Perceived ability to deceive and incremental prediction in pre-employment personality testing

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ABSTRACT

Personality tests now play an important role in pre-employment testing. However, faking, or purposefully distorting personality test responses, is a long-standing concern in this venue. The purpose of this research was to create and evaluate a measure, the Perceived Ability to Deceive scale (PATD), to help better understand individual differences related to faking. PATD demonstrated evidence of reliability and discriminant validity. Moreover, we tested whether PATD could significantly add to the prediction of a workplace criterion in personnel selection settings. As hypothesized, PATD significantly predicted incremental variance in Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) beyond Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, and Honesty–Humility. Overall, our results suggested that PATD is distinct from other faking-related measures and may provide new insights into the process of faking in pre-employment personality testing.

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1. Introduction

Reviews of personality research have come to the conclusion that measures of personality are, indeed, useful predictors of job performance (see Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). However, possible problems attributable to the faking of personality measures remain a challenge in personnel selection situations (e.g., Dwight & Donovan, 2003). Faking has been described "as a tendency for test takers to deliberately provide inaccurate responses to personality items in a manner that they believe will increase their chances of obtaining valued outcomes, such as a favorable hiring decision" (Goffin & Boyd, 2009, p. 151). Research suggests that faking in employment settings occurs less than in directed faking studies (Hough & Oswald, 2008). However, a critical mass of research suggests that faking may lower the validity of pre-employment personality tests (for a review, see Mueller-Hanson, Heggestad, & Thornton, 2006).

The first goal of the current work was to develop a new faking-related measure, the Perceived Ability to Deceive scale (PATD), and to initially evaluate its reliability and validity with respect to other faking-related scales. The second goal was to evaluate whether PATD has incremental validity over personality scales used in a personnel selection scenario.

1.1. The perceived ability to deceive

We define the perceived ability to deceive as one's perception of the extent to which one is able to successfully deceive others without having the deceit detected. We focused on the *perceived* ability to deceive and not the *objective* ability to deceive because test-takers are likely to have an inaccurate perception of their actual ability to deceive (Goffin & Boyd, 2009). Consequently, their perceived ability to deceive stands to be more influential in the prediction of their behavior. A person's perceived ability to deceive becomes relevant in a variety of situations, including pre-employment personality testing, and it may serve as an important antecedent of the *perceived ability to fake a response to an item* (see Goffin and Boyd's (2009) general model of faking). We suggest that levels of perceived ability to deceive will vary meaningfully between individuals. For example, those who have less experience with deception, or who have been caught deceiving in the past, may be more likely to perceive themselves as having a poor ability to deceive. Those who perceive themselves as being good at deceit should be more likely to engage in future deceit because they believe they can get away with it. In fact, those who report high PATD scores may have a socialization deficit. Through socialization, we are called to "behave in ways that are consistent with the norms of civilized adult conduct" (Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007, p. 1282). Therefore, those who report high PATD scores may not be well-socialized, as there is a very negative stereotype associated with lying (Anderson, 1968). Having a socialization deficit may remove any

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social conventions that would normally prevent a person from engaging in deceit or faking. Nonetheless, PATD and socialization deficit are conceptually distinct because the former focuses precisely on deception whereas the latter comprises wide-ranging tendencies.

An initial pool of items designed to measure the PATD construct in a work-related context was created for the current study, and comprehensive psychometric analyses (see Hinkin, 1998) were conducted to choose the final set of items appearing in Appendices A.1 and A.2.

Murphy and Davidshofer (2005) stressed that tests should have evidence of discriminant validity. Accordingly, measures of constructs that are theoretically distinct from PATD should not correlate strongly with it. Following Cohen (1988), correlations of .50 and greater are considered to be strong. Therefore, correlations significantly smaller than .50 were considered evidence that PATD was not redundant with existing but related measures.

The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1988), which measures both Self-Deception and Impression Management, has a long history of use in relation to faking in pre-employment testing. To establish the unique value of the PATD construct in faking research, it should not unduly overlap with the Self-Deception or Impression Management dimensions of the BIDR. Both Self-Deception and PATD involve some form of deceit. Theoretically, people with high levels of Self-Deception are unaware that they are distorting their responses (Paulhus). However, those with high levels of PATD *are* aware of their deceitful proclivities. Therefore, we propose:

H₁ₐ: Self-Deception and PATD will not correlate strongly ($r < .50$).

