Do attractiveness and competition influence faking intentions in selection interviews?

Anne-Kathrin Buehl
Klaus G. Melchers
Universität Ulm, Germany

Author Note
Anne-Kathrin Buehl and Klaus G. Melchers, Institut für Psychologie und Pädagogik, Universität Ulm, Germany.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anne-Kathrin Buehl or Klaus Melchers, Institut für Psychologie und Pädagogik, Universität Ulm, Albert-Einstein-Allee 41, D-89069 Ulm, Germany, e-mail: anne-kathrin.buehl@alumni.uni-ulm.de or klaus.melchers@uni-ulm.de.
Abstract

Faking models assume that characteristics of applicants as well as contextual factors determine whether applicants intend to fake. However, previous research on faking in interviews mainly investigated applicants’ characteristics while research on contextual factors is largely missing. Accordingly, we examined the influences of two such factors – attractiveness of the organization and competition among applicants – on the intention to fake in an interview. We conducted a vignette study with a 2×2 between-subjects design in which we varied competition and attractiveness. We found that attractiveness influenced faking intention. However, we found no effect for competition. Accordingly, interviewers should be aware that applicants are more prone to fake when they want to get access to attractive organizations.

Keywords:
faking; employment interviews; organizational attractiveness; competition
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Interviews are commonly used both by companies as well as by universities. However, given that interviewers need to rely on what interviewees tell them, there are fears that interviewees try to fake, that means, to use “an intentional distortion or a falsification of responses (…) in order to create a specific impression or provide the best answer” (Levashina & Campion, 2006, p. 300).

There are several models that describe antecedents of applicants’ faking intentions in selection procedures in general (e.g., Marcus, 2009; McFarland & Ryan, 2000; Roulin, Krings, & Binggeli, 2016) and also of their faking intentions in interviews in particular (Levashina & Campion, 2006). These models assume that characteristics of the applicant (e.g., personality, attitudes) as well as of the context (e.g., use of faking warnings) determine whether and if so to what extent applicants intend to fake. The main focus of these models as well as of most of the previous research is on antecedents that are related to characteristics of the applicant (cf. Bourdage, Roulin, & Levashina, 2017). However, as was pointed out by Ellingson (2012, p. 19), “people fake only when they need to fake”. Thus, it is important to identify contextual factors that influence applicants’ perceived need and consequently also their intention to fake.

Our aim was to consider two such factors that have been suggested previously: the attractiveness of the organization as well as competition among applicants. By doing so, we try to reduce an important gap in our knowledge given that previous studies on faking in interviews mainly concentrated on interviewees’ characteristics and especially on their personality (cf. Bourdage et al., 2017).

Development of Hypotheses

As noted above, the different faking models describe antecedents of applicants’ faking intentions. By doing so, these models are based on the core assumption of the theory of
planned behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991) that intentions are a necessary antecedent of actual behavior. Furthermore, in support of the TPB, a meta-analysis by Armitage and Conner (2001) found that the relationship between behavioral intentions and actual behavior is indeed relatively close.

Additionally – and based on Valence-Instrumentality-Expectancy (VIE) theory (Vroom, 1964) – Ellingson (2012) suggested that applicants only intend to fake if a targeted job is a valued outcome and if they also belief that they are capable of faking and that faking is necessary to obtain an offer (also see Ellingson & McFarland, 2011). Concerning the impact of valence, however, Ellingson noted a lack of attention in previous faking models. Thus, even though organizational attractiveness has been briefly mentioned in at least some of the faking models as an antecedent of applicants’ motivation to fake (e.g., Marcus, 2009), evidence concerning its impact on faking is missing. However, it is known that applicants prefer attractive employers or universities in comparison to less attractive ones (Belt & Paolillo, 1982). Furthermore, previous research also found a strong correlation between job/organization attractiveness and job pursuit intentions (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005). In line with this, we assume that people try harder and also do so by using faking tactics when they apply to an attractive organization. Therefore, we posit:

Hypothesis 1: Higher organizational attractiveness leads to higher faking intentions in interviews.

