

Effects of Nonverbal Cues and Verbal First Impressions in Unstructured and Situational Interview Settings

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The effects of nonverbal cues and verbal first impressions on unstructured and situational interviews were investigated. The study consisted of 160 undergraduate students assigned to one of eight interview scenarios. Interview scenarios involved the applicant either displaying good or poor nonverbal cues throughout the interview or a good or poor verbal response to the first three out of ten questions. Results of the analysis indicate a significant interaction between interview type and nonverbal cues; nonverbal cues significantly affected the unstructured interview scores but not the situational interview scores. No main effect and no interactions occurred involving the first impression manipulation.

Literature reviews indicate that the traditional employment interview lacks both reliability and validity (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965). For example, a meta-analysis by Hunter and Hunter (1982) reported a validity coefficient of only .14 for the unstructured interview. A more recent meta-analysis by Wiesner and Cronshaw (1988) analyzed and reported validities on four different interview styles and found that the validity coefficient was only .11 for unstructured interviews but was .35 for structured interviews.

Perhaps the reason for the lack of validity for the unstructured interview is that interview scores are affected by non-job related factors such as first impressions and nonverbal cues.

First Impressions

Both first impressions and information that is presented to a recruiter prior to the interview can result in the tendency for evaluators to form judgments about the applicant and make hiring decisions in the first few minutes of the interview (Farr, 1973; Farr & York, 1975; Luchins, 1957; Macan & Dipboye, 1988). The tendency for an early judgment is called the primacy effect and occurs as interviewers try to simplify increased amounts of information presented early in the interview (Farr & York, 1975). For example, a study by Farr and York (1975) looked at the effects of primacy and recency on recruitment decisions by varying the amount of information given to a recruiter. The results indicated that when only a single judgment was required from each subject, primacy effects were obtained.

Nonverbal Behavior

A second variable that can greatly affect interviewer judgments is nonverbal behavior such as eye contact, smiling, and posture.

Eye Contact - Thirteen studies have looked at the effect of eye contact on interviewer scores. (Amalfitano & Kalt, 1977; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Hollandsworth, 1979; Imada & Hakel, 1977; McGovern, Jones & Morris, 1979; Parson & Liden, 1984; McGovern, Tinsley, & Howard, 1978; Rasmussen, 1984; Sterrett, 1978; Tessler & Sushelsky, 1978; Washburn & Hakel, 1973; Wexley, Fugita & Malone, 1975; Young & Beier, 1977). As shown in the meta-analysis in Table One, in all but one of the above cases (Sterret, 1978), the researchers concluded that increased eye contact can greatly improve an applicant's overall rating as well as the subsequent hiring decision. In almost all cases, eye contact ranked as one of the top three variables that affected interview ratings.

Smiling - Four studies investigated the variable of smiling in their studies. (Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Rasmussen, 1984; Young & Beier, 1977; Washburn & Hakel, 1973). The results of these studies showed that smiling, compared to a neutral or frowning face, significantly increased interviewer evaluations.

Table 1**Meta-analysis of the effects of nonverbal cues on interviewer evaluations**

| Variable/Study | N | d |
|-------------------------------|-----|------|
| Eye Contact | | |
| Amalfitano & Kalt (1977) | 44 | .44 |
| Forbes & Jackson (1980) | 101 | 1.23 |
| Parsons & Liden (1984) | 517 | 3.10 |
| Tessler & Sushelsky (1978) | 60 | .41 |
| Young & Beier (1977) | 144 | 3.32 |
| TOTAL | 866 | 2.18 |
| Body Position | | |
| Forbes & Jackson (1980) | 101 | .19 |
| Sterrett (1978) | 160 | .13 |
| Parsons & Liden (1984) | 517 | 3.23 |
| TOTAL | 778 | 2.19 |
| Combination | | |
| Imada & Hakel (1977) | 72 | 1.52 |
| McGovern <i>et al.</i> (1979) | 52 | 2.50 |
| McGovern <i>et al.</i> (1978) | 52 | 1.83 |
| Rasmussen (1984) | 74 | .86 |
| Washburn & Hakel (1973) | 122 | .63 |
| Wexley <i>et al.</i> (1975) | 78 | .44 |
| TOTAL | 450 | 1.01 |
| Head Position | | |
| Forbes & Jackson (1980) | 101 | .84 |
| Young & Beier (1977) | 144 | 2.58 |
| TOTAL | 245 | 1.86 |

| | | |
|---------------------------|-----|------|
| Facial Expressions | | |
| Forbes & Jackson (1980) | 101 | .99 |
| Smiling | | |
| Young & Beier (1977) | 144 | 2.14 |

