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PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON UNDERSTANDING EFFECTS OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT ON ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

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“Whether an honest performer wishes to convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions”

— Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959)

Interest in the ways that job applicants' behavior is influenced by concerns about how they will be perceived, evaluated, and accepted during the hiring process is as old as organizational science. As early as the 1930s, researchers were concerned about how applicant faking and socially desirable responding affect self-report assessments to be used in personnel selection contexts (Bernreuter, 1933; Hendrickson, 1934; Kelly et al., 1936; Steinmetz, 1932; see Zickar & Gibby, 2006). On the other hand, research on impression management (IM) in employment interviews did not fully emerge until the 1980s and 1990s (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar et al., 1992; Stevens & Kristof 1995; see also conceptual work on IM by Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; and Schlenker, 1980). As with many areas of applied psychology, the practical implications of what has been learned from research over the past century have been of limited utility. Does faking happen? Surely, it does. Can faking be corrected or prevented? The answer to the first part is “not very well” and the answer to the second portion is “only with the careful development of assessments, which takes considerable time and effort.” Does impression management in interviews generally lead to more favorable evaluations? Yes. Are those individuals who engage in impression management during interviews likely to be good performers if hired? The answer to this appears to be that “it’s complicated” (Griffin, 2014).

Where does that situate this special issue? One reaction

to reading the literature in this area might be to recall the aphorism attributed to Voltaire: “*Il meglio è l’inimico del bene.*” This has been loosely translated into “perfect is the enemy of the good.” In other words, just because something may never be flawless does not mean we should not strive for improvement. A second reaction might be the realization that faking and IM are uniquely difficult areas to research. They share this with the study of lie detection. Can you just ask which people dissimulated? This approach is limited for some obvious reasons. Can we simulate the setting, manipulate contextual variables, and examine individual differences on assessment outcomes? Surely, but it is hard to say how well what has been studied will generalize to real-world application. The final reaction to this literature may well be that although advances have been incremental in these areas, the research itself remains important to people’s lives. Most people will apply for a job at some point, and all of those will likely be interviewed. Stakeholders within the organization will have to work with those who are eventually hired, and the results of poor decisions can be disastrous.

The remit for this special issue was intentionally broad: Any potential topic on how IM affects assessment outcomes using a range of methodologies was welcomed. The nine papers included in this issue were split for the most part between a focus on faking on personality assessments and IM in the interview. We are particularly excited that research looking at faking and IM are included in the same special issue because these two major research areas have tended to diverge in theoretical and methodological approaches. Faking researchers have been inclined to examine intentionally faking good, whereas IM researchers have divided their attention between honest and deceptive impression management tactics (Levashina & Campion, 2007). In a nutshell, intentional faking on personality assessments and

deceptive IM in interviews tend to lead to negative effects on assessment outcomes, whereas honest IM tends to lead to positive effects (see Baron, 1989 and Robie et al., 2020 for exceptions of the positive effects of honest IM vis-à-vis the “too much of a good thing” effect).

Setting the Stage: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The first paper, by Tett and Simonet (2021), provides an overview of the two perspectives on response distortion—faking is good and faking is bad. Although their focus is on personality assessments, their arguments can easily be transported to IM in the interview because the overall message of their paper is that if faking degrades construct validity, then it is “bad.” Important psychological constructs are being measured with both personality assessments and in interviews. No paper to our knowledge has so clearly juxtaposed these divergent perspectives. Taken at face value, the implication is that validation efforts in low-stakes situations (such as job incumbents) should no longer be assumed to transport to applicant settings where stakes are much higher. As such, Tett and Simonet’s paper sets the stage nicely for the rest of the papers.

Theme 1: Faking on Forced-Choice Personality Assessments

Three papers examine the use of forced-choice measurement on assessment outcomes. Forced-choice measurement is one of the areas of faking research that has shown some promise in reducing score elevation (Cao & Dragow, 2019) and maintaining (or increasing) criterion-related validity compared to single-stimulus measures (Salgado & Taurez, 2014). It is notable that none of the papers simply examined faking in traditional (single stimulus) normative measures of personality; questions regarding the deleterious effects of faking on these measures appear to have been asked and answered.