Furthermore, in their dynamic model of applicant faking, Roulin et al. (2016) proposed that applicants’ faking is an adaptive reaction to their perceived competition for a job with other applicants. This perceived competition refers to the instrumentality factor within the VIE-framework because it influences applicants’ belief that faking is necessary to gain the desired outcome. Thus, applicants realize that they need to push themselves in order to outperform others because they think that they could have a competitive disadvantage otherwise.
Several lines of research support this assumption. First, across several studies from different countries, Roulin and Krings (2016) found that the belief in a competitive world predicted faking intentions above and beyond applicants’ personality. Second, aspects like unemployment rates or companies’ recruitment policies influence applicants’ chances to get a job offer. In line with this, Griffith (2013) found that resume fraud increased by 28% when the official unemployment rate doubled. Similarly, applicants’ personality test scores increased during and before a recession (Robie, Emmons, Tuzinski, & Kantrowitz, 2011) or when selection ratios were relatively small (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998). We therefore posit:

Hypothesis 2: Higher competition among applicants leads to higher faking intentions in interviews.

Method

Participants

Participants were 119 German undergraduate psychology students (107 females, mean age = 22.65, SD = 4.35). They were recruited from a departmental subject pool and could participate in this study to partially fulfill a course requirement. 91.5% of them indicated that they had at least one previous selection interview (M = 3.72 interviews, SD = 3.17).

Procedure

We used a 2×2 between-subjects design. An a-priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1.5 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) had shown that 114 participants were necessary to detect intermediate sized main effects or interactions for this design with an α-level of .05 and a power of .75. Thus, our actual power was even slightly higher than .75 for such effects.

After signing up for our study, participants received a link to an online questionnaire in which they first had to answer demographic questions. Then, they read one of four
vignettes, which asked them to imagine applying and being interviewed for a specific Master’s program.

Admission interviews to a Master’s program represent a realistic scenario for German psychology students because a Master’s degree is required by most employers and also to get access to postgraduate clinical training and to PhD programs. Furthermore, for a substantial number of the Master’s programs, interviews are used as part of the admission process ("Liste Master Psychologie", 2016). Furthermore, 79.8% of the participants indicated that they would need to apply for a Master’s program in the following years, and the remaining even indicated that they were currently applying.

Participants were randomly assigned to one condition from the 2×2 design (high vs. low attractiveness of the Master’s program, and high vs. moderate competition to get into the program). After reading the respective vignette, participants received questions about its content as a manipulation check. Finally, we measured their intention to fake in the interview.

Vignettes

The four vignettes contained a description of the situation (applying for a Master’s program). To manipulate attractiveness, we varied relevant aspects from several university rankings (e.g., university infrastructure, quality of teaching). In the high attractiveness condition, the university fulfilled all aspects whereas in the low attractiveness condition, these aspects were not fulfilled or only to a small degree. Furthermore, we also manipulated the attractiveness of the city where the university was located (e.g., concerning opportunities for leisure time).¹

For operationalizing high versus moderate competition, we varied the selection ratio and necessary grade point average (GPA). In the high competition condition, only 100 out of 1100 applicants were admitted compared to 100 out of 200 in the moderate competition condition, and the necessary GPA for admission without having to go through a further selection stage was 1.1 in the high competition condition and 2.4 in the moderate competition
condition (according to the German grading system, GPA can vary between 1.0 and 4.0, with lower grades representing better performance).\(^2\)

**Faking Intentions**

Intention to fake in the admission interview was measured with an 11-item version (alpha = .83) of Levashina and Campion’s (2007) interview faking behavior scale that was already used by Ingold, Kleinmann, König, and Melchers (2015). The items (e.g., “I would cover something up in order to be able to give better interview responses.”) had to be answered on a 5-point scale from 1 = *does not apply at all* to 5 = *fully applies*.

**Manipulation Check**

Participants answered two questions: one on attractiveness (“I perceive this Master’s program as attractive”) and one on competition (“Getting into this Master’s program is competitive”) on 5-point scales. Furthermore, we asked them to indicate whether they were able to put themselves into this situation on a 5-point scale.

**Results**

Separate ANOVAs confirmed that there were no significant differences between the four experimental conditions regarding age, gender, or GPA, all \(F_s < 1.03\), all \(\eta^2_s < .03\).

Table 1 displays correlations and descriptive information for all study variables.