People scoring high on the Impression Management dimension of the BIDR are believed to engage in deliberate self-presentation to an audience, attempting to manage or distort the perception of their image (Paulhus, 1988). There may be a non-trivial relation between Impression Management and PATD because those who engage in Impression Management may believe that they are better at lying without getting caught. However, Impression Management items have a clear socially desirable or (if reverse keyed) undesirable salience to them. By contrast, PATD items are concerned with perceived ability to successfully deceive a target (e.g., a supervisor) without focussing on whether the deception is socially desirable or undesirable. Therefore, we propose:

H₁ᵦ: Impression Management and PATD will not correlate strongly ($r < .50$).

Anxiety appears to be negatively associated with deliberate distortion (Goffin & Anderson, 2007). An anxiety measure was included to provide evidence that PATD is not simply a function of the anxiety of respondents. Participants should score low on PATD because they believe that they are poor at getting away with deceit, and not just because their general level of anxiety makes them apprehensive about distorting their responses. Therefore, we propose:

H₁ᵧ: Anxiety and PATD will not correlate strongly ($r < .50$).

Schmit and Ryan (1992) and O'Neill, Goffin, and Gellatly (2010) suggested that test-taking motivation relates to the predictive validity of personality in pre-employment testing. Test-taking motivation measures respondents' motivation to do well on pre-employment tests. However, conceptually, test-taking motivation items do not tap test-takers' perceptions regarding their ability to deceive, therefore, we propose:

H₁ₐ: Test-taking motivation and PATD will not correlate strongly ($r < .50$).

1.2. Counterproductive Work Behavior and personality

Whereas the above hypotheses pertained to the discriminant validity of PATD, we also sought to investigate the extent to which PATD might improve the prediction of a workplace criterion beyond the prediction afforded by key personality traits.

Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) is "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both" (Bennett & Robinson, 2000, p. 349). CWB is a prevalent threat to organizations, and as a result it has become an important construct in the assessment of the criterion-related validity of personnel selection tests (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Salgado, 2002).

Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability are the most important of the Big Five personality scales in the prediction of CWB (for a review, see Berry et al., 2007). Also, in a study by Lee, Ashton, and Shin (2005), the addition of a non-Big Five trait, the Honesty–Humility scale, led to a significant improvement in the prediction of CWB. Therefore, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, and Honesty–Humility scales were chosen as the key personality predictors of CWB in the current study.

Unlike Social Desirability measures that have generally been shown not to predict job performance (Viswesvaran, Ones, & Hough, 2001), PATD may significantly predict CWB due to its unique characteristics. Those who consider themselves better at successfully sustaining deceit may be more inclined to engage in counterproductive behaviors, because they believe they are less likely to get caught. Based on our above definition of PATD, and the findings from the literature on personality and CWB, the following set of hypotheses was proposed:

H₂ₐ: PATD will predict CWB incrementally beyond Conscientiousness.

H₂ᵦ: PATD will predict CWB incrementally beyond Agreeableness.

H₂ᵧ: PATD will predict CWB incrementally beyond Emotional Stability.

H₂ₐ: PATD will predict CWB incrementally beyond Honesty–Humility.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Undergraduates ($N = 213$; 56.8% male) from a large Canadian university participated for course credit. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 37 years ($M = 18.77$, SD = 1.63). One hundred sixty participants (75.1%) had work experience. Thirty-eight participants (17.8%) were employed, with three (1.4%) working full-time (25 or more hours per week), and 35 (16.4%) working part-time (24 or less hours per week). One hundred and fifty-six participants (73.2%) had been employed the previous summer, with 99 (46.5%) working full-time, and 57 (26.7%) working part-time.

Participants were first asked to respond honestly while completing measures of demographics, CWB, anxiety, and PATD.

Next, as in McFarland and Ryan (2000), participants were given a role-playing scenario where they were asked to respond to a qualifying test in a way that would give them the best chance of being selected into a prestigious university. Instead of actually attaining the target "job", however, those scoring in the top 15% were told they would receive $15.00. Also, in accordance with