Personality Dissimulation

Can Job Applicants Dissimulate on Personality Tests?

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Abstract

Eighty-three subjects completed the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) and Self-Directed Search (SDS) under standard instructions. Subjects then completed a short version of the CPI six different times with instructions to respond as if they were applying for six different jobs. CPI scores shifted significantly under all six job-application instructions in the direction of general social desirability. Subjects were apparently insensitive to specific personality traits uniquely valued in each job. Individual differences in dissimulation ability showed small, but meaningful, correlations with certain CPI scales completed under standard instructions. SDS scores were not associated with dissimulation ability. The best dissimulators were interviewed and were found to have distinctive biographical traits.
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The Problem

Recent enthusiasm for the use of personality tests in personnel selection (Hogan, 1982; 1983; 1984; 1986) has converted relatively few I/O psychologists. Most still adhere to conventional wisdom, which suggests that self-report personality tests are far inferior to aptitude, ability, and behavioral tests for personnel selection (Dunnette, 1966; Ghiselli & Barthol, 1953; Guion & Gottier, 1965). This belief is based partially on the assumption that self-reports are easily faked; i.e., when people are being evaluated for a desired job position, they are motivated to give socially desirable responses instead of veridical responses to the personality items (Dunnette, 1966, p. 64; Norman, 1963). Dozens of studies since the 1950's have repeatedly demonstrated that item endorsement probability correlates .8-.9 with rated social desirability of the item. The alleged susceptibility of personality scales to motivated dissimulation is also apparently supported by disappointingly low correlations between the scales and job performance criteria (on the order of .2) in the personnel psychology literature.

The present study reevaluates the assumption that the validity of personality self-reports in personnel selection is adversely affected by the tendency of persons to give socially desirable, rather than veridical, responses to items. There are good theoretical reasons for believing that attempts to dissimulate will not improve an individual's score on a selection battery, and that the "social desirability motive" may actually adversely affect an individual's score.

Successful dissimulation first of all presupposes accurate knowledge of how personality traits are actually related to effective job performance. Such
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knowledge is widespread for certain traits and occupations (e.g., successful managers are socially ascendant), but less well known for others (e.g., successful architects score low on measures of emotional stability). Responding in a socially desirable fashion will therefore inappropriately elevate certain scale scores (e.g., high emotional stability scores generally are considered to be socially desirable, but not so for architectural creativity).

Even accurate knowledge of occupation-relevant personality traits is insufficient to dissimulate successfully, however. The job applicant must also be able to determine how to respond to individual personality items in order to elevate (or depress) his or her score on a trait dimension. This is not difficult for obvious, face-valid items, but the CPI contains items that vary in subtlety.

The above observations suggest that creating specific impressions on personality inventories requires appropriate knowledge, skills, and talents. Therefore, the distinction between ability tests (tests of "maximum performance"—Dunnette, 1966, p. 64) and personality tests (tests of "typical performance"—Dunnette, 1966, p. 64) begins to blur. Dissimilation on ability tests is generally regarded as impossible—e.g., one cannot do well on a mathematics test if one cannot add. If creating specific impressions on personality tests is also a skilled performance (as Johnson, 1981, Mills & Hogan, 1976, and Wallace, 1966, have argued), faking on personality tests can be as difficult as faking on ability tests. Lippa (1978) has shown that, indeed, genuine personality characteristics of subjects tend to "leak through" when they are asked to consciously role-play personality traits they do not
The present study tests empirically the skilled-performance conception of self-report personality assessment by comparing personality scores gathered under standard instructions to scores gathered under instructions to create specific impressions. After initial testing, subjects are instructed to respond to personality items as if the results of the test would determine whether they would be hired for specific jobs. The skilled-performance view predicts that, due to lack of job knowledge, subjects will tend to change all of their scores in the direction of general social desirability, but that these changes will occasionally be inappropriate for certain occupations.

Although past research has shown that people can change their personality scores when instructed to "fake" or role-play to create certain impressions (e.g., Dicken, 1960; Orpen, 1971), the analysis described here will, for the first time, systematically test whether people can successfully dissimulate across the full range of job-relevant personality traits in different job families.