To determine whether the manipulations were successful, we analyzed data from the manipulation check. Two Competition × Attractiveness ANOVAs revealed significant main effects for attractiveness when perceived attractiveness was the dependent variable, \(F(1, 115) = 498.73, p < .01, \eta^2 = .80\), and for competition when perceived competition was the dependent variable, \(F(1, 115) = 112.25, p < .01, \eta^2 = .49\). No other main effects or interactions reached significance, all \(F_s < 1.78\), all \(p_s > .18\), all \(\eta^2_s < .01\).

In line with Hypothesis 1, the groups with higher attractiveness also had higher means for the intention to fake than the other groups (cf. Table 2). However, in contrast to
Hypothesis 2, the means from the groups with higher competition were only somewhat larger than those from the groups with lower competition. This was confirmed by a Competition × Attractiveness ANOVA that revealed a significant main effect of attractiveness on faking intentions, $F(1, 115) = 8.83, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$, but no significant effect of competition and no significant interaction, both $F_s < 1$, both $\eta^2$s < .01. Furthermore, when age was considered as a covariate, the pattern of results remained identical. When described as standardized mean differences, the effect of attractiveness across the entire sample was of intermediate size, Cohen’s $d = .54$, but was negligible for competition, Cohen’s $d = .07$.

**Discussion**

Our study confirmed so-far untested predictions (Ellingson, 2012; Marcus, 2009) that organizational attractiveness influences faking intentions. However, regarding similar predictions for competition (Ellingson, 2012; Roulin et al., 2016) we found no significant effect.

Given theoretical arguments and previous evidence concerning perceived competition on faking intentions and faking behavior (Roulin & Krings, 2016), we hesitate to interpret our results as conclusive evidence that competition does not influence faking intentions. However, it might be that the attractiveness manipulation worked better than the competition manipulation (accordingly, the manipulation check for the attractiveness manipulation revealed a stronger effect than for the competition manipulation). Alternatively, it might also be that even though there was a significant main effect for competition in the manipulation check, German psychology students always feel pressure to put their best foot forward to ensure that they get admitted to a Master’s program. On the one hand, this pressure might stem from the need of a Master’s degree for nearly all career paths in Psychology. And on the other hand, the actual number of applications for Master’s programs outnumbers the available places at the different universities by far according to a recent survey of the German
Psychological Association (Abele-Brehm, 2017) so that participants might feel strong competition when they think of their own future applications independent from perceived competition in the present study. Furthermore, it might be argued that admission of only 100 out of 200 applicants in the moderate competition condition still represents relatively high competition. However, our aim for the two conditions was to choose values that are relatively realistic with regard to actual application and admission numbers and ratios for German Master’s programs. Future research is necessary to clarify this issue.

Obviously, measuring faking intentions in a vignette study in a simulated setting is another limitation. However, our participants either faced such a situation right now or would do so in the near future. Accordingly, they indicated that they were able to put themselves into this situation ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.73$, on a 5-point scale). Furthermore, recent empirical evidence (Dürr & Klehe, 2017) found a substantial correlation between intentions to fake an interview and actual faking behavior.

As another limitation, we did not consider possible differences between different types of interviews. However, theoretical models (Levashina & Campion, 2006; Roulin et al., 2016) argued that more highly structured interviews should reduce applicants’ opportunity to fake.

Concerning practical implications, our results suggest that interviewers should be aware that faking is especially likely when applicants want to get access to attractive organizations or universities. Thus, it is possible that interviewers’ attempts to impress applicants by giving a positive image of their organization (Wilhelmy, Kleinmann, König, Melchers, & Truxillo, 2016) increases applicants’ faking behavior.
References


Footnotes

1. The vignettes are publicly available at https://osf.io/7wkau.

2. It turned out that none of our participants’ current GPA was better than the required GPA in the high competition condition and only four participants had a GPA that was worse than the required GPA in the moderate competition condition.
Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables (N = 119).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>22.65</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Grade Point Average</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Attractiveness</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Competition</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Intentions to fake</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Gender was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male, and attractiveness and competition were coded as 0 = low/moderate and 1 = high.
* p < .05, ** p < .01
Table 2

*Means and standard deviations for the different experimental groups.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attractiveness low</th>
<th>Attractiveness high</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competition moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>n = 32</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>n = 34</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>M (SD)</strong></td>
<td><strong>M (SD)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived attractiveness</td>
<td>1.63 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived competition</td>
<td>2.81 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to fake</td>
<td>2.83 (0.48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>