



Employment testing online, offline, and over the phone: Implications for e-assessment



Rachel Grieve*, Jordana Hayes

University of Tasmania, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated faking across test administration modes in an employment testing scenario. For the first time, phone administration was included. Participants ($N=91$) were randomly allocated to testing mode (telephone, Internet, or pen-and-paper). Participants completed a personality measure under standard instructions and then under instructions to fake as an ideal police applicant. No significant difference in any faked personality domains as a function of administration mode was found. Effect sizes indicated that the influence of administration mode was small. Limitations and future directions are considered. Overall, results indicate that if an individual intends to fake on a self-report test in a vocational assessment scenario, the electronic administration mode in which the test is delivered may be unimportant.

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Pruebas de selección on-line, off-line y telefónicas: implicaciones para la evaluación electrónica

RESUMEN

Este trabajo investiga el falseamiento en los diferentes modos de aplicación de tests en el contexto de las pruebas para conseguir empleo. Por primera vez se incluyó la aplicación telefónica. Se distribuyó a los participantes ($N=91$) aleatoriamente en las modalidades de prueba (telefónica, Internet o papel y lápiz). Los sujetos realizaron una prueba de personalidad con instrucciones estándar y después con instrucciones de que falsearan la prueba como si fuesen aspirantes ideales a la policía. No resultaron diferencias significativas en ninguno de los dominios de personalidad en función del modo de administración. La magnitud del efecto indicaba que la influencia del modo de aplicación era escasa. Se abordan las limitaciones y directrices con vistas al futuro. En general, los resultados indican que si una persona trata de falsear una prueba de autoinforme en el contexto de la evaluación profesional el modo de administración electrónica de la prueba puede carecer de importancia.

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Palabras clave:

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The use of self-report psychological tests provides an opportunity for test-takers to provide false, strategic responses (MacNeil & Holden, 2006), in turn threatening the validity of test results (Tett & Simonet, 2011). With alternative forms of psychological test administration, a burgeoning field with particular importance in organisational contexts (Piotrowski & Armstrong, 2006), the aim of this research was to extend examination of electronic test administration mode and faking behaviour. For the first time, this study explored the effect of telephone, internet, and pen-and-paper test

* Corresponding author. Psychology Division. Faculty of Health. University of Tasmania. Private Bag 30. Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, 7001.
E-mail address: rachel.grieve@utas.edu.au (R. Grieve).

administration on the faking susceptibility of self-report psychological tests.

Applicant Faking

When an individual responds dishonestly and in a strategic manner on a psychological test, this is regarded as faking (Grieve & Mahar, 2010). Faking good refers to the act of deliberately altering test scores in order to appear more favourably (McFarland & Ryan, 2000). In high demand contexts such as selection for employment ‘applicant faking’, faking can be especially concerning (Tett & Christiansen, 2007). A job offer may be a reward for faking job-relevant traits well on a personality scale (Tett & Simonet, 2011). Organisations may then be at risk of hiring an applicant who has presented an incongruous personality profile, which may then have negative consequences for the organisation and the employee. It also means that an applicant who is a better fit with the organisation has missed an opportunity to be hired (Tett & Simonet, 2011).

Research into different administration modes has noted that online and telephone administrations provide good alternatives to pen-and-paper testing, and there are a number of benefits associated with these media. For example, the low-cost of online and telephone testing has been cited (Baca, Alverson, Manuel, & Blackwell, 2007; Templer & Lange, 2008), the ability for these media to reach people in rural areas (Baca et al., 2007), increased access to larger samples (Ryan, Wilde, & Crist, 2013), and to broaden the demographic profiles of respondents (Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Lewis, Watson, & White, 2009). In the vocational context, these aspects of alternative forms of assessment may be of particular interest given the increasing trend towards teleworking (Mahler, 2012).

However, given the potential consequences resulting from faking, there is a pressing need to be able to detect and measure the behaviour across a number of test administration media. Any findings suggesting that faking differs depending on delivery mode could have critical implications for how tests are administered. For example, if a particular administration mode is susceptible to faking, then it may be prudent for assessors to avoid that mode of delivery. In addition, exploring faking across administration modes may also add to our understanding of faking behaviour.

