed by the Crudelia scale: pleasure in causing pain and suffering to others. The AMRL-15 correlates to deficits in empathy, discriminating between offenders and non-offenders (Vukosavljevic-Gvozden, Opacic, & Perunicic-Mladenovic, 2015) and has been proven useful in predicting criminal recidivism (Medjedovic, Kujacic, & Knezevic, 2012). Paulhus & Jones, having compared amorality scales with others of similar construct (such as the Dark Triad), specifically noted that they target the broadest diversity of malevolent personalities (Paulhus & Jones, 2015).

To assess the ability to fake good, a measure based on adjusted differential scores was created to calculate the percentage of decreased AMRL-15 values from the initial value: $((E1 - E2) / E1) \times 100$. Instead of calculating simple differential scores, this method partially solves the problem of the floor and ceiling effect through weighting the differences of lower initial values more.

Intelligence was measured by the short version of Raven's Progressive Matrices (RPM; Raven, Court, & Raven, 1979) consisting of 18 items in total, constructed from tasks in its standard and advanced versions- a non-verbal, multiple choice, time limited measure of fluid intelligence (Pallier et al., 2002).

Personality- NEO Personality Inventory, Revised (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) was used to assess personality dimensions as classified by the five-factor model: Neuroticism ($\alpha = 0.83$), Extraversion ($\alpha = 0.81$), Openness ($\alpha = 0.83$), Conscientiousness ($\alpha = 0.84$), and Agreeableness ($\alpha = 0.87$). Participants were instructed to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 5-point scale.

Socially Desirable Responding - The Marlow-Crowne social desirability scale was used, a 33 item, true-false response format scale designed to measure whether respondents have answered truthfully or have managed

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