



A tale of two formats: Direct comparison of matching situational and behavior description interview questions



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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this meta-analysis was to examine the psychometric properties of situational interview (SI) and behavior description interview (BDI) questions written to assess the same set of job attributes. Using a final dataset of 29 coefficients ($N = 8148$), we found an observed mean correlation of 0.40 (0.47 corrected) between construct-matched SI and BDI questions. In terms of moderators, even lower correspondence resulted when (1) both question types had lower internal consistency, (2) there were more questions per format, (3) probing was not allowed in either format or when allowed in one format but not in the other, and (4) the purpose of the interview was for research (vs. employment). Given that their correspondence can be quite low under some moderator combinations, an important implication is that SI and BDI questions should not automatically be assumed to be interchangeable, even when written deliberately to assess the same attributes, and that incremental validity is very possible. Further, results suggest that SIs have higher overall mean validity compared to BDIs for predicting job performance (0.23 vs. 0.18, respectively). Results also indicated a slightly stronger relationship with cognitive ability measures for BDIs than SIs (0.11 vs. 0.09, respectively).

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One of the most consistent findings in the employment interview literature is the importance of structure. Whereas unstructured interviews leave the content and the evaluation process largely up to the discretion of the interviewer, structured interviews involve a high degree of standardization across applicants in terms of both the questions asked and the scoring procedures used (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1998). The rationale for incorporating structure into the interview process is that it reduces procedural variability across applicants (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994), which results in higher reliability (Conway, Jako, & Goodman, 1995; Huffcutt, Culbertson, & Weyhrauch, 2013), better predictive validity (Huffcutt, Culbertson, & Weyhrauch, 2014a; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988), and lower subgroup differences (Huffcutt & Roth, 1998).

The two most common structured interview formats are the situational interview (SI) and the behavior description interview (BDI). SIs require applicants to indicate what actions they would take in a series of hypothetical job-related situations (Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980). These questions are based on the premise that the intentions applicants state in their answers are predictive of their future workplace behavior (see Locke & Latham, 1990). Conversely, BDIs require applicants to describe actual experiences from their past that demonstrate important job attributes (Janz, 1982) and are grounded in the notion that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior (see Janz, 1989).

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Many interview developers use SI and BDI questions interchangeably, often within a single interview. Unfortunately, the degree of correspondence of these two question types has yet to be determined. Even when written deliberately to assess the same job dimensions using the same base of critical incidents, it is unclear whether the assessed constructs are the same and whether the interview scores are predictive of job performance to the same extent. Indeed, there are at least seven reasons to suspect that they may not be.

First, there appears to be differential influence from moderators. For example, research has suggested that SIs are less valid for more complex jobs, while BDIs are not influenced by job complexity (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Klehe, 2004). Second, interviewees tend to utilize different impression management tactics, namely ingratiation with SIs and self-enhancement with BDIs (e.g., Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002). Third, per their original methodology, there is differential use of probing such that probing is inherent with BDIs but not with SIs. Fourth, the context is clearly specified in SIs questions, whereas choice of context is dictated by the interviewees in BDIs.¹

Fifth, there may be method effects unique to each format, such as a “storytelling” influence with BDIs (see Bangerter, Corvalan, & Cavin, 2014; Huffcutt, Culbertson, & Goebel, 2015). Sixth, from a neuroscience perspective, the mental processes behind SIs and BDIs appear to be different with SIs centered in the prefrontal region and BDIs driven by the hippocampus in the temporal arm of the brain (Huffcutt, 2016). Seventh, empirically speaking, a handful of primary studies reported a surprisingly low SI-BDI correlation, including 0.15 in sample of district managers (Huffcutt, Weekley, Wiesner, Degroot, & Jones, 2001) and 0.20 in a sample of German managers (Klehe, König, Richter, Kleinmann, & Melchers, 2008). Taken together, these seven reasons suggest that SIs and BDIs may not be entirely interchangeable, an important consideration for a number of reasons including predictive validity, incremental validity, and perhaps even adverse impact.

The first purpose of this investigation was to explore the overall correspondence between matching SI and BDI questions collapsing across moderators. Indeed, if their correspondence is high, then including both types of questions would be unnecessary and the choice of which type to use would largely become a matter of preference. Conversely, if their correspondence is not overly high, then it would seem prudent to view them as distinct methods. In this case, the ratings from these two types of questions should be kept separate and not combined (as is common practice in the literature).

The second purpose of the current study was to explore moderators that could potentially drive the correspondence between SIs and BDIs either higher or lower. For our examination, we selected moderators that should theoretically impact the correspondence between matching SI and BDI questions. As explained in more detail below, we examined four such factors in this investigation. To our knowledge, these four factors have yet to be explored empirically in any previous SI-BDI meta-analysis. Understanding the influence of moderators is crucial to the process of elucidating the nomological boundaries of these modern structured interviewing techniques.

Finally, the third purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between the degree of SI-BDI correspondence and criterion-related validity. Although research suggests that both SI and BDI formats have relatively high overall validity (Huffcutt et al., 2004; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994; Taylor & Small, 2002), there is limited understanding of factors that can influence (moderate) their validity. The correspondence between the two formats may be one such moderator. When the correspondence between SI and BDI questions are relatively high, a general interviewee performance factor could be operating, and that could influence validity either higher or lower. On the other hand, a lower correspondence suggests measurement of different constructs, and when SI and BDI ratings are combined, a richer and diverse assessment could result. In short, there appears to be insufficient justification to predict the direction of the outcome.

While not a direct focus of this investigation, our third purpose has the added benefit of providing an updated analysis of mean SI and BDI validity. Large-scale meta-analyses of interview validity rarely provide specific and separate analyses of SI and BDI validity (i.e., Huffcutt et al., 2004; McDaniel et al., 1994). The one meta-analysis that focused directly on SI and BDI validity had a relatively small number of studies (Taylor & Small, 2002), due mainly to a tendency for researchers to combine question types into overall interview scores (e.g., Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988; Morgeson, Reider, & Campion, 2005²).

Our reanalysis is advantageous and timely for two reasons. One is that more studies have become available since these meta-analyses (particularly Taylor & Small). Second, while all of these meta-analyses used a “between-study” design, we limited our dataset to studies with matching SI and BDI questions. Using a “within-study” design provides more direct control for study-to-study differences (e.g., study design, interview design, individual interviewee and interviewer differences) and should result in more accurate mean estimates.

Finally, although again not a direct focus on our investigation, we incorporated an analysis of the correlation between cognitive ability and SIs and BDIs respectively. Although one meta-analysis has already done this (Huffcutt, Roth, & McDaniel, 1996), more studies have become available since it was conducted. Further, this analysis was between-study, and once again, our study is within. Understanding the degree of covariation between SIs and BDIs and cognitive ability is crucial for the practice of selection given that both are top predictors of job performance and that there is the potential to maximize incremental validity if their relationship is not overly high.

¹ To illustrate, consider the classic Weekley and Gier (1987) SI question for a mall jewelry store position where a customer becomes irate because his watch is not back from the repair shop and is overdue. In contrast, a reasonable BDI version would be something like “Tell me about a time when you had to deal with an irate person over something that was out of your control,” which could elicit an incredibly wide range of contexts including work, social, political, athletic, hobby, and religious.

² In the case of Morgeson et al. (2005), we were able to obtain the separate SI and BDI data directly from the authors upon request.

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