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The Effect of Providing Choices on the Validity of a Situational Interview for Resident Advisors

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A study was conducted to determine if providing choices on a situational interview would affect validity. A situational interview was developed for and evaluated using 36 resident advisors at a Southeastern university. Half the resident advisors responded to the written questions by writing what they would do in each of the fourteen scenarios. Their answers were rated by two job experts ($r = .92$). The other half of the resident advisors chose one of the three possible responses to each scenario. Correlations were calculated between the scores on the interviews and the resident advisors' performance evaluations. The forced choice group had a concurrent validity coefficient of .28 ($n = 19$, $p = .25$). The free write group had a concurrent validity coefficient of .38 ($n = 17$, $p = .13$). Results suggest situational interviews can be administered in written or multiple-choice format.

Typical Interview

The employment interview is the most widely used selection instrument despite its near absence of validity and reliability (Arvey & Campion, 1982). The conventional interview's main drawback is its lack of objectivity as interviewers will often rate the same interviewee differently. Furthermore, the outcome of the interview can be influenced by non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, hand shake quality, and fragrance (Young & Beier, 1977; Parsons & Liden, 1984; McShane & Aamodt, 1993). The interview is not likely to be phased out due to the apparent need to meet the individual face to face before hiring. Because employers insist on using the interview, researchers have tried to improve the interview process.

The Situational Interview

One such improvement in the interviewing process is the situational interview (Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980). The situational interview involves (1) using a job analysis to develop job related interview questions, (2) asking the same questions to each applicant, (3) using behavioral anchors to score the answers, and (4) having two or more people rate applicants answers (Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988). The situational interview has produced validity coefficients in the .30 - .46 range (Latham, *et al.*, 1980, Weekley & Gier, 1987).

The situational interview has several advantages. First, because it is based on a job analysis, it is job related. The applicants are asked what they would do in an actual on-the-job situation. Second, asking the same question to each applicant ensures consistency. Third, using behavioral anchors to evaluate applicants responses should reduce the effects of extraneous variables. Because the applicants' answers are compared to a scoring key, factors such as handshake, fragrance, and posture should not influence an interviewer's rating. Forth, having two people rate applicants' answers should reduce favoritism and provide a measure of inter-rater reliability.

Development

Latham, *et al.*, (1980) broke ground in addressing some of the inequities involved in the interview process by focusing on the situational interview. Their research used a systematic job analysis, the critical incident technique. This method involved taking incidents from work situations and re-writing them into questions to which applicants could answer. Such answers would provide predictive job related behavior based on actual and objective experience. This use of a situational interview resulted in inter-rater reliabilities of .76 and .79, and concurrent validity coefficients of .30 to .46.

Latham and Saari (1984) went a step further by conducting a follow-up study. They asked employees what they would do in hypothetical job-like situations. The employees' responses correlated (r = .39 to .42) with their actual on the job behavior as recorded by peers and supervisors.

In 1987, Weekley and Gier continued development of the situational interview. They researched and developed a standard job interviewing

procedure to be used by 1300 retail outlets. The interview predicted on-the-job performance (r=.45) and had a high inter-rater reliability (r=.84).

In 1993, Lin and Adrian (1993) created a situational interview to predict performance of school cafeteria managers. Their efforts resulted in a situational interview with a validity of .48 and reliabilities ranging from .92 to .98.

Factors Affecting the Situational Interview Training

Some authors have argued for the importance of training situational interviewers (Lin & Adrian, 1993). Maurer and Fay (1988) conducted situational interviews with extensively trained interviewers and relatively untrained interviewers. They found that extensive training was not essential to achieve high reliability in the situational interview. However, Manson (1988) found experts had a higher inter-rater reliability than non-experts.

Benchmarks. Buchner (1990) made a further contribution to the situational interview by using a more precise scale to evaluate the quality of the applicants' answers. A higher inter-rater reliability was found when using five anchors (r=.66) instead of the traditional three (r=.44).

