



# Predicting intentions to fake in psychological testing: Which normative beliefs are important?

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## ABSTRACT

While previous research has examined the utility of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in relation to intentions to fake in psychological testing, the current research extended the TPB model to empirically assess the role of moral norms and ethics. A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted ( $N = 225$ ). In step 1, attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm significantly predicted intention to fake, although only attitude and perceived behavioral control were significant individual predictors, with 52.3% of variance explained. In step 2, addition of moral obligation norms significantly improved predicted intention to fake and explained an additional 14% of variance. In step 3, ethical position explained no additional variance. Future research should consider specific applicant faking scenarios or a behavioral outcome measure. It is concluded that personal, moral norms, rather than other-centred norms, are valuable when predicting faking intentions, and that integration of existing theoretical models of faking is indicated.

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## La predicción de la intención de falsear las respuestas en los tests psicológicos: ¿qué creencias normativas son importantes?

### RESUMEN

Mientras la investigación precedente ha analizado la utilidad de la Teoría de la Conducta Planificada (TCP) en la intención de falsear los resultados de los tests psicológicos, esta investigación amplía el modelo de la TCP para evaluar qué papel juegan las normas morales y la ética. Se realizó un análisis de regresión jerárquica múltiple ( $N = 225$ ). En el paso 1 la actitud, el control conductual percibido y la norma subjetiva predecían de modo significativo la intención de falseamiento, aunque solo los dos últimos de modo significativo, con un 53.3% de la varianza explicada. En el paso 2, la adición de las normas de obligación moral mejoraba significativamente la intención de falseamiento predicha, explicando otro 14% de varianza. En el paso 3 la posición ética no añadía varianza explicada. La investigación futura tendría que considerar los escenarios de falseamiento por parte de los aspirantes o una variable resultado conductual. Se concluye que las normas morales personales antes que las normas centradas en los demás son las que cuentan a la hora de predecir la intención de falsear y se propone integrar los modelos teóricos sobre falseamiento.

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### Palabras clave:

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Norma moral

Self-report personality tests are commonly used for vocational selection and clinical purposes. However, the validity of psychological tests is challenged by studies which demonstrate that individuals are able to alter their honest responses to present themselves strategically, for example by faking good or faking bad (e.g., Grieve & de Groot, 2011;

Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Rogers, 2008). As distorted test responses may change selection and treatment decisions (e.g., Christiansen, Rozek, & Burns, 2010; Morgeson et al., 2007; Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998), identification of the characteristics which facilitate faking behavior is indicated. However, to date little research has examined the psychosocial predictors of intention to fake on psychological assessment. McFarland and Ryan's (2006) application of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that attitude toward faking, subjective norm regarding faking behavior, and perceived behavioral control over faking explains a significant proportion of variance in

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faking behavior. The current research aimed to extend the understanding of faking behavior by examining, for the first time, the incremental role of moral obligation norms and ethical ideologies in forming intentions to fake during personality testing.

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed that intention to undertake a particular behavior can be predicted by a combination of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control toward the behavior. Attitude reflects an individual's evaluation of the behavior as favourable or unfavourable. Subjective norm relates to the degree of social pressure the individual feels to engage in, or suppress, the behavior. Perceived behavioral control represents how easy, or how difficult, the individual perceives it would be to successfully perform the behavior in terms of their own abilities and external constraints. A favourable attitude, combined with a positive subjective norm and greater perceived behavioral control, should strengthen behavioral intention. In turn, strong intention increases the likelihood that the individual will perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB has received considerable empirical support (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001; Ravis, Sheeran, & Armitage, 2009). Ajzen (1991) acknowledged that the contribution made by each TPB predictor of intention is expected to vary depending on the type of behavior.

The TPB has shown applicability to activities involving deception, including cheating on an exam, shoplifting, and lying (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). McFarland and Ryan (2006) found that over two studies, 45–57% of variability in intention to fake when applying for a job could be predicted by a combination of attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm regarding faking behavior. These results suggest that the TPB is a sound, basic model for studying faking intentions. However, a large amount of variance remains unexplained. In addition, McFarland and Ryan did not consider the potential role of additional normative values.

