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ABSTRACT

The selection interview is a commonly used procedure for gathering applicant information upon which to base personnel decisions. Synder and Swann (1978) found that people tended to ask questions and generally seek information consistent with their initial beliefs about the person being interviewed. They suggested that this confirmatory questioning strategy might operate in settings such as the employment interview. Studies employing a fixed question selection response format where subjects selected interview questions from the same experimenter-provided list have failed to replicate, for selection interviews, Synder and Swann's finding. The present study employed a free question generation methodology to remove the potential confound caused by unaccounted for differences between experimenter-provided questions. Forty-eight college students generated pilot data for the construction of stimulus material for the study, 126 student interviewers participated in the experiment proper, and 90 students rated the freely generated questions for positivity/negativity. The results indicated that both male and female interviewers adopted confirmatory questioning strategies, asking significantly more negative questions of below average applicants than of above average applicants, regardless of applicant sex. Further results suggest that this same confirmatory bias exists for males and females when asking positive questions of same sex applicants. However, interviewers adopted disconfirmatory strategies when asking positive questions of opposite-sex applicants. (Author/NB)

Evidence for Confirmatory Biases in Interviewers' Questioning Strategies Using a Free Question Generation Methodology

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Evidence for Confirmatory Biases in Interviewers' Questioning Strategies Using a Free Question Generation Methodology

Sackett (1982) and McDonald and Hakel (1985) failed to replicate, for selection interviews, Snyder and Swann's (1978) finding that people tend to adopt confirmatory questioning strategies when seeking information about others. All previous studies have employed a fixed question selection response format where subjects selected interview questions from the same experimenter-provided list. The present study employed a free question generation methodology in order to remove the potential confound caused by unaccounted for differences between experimenter-provided questions. Results indicate that both male and female interviewers adopt confirmatory questioning strategies in that they ask significantly more negative questions of below average applicants than above average applicants, regardless of applicant sex. Further results suggest this same confirmatory bias exists for males and females when asking positive questions of same sex applicants. However, interviewers adopt disconfirmatory strategies when asking positive questions of opposite-sex applicants.

The selection interview is considered by many to be the most commonly used procedure for gathering applicant information upon which to base personnel decisions. Confronted with evidence that such decisions generally suffer from the interview's lack of reliability and validity, personnel researchers continue in their efforts to better understand the complexity of the interview process. In several recent studies, the focus has been on the interview as a dynamic process of social interaction and interpersonal judgment which involves formulating questions, forming impressions and attributing personal characteristics, as precursors to evaluative judgments (Dipboye, Fontenelle & Garner, 1984; McDonald & Hakel, 1985; Sackett, 1982). The present study closely parallels the paradigm advanced in these studies in order to further assess the effect of preinterview impressions of applicants on the way interviewers plan to conduct the interview.

The conceptual springboard for this line of research was a study by Snyder and Swann (1978) from which the authors concluded that in social interactions, people interact in a manner which fosters confirmation of their preinteraction hypotheses about another person. Specifically, their research indicates that people tend to ask questions and generally seek information which is consistent with, and therefore tends to confirm, their initial beliefs about another. Indeed, they demonstrated this tendency to adopt "confirmatory questioning strategies". They suggested that this same phenomenon might operate in settings such as the employment interview.

Sackett (1982), in a series of four studies, systematically explored some boundaries of the Snyder and Swann hypothesis about information seeking in the employment interview. He found little support for a confirmatory bias. In an effort to more fully articulate the role of

preinterview impressions in the employment interview process, McDonald and Hakel (1985) studied the effect of initial impressions as well as applicant sex and race on questioning strategies. They found that initial impressions did not significantly affect questioning strategies. Although initial impressions significantly interacted with applicant race in affecting questioning strategies, this interaction was dismissed as trivial because of the negligible amount of variance it explained.