Format. Andrews and Martin (1992) investigated the effect of format on situational interview scores. They presented undergraduates a situational interview for bank tellers either in writing or on videotape rather than the traditional oral questioning. Subjects responded orally or in writing. The authors found no difference in average interview scores and a high inter-rater reliability for each condition. Their results suggest a situational interview presented in written form with subjects responding in writing would be equivalent to the traditional oral administration with oral responding.

Aamodt, VanMarter, and Pearson (1993) also investigated the effect of format on situational interview scores. They developed situational interviews for tellers and resident assistants. Fifty-six participants were asked questions either orally or in writing and responded in the same format. The written format (r = .78) had a slightly higher inter-rater reliability than the oral format (r = .66). Participants responding to multiple choice written questions scored higher than participants responding to essay written questions and participants responding to oral ques-

tions.

Nonverbal Cues. McShane and Aamodt (1993) investigated the effect of nonverbal cues and verbal first impression on situational and unstructured interviews. A job applicant was videotaped while exhibiting either excellent or poor nonverbal behavior. In the excellent nonverbal behavior condition the applicant smiled, sat erect, and made eye contact with the camera. In the poor nonverbal behavior condition, the applicant sat slumping, made little eye contact, crossed arms, and fidgeted. The applicant displaying poor nonverbal behavior in the unstructured interview received lower scores than the applicant displaying excellent nonverbal scores in the unstructured interview and the applicants in the situational interview. Nonverbal cues significantly affected the unstructured interview scores but not the situational interview scores.

Racial Bias. Lin, Petersen, and Manligas (1987) evaluated the potential racial bias involved in situational interviews. They found Hispanic interviewers gave higher scores than black or white interviewers. Black interviewers gave higher scores than white interviewers. Furthermore, members of all races gave higher scores to applicants of their own race than they did to applicants of other races.

Gousie (1992) conducted situational and unstructured interviews to determine potential adverse impact of situational interviews. Surprisingly, there was a significant difference between scores given to black and white applicants on the situational interview but not on the unstructured interview.

Statement of Purpose

A written interview speeds administration because it does not require the applicants to be questioned individually; several applicants can be questioned at one time. However, the evaluation of each applicants' responses must still be evaluated individually. Furthermore, this evaluation needs to be completed by two or more people to have inter-rater reliability. Ease of administering the situational interview could be improved if a faster and easier method of evaluating applicants responses could be developed.

One possibility is to ask applicants to choose between the three behavioral anchors instead of having two raters evaluate the applicants' free response to each scenario. For example, applicants are given a situation and asked to choose the response they would make. They are provid-

ed the three behavioral anchors that were created in the development of the interview. The 1,3, and 5 ratings representing poor, average, and excellent performance, respectively, would not be provided to the applicant for obvious reasons. This format would have the advantages of group administration and be as easy to evaluate as a multiple-choice test.

Two questions are raised by this idea. Will applicants score higher on a multiple choice situational interview than on a written situational interview? And most importantly, will this self-administered multiple-choice interview have equal validity to a traditional situational interview? This study is an attempt to answer those questions.

It is hypothesized that:

1) The mean rating of subjects' responses in the multiple choice format will be higher than the mean rating of subjects' responses in the written format.

2) Both the multiple choice format and the written format of the situational interview will correlate significantly with the performance measure.

3) There will not be a significant difference between the validity coefficients of the multiple-choice and written format situational inter views.

METHOD

Subjects

Sixty-one sophomore, junior, and senior resident advisors from a southeastern university participated during resident hall staff meetings. No compensation was given to the subjects. Subjects were randomly assigned to conditions. Data from 25 subjects were not used due to nonstandard performance appraisal instruments, missing performance appraisals, or no available performance appraisal. Therefore, data from 24 women and 12 men were used for statistical analysis.

