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The influence of cognitive ability on interviewee performance in traditional versus relaxed behavior description interview formats

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ABSTRACT

Using an experimental condition that relaxed cognitive constraints in a behavior description interview (BDI), our results uncovered a pattern of low cognitive saturation in the traditional BDI format but significantly higher in the relaxed condition. Well over half of the time interviewees reported different experiences in the relaxed condition, and those experiences were rated higher by the interviewers and correlated more strongly with job performance. A potential implication is that inhibitive cognitive demands in traditionally administered BDIs result in a number of interviewees reporting relevant experiences that come to mind easily rather than ones that maximally portray their capabilities, thereby shifting BDIs more towards assessment of typical behavior. With reduced cognitive constraints, interviewees had greater opportunity to locate more maximally oriented experiences, with higher ability individuals benefitting the most.

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The behavior description interview (BDI) has emerged as a premier form of structured interviewing in organizations. Originated by Janz (1982), this format is distinct in that it is focused entirely on candidates' description of past experiences, ones that illustrate their job-relevant capabilities (i.e., KSAs). Research has found them to be a strong predictor of job performance (Taylor & Small, 2002). Further, they appear to provide consistent criterion-related validity across job complexity levels, something other structured interview formats do not necessarily do (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Klehe, 2004; see also Huffcutt, Weekley, Wiesner, & DeGroot, 2001).

The conceptual premise underlying BDIs is behavioral consistency, namely that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior (Janz, 1989). While descriptive and generally true, this premise does not explain the intricacies and mechanisms that underlie the BDI process and the array of factors that can influence its outcome. Obtaining such an understanding is important because

it helps define limitations and boundary conditions of the BDI as a selection technique and, in addition, provides a solid foundation for continued scientific advancement.

The primary purpose of this study is to add to understanding of the BDI process by exploring the potentially complex role of cognitive ability. Previous meta-analytic research has found a relatively small bivariate association between BDI ratings and cognitive ability. For instance, Huffcutt, Roth, and McDaniel (1996) found an observed mean correlation of only 0.12 (0.18 after full correction for artifacts). Yet, BDIs are very demanding cognitively, perhaps the most so of any known structured interview format. Consider that candidates must not only engage in a long-term memory search to locate relevant experiences, but also organize and articulate those experiences in the elaborate STAR reporting format that has become common (i.e., situation, tasks, actions, result). As such, a higher association would be expected. In contrast, answering a situational question (Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980) simply involves providing a speculative indication of what actions candidates think they might take when presented with a series of hypothetical scenarios.

Further complicating the BDI landscape is that the process of locating, organizing, and articulating past experiences occurs

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within the bounds and constraints of the typical interview context. Generally speaking, candidates are expected to begin their response shortly after each question is read, often within a matter of seconds. Such “immediacy of responding” as it could be called, does not seem sufficient for the cognitive processes described above to occur adequately. Further, some degree of stress is expected given the high-stakes nature of most employment interviews (e.g., Jahoda, 1980) and that candidates are being questioned by someone in a position of authority with whom they are usually unfamiliar. Research clearly shows that the ability to retrieve information from long-term memory tends to be impaired under such conditions (Tollenaar, Elzinga, Spinhoven, & Everaerd, 2008).

In short, it seems possible that, when administered in the typical interview manner, the cognitive load is too high for most (perhaps even all) candidates to search effectively their long-term memory for relevant experiences and then organize and articulate those experiences. That would help explain the small bivariate association. If candidates are not always able to present experiences that maximally portray their capabilities, a question of paramount importance then becomes what they present instead. An intriguing possibility is that they lock onto whatever reasonable experiences come to mind easily, ones that are highly accessible for reasons such as that they occurred recently or are highly memorable (e.g., first big assignment). Such a tendency, which seems very similar to the cognitive concept of an “availability” heuristic (see Kahneman, 2003) may swing BDIs towards assessment of typical behavior. Indeed, there is empirical evidence for such a position. In a study where both typical and maximal aspects of performance were assessed, Klehe and Latham (2006) found that BDI ratings correlated significantly higher with the typical aspects.