Posture - A third nonverbal cue which investigators found to rank high in influencing rater evaluations was posture. Hollandsworth (1979) defines posture as sitting erect while using hand and facial expressions that are appropriate for the verbal responses that are given. Both Hollandsworth (1979) and Parsons and Liden (1984) found posture to significantly affect applicant judgments, ranking just below such variables as eye contact and articulation. However, Forbes and Jackson (1980) did not find significance when they manipulated body posture.

The results of the studies seem clear in that an applicant who avoids eye contact, doesn't smile, has poor posture and generally displays a lack of interest will most likely become a rejected candidate even though these cues are probably not valid predictors of future performance. When interviewers form judgments based on these invalid sources of information, they end up screening applicants based on non-verbal behavior rather than important areas such as job knowledge, skill and ability.

In conclusion, these studies point to the need for a more objective means of evaluation and systematic scoring across job candidates. For example, Washburn and Hakel (1973) note the need for standardizing interviewer behavior, most notably to control for inadvertent contamination of interviewer perceptions. If, as the literature indicates, there is a need for a more objective and systematic interview technique to control for the strong influences of nonverbal behavior, then a technique such as the situational interview should be employed or tested on such variables to see if it can control or at least minimize such influences. Furthermore, Imada and Hakel (1977) suggest that a possible means for standardizing non-verbal behavior is to have the interviewer function primarily as an information gatherer. Similarly, the situational interviewer can be seen primarily as an information gatherer, specifically information on job behavior. If, as suggested above, non-verbal cues can be standardized,

then the situational style can be expected to go one step further and completely filter out the influences of non-verbal behavior, because the theory behind the situational interview is that it measures behaviors only.

Situational Interviews

Literature reviews indicate that the traditional employment interview lacks both reliability and validity (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965). In addition to the problems of first impressions are nonverbal cues discussed earlier, another cause of this ineffectiveness is that different interviewers often ask applicants different questions, most of which are not job related. Objective assessments are difficult to make when applicant responses vary and there is no objective recording and scoring of responses across applicants. The lack of consistent recording and scoring of job related questions makes it clear why the unstructured interview results in such low reliability and validity scores. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, various levels of non-verbal behavior such as smiling, facial expressions and eye contact can contaminate interviewer evaluations leading to a decision to reject an applicant based on invalid sources of information (Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Imada & Hakel, 1977; Young & Beier, 1977).

In light of the problems associated with unstructured interviews, several researchers have sought to develop a more behaviorally based, objective, reliable and valid means of selecting applicants. One such interview, called the situational interview, was first conceived in 1975 by Gary P. Latham. Five years later, Latham and his colleagues published the first empirical research on the situational interview indicating that it was a more reliable and valid selection instrument than the unstructured interview (Latham, Saari, Pursel, & Campion, 1980).

The situational interview is based on a job analysis method called the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). Critical incidents are obtained and then turned into situational interview questions. Applicants are asked to respond to these situational questions by explaining how they would behave in that situation. The applicant responses are then compared to predetermined benchmark answers which were generated and assigned weights by a panel of job experts.

Latham, Saari, Pursel, and Campion (1980) reported two concurrent validity studies from two industrial settings using an entry level job and a first line supervisor position. Validity coefficients ranging from .46 to .78

were found for both studies.

In another study, Maurer and Fay (1988) investigated the effects of interview type (situational interviews vs. conventional structured interviews) and interviewer training on rating variability among managers responsible for conducting employment interviews. Results from Maurer and Fay show that higher inter-rater reliabilities were found for the situational interview than for the conventional structured interview, even when compared to the group which received training in minimizing rating errors.