Taken together, the results regarding the generality of confirmatory questioning strategies suggest that they operate in certain situations, but do not seem to operate in the employment interview context. In discussing his somewhat mixed results, Sackett (1982) suggested two methodological features of his study which may explain his failure to uncover a confirmatory bias. The first was that subjects did not form preinterview hypotheses themselves, but rather were instructed by the experimenter to test certain hypotheses. This may be a less ecologically valid and therefore much weaker manipulation of hypotheses. Interestingly, McDonald and Hakel (1985) had subjects review resumes as the basis for preinterview hypotheses and while no main effect for initial hypothesis was found, this factor did interact significantly with certain applicant characteristics. The other methodological weakness emphasized by Sackett (1982), which also characterized McDonald and Hakel's (1985) study, was the use of a fixed-question response format, specifically, the selection of questions from a prespecified list. If questions designed to seek positive (or negative) information were objectionable to subjects for some unknown reason, not finding confirmatory biases may be an artifact of the specific questions presented to subjects. Sackett (1982) suggests the use of a free response format where subjects freely generate their own questions for use in the

interview.

The present study was designed to overcome the two methodological weaknesses mentioned above while concurrently manipulating not only applicant characteristics such as suitability and sex, but also interviewer sex so that these potential interactions and main effects on questioning strategies could be adequately assessed. If interviewers adopt confirmatory questioning strategies, when preparing to interview a below average applicant, they should generate more questions seeking negative information and fewer seeking positive information. Of course, the opposite pattern should result when interviewing above average applicants.

METHOD

Subjects

A total of 264 subjects where used in the three phases of this study. Forty-eight student subjects generated pilot data for the construction of stimulus material described below. One hundred, twenty-six student interviewers participated in the experiment proper in exchange for course credit. Finally, ninety student subjects rated the freely generated questions for positivity/negativity.

Stimulus Materials

Interviewers' initial impressions of applicants were created by manipulating entries on resumes and application blanks made to look as realistic as possible by using letterhead from a fictitious company. Application blanks and resumes were paired to create eight different "packets" of information manipulating applicant suitability and sex. Subjects were told that the university had been solicited by the organization to help in research on their interview process. They were further

told that the job applicants were "people currently going through a selection program at an established midwestern insurance company". After initial instructions, subjects reviewed a job description and each packet one at a time. After reviewing each packet, subjects provided ratings of overall acceptability, hirability, work experience, education and accomplishments.

From the original eight packets, four were selected representing qualified and unqualified males and females. A 2 X 4 MANOVA, with the five ratings serving as dependent variables, indicated that males and females did not differ in their ratings of these applicants, but above average applicants were rated significantly higher than below average.

Procedure

Male and female subjects were randomly assigned to either an above average or a below average preinterview hypothesis condition. Subjects in the above average (below average) condition reviewed a resume and application blank of either a highly qualified (unqualified) male or a female applicant.

When subjects arrived at the experimental room, they were introduced to the setting by reading (while the experimenter read aloud) a four paragraph description. The first paragraph explained that the university had "agreed to assist an established midwestern insurance company in their study of the employment interview". Moreover, subjects were told that they would be conducting interviews with the applicants who had been previously interviewed by company personnel, but before they made a final decision, they were "interested in your impressions of these applicants". Subjects were told that their evaluations and questions asked would be kept in strictest confidence. The remaining paragraphs gave

an overview of the procedure which involved going to another room to conduct the interview. They were then told that in the past, interviews were found to run more smoothly if questions were prepared in advance. Subjects were instructed to take several minutes to think about the questions they might ask, then "list all the questions you believe will help you assess the applicant's qualifications for this general staff accountant position".

After this introduction, subjects were instructed to read a job description, review the applicant's information packet containing a resume and application blank, make some initial ratings (manipulation checks), and generate their list of questions. Following this, subjects were fully debriefed and informed that actual interviews would not take place.

Phase three involved having the questions independently rated for the extent to which each sought positive or negative information about the applicant. The generated questions were transcribed such that each question was placed on a separate card. The total set of 904 questions was randomly divided into nine groups of 100. Subjects then were instructed to sort the questions into one of five piles where 1 (5) represented questions "seeking negative (positive) information about the applicant". Each time the nine groups of questions was sorted, the questions were mixed and another set of nine random groups was formed to control for any potential order or contrast effects. The result was that each question was rated for positivity/negativity by at least ten raters. The mean of these ratings for each question was then computed. To summarize, each student interviewer had generated questions and then the extent to which each question (for each interviewer) sought positive/negative information was determined.

