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FAKING IS AS FAKING DOES: A REJOINDER TO MARCUS (2021)

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ABSTRACT

Applicant faking poses serious threats to achieving personality-based fit, negatively affecting both the worker and the organization. In articulating this "faking-is-bad" (FIB) position, Tett and Simonet (2021) identify Marcus' (2009) self-presentation theory (SPT) as representative of the contrarian "faking-is-good" camp by its advancement of self-presentation as beneficial in hiring contexts. In this rejoinder, we address 20 of Marcus' (2021) claims in highlighting his reliance on an outdated empiricist rendering of validity, loosely justified rejection of the negative and moralistic "faking" label, disregard for the many challenges posed by blatant forms of faking, inattention to faking research supporting the FIB position, indefensibly ambiguous constructs, and deep misunderstanding of person–workplace fit based on personality assessment. In demonstrating these and other limitations of Marcus' critique, we firmly uphold the FIB position and clarify SPT as headed in the wrong direction.

KEYWORDS

faking, personality assessment, employment screening, threats to validity

Marcus (2021) offers a lively rebuke of Tett and Simonet's (2021) framing of faking on self-report personality tests and its implications for personality-based fit through hiring. In this brief rejoinder, we address 20 of Marcus' claims, clarifying misunderstandings and defending key points. We have no issues with Marcus' three "golden rules." How they are applied to the original T&S article, however, warrants clarification in several respects. We begin with an overview of how personality tests are intended to assist in achieving worker–workplace fit through hiring

Personality traits are relatively unique and stable propensities to behave, think, and feel, thereby reliably differentiating among individuals and allowing prediction of their future behavior, thoughts, and feelings. Differentiation and prediction make personality traits useful targets of assessment in hiring, whose chief task is differentiating job applicants predicted to behave, think, and feel in ways valued positively on the job. Hiring well is beneficial to both the worker and the hiring organization because *people want to work where they are rewarded for being themselves, and organizations do best when their workers are trait motivated* (Tett et al., 2013; Tett et al., 2021). Achieving a good fit requires valid assessment of both trait-relevant work demands and applicants' traits. Faking poses serious challeng-

es to valid personality assessment, and so identifying and limiting faking are critical for relying on personality tests in achieving fit through employment screening.

This generally accepted view of the role of personality assessment in worker–workplace fit is consistent with best hiring practices (SIOP, 2018)[1] and largely supported by decades of research and practice linking personality with job performance (e.g., Judge & Zapata, 2015; Tett et al., 1999), career interests (Barrick et al., 2003), and various other work-related outcomes. With this foundation in mind, we identify in Table 1 a list of 20 claims, ordered as presented in Marcus' paper, and our responses from the "faking-is-bad" perspective. Space constraints preclude comprehensive rebuttals. We address five of Marcus' more critical claims in limited detail.

Claim 1: Marcus claims the FIB position presented

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1 Such practices also call for identification of job-related attributes through work analysis serving construct-focused validation.

TABLE 1.
20 Claims by Marcus and FIB Position Responses

Section	Marcus' claims	pp.	Responses from a FIB perspective
1	**Faking from two perspectives**		
	1 T&S focus too little on faking from the applicant's perspective.	36	*See main text.*
	2 "[T]he only perspective that will take us closer to understanding [faking or related concepts] is that of the applicant, not the employer."	36	The employer contributes uniquely to understanding faking by its choice of targeted traits, how those traits are identified, the test environment, response instructions (e.g., faking warnings), and the tests themselves regarding validity and susceptibility to response distortion. Rejecting faking from the employer's perspective is counterproductive.
	3 The primary goal of SPT is to "understand what is going on in personnel selection," as though faking researchers adopting a FIB approach have some other aim.	36	FIB researchers share exactly the same aim. Where they differ is in their approach to meeting it. Why Marcus would imply FIB researchers have a different aim is unclear.
	4 The FIB position portrays the organization and applicant as courtroom judges and defendants and as examiners overseeing students taking an exam.	36	These are good analogies Marcus leaves unexplored. Marcus' approach suggests cheating on an exam is acceptable and even desirable, failing to recognize the direct threat it poses to validity.
	5 The organization and applicant are (instead) like two daters.	36	*See main text.*
	6 "Informed motivation" to self-present depends, in part, on "the discrepancy between (honest) self-image and perceived employer's expectations such that larger discrepancies tend to *lower* informed motivation" (italics in original), which is opposite the FIB perspective.	36	Marcus ignores findings showing that, counter to his claim, respondents with lower honest scores (on a desirable trait) fake more because they have more room to fake up (e.g., McFarland & Ryan, 2000; Tett et al., 2012).
	7 The idea that faking opportunity is related to faking behavior is a tautology.	37	Marcus does not explain the tautology because there is no tautology. A low honest score leaves more opportunity to fake up, and respondents with lower honest scores actually do fake more.
	8 The selection setting is competitive so we should not bother trying to assess and control faking.	37	The inherently competitive nature of hiring is a major motivator for faking. Ignoring faking is a capitulation, threatening personality assessment aims.

