

## HOW DO APPLICANTS FAKE?

A RESPONSE PROCESS MODEL OF FAKING  
ON MULTIDIMENSIONAL FORCES-CHOICE PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS IN HIGH-STAKES

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## Introduction

Faking on personality assessments remains an unsolved issue, raising major concerns regarding their validity and fairness. Although there is a large body of quantitative research investigating the response process of faking on personality assessments, for both rating scales (RS) and multidimensional forced choice (MFC), only a few studies have yet qualitatively investigated the faking cognitions when responding to MFC in a high-stakes context.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it could be argued that only when we have a process model that adequately describes the response decisions in high stakes, can we begin to extract valid and useful information from assessments.

Thus, this qualitative study aimed to

- explore and identify factors influencing the test-takers' decisions regarding faking specific items and blocks, and factors influencing the willingness to engage in faking in general when completing a MFC personality assessment;
- investigate the extent to which the edit and select decisions are influenced by how items within blocks are matched on desirability.

## Method

**Design:** Cognitive interviews conducted in focus groups

**Participants:** N=32 participants recruited on LinkedIn, split into 8 focus groups

- 21 (65%) were women, and 11 (35%) were men.
- The age ranged from 19 to 63 years ( $M = 29.5$ ,  $SD = 11.74$ ).

**Questionnaire:** I compiled 16 blocks of 4 statements selected individually from OPQ32i and some other retired instruments of the Occupational Personality Questionnaire family<sup>2</sup>. The statements were selected to create four types of blocks:

- **matched desirable blocks** – all statements represented desirable behaviours
- **matched undesirable blocks** – all statements represented undesirable behaviours
- **unmatched blocks** – some statements represented desirable behaviours and some undesirable
- **ambiguous blocks** – some statements were ambiguous with respect to their desirability

**Procedure:** Participants were presented with the pre-selected blocks from the OPQ32i (on-screen) and were asked to complete the blocks individually to familiarise themselves with the questions. After 10 minutes they were interrupted, and the interview began following the semi-structured interview guide.

## Results

The analysis of the data revealed five distinct themes, namely:

## 1. Activation mechanisms

- past behaviours (work/home)
- self-concept (work/home)
- ideal employee

## 2. Ranking of statements

## 3. Factors influencing the block-specific decision to edit one's ranking

- Avoiding looking bad
- Avoiding statements with ambiguous desirability
- Avoiding inconsistent responding

## 4. Making a selection decision and item desirability matching:

Participants reported different experiences in regard to deciding what ranking to submit dependent on how items within blocks were matched on desirability.

