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People "fake-good" on personality self-reports more strongly in a job context than in a dating context

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ABSTRACT

Socially desirable responding can impair the validity of self-report questionnaires, especially in high-stakes situations in which people are incentivized to manage the impression they make on others. The current experiment examined the context dependency of impression management. Participants ($N = 231$) completed the Big Five Inventory-2 twice, first honestly and then with faking-good instructions in a job or dating context. Socially desirable responding was present in both contexts but was more pronounced in the job context than in the dating context for many (but not all) Big Five domains and facets. Future research should investigate whether faking behavior differs across contexts not only under faking-good instructions but also in high-stakes situations (e.g., personnel selection or online dating).

1. Introduction

The presentation of one's personality can have far-reaching consequences such as the likelihood of landing a desirable job or finding a romantic partner. People thus manage these impressions, particularly in high-stakes contexts. To assess impression management on self-report questionnaires, previous studies have used faking-good instructions which tell people to manipulate their answers using either context-free instructions (e.g., "present yourself in the best light possible"; Davies, 2001) or job/university application contexts ("imagine that you are participating in a student selection procedure"; Ziegler & Bühner, 2009). This research has found that people present themselves as more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, open, and less neurotic when instructed to fake-good compared to when responding honestly (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999).

However, few studies have compared impression management across different contexts. For instance, do people present themselves differently when trying to impress a potential employer versus a potential romantic partner? Our literature review found no empirical studies examining how faking-good affects Big Five self-reports in the dating context. However, there is evidence that online daters often deceive about their height, weight, and age (Toma et al., 2008) and it seems likely that deception is not limited to these physical characteristics but also spans personality traits. Moreover, what is socially desirable in a romantic partner might differ from what is desirable in a job candidate. We therefore directly compare the effect of faking-good instructions across these contexts.

1.1. Managing personality impressions

Previous research indicates that impression management alters how people respond to personality self-report questionnaires. For example, job applicants bias their self-reports towards social desirability more than current employees do (Rosse et al., 1998) and workers who anticipate their responses will be seen by their managers score higher on conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability than those responding anonymously (Vecchione et al., 2014). This faking is often tailored to specific job demands (Birkeland et al., 2006) and depends on the situational pressure experienced by an applicant (e.g., Pauls & Crost, 2005). In general, however, *meta*-analytic evidence suggests that faking-good instructions affect all Big Five domains such that people portray themselves as more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, less neurotic, and more open when instructed to fake-good in a job context compared to when responding honestly (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1999).

Like job applications, dating is another relevant life domain. Thus, faking-good instructions in the dating context might lead to similar biases. Yet, personality aspects valued in love life are not necessarily the same aspects as those valued in work life. In this regard, the distinction

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between agency and communion is important (Paulhus, 2002). Agency includes traits relevant for "getting ahead" and communion includes traits relevant for "getting along" (Hogan et al., 1985). Whereas most work contexts emphasize agency, communal traits are perceived as particularly desirable by peers and close others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Thus, people may fake personality self-reports differently for employers vs. romantic partners.

Within the Big Five framework, the domains of extraversion and agreeableness allow for a quite clear mapping onto agency and communion, respectively (Entringer et al., 2022). Hence, one might hypothesize that extraversion scores should be faked particularly in a job context whereas agreeableness scores should be faked particularly in a dating context. Another potential hypothesis could concern the domain of conscientiousness. Even though it does not align particularly well with the construct of agency (Entringer et al., 2022), conscientiousness spans three facets – *organization*, *productiveness*, and *responsibility* (Soto & John, 2017) – which are all task-oriented and therefore likely valued by most employers but less by romantic partners.

At the same time, the expectations for the domain of agreeableness become less clear from looking into the facet level. The facets of agreeableness are *compassion*, *respectfulness*, and *trust* (Soto & John, 2017), and while compassion and trust do seem more relevant in close relationships, respectfulness (for instance towards supervisors) could be particularly adaptive in professional contexts. Similarly, the picture might be more complex for extraversion, which covers the facets *sociability*, *assertiveness*, and *energy* (Soto & John, 2017). Although these aspects may be appreciated by many employers, there are certainly also jobs in which they are not particularly valuable (e.g., librarian, truck driver). Similarly, most people prefer a romantic partner who is somewhat sociable, assertive, and energetic, but they also vary considerably in the degree to which they prefer these traits (Botwin et al., 1997).

