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

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

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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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

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; Rivis, 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, Sydell, 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%

were 26-35, 28% were 36-45, 21% were 46-55, 7% were 56-65 and 8% were over 65.

Design

A cross-sectional, correlational design was used, with analysis conducted via hierarchical multiple regression. In the first step, the predictor variables were attitude to faking, perceived behavioral control over faking, and subjective norm regarding faking behavior. In the second step, moral obligation norm was added as a predictor. In the final step, ethical idealism and ethical relativism were added as predictors. The criterion variable was intention to fake.

Materials

Demographics. Information was requested for age and gender.

Theory of planned behavior constructs. Items testing the TPB were developed based on McFarland and Ryan's (2006) model of faking behavior, and Beck and Azjen's (1991) exploration of cheating, shoplifting, and lying intentions.

Attitude toward faking. Participants indicated how much each of eight semantic-differential items reflected their views about faking on psychological tests. A sample statement is *Faking on psychological tests is: good-bad*. Five items were reverse-scored. Scores were summed: higher scores indicate a more favourable attitude towards faking. Internal reliability in the current sample was good (Cronbach's α = .83).

Perceived behavioral control over faking behavior. Perceived behavioral control was measured through five items using a 5-point Likert-type scale with the anchors 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A sample item is *It would be easy for me to fake responses to a psychological test*. One item was reverse-scored. Scores were summed, with high scores indicating high levels of perceived behavioral control over faking behavior. The current sample suggested good internal reliability for this measure (Cronbach's α = .83).

Subjective norm concerning faking behavior. Subjective norm was measured through two items, using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A sample item is *No-one who is important to me would care if I faked on a psychological test.* Scores were summed: high scores indicate favourable subjective norm regarding faking behavior. Inter-item correlations in the current sample suggested good internal reliability (r = .81).

Moral obligation norm concerning faking behavior. Moral obligation was measured through two items assessing personal position towards engaging in faking behavior, using a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors of 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A sample (reversed) item is *Even if I had a good reason, I could not bring myself to fake responses on a psychological test.* High scores indicate a low moral obligation to suppress faking behavior. Inter-item correlation in the current sample was acceptable (r = .61).

Intention to fake. Intention to fake was measured through four items using a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging between 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A sample item from four items was *I intend to fake on future psychological tests*, with scores summed and higher scores representing a greater intention to fake. Cronbach's α in the current sample (.88) suggested very good internal reliability.

Ethical position. Ethical position was measured using Forsyth's (1980) Ethics Position Questionnaire. The scale uses a 9-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 9 = completely agree. Two 10-item sub-scales identify an individual's ethical position: idealistic or relativistic. Sample items are *One should never psychologically or physically harm another person* (ethical idealism), and *Whether a lie is judged to be moral or immoral depends upon the circumstances surrounding the action* (ethical relativism). High mean sub-scale scores indicate a high level of idealism or relativism respectively. Internal reliabilities are good, with Cronbach's α of .88 for ethical idealism and .85 for ethical relativism in the current sample.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's ethics committee. Potential participants were then invited to participate in a survey investigating "individual differences in psychological testing". After giving informed consent, participants completed the measures, before being debriefed and given the opportunity to have any questions answered.

Results

There was a small amount of missing data, thus, cases were excluded listwise, leaving data from 218 participants in the analysis. All relevant multivariate assumptions were met. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

Variable	M	SD
Intention to fake	8.50	3.27
Attitude	14.60	5.74
Perceived behavioral control	14.02	4.38
Subjective norm	5.36	2.04
Moral obligation norm	4.22	1.76
Ethical idealism	6.83	1.33
Ethical relativism	5.33	1.46

Table 2 shows the correlations between variables. There were small to moderate positive correlations between the TPB predictor variables of attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm, while all TPB variables were moderately and positively related to intention to fake. Moral obligation norms were strongly related to intention to fake. Ethical idealism shared small and negative relationships with the TPB variables. Ethical relativism was only weakly correlated with all other variables.

In Step 1 of the hierarchical multiple regression, the combination of attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm significantly predicted intention to fake, R = .73, R^2 = .53, $F(3, 214)$ = 80.38, $p < .001$ (adjusted R square = .52) , accounting for 52.3% of variability in intention to fake. These results represent a very large effect, f^2 = 1.12 (Cohen, 1992). Within the model, attitude and perceived behavioral control were significant individual predictors, with more positive attitudes and greater perceived behavioral control related to increased intention to fake. Subjective norm was not a significant individual predictor.