One further prediction can be made. Just as mathematically bright individuals can do well on mathematical ability tests, individuals ought to be able to create favorable impressions for occupations in which they already have interests, skills, and experience. The present study predicts that individual differences in the ability to create specific impressions in employment testing will be a function of personality and prior occupational interests, skills, and experience.
Subjects

Subjects were 83 undergraduate students (roughly half male, half female) enrolled in an introductory psychology course. They received extra credit points for participating in the study. Additional extra credit points were offered to the individuals who made the highest scores under the six employment testing conditions.

Initial Assessment Measures

Subjects completed the California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough, 1975) and the Self-Directed Search (SDS; Holland, 1979). The CPI is a 480-item, forced-choice, self-report personality test containing 18 standard scales to measure normal differences in personality. The CPI is regarded as one of the best, if not the best, existing measures of normal personality (Kelly, 1965; Kleinmuntz, 1967). The SDS measures occupational preferences, experiences, competencies, and interests in each of Holland's six occupational categories: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Holland's classification scheme has become the most widely used system for classifying occupations; it is currently used to organize and interpret the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Campbell & Holland, 1972) and the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (Viernstein, 1972).

Measures Administered for Employment Testing

The second stage of testing involved six retestings with a shorter version of the CPI. Subjects were instructed to respond as if they were applying for six jobs representing Holland's six occupational categories: police officer, dental technician, architect, religious counselor, business manager, and
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cashier/short-order cook. The order of these testings was randomized, with rest between testings to minimize order effects and fatigue. The shorter CPI consists of the following four scales from Burger's (1975) short form for the CPI: Self-Control, Dominance, Flexibility, and Socialization. Each scale marks, respectively, four broad factors that recur in all major factor-analytic studies of personality (Hogan, 1982), including factor analyses of the CPI (Megargee, 1972): emotional stability, social ascendancy, independent thinking, and conventionality.

Analyses

Full-scale CPI scores were estimated from short-form scores with regression equations provided by Burger (1975). Such estimates have been found to be accurate in past research (Armentrout, 1977; Schut, Hutzel, Swint, & Gaston, 1980; Schut, Hutzel, Whiddon, & Hartman, 1983). Both CPI scores gathered under standard instructions and CPI full-scale-estimates were converted to standard scores using the normative data in Gough's (1975) CPI manual.

Two sets of analyses were then conducted. The first was a set of correlated t-tests to determine whether CPI scores gathered under the six employment testing dissimulation conditions differed significantly from CPI scores under standard conditions. It was noted whether score changes were in the direction of general social desirability or in the direction appropriate to the occupation. "Appropriate direction" was defined by actual obtained relationships between CPI scores and job performance demonstrated in past research. Most of this relevant is described in the Handbook for the CPI (Megargee, 1972). Positive correlations between a CPI scale and job
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performance criteria indicate effective employees score high on that dimension; successful dissimulation would require elevation on that scale. Scales that correlate near zero indicate average trait levels are sufficient for effective performance and would require no score change. Scales that correlate negatively indicate the necessity of lowering one's score for successful dissimulation. (See Table 1 for a summary of "ideal profiles".)

The second set of analyses compared "dissimulation ability" scores for each subject to SDS scores and CPI scores obtained under standard instructions. Initially, dissimulation ability scores were created by computing difference scores (D scores—Cronbach & Gleser, 1953) between the subject's four-trait CPI profile and the four-trait profile of a typical effective employee. Dissimulation ability was defined as reversed D scores, which measure resemblance to an effective employee's profile. For example, the profile of a successful architect is low Self-Control, high Dominance, high Flexibility, and low Socialization. As a subject's simulated CPI scores approach this profile, his or her dissimulation ability score for that occupation increases. Subjects received six simulation ability scores, one for each occupation. These dissimulation ability scores were correlated with all scales from the SDS and CPI, partialling out the similarity between subjects' straight-take and faked profiles. Individuals with the highest scores in the six areas were interviewed informally to look for distinctive biographical data.