Overall, given the lack of empirical work comparing a job to a dating context, deriving specific hypotheses about context-dependent faking in particular Big Five domains would involve much speculation and seems premature. For this reason, the present research takes an entirely exploratory approach.

2. Methods

Participants took part in an online experiment where they completed the BFI-2 (Danner et al., 2019; Soto & John, 2017) twice, once honestly and once with an instruction to fake-good either towards a potential employer (job context) or towards a potential romantic partner (dating context). The study was not preregistered. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all data inclusion/exclusion criteria, whether inclusion/exclusion criteria were established prior to data analysis, all measures in the study, and all analyses including all tested models.

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from two German universities, social media, and private requests. In total, 238 participants completed the study. Seven participants were excluded because they failed more than one of three attention checks (see below). This criterion was established prior to data analysis. The remaining 231 participants were aged between 18 and 74 years ($M = 34.08$, $SD = 15.96$). Most of them identified as female (164 female, 66 male, 1 unidentified) and $n = 119$ were randomly assigned to the job application condition and $n = 112$ to the dating condition. They were highly educated and most were heterosexual and, in a relationship (see Tables S4 to S6 for details).

2.2. Study design and procedure

The present experiment used a 2x2 mixed design where *instructions* varied within (honest vs. fake-good) and between subjects (faking in a job application context vs. faking in a dating context). Assignment to the context condition was random. The three different instructions used across conditions were as follows (see Table S1 for German originals):

Honest condition: "Below, several statements will be presented to you. For each statement, please mark the option that applies to you best. Please answer honestly. At the end of the survey, you will receive feedback on your personality based on your responses.".

Job condition: "Employers have to choose from many applicants. That's why employers carefully consider whom they want to hire. Please imagine that an employer will decide whether to hire you based on your answers to the following questionnaire. This is your dream job. Therefore, your goal is to get the job. Fill out the following questionnaire in a way that increases your chances of getting the job. But be careful, a test expert will review the results for faking, and you don't want to get caught.".

Dating condition: "Individuals must choose from many different potential partners in their dating life. For this reason, people carefully consider whom they want to date. Please imagine that a potential dating partner will decide whether to date you based on your answers to the following questionnaire. This is your dream partner, and your goal is to date this person. Fill out the following questionnaire in a way that increases your chances of getting a date. But be careful, a test expert will review the results for faking, and you don't want to get caught.".

Upon completing the personality inventories, participants answered to a set of sociodemographic questions. Eventually, they received personality feedback on the Big Five (based on responses in the honest condition).

2.3. Measures

BFI-2. We used the German version of the BFI-2 (Danner et al., 2019) which includes 60 items (12 items per domain, 3 items per facet) rated on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (completely agree). Across conditions, Cronbach's alphas were good on the level of domains (ranging from 0.80 to 0.92) and acceptable on the facet-level (ranging from 0.54 to 0.89; see Tables S2 & S3 for details).

Attention Checks. We included three instructed response attention checks. For example, the first attention check was: "Please choose the response option 'completely agree' here.".

Manipulation Checks. After completing the faking-good condition, participants answered two manipulation check questions, one of which pertained to the condition they had actually been in: "I answered the last 60 questions in a way that would increase my chances of getting [a dream job / a date with a dream partner]". Participants responded to these two questions on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.4. Data analyses

To test whether faking-good instructions (no matter the context) yielded different personality self-reports than did honest instructions, we conducted paired sample *t*-tests, separately for each Big Five domain. To test whether faking effects differed across the two contexts, we tested interaction effects in mixed 2x2 ANOVAs, separately for each Big Five domain and facet. To guard against an inflation of type-I errors due to multiple testing, we used a conservative alpha level of 0.01 (two-tailed) in all tests.