In Step 2, moral obligation norm was added to the model. This significantly improved the model, explaining an additional 14% of variance, R^2 change = .14, Fchange $(1, 213)$ = 88.63, $p < .001$, resulting in a model that explained 66.2% of variance in the intention to fake, R = .82, R^2 = .67, $F(4, 213)$ = 107.13, $p < .001$, (adjusted R square = .662). This was an extremely large effect, f^2 = 2.03 (Cohen, 1992). Attitude, perceived behavioral control, and moral obligation were significant individual predictors of intention to fake, with more positive attitudes towards faking, greater perceived control over faking, and less moral obligation to suppress faking, associated with increased

Table 2
Bivariate correlations

	Intention to fake	Attitude	Perceived behavioral control	Subjective norm	Moral obligation norm	Ethical idealism	Ethical relativism
Intention to fake	1.00	.55***	.61***	.25***	.73***	-.24***	.09
Attitude		1.00	.28***	.39***	.52***	-.26***	.08
Perceived behavioral control			1.00	.32***	.45***	-.26***	.05
Subjective norm				1.00	.43***	-.15*	.08
Moral obligation norm					1.00	-.24***	.16*
Ethical idealism						1.00	.01
Ethical relativism							1.00

.*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

intention to fake. Subjective norms did not significantly contribute to the model.

In the third and final step, idealistic and relativistic ethical position were added to the model. This explained virtually no additional variance in the intention to fake, R^2 change = .00, *F*change (2, 211) = 0.14, $p = .874$. This final model explained 65.9% of variance, $R = .82$, $R^2 = .67$, $F(6, 211) = 70.89$, $p < .001$, (adjusted R square = .659). This was an extremely large effect, $f^2 = 2.03$ (Cohen, 1992). Significant individual predictors were unchanged from the previous step. Details of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Hierarchical Multiple Regression

		b	Std. error	Beta	t-statistic
Step 1	Constant	-.25	0.61		-4.16
	Attitude	.23	0.03	.40	7.67***
	Perceived behavioral control	.37	0.04	.49	9.74***
	Subjective norm	.06	0.08	.04	0.74
Step 2	Constant	-.27	0.51		-0.54
	Attitude	.12	0.03	.22	4.59***
	Perceived behavioral control	.26	0.03	.35	7.78***
	Subjective norm	-.08	0.07	-.05	-1.13
	Moral obligation norm	.89	0.09	.48	9.41***
Step 3	Constant	-.43	1.08		0.39
	Attitude	.13	0.03	.22	4.57***
	Perceived behavioral control	.26	0.03	.35	7.70***
	Subjective norm	-.08	0.07	-.05	-1.12
	Moral obligation norm	.89	0.10	.49	9.36***
	Ethical idealism	.04	0.10	.02	0.37
	Ethical relativism	-.04	0.09	-.02	-0.38

*$p <. 05$, **$p < .01$, *** $p< .001$

Discussion

As hypothesised, attitudes towards faking and perceived behavioral control over faking significantly predicted intention to fake on psychological tests; however, subjective norm was not a significant individual predictor to the model. Also as hypothesised, the addition of moral obligation explained significantly more variance in intention to fake, over and above the variance explained by the traditional TPB variables. However, in contrast to predictions, the inclusion of ethical position explained no additional variance.

Overall, while the combination of the basic TPB variables predicted faking intentions in this sample, subjective norm was a weak contributor to the model. This finding is in line previous research regarding intentions to perform dishonest actions such as cheating, shoplifting, and lying (Beck & Ajzen, 1991), and faking on psychological tests (McFarland & Ryan, 2006), where the contribution made by subjective norm was the lowest. However, unlike previous research, the current results did not reveal a significant effect of subjective norm. A possible explanation may come from the sample tested here: both Beck and Ajzen (1991) and McFarland and Ryan (2006) reported on data collected entirely from student samples. In contrast, in the current research, a community sample was used. It is possible that individuals in a community member sample felt less social normative pressure than their student sample counterparts. This may have weakened the effect of subjective norms within the model, resulting in a non-significant effect.

This research examined for the first time the role of moral norms in the prediction of intentions to fake in psychological testing. In line with previous research investigating intentions towards value-laden behaviors (Beck & Ajzen, 1991; Elliott & Thomson, 2010; Godin et al., 2005; Nemme & White, 2010; Parker, Manstead, & Stradling, 1995; White et al., 2009), moral obligation significantly predicted intention to engage in faking. Low personal moral obligation to suppress faking behavior revealed the highest correlation with intention to fake, indicating that a positive view of the morality of faking increases intention to fake. Overall, these results suggest that the predictive value of moral obligation generalises to the faking context and supports the utility of distinguishing between normative types in the domain of psychological assessment. It is therefore recommended that moral obligation be measured separately to other normative influences when using the TPB to predict faking and similar intentions.