While many measures have been shown to be equivalent when comparing online and pen-and-paper delivery modes (e.g., Bates & Cox, 2008; Carlbring et al., 2007; Casler et al., 2013; Williams & McCord, 2006), to date, research examining vocational faking as a function of administration is limited, with only one study comparing faking in online and pen-and-paper contexts. Grieve and de Groot (2011) examined faking across Internet and pen-and-paper administration modes. Participants were able to choose whether to complete the measures online or in pen-and-paper format. Participants first completed both measures honestly, completed distractor items, and then completed the HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009) under ‘fake good’ instructions (told to imagine they are applying for their “ideal job”). A between groups analysis found no significant difference in the faked scores across administration modes, and the effect sizes were small. The authors concluded that when an individual is faking, the mode of test administration has minimal influence. However, while providing promising initial insight into the susceptibility of online measures, there are limitations to this study that warrant additional consideration.

Firstly, the ‘fake good’ condition was vague in its use of an “ideal job” (Grieve & de Groot, 2011) as the target profile. It would seem possible, if not probable, that participants would have had varying conceptions of their ideal job, and would have responded differently depending on their job preferences. This would invariably lead to a variety of personality profiles depending on (for

example) whether a participant wants to be a librarian or an advertising executive, as demonstrated by Furnham (1990). Thus, the use of a specific job in the faking good instructions would add greater experimental control. Secondly, participants in Grieve and de Groot’s (2011) study were not randomly assigned to administration conditions, which may have resulted in systematic differences in responses as a function of modality preference. Finally, telephone administration was not considered in Grieve and de Groot’s study. If telephone administration were to yield different results to online and pen-and-paper delivery modes when faking, this would add insight into the use of the telephone for psychological testing and e-assessment more broadly.

Equivalence of Telephone Administered Measures

Existing research into the equivalence of telephone testing is limited. Knapp and Kirk (2003) explored the equivalence between other administration modes, with the inclusion of an automated touch-tone phone condition. Participants were randomly allocated to either a pen-and-paper group, an Internet group, or a touch-tone phone group and asked to answer highly sensitive questions (for example, ‘Have you ever had phone sex?’) and also rated how honestly they had answered the questionnaire. The results showed no significant difference between groups on any of the questionnaire items and no significant difference in how honestly participants rated their answers.

However, other research comparing telephone, Internet, and mail surveys has found that participants tended to give more extreme positive responses in telephone administration (Dillman et al., 2009). The effect of online and telephone administered surveys on responses regarding alcohol use and alcohol-related victimisation has also been investigated, with the finding that women in the online group answered in a less socially desirable way (Parks, Pardi, & Bradizza, 2006).

So, with limited research on the equivalence of telephone administration, it may be difficult to make inferences about the utility of this delivery mode in psychological testing. Importantly, a specific gap exists in terms of the inclusion of the telephone in faking equivalence research. Thus, it is currently unclear as to how telephonic administration mode might influence faking in job applicants.

The Current Research

The current study extended investigation of faking across administration modes by using random allocation (thereby mitigating self-selection concerns), by providing a specific job as the target profile (to strengthen the experimental manipulation) and by examining for the first time the influence of telephone mediated administration in addition to online and pen-and-paper testing.

Selection of the specific job to act as the target profile was predicated on including a job role that was broadly known to participants. Mindful of the need to facilitate interpretation of the results within existing job-specific vocational application personality data, the role of police officer was selected. As Detrick, Chibnall, and Call (2010) had investigated faking in police applicants, use of the police officer target profile allowed comparisons to be made in terms of test scores. The applicants in Detrick et al.’s (2010) study self-reported high on emotional stability, agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness, and were able to significantly change their scores to such an extent as to alter their rank ordering. This knowledge allowed predictions to be made about the nature of faking good in the current study. Thus, it was hypothesised that participants would be able to fake good when instructed to complete a personality measure when applying for a job as a police recruit. Specifically, in line with Detrick et al., it was expected that

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