In this study, we conducted BDIs in the traditional face-to-face manner, but, in addition, created a parallel experimental condition where candidates had more time and a more relaxed environment in which to identify and articulate their experiences. Given the opportunity to apply cognitive resources to a greater degree, we expected that candidates would tend to present different experiences than the ones they reported in the traditional format. As such, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. A majority of the experiences candidates present in the more relaxed condition will be different from the ones they relate during the traditional behavior description interview.

Of course, different is not always better. To provide evidence that the experiences related in the relaxed condition were more maximally representative of their underlying skill sets, we collected ratings of job performance from the supervisors of the candidates. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Ratings of the experiences candidates present in the more relaxed condition will correlate higher with job performance than ratings of experiences presented in the traditional behavior description interview.

An important premise highlighted earlier pertains to the difference between typical and maximal behavior (Sackett, Zedeck, & Fogli, 1988). If the experiences related in the relaxed BDI condition were in fact more maximally representative of candidates' capabilities, they should have been rated higher overall than the experiences in the traditional format. Assessing this difference provides an important check of the efficacy of the relaxed condition, and, to some degree, provides at least some empirical evidence of the maximal premise. We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. The overall mean of the BDI ratings will be significantly higher in the relaxed format than in the traditional format.

Finally, by providing an environment where cognitive processes were less constrained by immediacy of responding, individual differences in cognitive ability should have had more opportunity to exert influence. In particular, higher ability candidates should have been able to perform a more extensive search of long-term memory, utilize greater working memory capacity (see Baddely, 1986) to evaluate potential experiences and pick ones that maximally portray their capabilities, and, finally, better organize and articulate those experiences. Further, these candidates may have had greater ability to discern the underlying intent (dimensions) of the BDI questions, a capability which has been linked to cognitive ability (e.g., Jansen et al., 2013; Melchers et al., 2009). We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Cognitive ability will correlate higher with ratings of past experiences in the relaxed BDI format than with ratings in the traditional format.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

We recruited 85 participants (31 male, 54 female) from two Midwestern universities in the United States, all of whom were students either currently or recently (within the past three months) employed. A high majority of their employment was outside the university environment (e.g., retail).

The first two authors conducted the BDIs. Participants were asked to dress professionally, and, further, to prepare as if it were an actual job interview. A monetary incentive was offered for the two who received the highest overall ratings at each institution. These two authors followed the conventional format (see Janz, 1982) of requiring candidates to relate complete experiences including the situation/tasks involved, the actions they took, and the outcome, and used limited probing to ensure that experiences were complete.

After the interview, participants completed an online mental ability measure and then were provided with the same BDI questions in an electronic format and asked to spend several days thinking of and reporting their best experiences. When completed, participants returned the electronic file to one of the two first authors.

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Behavior description interview

Over 200 critical incidents were collected from an array of general entry-level positions, which were then sorted based on similarity. Seven dimensions resulted: 1) *self-control/diplomacy* (remaining calm and in control when customers display irritation and anger), 2) *initiative/problem-solving* (taking the initiative to fulfill customer needs and/or resolve problems), 3) *concern for others/altruism* (having a sincere desire to help customers), 4) *honesty/integrity* (being honest and ethical in all matters, including merchandise and company policies), 5) *dependability* (fulfilling all job duties, including covering assigned shifts, in a timely manner), 6) *respect for authority* (accepting and following direction and even criticism from superiors), and 7) *persistence* (maintaining effort even when tired or experiencing frustration or setbacks).

Consistent with common organizational practice, we wrote one BDI question for each dimension and developed a corresponding behaviorally anchored rating scale. To illustrate, the question for *Self-control/diplomacy* was “Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a person who was very angry with you over something that was not your fault” and for *Persistence* it was “Tell me about a

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