### The Role of Moral Norms in the Theory of Planned Behavior

Subjective norms as assessed by traditional TPB approaches do not address the potential influence of other normative belief categories (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Moral norms are dependent on an individual's personal view of what constitutes ethical behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998). Moral norms appear to be a useful addition in predicting intention to engage in ethically value-laden behaviors over and above the basic TPB model, with a review finding an additional 4% of variance explained across 11 TPB studies (Conner & Armitage, 1998). Godin, Conner, and Sheeran (2005) concluded that for morally relevant behaviors, moral norms play an important role. More recently, moral norm has also demonstrated an influence on intentions beyond the traditional TPB components in value-laden behaviors such as recycling (White, Smith, Terry, Greenslade, & McKimmie, 2009) and unsafe driving (Elliott & Thomson, 2010).

Given the usefulness of moral norms in examining value-laden behaviors in the context of faking a psychological test, considering the role of moral norms may also be relevant. It is unsurprising that a number of theoretical faking models propose that morality and values predict faking behavior. Goffin and Boyd (2009) presented a model that proposed that addition consideration of the role of moral codes in faking is indicated. McFarland and Ryan (2000) suggested that values and morals might influence faking beliefs and intentions to engage in faking behavior. Snell, Sydel, and Lueke (1999) also recommended that the role of morality be considered in applicant faking behavior. However, despite the intuitive appeal of morality as a possible variable of interest in faking and these theoretical proposals, the effect of morality on intentions to fake in psychological testing is yet to be empirically examined. In fact, to date, only one study (Grieve, 2012) has empirically considered the role of morality in regards to faking, and in that study, assessment of morality was only indirect, with honest-humility acting as a proxy measure. Grieve

found that when considered with other personality variables, lower levels of honesty-humility significantly predicted intentions to fake in psychological assessment. However, once additional variables were included, honesty-humility was no longer a significant predictor. Grieve's findings point to the fact that a variable such as honesty-humility, while associated with moral principles may not capture the nuances of the moral norms, at least as in regards to the value-laden behavior of faking. The current research aimed to address the gap in the literature regarding moral norms.

### Additional Considerations: Ethical Position

Related to the field of morality is ethics. Schlenker (2008) conceptualised ethical position as an individual's moral orientation to drive decisions on what is right or wrong. Schlenker and Forsyth (1977) proposed that ethical judgment could be described using two dimensions: ethical idealism and ethical relativism. High ethical idealism is characterised by a belief that there is a single, morally correct choice that can be made in any situation, while high ethical relativism is characterised by a more reflective approach that takes into consideration the specifics of the situation (Forsyth, 1980). Thus, within the current research context, it could be argued that for individuals with a high idealistic ethical position, the intention to fake is less likely. For example, an individual with a high idealistic ethical position may believe that all lying is wrong, and thus lying on a psychological test to get a job would also be wrong. In contrast, for those high in ethical relativism, more positive intentions towards faking are possible. For example, an individual with a high relativistic ethical position may believe that although lying is not desirable, lying on a psychological test to get a job that will allow them to take better care of a family member in need is acceptable.

### The Current Research

Previous research suggests that TPB may serve as a useful framework for the investigation of intentions to fake on a psychological test (McFarland & Ryan, 2006). Further, a corollary of the nature of subjective norms in regards to value-laden behaviors implies that additional consideration of moral norms is indicated (Godin et al., 2005). These findings align with theoretical models that propose that morality may predict the intention to fake on psychological tests (Goffin & Boyd, 2009; McFarland & Ryan, 2000; Snell et al., 1999). The current research sought to align these theoretical approaches, and, for the first time, to provide an empirical test of them. In addition, it was hoped that including ethical values might also provide an enriched understanding of the predictors of faking intention.

In line with McFarland and Ryan's (2006) study, it was firstly hypothesised that the TPB variables of combination of attitudes towards faking, perceived behavioral control over faking, and subjective norm regarding faking behavior would significantly predict intention to fake on psychological tests. Specifically, it was anticipated that a favourable attitude, a high level of perceived behavioral control over faking, and a positive subject norm regarding faking would be related to increased intention to fake. Secondly, it was hypothesised that considering the role of moral obligation and ethical position would explain a significant amount of additional variance to the model, with a low moral obligation to avoid faking, lower levels of ethical idealism, and higher levels of ethical relativism related to increased intention to fake in psychological testing.

### Method

#### Participants

Survey responses were received from 225 community members (56 male, 169 female). Twenty-four percent were aged 18–25, 13%

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