continued

by T&S favors the organization's perspective over that of the applicant and that serving the interests of either party is inappropriate. We offer two responses. First, Principle A of the APA Ethical Principles (2017) states, "Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care

to do no harm." Contrary to Marcus' stance, serving the interests of relevant parties is, in a very direct sense, job #1 for all psychologists. The FIB position directly exemplifies this principle by explicitly seeking to advance the interests of both workers and organizations through improved per-

TABLE 1. (CONTINUED)
20 Claims by Marcus and FIB Position Responses

Section	Marcus' claims	pp.	Responses from a FIB perspective
2	**Faking as morally bad behavior**		
	9 Marcus suggests fraudulent faking "is a clear violation of widely accepted social norms."	37	Agreed.
	10 Non-fraudulent forms of faking include attempts to adapt to the employer's expectations.	37	Counter to the idea that such aspirational responding might contribute to valid prediction, research shows faking weakens personality test validity (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2017; Christiansen et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2017). Because the biggest fakers are those with the greatest opportunity to fake, hiring someone opposite a good fit for the job cannot be compensated by "adaptive" intentions (Tett & Christiansen, 2007).
	11 Identifying all upward response distortion as having the same cause (i.e., faking) is unscientific; it is more scientific that "the label of self-presentation is open to all kinds of meanings and interpretations."	38	*See main text.*
	12 "Self-presentation" is preferred over "faking" because the former, unlike the latter, is amoral.	38	(a) Marcus implies the morality of a behavior is tied to the quality of research inferences drawn about that behavior, but he never articulates the basis for that connection. (b) As with employee theft, abusive supervision, harrassment, bullying, and falsification of documents, faking is both harmful and intentional, warranting recognition as immoral behavior. Recognizing this in no way undermines the quality of scientific inferences about faking and similarly undesirable behaviors. Marcus offers no evidence to support his loosely presented inference. (c) Faking warrants research attention precisely because it leads to negative consequences. T&S articulate 12 problems with faking, all of which Marcus either ignores or fails to counter. Recognizing faking as intentional is important in understanding and managing it. (d) Changing the "faking" label would not eliminate the behavior nor its negative consequences. "Faking" is easily understood by researchers, practitioners, and organizations. It is a perfectly apt label.
	13 Marcus agrees with T&S' assessment that research on the effects of faking on the validity of personality tests for predicting performance is mixed.	38	Closer examination of the faking literature shows faking severely undermines personality test validity in selection applications (e.g., Jeong et al., 2017). The ambiguous research findings are due to inappropriate reliance on social desirability scales as faking measures (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1996; Ones et al., 1996), and low power to detect suppressor effects (Burns & Christiansen, 2006; Christiansen et al., 1994; Goffin & Christiansen, 2003).