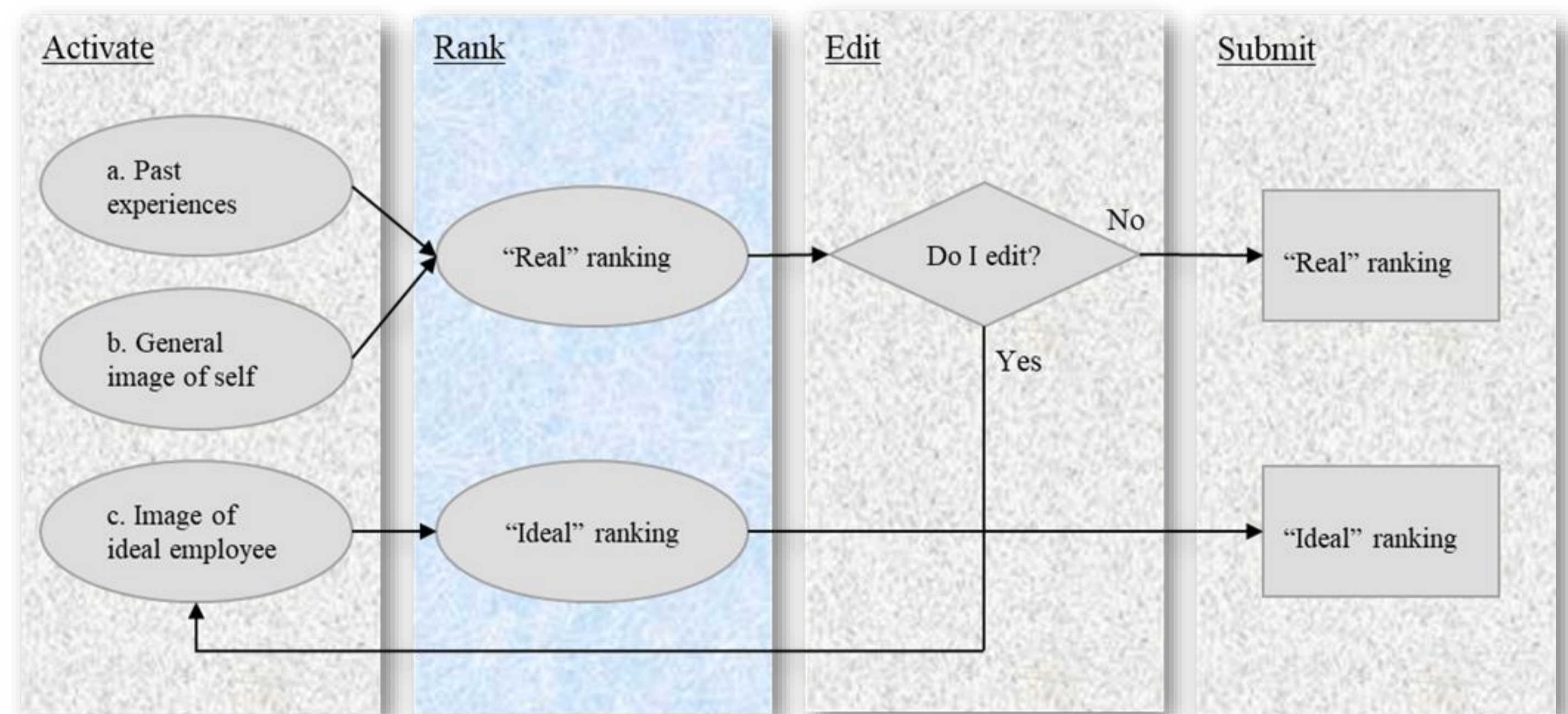
## 5. Factors influencing the tendency to edit the questionnaire as a whole

- Will the employer know that I was not 100% honest
- Perceiving the questionnaire as a test
- The perception of psychological safety and the psychological contract
- The importance of achieving the desired outcome
- The degree to which the job is associated with a long-term career choice
- The perception of prevalence of faking among others

## Discussion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, I propose a new response process model of faking forced-choice items, the Activate-Rank-Edit-Submit (A-R-E-S) model.

*The Activate-Rank-Edit-Submit model of faking forced-choice questionnaire items.*



*Note.* All shaded areas represent unobserved judgement stages

Based on the findings, I formulated five recommendations that can be implemented in practice **to facilitate honest responding on MFC personality assessment in high-stakes situations.**

1. All personality assessments should include context specific instruction to facilitate the activation of relevant self-knowledge and thus, more accurate responding.
2. Personality assessment needs to be of sufficient length (ideal length needs to be established) as honest responding seems more likely towards the end of a longer questionnaire, as faking consistently becomes increasingly more difficult.
3. Test takers should not be allowed to revisit answers to remove the possibility of response distortion to create a more consistent profile.
4. Test developers should refrain from utilising blocks of mixed desirability or matched undesirable blocks and instead use matched desirable blocks.
5. The context in which the personality assessment is administered needs to be perceived as psychologically safe by the test taker.

## References

1. Sass, R., Frick, S., Reips, U. D., & Wetzel, E. (2020). Taking the test taker's perspective: Response process and test motivation in multidimensional forced-choice versus rating scale instruments. *Assessment*, 27(3), 572-584.
2. Bartram, D., Brown, A., Fleck, S., Inceoglu, I., & Ward, K. (2006). OPQ32 technical manual. SHL Group, Thames Ditton, Surrey.