Procedure

Creating the Situational Interview. Five resident assistants generated a total of 68 critical incidents of either exceptionally good or exceptionally bad on the job behavior. Three resident directors independently sorted the incidents into one of the eight categories from the performance evaluation form. Critical incidents that were not placed into the same category by two or more resident directors were discarded from consideration. Two resident directors selected the two incidents from each category that they thought best represented that dimension. No incidents from the programming dimension were considered appropriate for the situational interview, therefore, none were used. The two resident directors rewrote the remaining incidents into questions and generated answers for the 1,3, and 5 anchors (Weekley & Gier, 1987). The interview had a total of 14 questions.

Interview Administration. The interview was administered to 61 resident advisors during resident hall staff meetings. They were told the purpose of the interview was to develop a new selection procedure for resident advisors and to answer some research questions about interviewing techniques. They were not told the hypothesis of the experiment.

Half of the resident advisors were given the written interview questions and asked to respond in writing. The other half of resident advisors were given the written interview questions and the three anchors for each question, without the value, and asked to choose between the alternatives provided. The written response group's answers were independently evaluated by two Resident Directors using the scoring guide previously developed. The mean score each subject received from both resident directors on the 14 questions was calculated. The multiple choice group's score was determined by averaging the values of the anchors that they chose for each situation.

The dependent variable was the performance evaluation completed by the Resident advisor's immediate supervisor, one of the 19 resident directors, during the previous semester. The performance evaluation form contained eight categories with 4-12 behavioral statements per category for a total of 74 ratings. Resident advisors were rated either outstanding, exceeds expectations, satisfactory, needs improvement, or unsatisfactory on each of the dimensions. These ratings were converted to 5,4,3,2,or 1 points, respectively. Residential Life believes each of the categories on the performance appraisal are equally important, the

number of dimensions within a category reflects the complexity and not the importance of the dimension. Therefore, the dependent measure was the average of the mean rating from each category.

The correlation between interview score and performance rating was calculated for the two groups.

RESULTS

The multiple choice interview correlated .28 ($n = 19$, $p = .25$) with performance. The written format correlated .38 ($n = 17$, $p = .13$) with performance. There was not a significant difference between these two correlations. Combining both formats, overall the interview correlated .28 ($n = 36$, $p = .095$) with performance. This figure is consistent with those typically found in the literature for situational interviews.

Inter-rater reliability of the written form was .92 ($p = .0001$). Evaluating the multiple choice responses with a scoring key did not require multiple raters and therefore no inter-rater reliability was calculated.

The mean rating of subjects' responses in the multiple choice format ($M = 4.76$, $sd = .20$) was significantly higher than the mean rating of subjects' responses in the written format ($M = 4.09$, $sd = .32$), $t(36) = 7.48$, $p = .0001$. This finding is consistent with that found by Aamodt *et al.* (1993).

DISCUSSION

Neither format of the situational interview correlated significantly with performance. However, correlations in the .28 - .38 range are consistent with other research on situational interviews.

The situational interview has been shown to predict performance (Latham, *et al.*, 1980; Latham & Saari, 1984; Weekley & Gier, 1987; Maurer & Fay, 1988). This research was conducted to determine if the format of the situational interview effects validity. Results indicated the written response format was more valid but not significantly. This finding gives support to the idea of varying the format of the situational interview.

Traditionally, the situational interview is administered with oral questions and answers. Both Andrews and Martin (1992) and Aamodt et al. (1993) showed that a situational interview could be administered in either written or oral form and that the interviewee could respond either orally or in writing without affecting scoring or inter-rater reliability.

The present research showed that written situational interview questions could be a valid predictor of actual on-the-job performance when using written interviewee responses in either a free-write or multiple choice format. Although the free-write response had higher, but not significantly, validity.

Sample size was severely reduced by several problems. Many resident advisors were evaluated on a non-standard performance appraisal. Performance appraisals for some resident advisors were missing or otherwise unavailable. Twenty-five of the 61 resident advisors participating in the study had unusable or unavailable performance appraisals.

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