3. Results

3.1. Manipulation checks

In the job condition, participants agreed more strongly with the statement that they responded to the last 60 questions to increase their chances for a dream job ($M = 4.09$) than with the statement that they responded to last 60 questions to their chances for a dream partner ($M =$

2.63; $t = 10.67$; $p < 0.001$). Vice versa, in the dating condition, participants agreed more strongly with the statement that they responded to the last 60 questions to increase their chances for a dream partner ($M = 3.75$) than with the statement that they responded to last 60 questions to increase their chances for a dream job ($M = 2.69$; $t = 7.91$; $p < 0.001$). This confirms participants understood instructions.

3.2. Faking-good versus honest responding

The *t*-tests indicated that participants reported higher scores on extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and lower scores on neuroticism, in both the job and dating condition compared to the honest condition (Table 1). This suggests that, as intended, people responded more socially desirable when instructed to fake-good. These effects were sometimes moderate (minimum $|d| = 0.33$) but often very substantial in size (maximum $|d| = 1.32$; see Table 1).

3.3. Job versus dating condition

As shown in the right part of Table 1 and in Fig. 1, the amount of faking was not identical across the job and dating contexts. Specifically, ANOVAs yielded significant interaction effects for all of the Big Five domains except for agreeableness which indicated that people faked more heavily in the job condition than in the dating condition. For conscientiousness, which includes facets that are valued in most workplace setting (i.e., organization, productiveness, responsibility), this finding was not surprising. Interestingly, however, participants also presented themselves as less neurotic, more extraverted and more open, domains that are not obviously or unambiguously more adaptive in the workplace versus in a romantic relationship.

Fig. 1 also shows the results on the level of facets (see S7 for details). These results suggest that the perhaps somewhat surprising interaction effects for extraversion, neuroticism, and openness were driven by the facets of assertiveness, anxiety and emotional volatility, and creative imagination, respectively. Also, even though we did not observe context-dependent faking for agreeableness on the domain-level, there was indeed one significant interaction effect on the facet-level suggesting greater faking of respectfulness in the job compared to the dating context.

4. Discussion

Past research has investigated how impression management can affect self-reports on personality questionnaires by comparing the responses of participants when instructed to respond honestly to their responses when instructed to fake-good in a job application context (i.e., respond in a way that increases their chances of getting a job; e.g., Ziegler & Bühner, 2009). The current experiment is one of the first to investigate the impact of faking-good instructions not only in a job application context but also in a dating context (i.e., respond in a way that increases one's chances of getting a date). Our results yielded two major insights: (1.) Faking-good instruction had a *large* impact in both contexts (i.e., reports of greater extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness and of lower neuroticism) and (2.) they had a notably *larger* impact in the job context compared to the dating context.

The first finding is relevant because previous faking research has often exclusively relied on work-related contexts but has rarely tested whether findings generalize to other settings. We identified dating as another context where personality traits may be faked and results clearly support that faking effects do generalize to significant contexts other than job applications.

The second finding—that faking was generally stronger in the job context (except for agreeableness)—was surprising. Even though our study was exploratory, we anticipated that only some Big Five domains (conscientiousness) would be faked more heavily in the job context whereas other domains (agreeableness) or facets thereof (compassion, trust) would perhaps be more susceptible to faking in the dating context. However, the pattern of results quite clearly speaks against the notion that some personality aspects are faked more strongly in the dating context than in the job context.

Why was faking *generally* more pronounced in the job than in the dating context? One possible explanation is offered by the facet-level results. For example, *creative imagination* (a facet of openness) was faked significantly more in the job versus dating context, perhaps because creativity is particularly valued by employers. At least, this could be true for the white-collar job industry which was likely the job industry most of the highly educated participants had in mind while faking-good in the job context. Similarly, *anxiety* (a facet of neuroticism) was faked to be lower in a job than in a dating context which fits well with an agency and communion perspective, since anxiety indicates low agency (Entringer et al., 2022). As such, even though not all of the Big Five may seem particularly more work-relevant than relationship-relevant from a global (i.e., domain-) level perspective, they often partly do on the level of facets. This may explain why faking was generally more pronounced in the job than in the dating context.

