

## Invade or Evade? The Trade-off Between Privacy Invasion and Item Fakability

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*Previous research has reported a positive correlation between the perceived invasiveness of overt integrity test items and their perceived fakability. The present study investigated the extent that items rated as being invasive were actually susceptible to faking. An inverse relationship was found between the perceived invasiveness of integrity test items and the degree to which they could be successfully faked. Somewhat surprisingly, items rated as the most invasive were the most resistant to faking. Making an overt integrity test less invasive appears to render it more fakable. A complete PDF version of this article can be obtained at [www.radford.edu/~applyhrm](http://www.radford.edu/~applyhrm).*

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Paper-and-pencil integrity tests (or their computerized equivalents) are primarily used to detect prospective employees who are thought to be at risk for committing theft or engaging in other related counterproductive behaviors in the workplace (Alliger, Lilienfeld, & Mitchell, 1996). Although measures of counterproductive behavior have existed for over 40 years, the last decade has marked an expansion of both the number of integrity tests available and research on these tests (Sackett, 1994).

Integrity tests can be placed into two categories: overt and personality-based (Sackett, Burris, & Callahan, 1989). Overt tests measure the likelihood of counterproductive behavior based upon responses to questions designed to assess thoughts, feelings, and expected behaviors towards honesty and punishment of deviance, as well as admissions of past counterproductive behaviors (Cunningham, Wong, & Barbee, 1994). Personality-based tests consist of questions designed to tap personality traits, such as conscientiousness and impulse control, which are presumably related to integrity.

A meta-analysis conducted by Ones, Viswesvaran, and Schmidt (1993) found both test types to have moderate concurrent and predictive validity for an aggregate of counterproductive behaviors. Despite the apparent validity of these tests, critics of integrity testing have raised several ethical and practical concerns about using integrity tests for employee selection. The majority of criticism has been leveled against overt integrity tests. Criticisms of overt tests include: (a) the items can be highly offensive and invasive of personal privacy; (b) many items are often highly transparent and can be easily faked (Stone & Herringshaw, 1991); and (c) there is a high error rate associated

with overt integrity tests (40 to 60% of job applicants “fail” integrity tests; see Sackett et al., 1989). Because two of these issues, invasion of privacy and faking, are of central importance to business professionals, we examined item invasiveness and fakability in an overt test.

### **Invasion of Privacy and Overt Integrity Tests**

Several authors have noted that there are professional, ethical, and moral responsibilities that industrial psychologists and human resource professionals have for protecting the privacy and dignity of job applicants (Guion, 1967; Stone & Stone, 1990). Stone and Stone (1990) have provided a review of the test-related factors (e.g., test content, verifiability of information, validity of procedures, transparency of procedures) that may influence whether test takers feel or perceive that their privacy has been invaded. Thus, invasion of privacy is defined as the perception by a test taker that the test question(s) asks for information that is private and/or nobody’s business but their own. Overt integrity tests often ask applicants for information about thoughts or behaviors that they may feel uncomfortable providing. Relative to other selection procedures (e.g., interview, personality, drug testing, background check, work sample, medical exam), the overt integrity test is ranked as moderately invasive (Rynes & Connerley, 1991; Stone et al., 1989; Stone, Stone-Romero, & Hyatt, 1994), indicating that respondents typically feel that integrity tests inquire about more personal information than other commonly used selection measures (e.g., personality, interview).

There are several other reasons why it is important to consider the invasiveness of overt integrity tests. First, applicants may be less attracted to an organization that uses an invasive test than one that doesn’t (Gilliland, 1993; Rynes, 1993). Second, from a legal perspective, measures viewed as too invasive may increase the likelihood of legal challenges (Bible, 1990; Gilliland, 1993; Rynes, 1993). The case of *Soroka v. Dayton Hudson Corporation* provides an example of legal action taken by applicants against an organization, on the basis of the perceived invasiveness of test questions (Meranda, 1993). Finally, state legislation may restrict assessment measures viewed as invasive. For example, based in part on privacy concerns, both Massachusetts and Rhode Island currently restrict the use of integrity tests (cf. Sackett et al., 1989).

### Ease of Faking and Overt Integrity Tests

Although overt integrity tests have been shown to be valid predictors of counterproductive behaviors and overall job performance among job applicant groups (see Ones et al., 1993), that does not mean that they are not susceptible to faking. A number of studies have shown that individuals can inflate their integrity test scores when instructed to “fake good” (Alliger et al., 1996; Ryan & Sackett, 1987; Snyman, 1993). Results from a recent meta-analysis (Alliger & Dwight, 2000) suggest that overt tests are highly susceptible to faking ( $d = 1.02$ ,  $k = 11$ ,  $N = 1083$ ).