Results

Manipulation Check

Subjects' evaluative ratings of the applicants prior to question generation were assessed to assure that preinterview impressions had been adequately manipulated. As was the case with the similar pilot ratings, a 2 X 2 X 2 MANOVA (interviewer sex, applicant sex, applicant suitability) indicated no significant differences in males' and females' evaluations of the applicants' acceptability, but a highly significant applicant suitability effect ($F = 44.13$, $df = 5, 111$, $p < .001$), was found.

Experimental Results

To assess whether a confirmatory bias had occured, the number of positive and negative questions generated by each interviewer was computed. More specifically, since the questions had been rated on a 5-point scale, positive questions were counted if their mean rating was equal to or greater than a value of 4, while negative questions were counted if their rating was equal to or less than 2.

A 2 X 2 X 2 MANOVA (interviewer sex, applicant sex, applicant suitability) was performed using the number of positive and negative questions as the dependent variables. A significant main effect for applicant suitability emerged ($F = 2.88$, $df = 2, 115$, $p < .04$).

Three-way ANOVAs were then performed on the number of positive and negative questions separately. The results for the negative and positive questions, respectively, are presented in Table 1. For negative questions, a significant main effect for applicant suitability was found ($F = 6.82$, $df = 1, 116$, $p < .01$), indicating that significantly more negative questions were asked of poor candidates than of qualified candidates. This effect is illustrated in Figure 1. No other main effects or interactions

were significant.

For positive questions, a significant three-way interaction was found ($F = 5.10$, $df = 1, 116$, $p < .03$). This interaction is also illustrated in Figure 1, showing that for both males and females, when interviewing a same-sex applicant, they asked more positive questions of above average applicants than below average. This represents a confirmatory bias. On the other hand, a disconfirmatory strategy was found when interviewing opposite-sex applicants. Both males and females tended to ask fewer positive questions of above average applicants compared to below average.

Discussion

The present findings strongly suggest that interviewers adopt confirmatory questioning strategies based on preinterview information, particularly with regard to asking negative questions. The finding of a disconfirmatory bias in opposite-sex interviews may potentially be explained in several alternative ways, each representing hypotheses for further study.

One possibility is grounded in the attraction literature. That is, our interviewers, who were college undergraduates interviewing applicants for a staff accountant position, may have seen themselves as more similar to the below average applicant than the above average. This assumption of similarity might lead interviewers to seek information protecting positive self-perceptions, i.e., to seek positive information. This type of similarity bias has been found in another ongoing study examining job interview behavior (John Pryor, personal communication). Further research could be done in a situation where applicant attribute similarity, other than sex, is varied.