Another explanation could be that different *relational models* may underly people's social relationships at work versus with a romantic partner (Fiske, 1992). Specifically, relationships at work often follow a "market pricing" model where work is provided in exchange for a wage as a function of market prices or utilities (Fiske, 1992). In contrast, intimate relationships follow a "communal sharing" model where partners give what they can and take what they need based on a sense of unity without any concept of prices or utilities (Fiske, 1992). Since the latter type of relationship rests less upon explicit mechanisms (market dynamics) but more on a subjective feeling (sense of unity), *authenticity* likely plays a greater role in these relationships. As such, people's tendency to bias responses in a socially desirable fashion may be tempered in a dating context compared to a job context where authenticity is less important. This interpretation would also fit with Toma et al.'s (2008) conclusion that online daters reporting their height, weight, or age

Table 1
Comparisons between control and faking-good conditions by big five domain.

Domain	Condition	M_{honest}	M_{faking}	*t-Test Between the Honest and Faking-good Condition*			*Mixed ANOVA Interaction Effects for Context-Dependent Faking*		
				d [95 % CI]	*t*	*p*	η2	*F*	*p*
E	Job	3.39	3.80	0.76 [0.49; 1.02]	8.17	< 0.001	0.01	12.82	< 0.001
	Dating	3.39	3.58	0.33 [0.07; 0.60]	5.31	< 0.001			
A	Job	3.95	4.30	0.81 [0.55; 1.08]	9.42	< 0.001	0.00	1.80	0.18
	Dating	4.0	4.31	0.60 [0.33; 0.87]	7.62	< 0.001			
C	Job	3.73	4.45	1.24 [0.96; 1.52]	14.50	< 0.001	0.01	14.86	< 0.001
	Dating	3.68	4.13	0.76 [0.49; 1.03]	9.33	< 0.001			
N	Job	2.65	1.83	−1.32 [-1.61; −1.04]	−13.17	< 0.001	0.01	9.59	0.002
	Dating	2.65	2.08	−0.89 [-1.17; −0.61]	−10.68	< 0.001			
O	Job	3.63	4.00	0.61 [0.35; 0.88]	8.82	< 0.001	0.004	7.26	0.008
	Dating	3.70	3.91	0.34 [0.08; 0.61]	6.09	< 0.001			

Note. E = extraversion, A = agreeableness, C = conscientiousness, N = neuroticism, O = openness.