Recent research suggests that test taker dissimulation can reduce the criterion-related validity of non-cognitive selection measures (Douglas, McDaniel, & Snell, 1996). Moreover, faking in a sample of applicants can radically alter who is selected, even though criterion-related validity is not destroyed (Zickar, Rosse, & Levin, 1996).

Thus, the fact that overt integrity tests show criterion-related validity (e.g., Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996) is not sufficient evidence to support the claim that there is no harm done to organizations by applicant faking (see Rosse et al., 1998 for a complete discussion).

How do faking and privacy invasion tie together? Stone and Stone (1990) proposed in their model of privacy that the more transparent the measure (e.g., the more fakable) the less invasive the measure will be perceived by a test taker. The rationale for this is that the more transparent the measure the more control the test taker will feel they have in managing the information they provide about themselves. Stone and Jones (1992), however, found, at the test level, that respondents responded more favorably to a less transparent integrity measure. Similarly, Dwight and Alliger (1997a) found that, in general, items that respondents considered to be most invasive were also the items that they considered to be the most transparent; this was found to be especially true for admission items (e.g., Over the last three years, what's the total amount of money you've taken without permission from your employer?). Although inconsistent with the Stone and Stone (1990) privacy model, the results of both studies are consistent with other models of test taker reactions (Arvey & Sackett, 1993; Gilliland, 1993) that propose that test takers will react more negatively to a measure that they perceive is fakable. Dwight and Alliger (1997b) suggested that the removal of admission items might result in the dual benefit of reducing the fakability and perceived invasiveness of overt integrity tests. This assumes, however, that individuals can effectively dissimulate on the items they perceive as easy to fake.

## **Present Study**

The present study extends the research of Dwight and Alliger (1997a) by investigating the relationship between the perceived invasiveness of overt integrity test items and the actual susceptibility of those items to faking. Dwight and Alliger (1997a) tested only the relationship between *perceived* fakability and the perceived invasiveness of overt integrity test items. To test the relationship between *actual* fakability and invasiveness, data from Dwight and Alliger (1997a) were combined with two independent data sets taken from studies designed to investigate the susceptibility the overt test to faking. Mean item ratings of perceived invasiveness were combined with actual item scores for individuals who completed the same items when given standard or "fake good" instructions. Thus, the combined data sets allowed assessment of the relationship between the invasiveness of an item and the extent to which those instructed to fake good could effectively dissimulate on that item or item type.

## **Method**

The items examined came from the Employee Integrity Index (EII), developed by Ryan and Sackett (1987). This test contains 62 items (51 attitude and 11 admission items) modeled closely after items used in published overt integrity tests. Embedded within the EII were seven items from the Unlikely Virtues scale of Tellegen's (1982) Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire. The Unlikely Virtues scale is similar to the Lie scale of the MMPI-2. A typical Unlikely Virtue item is "I have at times eaten

too much.” The following is a brief description of the three data sets combined in this study.

### **Data Set 1**

The first data set was previously described in the introduction. Dwight and Alliger (1997a) had 102 undergraduate students enrolled at a large northeastern university rate each EII and Unlikely Virtues item for its invasiveness, ease of faking, and job relatedness. The 69 test items were sorted into eight categories by four judges. The eight categories were based in part upon the work of Sackett and Harris (1984). Sackett and Harris identified 10 types of integrity test items commonly used in overt integrity tests. To enhance interpretation, these question types were further condensed into eight *a priori* categories.

The eight categories were as follows: Protect items (require the test taker to indicate whether they would protect others who had engaged in counterproductive behaviors); Lenient items (asks the test taker to indicate whether they would be lenient with respect to the wrong-doings of others); Admit-thought items (items which require the respondent to indicate the degree to which they have thought about engaging in counterproductive behaviors); Admit-behavior (require the individual to admit to directly participating in misbehaviors); Common items (require the individual to indicate that extent to which theft and other misbehaviors are common); Excuse items (individuals to indicate whether there are excuses or justifications for stealing or performing other questionable behaviors); “Lie” items (Unlikely Virtue items); and Miscellaneous items (items which did not fit well into the other categories). The mean item ratings can be found in Table 1. All items were rated on six-point scale ranging from 0 (not invasive/fakable) to 5 (extremely invasive/fakable).

### **Data Set 2**

The second data set was generated by Alliger et al. (1996). A between-subjects experiment was conducted to assess the effects of coaching and faking instructions on the EII, relative to a group of participants given standard instructions. Participants in the experiment were undergraduate students enrolled at a large northeastern university. Participants received course credit for their participation. Data from two conditions were used in the present study: just take ( $N = 41$ ) and fake good ( $N = 36$ ).