TABLE 1. (CONTINUED)
20 Claims by Marcus and FIB Position Responses

Section	Marcus' claims	pp.	Responses from a FIB perspective
	14 Marcus offers an example of an applicant with an honest score of 4 intentionally elevating it to 5.	38	This example understates the problem of faking. Cases where an honest 1 or 2 is deliberately elevated to a 4 or 5 are ignored.
3	**The consequences of faking**		
	15 Validity understood as job-relatedness does not require a targeted construct.	38	*See main text.*
	16 $X = T + e$ can be expanded into $X = T + b + s + e$, where b = bias and s = "social meaning." From this, two scores can be split off: $Xc = T + b + e$, targeting a construct, and $Xs = s + e$. Xs offers incremental prediction of performance beyond Xc.	39	Marcus recognizes b as including faking but ignores (a) all its negative effects on validity inferences articulated by T&S and (b) how it can offset any possible benefit afforded by Xs. Marcus also ignores research showing that (c) response distortion does not predict job performance (e.g., Jeong et al., 2017), (d) aspirational responding cannot account for actual faking (e.g., overclaiming, Bing et al., 2011; bogus items, Anderson et al., 1984; faking admissions, Donovan et al., 2002), and (e) faking predicts CWBs positively (Peterson et al., 2011), as cited by T&S.
	17 The ideal employee coefficient (IEC) offers separation of trait and response distortion variance.	40	IEC is defined as a mix of skills and motivational components without reference to job-specific demands. As with self-presentation, lack of a clear definition and nomological net impedes scientific advance based on IEC.
	18 Surprisingly, T&S define validity without reference to context.	40	Emphasis on constructs as critical for understanding validity does not imply contexts are irrelevant. The screening context is what makes faking a threat to the valid assessment of targeted traits. Anyone who understands validity and how personality tests are expected to promote worker-workplace fit should not be surprised by reliance on a construct-focused definition of validity.
	19 Personality tests used in selection settings are maximum performance tests.	40	Personality tests are not designed to be performance tests (typical or maximal) and their value as vehicles for personality-based fit is undercut to the degree they behave as such (Tett & Simonet, 2011).
	20 "Faking is good" is a "stupid" credo.	41	*See main text.*

sonality-based fit.

Second, it is false at both a basic level and in application that the FIB position favors the organization's perspective. All the various types of faking articulated by Griffith et al. (2011) and cited by T&S are identified from the applicant's point of view. For example, fraudulent faking is when an applicant knowingly falsifies self-report responses; ex-

aggeration is when the applicant seeks to "polish the truth." Faking is an applicant's behavior; it is applicant generated, applicant motivated, and applicant presented. Obviously, efforts to detect and manage faking must focus on applicants' psychological processes serving each type of faking.

The FIB position also does not take sides when it comes to the threat of faking. Several passages in T&S

make this clear. On p. 12, for example, T&S note that faking:

> is detrimental to both the organization and the applicant. Even if faking affords useful prediction of performance, it cannot engender job satisfaction from trait-based PE fit (Charbonneau et al., 2021); good fit accrues to the degree the individual's traits help meet work demands (Christiansen et al., 2014; Tett et al., 2013). Faking essentially guarantees poor fit over time in terms of trait-based satisfaction, promising weaker work motivation and higher withdrawal.

Similar statements are found on pp. 11, 13, and 15. The FIB approach clearly considers faking a threat to *both* organizations *and* applicants, even nonfaking applicants. Marcus' suggestion that T&S minimize faking from the applicant's perspective is unfounded.

Claim 5: Marcus claims an organization and applicant are like two daters seeking a compatible relationship, and that, "If [the daters] come to the conclusion that such [a] relation is desirable, they then have to convince their prospective partner to arrive at the same conclusion about themselves" (p. 36). Marcus seems to be suggesting that compatibility would be achieved by any sort of convincing, regardless of its truth value. As often occurs in dating, the two parties may have incompatible aims.[2] By Marcus' account, if a sex-seeking dater can smooth-talk a commitment-seeking dater to consent to having sex, then compatibility has been achieved. But compatibility occurs only when each party actually provides what the other seeks. The organization seeks a worker with traits serving performance, loyalty, and longevity, whereas the faker seeks to be hired regardless of actual fit. These are fundamentally irreconcilable aims. By conflating "convincing" and "compatibility," Marcus shows a deep misunderstanding of person–workplace fit and the role of personality assessment in achieving it.

