How Faking Impacts Personality Assessment Results

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People constantly ask us how faking affects the results of personality assessment. We believe that faking doesn’t matter, and we say this for two reasons. First, the data show that people can’t or don’t fake their answers on personality questionnaires. Second, it is very hard to define faking. Let’s take these two points in order.

I. Do People Fake their Responses on Personality Inventories? With regard to people’s ability to fake their scores on, for example, the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI), consider the following. Hogan, Barrett, and Hogan (2007) tested over 5,000 job applicants using the HPI; these people were subsequently denied employment. Six months later, they reapplied for the same job and completed the HPI a second time. It seems reasonable to assume that they would try to improve their scores the second time; however, virtually none of their scores changed beyond the standard error of measurement. The data are quite clear—even when motivated to fake, people’s scores on the HPI don’t change.

We believe that concerns about faking reflect a misunderstanding of what people do when they answer items on a personality inventory. There are two views about this: (a) self-report; and (b) impression management. These views have very different implications for understanding faking.

The Self-Report View of Faking. This view assumes that people answer items on personality measures by providing factual self reports, and faking involves lying. This view assumes that memory is like a videotape so that, when people read an item on an inventory (“I read ten books a year”), they compare the item with the memory tape, and then “report”; that is, they offer factual accounts of how an item matches their memory tape. Faking involves providing false reports about the match between the content of an item and the content of memory.

However, memory researchers from Bartlett (1937) to the present agree that memories are not factual recordings of past events, they are self-serving reconstructions designed to create a particular impression on others—people construct their memories and use them for strategic purposes.

Impression Management Theory. Our view is that during social interaction, people try to maximize social acceptance and status and minimize rejection and the loss of status (i.e., they are engaged in trying to get along and get ahead—cf. Hogan, 2006). When people respond to employment interview questions, assessment center exercises, or items on a personality inventory, they do what they always do during social interaction—they try to create a favorable impression of themselves. In this view, faking involves distorting the way one normally talks about oneself during social interaction.
Personality is most important in social interaction, and it is useful to compare social interaction with handwriting. Both are skilled performances, they reflect skills that we learned as children. In both cases, we perform best when we think about what we are trying to do, and we perform poorly when we think about how we are doing it—that is, both types of performance are best when they are unreflective, automatic, even unconscious. Now imagine trying to change your handwriting—i.e., to fake it. It is extremely difficult to do, and even when we try, others can almost always recognize the handwriting as ours. Now imagine trying to change the way you interact with others—i.e., to fake. It is extremely difficult to do, and even when we try, others still know it is us.

II. How to Define Faking. We do not believe there are “true selves” inside people. We make a distinction between the person you think you are (your identity) and the person we think you are (your reputations). Identity is very hard to study; after 100 years of research, we still don’t know much about it. However, this may not matter because it seems clear that we make it up our identities in idiosyncratic ways. On the other hand, reputation is easy to study, we know a lot about it, and it is immensely consequential for our lives and careers. Successful people know how to control their reputations—this is impression management. Moreover, many successful people (e.g., former President Ronald Reagan) never engage in introspection and are unable and unwilling to talk about their identities; however, they are very shrewd at managing their reputations.

But most importantly, the HPI is designed to predict reputation not measure identity. Reputation reflects a person’s typical interpersonal style, which is like a person’s handwriting. So with regard to faking, the question of whether a person’s answers (to the HPI) are consistent with a person’s identity (his/her true self) is irrelevant. The right question concerns whether a person’s answers are consistent with a person’s reputation? This is the sense in which faking should be understood.

Consider the goals of child rearing. Small children usually act in ways that are consistent with their “true” desires and urges—they pee their pants when they feel like it. Child rearing consists almost entirely of training children to hide, or at least delay, their “true” desires and to behave in ways that are consistent with the norms of civilized adult conduct. Some people believe that child rearing involves teaching children to fake, to be inauthentic, and is a process that is inherently alienating. In contrast, we believe child rearing involves training children to behave in a socially appropriate manner, and that their natural selves are something they need to overcome.

The items on the HPI sample ordinary socialized adult behavior. Most adults know the rules of conduct and respond to HPI items in terms of social norms rather than in terms of their true (childlike) desires and urges. On the other hand, criminals and other deviants answer HPI items in ways that are more consistent with their “true” selves—and with their typical behavior. The larger point is that it is almost impossible to distinguish faking from
socialized behavior. And this means that it is very hard to assign a clear meaning to the claim that some people fake when they respond to personality measures.

III. A Practical Example. Consider a practical question. There are three HICs on the HPI Prudence scale (Moralistic, Mastery, and Virtuous) that are designed to measure implausible responding—i.e., “faking”. A sample item would be “I have never told a lie.” Scores on these three HICs are normally distributed. How should we interpret very high or perfect scores on these three HICs? Regarding this interpretation, we would make four points.

First, it is important to remember that the HPI is designed to predict reputation, to predict how people will be described by others—it is NOT designed to predict how people think about themselves. Thus, people with very high scores on these three HICs will seem socially appropriate in the extreme. They will be mannerly, polite, buttoned down, and careful not to give offense.

Second, a general principle is that scores should be interpreted in the context of other scores. A relatively frequent pattern of scores includes a very high score on these three HICs and a high score on the Mischievous scale of the HDS. This pattern suggests a person with good social skills—clever, pleasant, and quite charming—who is also manipulative, agenda-driven, risk-taking, limit testing, and very cautious. His/her potential deviousness will be very hard to detect—especially during an interview. In time, other people usually catch on to the person’s manipulative tendencies, and that may cause problems for the person’s career. But in the short term, such people prosper in organizations.

Third, a more common pattern includes very high scores on the three “faking” HICs, and high scores on HPI Prudence, HDS Diligent and/or Dutiful, and high MVPI Tradition and/or Security. These people tend to be socially correct, but self-righteous, rule bound, perfectionistic, and risk-averse; they are scrupulous in their treatment of others and exacting in their expectations. Bosses and senior managers usually find these tendencies attractive, but as managers, such people alienate and disempower their subordinates.

Finally, we sometimes see a pattern that combines high scores on the “faking” HICs with overall attractive results on the HPI, HDS, and MVPI. Such people have superb social skills and few if any developmental needs. Their only issue is one of generating resentment in others because they seem too good to be true.

The major point of this section concerns how to interpret high scores on the HPI HICs designed to detect “faking”. We think the interpretation is substantive—such scores predict a particular interpersonal style. It is a style marked by extreme social appropriateness, good manners, and ultra-civility. Are people with these scores faking or are they engaged in a particular form of impression management?