After this paper was presented at the American Psychological Convention in August, 1986, reflection and discussion with others led to another set of analyses using a second operational definition of dissimulation ability. I saw two possible problems with reversed D scores as dissimulation ability criteria.
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First, D scores tend to be unreliable. Second, the D scores penalize individuals whose scores deviate in any direction on scales that require only average levels (i.e., standard scores of 50). In actual personnel decisions, tendency toward high or low scores are almost always used; rarely are individuals chosen on the basis of average scores. Therefore, a second index of dissimulation ability was created by simply summing scores on which successful employees score high and subtracting scores on which successful employees score low. This dissimulation index was correlated with the previous dissimulation index, SDS scores, and CPI scores, with straight/faked similarity partialled out.

Results

Results of the first set of analyses, shown in Table 1, indicate that subjects did indeed change their scores significantly when moving from standard to employment interviewing conditions. However, subjects seemed to be insensitive to the specific personality requirements of each job; rather their scores moved in the direction of general social desirability. Overall, subjects tended to raise their scores on emotional stability, social ascendancy, and conventionality, while lowering their scores on independent thinking, regardless of the job for which they were "applying." All but 2 of the 24 t-tests were statistically significant. The shape of all faked profiles—with the exception of dental technician—was similar, showing the highest peak on social ascendancy and lowest valley on independent thinking. The faked dental technician profile differed only in that emotional stability was the highest peak.
Results of the second set of analyses with the D dissimulation ability index indicate that the variance in subjects' dissimulation abilities was not well explained by differences in occupational interests and competencies. In no case did an occupational score show a significant correlation with its corresponding simulation ability score. The few apparently significant correlations were extremely small in magnitude and can easily be attributed to chance.

D scores showed small, but meaningful, relationships with CPI scores gathered under standard instructions. Out of 108 correlations, 23 were significant at the .05 level, indicating the results were probably not due to chance. Good police dissimulators tended to score high on Well-Being, Socialization, Tolerance, Achievement via Conformity, and low on Flexibility. Good dental dissimulators scored high on Social Presence, Self-Acceptance, Well-Being, Socialization, Achievement via Conformance, Intellectual Efficiency, and low on Flexibility. Good architect dissimulators scored high on Flexibility and low on Socialization, Self-control, Tolerance, and Achievement via Conformance. Religious counseling dissimulation showed only a marginal ($r = .15, p < .10$) correlation with Flexibility. Good managerial dissimulation correlated positively with Capacity for Status, Responsibility, Tolerance, and Empathy. Finally, cook/cashier dissimulation ability was associated with high scores on Self-Acceptance and low scores on Achievement via Independence.
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The second index of dissimulation ability tended to correlate very highly with the original index (median $r = .87$); only the religious counselor indices failed to correlate significantly. The correlations between the second dissimulation ability index and SDS and CPI were almost identical to the first set of correlations. Correlations between the CPI scales and two indices of dissimulation ability can be found in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The more informal biographical data on the six best dissimulators were consistent with the CPI findings. The best police officer simulator was an administration of justice major who received the Most Valuable Player honor for the college's baseball team. The best dental technician simulator was a nurse who had returned to school and was sporting a 3.9 grade-point average. The best architect simulator was a highly-motivated, individualistic, adult returning student majoring in human development. The best religious counselor simulator was a soft-spoken, yet intelligent psychology major whose father is a psychiatrist. The best business manager simulator was a vivacious business major who was president of a scholastic fraternity, vice-president of the student government association, writer for the college newspaper, and recipient of four academic awards at the college's honors convocation. The best cashier/cook simulator was undistinguished academically, but had experience in the short-order food business.
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Discussion

The present data bring into serious doubt the notion that people can appropriately tailor their self-presentations to score favorably on personality inventories during employment testing. When asked to dissimulate, people tended to raise their scores in the direction of general social desirability, which is inappropriate for certain jobs. If a test selection battery includes scales whose socially desirable poles are negatively related to performance criteria, conscious attempts at dissimulation will actually lower a dissimulator's score.