### **Data Set 3**

The third data set was obtained from Dwight and Alliger (1997b). This data set was in essence a replication of Alliger et al. (1996) in that it used a between-subjects design where undergraduate students were assigned to a just take, fake good, or coaching condition. Only data from the just take ( $N = 40$ ) and fake good ( $N = 40$ ) conditions were used in the present study. One difference between the two studies is that Alliger et al. administered the EII via paper-and-pencil and Dwight and Alliger (1997b) administered the EII by computer. A second difference is that participants did not receive course credit for their participation but were only given an opportunity to

obtain a monetary sum if they were “hired” for the job for which they were asked to “apply”.

## Data Analyses

First, the test item means and standard deviations from each of the three data sets were combined into one data set. Item means and standard deviations were calculated separately by condition for each of the two faking studies. Thus, analyses were at the item level ( $N = 69$ ), the number of overt test items. Effect sizes ( $d =$  the mean for the just take condition subtracted from the fake good mean, divided by the pooled standard deviation) were computed by item comparing the just take condition to the fake good condition. Large positive effect sizes indicate the extent that respondents were able to dissimulate effectively, whereas near zero numbers indicate that the respondent actually was ineffective; except for the “lie” scale where higher scores reflect a greater tendency to engage in response distortion. Zero-order correlations were then computed to determine the relationship between effect sizes and invasiveness ratings. Second, to identify what *item types* were most susceptible to faking, effect sizes ( $d$ ) were computed comparing the just take and fake good conditions for both data sets.

## Results

The zero-order correlation between invasiveness ratings (see Table 1) and item effect sizes ( $d$ ), using data from Alliger et al. (1996), was  $-.25$ . A similar correlation ( $r = -.28$ ) was found when using data from Dwight and Alliger (1997b). The correlations suggest that, in general, items perceived as more invasive were actually *less fakable*. To get an understanding whether or not this relationship differed by item type, effect sizes were computed for each data set by type of item. Table 2 presents the results of these analyses. Notice that although admit-behavior items were *perceived* as the easiest to fake (see Table 1), both data sets found these items to be the least susceptible to faking instructions ( $d = .26$  and  $.67$ , respectively).

## Discussion

Dwight and Alliger (1997a) suggested that the overt integrity test might be made less fakable and perceived as less invasive if certain items identified as both invasive and fakable were altered or removed. The results from this study do not support this proposition. Specifically, the present results suggest that the removal of (substantially invasive) admit-behavior items might actually lead to a *more* fakable test. That is, although Dwight and Alliger found that admit-behavior items were identified as being invasive, and that these same items were also *perceived* as being the most easy to fake, the analyses from this study indicate that admit-behavior items were the least susceptible to dissimulation. The strength of this conclusion is bolstered by the fact that the same pattern of results was found in two independent samples.

**Table 1**  
**Question Type Differences by Rating Dimension**

Question type	Invasion of privacy		Ease of faking	
	M	SD	M	SD
Admit-behavior	3.49 <sup>a</sup>	1.56	4.00 <sup>a</sup>	1.20
Lie	2.67 <sup>b</sup>	1.23	3.21 <sup>c</sup>	1.02
Admit-thought	2.62 <sup>b</sup>	1.25	3.79 <sup>a</sup>	.89
Common	2.38 <sup>c</sup>	1.17	3.36 <sup>b,c</sup>	.85
Protect	2.12 <sup>d</sup>	1.40	3.80 <sup>a</sup>	1.10
Excuse	2.10 <sup>d</sup>	1.10	3.50 <sup>b</sup>	.94
Miscellaneous	2.07 <sup>d</sup>	.73	3.35 <sup>b,c</sup>	.51
Lenient	1.86 <sup>c</sup>	1.09	3.48 <sup>b</sup>	.92

Note:  $N = 102$ . Different superscripts represent within rating dimension means significantly different,  $p < .01$ . The number of items in each category was 9, 7, 13, 17, 2, 8, 5, and 8, respectively. Items were rated on 1 – 5 scales with “5” being anchored either “very invasive” or “very easy to fake”.

An explanation is needed, however, as to why admit-behavior items were the most resistant to response distortion despite the fact that they were perceived as being the most fakable. It may be that although respondents believe that they can fake such an item, the actual strategies they use when faking are flawed. Cunningham (1989) provides some support for this explanation. Cunningham found that test takers often adopt faulty test taking strategies when engaging in response distortion. For example, when responding to an admit-behavior item (e.g., What is the dollar value of all property you have taken without permission from places other than work, such as from school or from friends?) a person might admit to taking an inexpensive item, thinking that saying they have never taken anything would make them appear too perfect (i.e., result in a lower score). However, in actuality, any admission of misbehavior contributes to a lower integrity test score. This explanation is consistent with other research that has found that some test-takers score lower on non-cognitive tests when instructed to fake good than when asked to respond honestly or when given standard instructions (e.g., Frei, Snell, McDaniel, & Griffith, 1998).