The study by Huber et al. (2021) was consistent with the abovementioned meta-analyses in that they showed that a multidimensional forced-choice (MFC) measure substantially reduced score elevation in comparison to a single stimulus measure. The incremental contribution of their study is that they found the possible underlying mechanism in the forced-choice conundrum of reduced score elevation without substantial increases in criterion-related validity. Specifically, motivated score elevation was reduced on the MFC measure but appeared to elicit selective faking on work-relevant dimensions.

The Lee and Joo (2021) paper also examines issues surrounding forced-choice measurement by focusing on resistance to faking associated with MFC measures from a differential item/test functioning lens. They report that the MFC measure exhibited less differential functioning across faking conditions than a single stimulus measure. However, the picture emerging from this study is not all positive. Spe-

cifically, including positively and negatively keyed items in forced-choice blocks increased trait recovery accuracy (as compared to just including positively keyed statements). However, mixed key blocks appear inconsistent with the original purpose of MFCs because resistance to faking is substantially reduced due to increased scoring transparency. This indicates that in high-stakes selection contexts techniques methods should be used that do not require mixed-keyed blocks (see Salgado et al., 2015 regarding the predictive power of quasi-ipsative, forced-choice measures).

The final paper examining forced-choice methodology utilizes a novel approach to detecting faking on forced-choice instruments. Kuzmich and Scherbaum (2021) tested the notion that fakers could be identified by how they use their computer mouse to respond to items on a forced-choice measure. Previous related work has been done using eye-tracking equipment that would be difficult to bring to scale outside of the laboratory (van Hooft & Born, 2012). Conversely, most candidates in large-scale testing make use of a computer mouse. Kuzmich and Scherbaum examined five indices of mouse tracking and found one (deviation from a straight line in mouse trajectory from starting point to item choice) that reliably discriminated between those directed to respond honestly and those directed to fake good. Implications for faking detection using a relatively easy to implement technology are encouraging, even if there remains little consensus on what to do once fakers are identified (Burns & Christiansen, 2011).

Theme 2: Effects of Impression Management in Employment Interviews

The next four papers all examined the effects of IM in interviews. The explosion of research in this area and potential synergies with the faking literature are an important development in personnel selection research. Compared to the previous decade (2001–2010), we counted a similar number of articles related to faking personality inventories that had been published during 2011–2020. In contrast, the number of articles published in the area of IM in interviews *more than doubled*. Interview studies are often quite costly in terms of time and effort, with any number of potential obstacles arising that are easily circumvented in direct faking studies with personality inventories. Given the ubiquity of employment interviews, this advancement in research on personnel selection may be looked back on as a turning point in this area.

The study by Charbonneau and colleagues (2021) was one a long time coming. It is often claimed that applicants disadvantage both the applicant and the organization in terms of person–job and person–organization misfit when they misrepresent themselves during selection; however, this assertion has not been extensively tested. In this study, honest IM in the interview did not have any negative effects on fit. However, deceptive IM in the interview revealed a

negative relationship with fit, which in turn accounted for the relationship between deceptive IM and well-being, employee engagement, and job stress. The results confirm that interviewees should think twice about employing deceptive tactics, as such misrepresentation is likely to eventually catch up with them should they get the job.

The next study, by Roth et al. (2021), attempts to identify the elusive cues that can be used to identify deception in the interview (see Luke, 2019, for a review of how difficult this has proven in past efforts). The researchers focused on two deception cues—plausibility of claims made and verbal uncertainties in expression. As one might expect, honest IM was positively related to plausibility, which in turn was related to more favorable interview ratings. On the other hand, deceptive IM was associated with increased verbal uncertainty and was negatively related to plausibility. The observed positive relationship between deceptive IM and interview ratings suggests that if raters do not correctly identify plausibility cues, they may inadvertently reward interviewees for providing deceptive information.

Canagasuriam and Roulin (2021) examined the effect that a competitive organizational culture has on faking in the job interview. Their analyses suggested that organizational culture did not directly impact the extent to which applicants faked and that self-reported faking was not related to interview performance. However, applicants facing a more competitive organizational culture perceived the ideal personality to involve lower agreeableness and honesty-humility, resulting in representing themselves as lower on expressions of these traits in order to increase their fit with the organization. These results serve as a reminder that faking can be a function of both the perceived requirements of the job as well as the demand characteristics of the organization.