These findings are parallel to a similar study by Henemen (1975) which showed higher reliability in structured group interviews than in unstructured group interviews. Henemen's study also used trained and untrained interview groups, but like Maurer and Fay, no differences between the two groups were found. Maurer and Fay (1988) attribute their findings to two advantages of the situational interview. The first advantage is that the situational interview is effective in reducing interviewer variability in questioning, interpreting, and recording applicant information. The second advantage is that the psychometric properties of the situational interview increase the likelihood of overall evaluations to be derived from behavioral rather than subjective methods.

As with Maurer and Fay, Weekley and Gier (1987) had the opportunity to conduct research in an applied setting. Their research was conducted on sales applicants, using the situational interview as the selection instrument for 1,300 retail outlets. Using sales volume as the performance measure to determine the predictive validity of the situational interview, Weekley and Gier obtained a validity coefficient of .45. Their follow up investigation with the managers who used the selection technique found an overwhelmingly positive attitude for the method over the previously used unstructured method.

It is the purpose of this study to compare the influences that first impression effects and nonverbal cues have on interviewer evaluations of applicants in both unstructured and situational interview settings. It is therefore hypothesized that:

- 1) In the unstructured interview, subjects viewing an applicant with a poor verbal first impression will rate subsequent responses to questions lower than in the good verbal first impression scenarios.

- 2) The display of good and poor nonverbal cues will significantly affect applicant ratings in the unstructured interview while the display of good and poor nonverbal cues will not affect applicant ratings in the situa-

tional interview.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 165 (106 females, 59 males) volunteer undergraduate students from a medium sized southeastern university. All subjects were enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses and received extra credit for their participation in the experiment.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions formed by a 2 (interview type) by 2 (response type) by 2 (nonverbal cues) factorial design. Subjects viewed a videotape of a female applicant answering questions in either a situational interview or an unstructured interview. Eight interview scenarios were developed which displayed good and poor nonverbal cues along with good and poor initial response type. Subject evaluations of the seven neutral responses were averaged and served as the dependent measure.

Interview Manipulation

In the unstructured interview condition, the subjects were told that they were going to observe an interview and then evaluate the applicant as though they were thinking of hiring the applicant for their company. They were given a score sheet with each question written down as it was said on the tape along with a 5 point Likert scale ranging from poor to excellent. They were also told that after watching and listening to the interview, they would have about ten seconds to judge the applicant before the next question was asked. At the end of the interview, each subject was asked to record an overall performance rating.

Subjects in the situational interview condition were told that they were going to observe a situational interview. A brief description was given of the interview style. A score sheet with each interview question as well as five benchmark answers were given to each subject. The subjects were told to listen to and watch the applicant respond to each question and afterwards, to circle the number on the score sheet that most closely

matched the response given by the applicant. Subjects were also informed that there would be a 10 second delay between each question so that they could rate the applicant. It was emphasized to the subjects that they should listen to each question and response before turning to the score sheet to find and record their decision. As with the unstructured score sheet, a 5 point Likert scale was used to evaluate the overall interview performance.

The situational interview script was recorded from actual interview questions and responses developed for a large credit union. Because a situational interview has its first and fifth responses weighted as poor or excellent, the benchmark responses served respectively as the poor and excellent response type.

All scripts were filmed in an office type setting and were performed by a 27 year old female with extensive acting experience. Both video taped interview styles went through revisions by the experimenter's thesis chairman until the independent variables met approval.

Response Type manipulation

The first three responses given by the applicant served as the response type manipulation. In the situational interviews, subjects in the poor condition viewed an applicant who responded to the first three questions with answers that corresponded to the lowest benchmark answer. Subjects in the good response condition viewed an applicant who responded to the first three questions with answers that corresponded to the highest benchmark answer. The next eight responses made by the applicant in the situational interview corresponded to the middle benchmark answer.

The first three questions in the unstructured script were recorded from a study by Rasmussen (1984) which listed poor and good interview responses. The remaining seven questions were generated by the experimenter and the responses were evaluated by other graduate students from the industrial/organizational psychology department. The evaluation was performed by asking each graduate student to judge the question on a likert scale. When the evaluated questions averaged out to a 3 (average response) they were used in the interview.