The results concerning prediction of dissimulation ability must be interpreted cautiously because the D scores used in these analyses may be inherently unreliable. At best, attempts at predicting skilled dissimulators must be described as only mildly successful. The Holland SDS scales seem to be inappropriate for such a task. Dissimulation ability did seem to correlate meaningfully, albeit modestly, with appropriate CPI scales. For example, Achievement via Conformance (which assesses the ability to work well with others under structured conditions) is associated positively with police and dental dissimulation, but negatively with architectural dissimulation. Flexibility is associated positively with architectural and counseling dissimulation, but negatively with police, dental, and cashier/cook dissimulation. Informal biographical data supported the CPI results by indicating that the top dissimulators in each occupational category seemed to possess the personality traits and talents to be successful in his or her respective category.
Understanding the limits of dissimulation more fully will require an examination of item characteristics as well as the situational contingencies of the testing and characteristics of the persons tested. Item subtlety (Burkhart, Gynther, & Christian, 1978), overlooked in the present study, may be an important moderator variable to examine in future research on simulation ability. Future research should also examine the relationships between objective measures of job performance and straight versus faked scores in samples of employed adults with varying degrees of on-the-job experience.

Within its limitations, the results of the present study suggest that the alleged motive to give socially desirable responses is not necessarily a threat to personality scale validity in personnel selection. If this be true, what are we to make of the low correlations between personality tests and job performance criteria reported in the literature? Low correlations between personality scales and performance criteria do not in themselves demonstrate that the social desirability motive is at fault; other culprits may be responsible.

Hogan, DeSoto, and Solano (1976) argue that unreliable and irrelevant scales and criteria account for low correlations throughout the entire field of objective personality testing. According to Hogan (1983), critiques of personality assessment, such as Mischel's (1968) book, tend to present selectively studies using psychometrically and conceptually weak measures, while ignoring a significant body of successful research in personality assessment.

The present data indicate that the social desirability motive does not necessarily invalidate personality information in selection procedures.
Perhaps it is not over-optimistic to think that, as personality assessment makes conceptual and technical advances, personality tests will become more and more useful in personnel selection.
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Author Notes

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Table 1

Personality Score Changes when Dissimulating for Different Jobs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions</th>
<th>Self-Control</th>
<th>Dominance</th>
<th>Flexibility</th>
<th>Socialization</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>48.46</td>
<td>8.36</td>
<td>63.12</td>
<td>8.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t value</td>
<td>(t= 8.05**)</td>
<td>(t= 8.61**)</td>
<td>(t= -11.81**)</td>
<td>(t= 2.31*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Target</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(LOW)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>54.30</td>
<td>10.49</td>
<td>55.26</td>
<td>11.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t value</td>
<td>(t= 11.29**)</td>
<td>(t= 3.54**)</td>
<td>(t= - 9.15**)</td>
<td>(t= 6.04**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Target</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(MEDIUM)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>49.10</td>
<td>11.91</td>
<td>54.50</td>
<td>11.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t value</td>
<td>(t= 7.70**)</td>
<td>(t= 3.33**)</td>
<td>(t= -10.22**)</td>
<td>(t= 3.02**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Target</td>
<td>(LOW)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(LOW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Counselor</td>
<td>59.38</td>
<td>7.80</td>
<td>61.28</td>
<td>9.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>t value</td>
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<td>(t= 7.35**)</td>
<td>(t= - 5.95**)</td>
<td>(t= 7.76**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Target</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(LOW)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Manager</td>
<td>48.10</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>63.14</td>
<td>8.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t value</td>
<td>(t= 7.03**)</td>
<td>(t= 8.97**)</td>
<td>(t= -12.23**)</td>
<td>(t= 3.50**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Target</td>
<td>(LOW)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(MEDIUM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashier/Cook</td>
<td>48.73</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>49.02</td>
<td>14.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>t value</td>
<td>(t= 6.40**)</td>
<td>(t= -0.34ns)</td>
<td>(t= - 7.07**)</td>
<td>(t= 1.73ns)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideal Target</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
<td>(MEDIUM)</td>
<td>(MEDIUM)</td>
<td>(HIGH)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Scales, t Values, and Ideal Target Profiles
Note. Means are expressed as standard scores based on normative data in Gough's (1976) Manual for the CPI. All t-tests are two-tailed, correlated, with 82 degrees of freedom. The t values were calculated by subtracting the standard instruction mean from the dissimulation mean, in order that the sign of the test would indicate whether the score change was in the appropriate direction. Successful dissimulation is generally marked by positive, significant t values for HIGH profile points and negative, significant t values for LOW profile points. Appropriate directions of change for MEDIUM profile points depends on whether scores under standard conditions were above or below 50.