A second explanation may be that admit-behavior questions often ask about theft behaviors that are uncommon. There is some debate about the actual base rate of counterproductive behaviors (see Murphy, 1987). It is possible that the greater resistance of admit-behavior items to faking may only be due to a low base rate for these behaviors. Thus, individuals who dissimulate respond that they never or sometimes engage in these counterproductive behaviors so as to effectively dissimulate while those in the just take condition provide veridical responses that they never or rarely engage in these behaviors. The results presented in Table 2, however, tend not to support this proposition. Although the results for Alliger et al. (1996) did not show that mean admit-behavior scores differed ( $p < .05$ ) by condition, the difference may still have practical significance ( $d = .26$ ). Results from the Dwight and Alliger (1997b) data set, however, revealed that those in the fake good condition scored higher ( $d = .67, p < .01$ ) on admit-behavior items than those in the just take condition. The results of these analyses tend

to suggest that there are substantial differences for admit-behavior item responses by condition.

**Table 2**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Actual Faking Susceptibility by Data Set and Item Type**

Item Type	Just Take		Fake Good		d
	M	SD	M	SD	
<u>Admit - behavior</u> <sup>1</sup>					
Data set 2	4.14	.69	4.35	.93	.26
Data set 3	4.61	.51	4.88	.30	.67
<u>Lie</u> <sup>8</sup>					
Data set 2	2.51	.53	2.92	.86	.60
Data set 3	2.51	.48	2.96	.74	.73
<u>Admit - thought</u> <sup>3</sup>					
Data set 2	3.37	.52	3.79	.97	.55
Data set 3	3.88	.59	4.51	.58	1.06
<u>Common</u> <sup>6</sup>					
Data set 2	3.04	.59	3.56	.87	.71
Data set 3	3.63	.58	4.19	.70	.87
<u>Protect</u> <sup>2</sup>					
Data set 2	3.00	.85	3.53	1.21	.51
Data set 3	3.45	.75	4.29	.98	.97
<u>Excuse</u> <sup>4</sup>					
Data set 2	3.62	.48	3.97	.90	.71
Data set 3	4.08	.46	4.54	.47	1.01
<u>Miscellaneous</u> <sup>7</sup>					
Data set 2	3.44	.52	3.72	.76	.43
Data set 3	3.63	.55	4.22	.81	.86
<u>Lenient</u> <sup>5</sup>					
Data set 2	3.20	.59	3.68	.82	.69
Data set 3	3.71	.46	4.27	.66	1.00

Note: Item types are rank ordered according to their perceived invasion of privacy ratings derived from data set 1. Data set 2 was derived from Alliger et al., (1996). Data set 3 was taken from Dwight and Alliger (1997b). Superscripts represent the rank ordering of item types for perceived ease of faking ratings.

## Limitations

This leads to the identification of one of the limitations of this study. Although the present study includes two independent data sets that allow for the analysis of faking responses, it does not include information about the item validities. Data from a criterion would allow us to test the extent to which item validities are influenced by faking.

One might also question the external validity of our results considering the fact that undergraduate students were used in each of the three data sets. Evidence for the

external validity of the present results are enhanced, however, when one considers that over 80% of the total participants (with all data sets combined) indicated that they had worked or were working in jobs where integrity testing is common and over 30% reported having taken an integrity test as part of an actual job application. Nonetheless, additional research, using actual applicants, should be conducted to further assess the generalizability of the present results.

Finally, one might question the stability of these findings considering how effect sizes fluctuated by data set. Although the magnitude of  $d$  scores did fluctuate by data set, we believe this to be due to methodological differences between the studies from which the data sets were derived. Even though differences in effect size magnitude were found, however, the rank ordering of item susceptibility was fairly consistent. The correlation between the effect size estimates between the two data sets was moderate ( $r = .57$ ).

### Final word

What is the main point we would want practitioners to “take away” from this research? Overt integrity tests are extremely susceptible to faking (and coaching as well). For many organizations, this will render these tests unattractive. For those organizations that wish to use them, however, the good news is that overall, these tests and most of the item types within them, are viewed as only moderately invasive. The bad news is that attempting to further reduce the invasiveness, by removing the most offending items, will only render the tests more fakable.

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 Meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Atlanta, GA

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