# Feeling like a fraud! Transparent Assessment Centers, Faking and Performance

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Faking, the intentional distortion of behavior in order to create a favorable image (Levashina & Campion, 2006), is a great concern in the context of personnel selection (e.g., Mueller-Hanson, Heggestad, & Thornton, 2003). In fact, studies show that candidates engage in faking during selection procedures (e.g., Weiss & Feldman, 2006) and that such faking can enhance their evaluations during these procedures (Levashina & Campion, 2007).

Theoretical models of faking stress that features of the assessment situation can considerably shape faking tendencies (e.g., McFarland & Ryan, 2006), a conclusion also in line with the cognitive affective personality system theory (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) and studies on personality inventories (Klehe et al., 2012) and employment interviews (Day & Carroll, 2003) which suggest that the more obvious the targeted evaluation dimensions are to candidates (i.e., transparency), the more candidates engage in faking behavior. For Assessment Centers (AC), however, surveys show that practitioners increasingly rely on transparent ACs (Thornton & Krause, 2009), most prominently out of fairness considerations. Consequently, the first goal of the present study was to investigate whether transparency fosters candidates' faking.

Logically, transparency should thus allow candidates to perform well, as it offers candidates the opportunity to adjust their behavior to the requirements of the situation (e.g., Smith-Jentsch, 2007, Study 1). Yet, studies addressing the consequences of transparency yielded rather inconsistent results (Klehe, König, Richter, Kleinmann, & Melchers, 2008 vs. Kolk, Born, & van der Flier, 2003). Thus, the second goal of the study was to explain why transparency does not necessarily enhance performance ratings. For this purpose, we borrowed from the research on emotional labor (e.g., Hochschild, 1990) to introduce the concept of inauthenticity (e.g., Sloan, 2007) into research on personnel selection. This literature suggests that faking emotions makes people feel inauthentic with negative psychological consequences and increased distress (e.g., Grandey, 2003). The same may well be true for faking competencies or accomplishments (Burke, 1991). Thus, we suggest that faking in the AC should cause feelings of inauthenticity. These feelings should in turn increase distress, which is known to harm performance. Accordingly, this study extends previous research on candidate faking by investigating the role of AC transparency and by introducing the construct of inauthenticity into the personnel selection context.
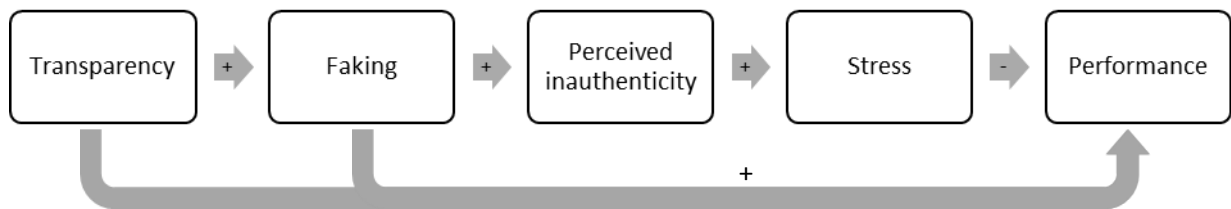
Methods

The AC was run as an application training program for university graduates. Observers were 23 students majoring in work and organizational psychology who had undergone a two-day frame-of-reference observer training (Lievens, 2001). Following the feeling-thinking-power taxonomy (Kolk, Born, & van der Flier, 2004), the AC focused on the three performance dimensions cooperation, planning and leadership. Cooperation was defined as the ability to efficiently work with others, to maintain a positive working atmosphere, to appreciate and refer to the opinion of others and to think in somebody else's shoes. Planning was characterized as the ability to prioritize tasks, make plans for tasks and projects, make appointments in due time and integrate information correctly and leadership was defined as the ability to influence and motivate others, to delegate tasks and to take on responsibility.