Claim 11: Marcus claims "it is essentially unscientific to conclude one specific meaning simply from observing the behavior" (p. 38) and touts as some unstated scientific advantage the fact that "the label of self-presentation is open to all kinds of meanings and interpretations" (p. 38). We offer four responses. First, Marcus never explains why a single interpretation is less scientific than multiple interpretations. Science advances by winnowing down all possible explanations to those best supported by theory and evidence. In principle, there is nothing unscientific in promoting a single best interpretation for anything. Second, the FIB position identifies not one interpretation of response distortion but four, each a distinct type of faking supported by evidence and reason (Griffith et al., 2011). Third, interpretations are more scientifically sound when based on clearly defined terms. The FIB perspective defines faking

as deliberate upward responding to personality test items so as to improve one's chances of getting hired (Griffith et al., 2011). Marcus' promotion of self-presentation as "open to all kinds of meanings and interpretations" directly opposes the scientific precept of definitional clarity. Finally, self-presentation is one of the four types of faking identified by Griffith et al. (2011). Despite its noble presentation, aspirational responding per Marcus' version of self-presentation fits the definition of faking from the FIB perspective.[3] Definitions matter and if Marcus seeks to distance self-presentation from faking, he needs to articulate the distinction in a way that makes that clear.

Claim 15: Marcus promotes an empiricist rendering of validity emphasizing job-relatedness. In contrast, the unitarian perspective strongly endorsed by T&S says test validity boils down to theory and evidence bearing on the accuracy of test scores for a stated purpose in light of a targeted construct (SIOP, 2018). The nature of validity has been debated and definitions refined over many decades (e.g., Binning & Barrett, 1989; Borsboom et al., 2004; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Guion, 1980; Gulliksen, 1950; SIOP, 2018). Here we note the construct-based interpretation precludes a purely empirical rendering of job relatedness, whereas job relatedness permits a construct-based rendering of validity. A test that correlates with performance may be judged as job related by a purely empirical standard, but one that does so without a targeted construct fails to meet the more rigorous construct standard (SIOP, 2018).

Beyond the semantics of validity and job relatedness, T&S articulate four other challenges that Marcus entirely ignores. Purely empirical renderings of validity (a) are not only incompatible with contemporary understanding of validity, they also (b) impede test evaluation and development, (c) undermine execution of multiconstruct assessment plans, (d) promote acquiescence in limiting threats to personality-based fit, and (e) ignore effects of nontargeted variance on assessment of interitem and interscale structure. By failing to counter these points, Marcus' arguments favoring systematic nontargeted test score variance fail to displace the unitarian model of validity as best selection practice.

Claim 20: In his concluding remarks, Marcus retorts that "faking is good" is a "stupid" label. We disagree. SPT recognizes at least the fraudulent form of faking but ignores its various threats to personality test validity in achieving fit. Concomitantly, Marcus fails to distinguish his version of self-presentation from a form of faking bearing the same

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2   Evolutionary psychology has long established differential mating strategies for men and women stemming from biological principles of parental investment. Trivers (1972) is the seminal foundation for this, and Schmitt (2005), among many other sources, articulates the fundamentals.

3   Stealing food to feed one's family may be a noble act, but it is stealing nonetheless.

label clearly defined by the FIB camp (Griffith et al., 2011). He advances this form of response distortion as desirable in the form of IEC and X_s, but instead of offering definitional clarity, Marcus promotes self-presentation as "open to all kinds of meanings and interpretations." Any approach to response distortion that recognizes faking but ignores its negative consequences *and* encourages reliance on deliberate, ambiguously nontargeted scale variance carrying the same negative consequences fully earns membership in the "faking-is-good" camp.

In closing, we note there is a long history of thought on the link between morality and knowledge, between personal values and empirical observations and their judged importance in scientific investigation (Becker, 1976; Hume, 1739/1961). Challenging arguments and results based on whether or not one likes the terminology invites confusion of fact with personal preference. Denial is not refutation. By putting the desirability of construct labels and consequences ahead of inferential rigor based on definitional precision, as permeates Marcus' critique, we degrade the power of science to lead us to better futures. Marcus astutely notes the world will keep spinning with the loss of valid personality assessment in hiring. We suggest a spinning world is a low bar for scientific advance. Personality has untapped potential to deliver improved fit between workers and their work situations and Marcus' disregard of faking—or whatever he wants to call it—is a willful step backward in that more optimistic and productive pursuit.

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