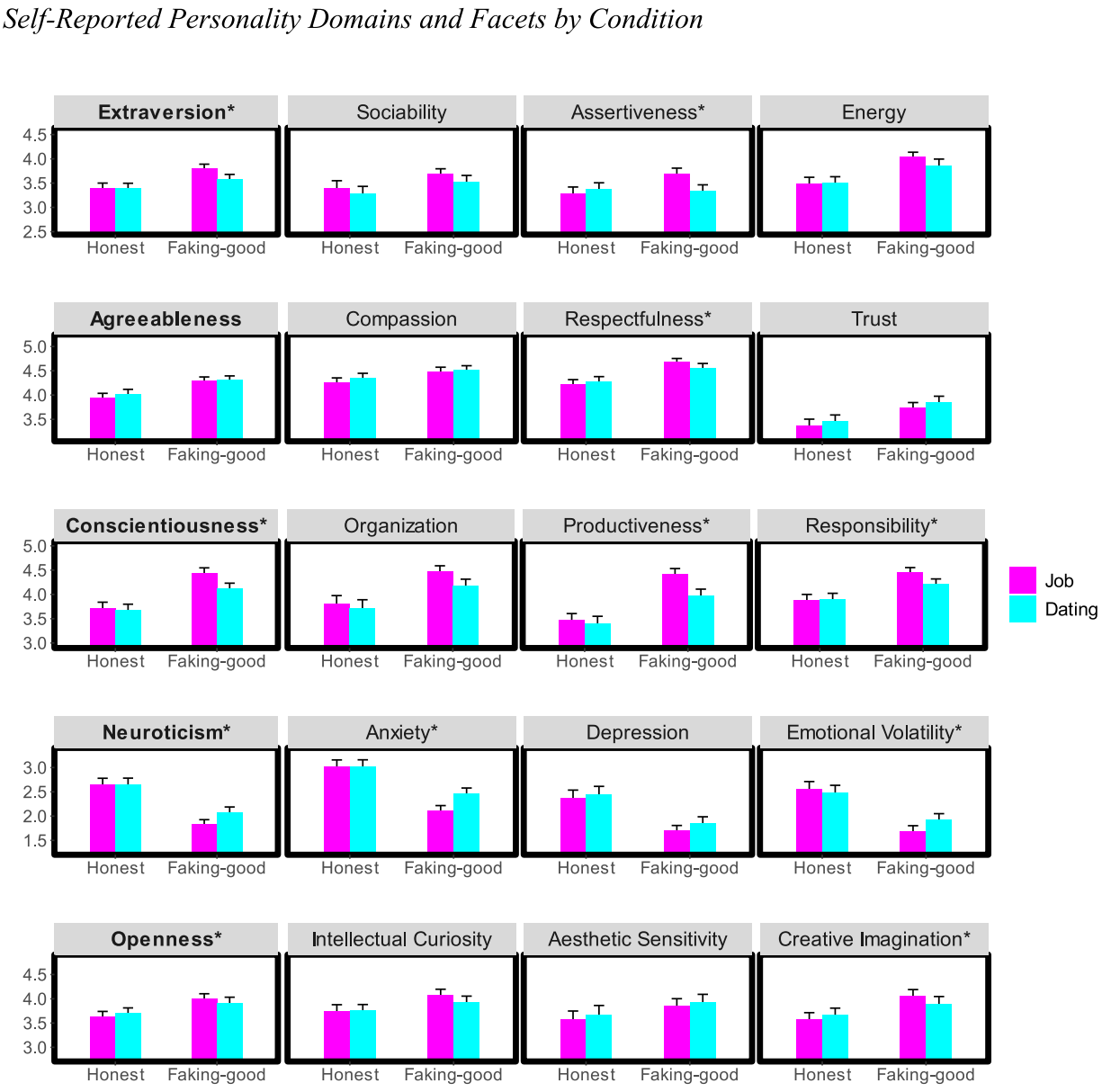

Fig. 1. Self-reported personality domains and facets by condition. *Note*. Error bars reflect 95% Confidence Intervals. Domains and facets with a significant interaction effect ($p < 0.01$) are marked with an asterisk.

deliberately balance deceptive opportunities with the social constraints of establishing romantic relationships.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

The present study had a number of noteworthy strengths. We used a rigorous within- and between-subjects design (Viswesveran & Ones, 1999) and assessed not only broad personality domains but also their narrower facets. Nevertheless, the present study is not without limitations. First, we used hypothetical scenarios rather than actual high-stakes situations. Future research should test faking in real personnel selection and online dating to improve ecological validity.

Second, our inferences are based on a WEIRD convenience sample (Henrich et al., 2010). As such, they are not readily generalizable to societies outside of the Western, industrialized sphere. And even within this sphere, faking manipulations in the present experiment might have interfered somewhat with sociodemographic peculiarities of our sample. Specifically, since most participants were highly educated, they might have primarily conceived of white-collar "dream jobs" and since most of them were female and heterosexual, they probably conceived of male "dream partners". Future studies involving more heterogenous samples are needed to corroborate the generality of findings reported here.

Finally, our study was only concerned with mean-level effects (e.g., people reporting higher conscientiousness under faking instructions on average) but research has also documented individual differences in individual faking patterns (e.g., some faking mostly in terms of

conscientiousness, others mostly in terms of openness; Bensch et al., 2019). Complementing these perspectives in future research seems promising, especially if individual differences in target jobs are considered simultaneously.

5. Conclusion

The present study shows that faking-good in personality questionnaires is a tendency that may span distinct contexts, especially job applications and dating. Further, rather than being calibrated to the different demands in these contexts in a nuanced way, faking in the job context seems generally more pronounced compared to the dating context across the majority of personality domains. This may have to do with greater concerns of authenticity in the dating context. Future research should replicate these findings and test the proposed explanations to enhance understanding of socially desirable responding.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Richard Rau: Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Investigation. **Louisa M. Schömann:** Writing – original draft, Project administration. **Michael P. Grosz:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2025.104596.

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