Nonverbal Behavior Manipulation

For each interview condition, subjects observed an applicant exhibiting

either excellent nonverbal behavior or an applicant exhibiting poor nonverbal behavior. In the excellent nonverbal behavior condition, the applicant sat erect with her back to the chair and hands in her lap. Eye contact was directed at the camera which served as the interviewer. Facial expressions included an occasional smile or an attentive look.

In the poor nonverbal behavior condition, the applicant sat with a slumped posture. Arms were either crossed or hands were in her lap fidgeting. Eye contact was usually directed at the ceiling or floor. Facial expressions were usually placid but involved an occasional frown.

As stated above, first impression type effects were not found, a possible explanation being that nonverbal cues overshadowed them. To further test for effects on initial responses, future research could use an audio only condition so that the verbal responses are not overshadowed by nonverbal cues. Finally, the results of this study confirm that the unstructured interview allows nonverbal cues to interfere with an objective evaluation of the applicant, which in part explains its low validity of .14. The situational interview, with an average validity of .33, demonstrated that nonverbal cues do not interfere with evaluations. Knowing that nonverbal cues will not interfere with the situational interview, greater confidence can be placed in its assessments. The primary goal of a selection instrument is to determine a candidates job knowledge, skills, and abilities and should be able to do just that without allowing interviewer evaluations to be influenced by non-job relevant data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA was performed to test for the effects of the independent variables of first impression type (good, poor) nonverbal cues (good, poor), and interview style (situational, unstructured). The dependent variable was the average of the ratings to the responses to questions four through ten.

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, no main effect and no interactions occurred involving the first impression manipulation. Regardless of how the applicant responded the first three questions, either good or poor, ratings of answers to subsequent questions were not significantly affected.

An explanation as to why the first impression conditions proved insignificant could be that nonverbal cues carry so much weight that first impressions are merely overshadowed by the display of good or poor nonverbal cues.

Table 2**Means and Standard Deviations**

| | Interview Type | | | |
|----------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|
| | Situational | | Unstructured | |
| | First Impression | | First Impression | |
| | Good | Poor | Good | Poor |
| Nonverbal Cues | | | | |
| Good | 3.03 (.28) | 3.20 (.58) | 3.22 (.79) | 3.12 (.71) |
| Bad | 3.09 (.43) | 2.95 (.20) | 2.21 (.74) | 2.48 (.68) |

As also shown in Tables 2 and 3, a significant interaction occurred between interview type and nonverbal cues; nonverbal cues significantly affected the unstructured interview scores but not the situational interview scores. When poor nonverbal cues were displayed in the unstructured interview, the ratings of interview performance were lower than when good nonverbal cues were displayed. This suggests that the unstructured interview, in addition to asking non-job related questions, allows the interviewer to make subjective interpretations based on non job-related variables. It is this weakness which points out the advantage the situational interview has in forcing interviewer evaluations to reflect the degree of quality in applicant responses.

Table 2**ANOVA Source Table**

| Source | DF | SS | F | p< |
|---------------------------------|-----|-------|-------|------|
| Interview (I) | 1 | 3.46 | .90 | .002 |
| First Impression (F) | 1 | .22 | .64 | .425 |
| Nonverbal Cues (N) | 1 | 8.96 | 24.63 | .001 |
| Interview*First Impression | 1 | .03 | .10 | .753 |
| Interview*Nonverbal Cues | 1 | 5.52 | 15.79 | .001 |
| First Impression*Nonverbal Cues | 1 | .02 | .07 | .792 |
| I*F*N | 1 | 1.25 | 3.56 | .061 |
| Error | 162 | 56.62 | | |
| Total | 169 | 76.98 | | |

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Finally, the results of this study confirm that the unstructured interview allows nonverbal cues to interfere with an objective evaluation of the applicant, which in part explains its low validity of .14. The situational interview, with a validity of .33, demonstrated that nonverbal cues do not interfere with evaluations. Knowing that nonverbal cues will not interfere with the situational interview, greater confidence can be placed in its assessments. The primary goal of a selection instrument is to determine a candidate's job knowledge, skills, and abilities and should be able to do just that without allowing interviewer evaluations to be influenced by non-job relevant information.

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