The final paper examined the effects of social norms on faking behavior in the interview. The importance of social norms in affecting behavior has been known for decades (Sherif, 1936). Sinclair and Agerström (2021) observed very small differences when participants were informed about norms about faking interviews compared to when this information was withheld. However, when participants were informed that the normative behavior was to be honest interviews, willingness to fake diminished. The implication is that faking might be reduced by transmitting a prosocial message about honesty to applicants prior to conducting the interviews.

Theme 3: Impression Management Tactics in Applicants' Social Media Posts

The last paper in the special issue is deserving of its very own theme. Myers and colleagues (2021) detail their development of a scale that measures three IM tactics on Facebook: defensive, assertive deceptive, and assertive honest. They found honest IM tactics were positively related

to job search outcomes but that personality characteristics were differentially related to the IM tactics employed in the posts. Their scale will undoubtedly be helpful for researchers to use in examining how candidates strategically use social media in their job search.

Conclusion: There's Still Time to Change the Road We're On

Although considerable effort has been invested in exploring how job candidates present themselves and the effects these tactics have on assessment results in selection contexts, some of the lessons from this research have taken a long time to become accepted in *either* research or practice. For example, in employment interviews it has been long been known that “softball questions” that are easily prepared for are not very useful, in no small part because they tend to be generic rather than job specific (Campion et al., 1994). Often overlooked in the design of other assessments is the maxim not to ask questions where every motivated applicant can easily deduce the response for which the organization is looking. Despite the collective wisdom regarding transparency, personality inventories routinely have applicants indicate how true a set of very desirable and undesirable statement might be of them. It should come as no surprise to find that the validity of such inventories in applicant samples is at best compromised, and oftentimes destroyed, when highly transparent questions are used (Jeong et al., 2017).

One might reasonably ask why the use of highly transparent self-report inventories has been steadily increasing (cf. Morgeson et al., 2007), many of which contain items that most of us would balk at asking during an employment interview. Unfortunately, the answer is rooted in how we have reported and disseminated our research. Most meta-analyses on the validity of selection tools do not even consider (either in coding or as a tested moderator) whether the assessments were completed in a low-stakes setting or in a high-stakes situation where motivation to appear favorably might affect results. Although Guion and Gottier (1965) identified this as a critical deficit in the literature on the validity of self-report measures, fewer than 10% of the studies have used actual applicants. Validity estimates from nonapplicant samples in meta-analyses generally swamp the results from actual applicants, and the true validity for the latter are lost in the sample-weighted mean validity estimates.

This has led to two unfortunate outcomes. First, it encourages future researchers to take the path less costly in terms of time and effort, utilizing samples of convenience in validation studies that are composed of students or incumbents. This perpetuates the problem. Second, it conveys a false sense of the usefulness of transparent assessments, encouraging organizations to do what is cheap and easy. But at what cost? In the long term, hiring processes that

leverage these assessments will onboard employees whose job performance does not justify the cost of the assessment. Only by being candid about the limitations of our samples and by focusing our validation efforts on the actual populations of interest will we earn the trust of organizations. *Vendors of commercial assessments clearly share responsibility for assuring clients that samples of convenience can be used to demonstrate the job relatedness of applicants' scores at the same time they deny the science showing otherwise* (e.g., Jeong et al., 2017).

Organizational scientists therefore need to stop being part of the problem and start being more engaged in solutions. The papers brought together in this special issue are a step forward. It is not until the effects of impression management on assessment outcomes are better understood that more effective assessments can be developed that minimize opportunities for applicants to improve the odds of obtaining a job offer through deception alone. As noted, such assessments take considerable time and effort to develop. However, encouragement can be found in two current directions in this literature. First, research on the faking of single stimulus personality inventories has given way to advancing understanding of response processes for forced-choice inventories, the most promising of which use response options that are balanced on attractiveness to reduce faking. More research is needed that compares IRT-based MFC scoring to traditional classical test theory approaches to scoring forced choice, as IRT-based MFC scoring can result in lower estimates of criterion-related validity (Fisher et al., 2019). Second, there has been an eruption of research on applicant behavior in employment interviews that better distinguishes between “putting your best foot forward” and outright deception. Taken together, these trends hold promise for having a science that informs practice in a more forthright manner: Too often we have been satisfied getting what we want rather than what we need.

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