The findings regarding the function of moral norms in intentions to fake in psychological testing have implications within test administration settings. Some research has suggested that warnings (suggesting that individuals may or will be caught) as useful prior to (Schenk & Sullivan, 2010) or during (Landers, Sackett, & Tuzinski, 2011) psychological testing in order to reduce response distortion. It is feasible that moral norms could be used to inform the kind of warnings given in psychological testing, in order to enhance deterring effects.

At the bivariate level, the correlation between ethical relativism and intention to fake was weak. Ethical idealism was significantly negatively correlated with intention to fake, suggesting that participants who believe in good consequences resulting from a morally 'right' action are less likely to fake. However, despite this significant bivariate relationship, the contribution of ethical idealism within the multivariate model was not significant. The null results regarding the role of ethical position in predicting faking intentions is difficult to explain. With a sample size exceeding Green's (1991) recommendations for assessing the contribution of individual predictors in multiple regression, it would seem that the null results

regarding were not due to insufficient power. Attention must then turn to the nature of the constructs themselves. It would seem that within the context of a TPB derived model, ethical position may have only limited utility in the prediction of faking intentions. Iverson (2007) identified numerous complex and interactive factors that may motivate faking behaviors, several of which may be pertinent to ethical position (for example greed, justification, and entitlement) and social or moral norms (for example secondary gain and reinforced behavior patterns). It is therefore possible that within the psychosocial context of the TPB model it was difficult to accurately explore the potential interactions and bidirectional associations between motivations and ethical idealism. Given the likely conceptual value of ethical idealism in predicting faking intentions, and the bivariate relationship involved, it seems possible that the TPB constructs may have absorbed the contribution of ethical idealism. It is also possible that ethically relativistic individuals were ambivalent regarding faking intention as it was operationalised here, perhaps requiring more information (e.g., how badly do I need this job?) before determining their willingness to engage in faking in psychological assessment.

Still, it remains that a number of additional constructs may be useful to consider in future research investigating intentions to fake in psychological assessment. For example, socially desirable responding is associated with a tendency to enhance the self (Holden, 2007). Given the influence of social desirability in self-presentation, considering the role of individual differences such as these in predicting faking intentions may provide additional insight.

Additional Considerations and Limitations

This research was conducted entirely using self-report. It is therefore feasible that common-method variance may have influenced findings. However, given ethical relativism's weak correlation with the other variables, it seems unlikely that measurement error, if present, was systematic.

This study addressed generic faking intentions. Future research would benefit from delineating intentions to fake in specific faking situations (for example, an unemployed vs. incumbent applicant). It is possible that the role of moral obligation norms and ethical position (or indeed variables such as social desirability, as noted above) may be more salient depending on the faking scenario. It is therefore recommended that future studies explore intentions in a range of specific faking contexts in order to identify specific predictors.

Finally, it is important that future studies explore whether the TPB model improves prediction of actual faking behavior, as well as faking intention. However, as individuals rarely admit to faking in non-analogue situation (Hall, Thompson, & Poirier, 2007; Morel & Marshman, 2008; Taylor, Frueh, & Asmundson, 2007), operationalisation of this aspect of the model may prove challenging. Still, given the well-established role of intention as a precursor to behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), it remains that identification of the predictors of intention to fake in psychological testing is indicated.

Conclusion

Outcomes of psychological testing have important consequences in a range of domains, such as vocational, clinical, and forensic contexts, with psychological test results informing a number of possibly life-altering decisions (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2010). However, to date, firm understanding of the antecedents of faking behavior is limited, with most research presenting theoretical perspectives rather than empirical evidence. This research aimed to address this problem by empirically examining constructs drawn from sound theoretical positions.

This research examined for the first time the role of attitude, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, moral obligation, and ethical ideology in the prediction of intention to fake. A favourable attitude toward faking, a high level of perceived behavioral control over faking, and a low level of moral obligation to suppress faking behavior contributed strongly to the prediction of intention to fake on a psychological test.

The current model supports the previous findings (McFarland & Ryan, 2006) regarding the overall contribution made by attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norm regarding intention to fake. However, importantly the current findings extend understanding by highlighting the utility of the inclusion of personal moral obligation norms in research of this nature. It would seem that, in the context of faking, an integration of the theoretical approaches regarding morality (e.g., Goffin & Boyd, 2009; Snell et al., 1999) and the TPB is indicated. Specifically, it would seem that consideration of morality in the form of normative beliefs is of value, over and above the traditional TPB approach using subjective norms.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflicts of interest.

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