Using a within-subject design, 88 participants underwent three exercises (a structured interview, a role play and a group discussion) under nontransparent assessment conditions and underwent three similar exercises (another interview, another role play and another group discussion) under transparent conditions. The corresponding exercises differed in content but not in format or desirable candidate behavior so that they could be subsequently compared. Still, they were randomly rotated across participants to rule out exercise effects. Two observers per participant rated candidates' performance in the non-transparent condition (interrater agreement = .85) whereas two other observers rated their performance during the transparent condition (interrater agreement = .87).

After each exercise, we measured participants' level of faking with Levashina and Campion´s (2007) subscale "Inventing" (7 items; α = .88 -.94), their perceived inauthenticity with a measure adapted for the current setting from earlier studies on inauthenticity in relation to emotional labor (5 items; α = .70 - .83), and their experienced distress with an adapted 23-item version of the perceived stress questionnaire (Levenstein et al., 1993; α = .91 - .94).

Finally, borrowing from the measure of candidates' ability to identify criteria (ATIC; Kleinmann et al., 2011), we asked participants to note down the performance criteria on which they believed to have been observed in each previous exercise in order to test whether our transparency manipulation had indeed worked.

Results

An dependent sample *t*-test showed that the transparency manipulation was successful, $t(86) = -8.91$, $p < .00$. Also, most participants (90%) said that they behaved the same way they would have in an actual selection context. Different than expected, the nontransparent and the transparent assessment conditions did not differ on faking ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .61$ vs. $M = 1.66$, $SD = .65$; $t(85) = .83$, n.s.), inauthenticity ($M = 2.36$, $SD = .67$ vs. $M = 2.31$, $SD = .73$; $t(86) = .78$, n.s.), distress ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .48$ vs. $M = 2.39$, $SD = .57$; $t(87) = .62$, n.s.) and eventual performance ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .53$ vs. $M = 3.36$, $SD = .60$; $t(87) = .11$, n.s.). We did find the expected relationship between faking and inauthenticity in both conditions (nontransparent: r = .48, p < .01, transparent: r = .58, p < .01). Mediation analyses (Process for SPSS; Hayes, 2013) further confirmed the proposed indirect effects of (a) faking on distress via inauthenticity (Table 1; Sobel $Z = 5.94$, $p < .01$) and (b) inauthenticity on performance via distress (Table 2; Sobel $Z = -3.18$, $p < .01$).

Table 1: Results of the regression analyses (a) of faking on distress via inauthenticity

Predictor	Criterion	*b*	*p*
Faking	Inauthenticity	.59	<.01
Inauthenticity	Stress	.44	<.01
Faking	Stress	.09	.13
Inauthenticity		.44	<.01

Table 2: Results of the regression analyses (b) of inauthenticity on performance via distress

Predictor	Criterion	*b*	*p*
Inauthenticity	Stress	.48	<.01
Stress	Performance	-.35	<.01
Inauthenticity	Performance	.08	.32
Stress		-.35	<.01

Discussion

The goal of the present study was (a) to investigate whether transparency results in more faking behavior during AC exercises and to (b) embed perceived inauthenticity as a new concept to the personnel selection research and thereby provide an explanation as to why transparent ACs have not unequivocally led to higher performance in candidates.

With regard to the first goal, the study showed that contrary to previous results in related literatures, transparency in ACs does not increase fraudulent behaviors in participants. From an applied perspective, this finding is valuable as it suggests that making evaluation dimensions transparent to candidates does not result in candidates pretending to be the perfect match at the likely cost of undermining selection quality. Furthermore, it confirms practitioners' tendency to run ACs transparently.

Secondly, data support the proposed role of inauthenticity in linking faking during the assessment center to participants' experienced level of distress, which in itself was negatively linked to their level of performance. Thus, our findings address the phenomenon of faking from candidate's own perspective, suggesting that faking results in psychological discomfort, which, in turn, may counteract any positive benefit that faking may otherwise have on candidates' performance. These findings are both in line with findings from emotional labor research and yield useful inferences for further research as well as for practical adaptions.

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