*p < .05
**p < .01
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#### Table 2

**Personality Correlates of Dissimulating Ability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Police Officer</th>
<th>Dental Technician</th>
<th>Architect</th>
<th>Religious Counselor</th>
<th>Business Manager</th>
<th>Cashier/Cook</th>
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<td>CPI Scale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>13 13</td>
<td>11 14</td>
<td>11 12</td>
<td>10 11</td>
<td>11 16</td>
<td>13 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity for Status</td>
<td>08 08</td>
<td>09 15</td>
<td>05 04</td>
<td>05 11</td>
<td>21* 28*</td>
<td>-08 -05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>10 10</td>
<td>07 07</td>
<td>-08 -08</td>
<td>-02 11</td>
<td>10 14</td>
<td>06 07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Presence</td>
<td>18 18</td>
<td>22* 25*</td>
<td>-14 -13</td>
<td>04 02</td>
<td>16 14</td>
<td>17 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Acceptance</td>
<td>14 14</td>
<td>21* 14</td>
<td>-07 -05</td>
<td>12 06</td>
<td>-02 01</td>
<td>22* 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>25* 25*</td>
<td>24* 31*</td>
<td>-15 -16</td>
<td>01 03</td>
<td>11 08</td>
<td>02 08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
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<td>05 13</td>
<td>09 09</td>
<td>-08 18</td>
<td>26* 22*</td>
<td>-15 -08</td>
</tr>
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<td>Socialization</td>
<td>27* 27*</td>
<td>19* 25*</td>
<td>-34**-34**</td>
<td>-11 11</td>
<td>10 -03</td>
<td>13 20*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Control</td>
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<td>14 18</td>
<td>-22* -23*</td>
<td>-05 -02</td>
<td>04 -04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
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<td>17 22*</td>
<td>-21* -23*</td>
<td>-03 03</td>
<td>24* 16</td>
<td>-03 -05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Impression</td>
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<td>10 15</td>
<td>-18 -20*</td>
<td>12 09</td>
<td>14 12</td>
<td>-13 -09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communality</td>
<td>10 10</td>
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<td>-02 01</td>
<td>03 10</td>
<td>-06 -01</td>
<td>08 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement via</td>
<td>29** 29**</td>
<td>28** 31**</td>
<td>-26* -26*</td>
<td>-08 03</td>
<td>01 -08</td>
<td>-09 01</td>
</tr>
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<td>Conformance</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Independence</td>
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<td>-06 17</td>
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<td>Psychological Mindedness</td>
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<td>23* 22*</td>
<td>15 17</td>
<td>12 14</td>
<td>-03 -27*</td>
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<td>Femininity</td>
<td>12 12</td>
<td>04 06</td>
<td>-18 -16</td>
<td>09 26*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>13 13</td>
<td>-07 -03</td>
<td>-02 -03</td>
<td>00 -10</td>
<td>19* 18</td>
<td>03 -02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Note. Decimal points omitted from all correlation coefficients. Coefficients are partial correlations correcting for initial similarity between straight-take CPI profile and ideal target profiles. \( N = 83 \).

\( a \) Criterion is similarity between faked profile and ideal target profile.

\( b \) Criterion is the raw sum of personality scale scores related positively to effective performance minus the scale scores related negatively to effective performance.

\( c \) Correlations are identical for criteria because the correlation between the two criteria for this occupation was 1.0.

* \( P < .05 \) (one-tailed)

** \( P < .01 \) (one-tailed)