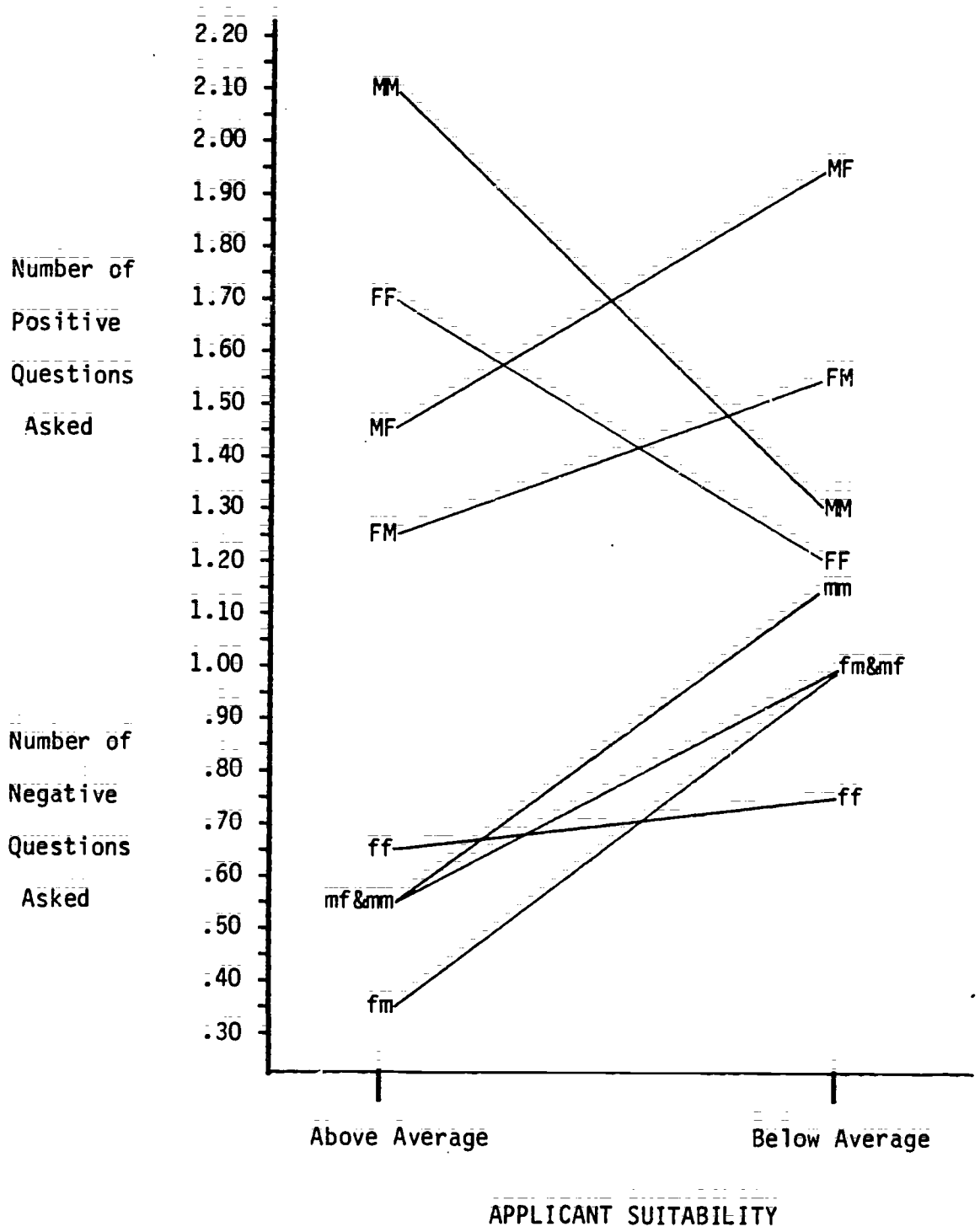
An additional explanation is one related to social pressures and norms. One could argue that a leniency or equity bias is responsible for individuals providing others the opportunity to disconfirm a negative impression. In this case, we are not speaking about a general norm, but one which is made salient by issues in today's society. It is conceivable that both males and females, being aware of the possibility of sex bias, will attempt to present the appearance of behaving equitably, or even more leniently, towards members of the opposite sex. What better way to allow others to disconfirm an already held negative impression than by asking questions eliciting positive information? Conversely, under conditions where norms do not operate, i.e., when a positive impression exists, there is considerably less need for positive questions to either obtain information or to demonstrate one's desire for equity.

Finally, with regard to the differences between positive and negative questions, it is conceivable that positive questions have a multi-purpose function in interview interactions, which go beyond that of negative questions. Positive questions may be used as "filler" during interactions, whereas negative questions may be more effective as diagnostic tools, since they are more likely to reveal "knock-out factors" or socially undesirable behaviors. Negative questions are useless as filler, however, because of their negative emotional impact. Because positive questions may be used as interactional filler, indicators of norm awareness or information seeking, there may be more variability in their use. Of course, these are merely speculations, therefore these and many other questions require further study.

Table 1

Combined ANOVA Summary Tables for Number of Negative and Positive Questions Asked

	No. of Negative Quests.				No. of Positive Quests.		
SOURCE	df	MS	F	p	MS	F	p
Interviewer Sex (IS)	1, 116	.40	.44		2.33	1.47	
Applicant Sex (AS)	1, 116	.01	.01		.07	.04	
Applicant Suitability (S)	1, 116	6.28	6.82	<.01	.61	.38	
IS X AS	1, 116	.05	.06		.00	.00	
IS X S	1, 116	.18	.20		.02	.01	
AS X S	1, 116	1.02	1.11		.34	.21	
IS X AS X S	1, 116	.42	.45		8.13	5.10	<.03



Note: MM = Male interviewer-Male applicant (positive questions), mm = Male interviewer-Male applicant (negative questions), etc.

The interaction effects for negative questions are not significant, however, they have been depicted to facilitate comparisons to the interactions for positive questions.

Figure 1: Effects of Applicant Suitability on Number of Negative and Positive Questions Asked

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