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Rose colored webcam: Discrepancies in personality estimates and interview performance ratings



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ABSTRACT

Companies increasingly use computer-controlled interviews as a less expensive and more efficient way to screen job applicants. Despite these advantages, this interview format may prevent evaluators from accurately judging an applicant's personality traits, which, in turn, may influence hiring decisions. Two traits in particular, agreeableness and conscientiousness, have been found to predict performance in many occupational settings. In the current research, participants randomly were assigned to either a face-to-face (FTF) or computer-controlled (CC) mock job interview. Interviewees were rated by external observers as higher in conscientiousness and agreeableness when the interview was CC rather than FTF. In addition, observers rated interview performance more positively than did the interviewees themselves – particularly when the interview was CC. Finally, the discrepancy between self and observer judgments of the interviewees' personality (in terms of agreeableness and conscientiousness) mediated the relation between interview format and the discrepancy between self and observer ratings of interview performance. These findings suggest that CC interviews have the potential to yield overly positive evaluations of interviewees, thereby biasing personality judgments and estimations of ultimate job performance.

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1. Introduction

Human communication evolved over hundreds of thousands of years largely through face-to-face interaction. Recent advances in technology allow us to communicate with one another over vast distances and via a variety of media. Modern methods of communication have clear – and now essential – practical advantages. They also allow us to establish and maintain important social connections and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, communicating from a distance (e.g., by phone or webcam) often places restrictions on how effective we can be at relaying our intended message. It also can make it more difficult to interpret the reactions of our communication partners. These difficulties largely result from a relative deficit in verbal or nonverbal cues. Indeed, without the benefits of verbal and nonverbal cues that are inherent to face-to-face interaction, communicating via modern technology may even distort the ability to portray one's true personality. While the advantages of long-distance and computer-mediated forms of communication generally outweigh any disadvantages with the efficiency of the interaction, there may be situations in which concerns with distorted communication and person

perception are paramount. The job interview would seem to be one of those situations.

One emerging communication medium is the computer-controlled (CC) online interview. A CC interview is entirely conducted by a computer program, which presents questions to the applicant and records her or his responses for later review. A growing trend in job selection is the use of CC online interviews as an inexpensive and efficient tool for gaining and screening many applications. The use of CC interviews has the advantage of being fast and cheap; but, for selection interviews, their use may impact the discrepancy between the interviewer's perception of the candidate's personality and the candidate's self-reported personality, therefore, their potential for the position.

Funder's (1995) realistic accuracy model (RAM) provides a theoretical context in which to consider the potential ramifications of using CC interviews for personnel selection. The RAM model comprises four steps: relevance of cues, availability of cues, detectability of cues, and utilization of cues. The type of communication (i.e., evaluative, casual, etc.) dictates which personality traits are relevant to the evaluator, which cues are relevant for those traits, and how the evaluator uses the cue information (RAM steps 1 and 4). Importantly, personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness have been shown to predict performance in the workplace. For example, employees across diverse occupations (clerical workers, sales agents, and production line workers) who

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were high in both conscientious and agreeableness earned more favorable job performance reviews (Witt, Burke, Barrick, & Mount, 2002). When judgments about these personality traits have to be made, it has been shown that non-verbal cues play a large role in their evaluation (Borkenau & Liebler, 1992). Because of this, it is important to understand if interviews conducted by new mediums of communication can affect how these traits are judged.

The main focus of this study is how the communication medium affects the second and third step of the RAM model; that is, which cues are available and how easily they can be detected. The lack of a present interviewer means that participants have no cues to help regulate their communication. Observers watching the video also are affected. They do not see the interviewee act as if another person was present, losing some non-verbal cues that only emerge in communication with another person. Thus, for both the interviewee and the observer, a CC interview format constrains both the availability of cues and the ease with which they can be detected (see also Chapman & Rowe, 2001, 2002; Fullwood, 2007; Wilson & Lu, 2008). In short, the loss of non-verbal cues has been shown to affect the observer's personality judgments in an interview context (e.g., Blackman, 2002).

As an example of this process, Blackman (2002) examined the effect of using a telephone to conduct employment interviews. The study was designed to investigate whether the mode of communication affected the discrepancy between the interviewer estimates of the interviewee's self-reported personality. Specifically, she examined whether the lack of nonverbal communication affected the interviewer's judgments of the interviewee's personality. During the experiment interviews were conducted either face-to-face (FTF) or over the telephone. After the interview, participants rated themselves on various personality traits and had the same traits rated by the interviewer. There was greater agreement between the participants' self-rated personality and the interviewer's estimates of the participants' personality in the FTF condition than in the telephone condition. With the removal of nonverbal cues, the interviewer was less accurate in estimating the participant's personality. Further evidence of the effects of diminished or removed nonverbal cues comes from research demonstrating that the greatest differences between self and observer ratings are found for personality traits that have been rated as having a strong nonverbal component, such as extroversion and warmth (Blackman, 2002; DeGroot & Gooty, 2009).

In the current study we interviewed participants in a face-to-face (FTF) or computer-controlled interview (CC). We recorded the discrepancy between the observer's estimates of the participants' job-related personality traits (agreeableness and conscientiousness) and the participant's own self-reported scores. We also measured the discrepancy between the participant's expectations of interview performance relative to the observer's actual ratings of performance. We predicted that the diminishment of non-verbal cues and their detection in the CC condition would lead to greater discrepancy between the observers' and interviewees' estimates of their job-related personality traits. We also predicted that the diminishment of non-verbal cues and their detection in the CC condition would lead interviewees to form lower estimates of the quality of their performance during the interview. Finally, we predicted that discrepancies in job-related personality ratings would mediate the relationship between interview condition and participant's expectations of interview performance.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Eighty-four undergraduate students were recruited; 41 participants were in the FTF condition and 43 were in the CC condition.

The mean age of the sample was 20.35 ($SD = 4.49$; min = 18; max = 46). Slightly over half of the participants were female (58.3%). Forty-five percent of the participants were White, 23% were African American, 23% were Asian, and 9% were of other ethnic origins. Participants were awarded course credit for their participation. Observers were unable to evaluate the interviews for four participants: three due to computer error and one who declined to be recorded.¹

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Self-reported personality

Participants first completed several computerized questionnaires, including the Big Five Inventory (BFI-44: Benet-Martinez & John, 1998).² Each item was rated on a 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*) scale. Example items from the inventory and the constructs they measure include: "I am a reliable worker" (conscientiousness) and "I am considerate and kind to everyone I meet" (agreeableness). The internal consistency estimates for each of the Big Five constructs were acceptable (openness $\alpha = .71$, conscientiousness $\alpha = .73$, extroversion $\alpha = .76$, agreeableness $\alpha = .74$, and neuroticism $\alpha = .67$).

2.2.2. Interviews

After the questionnaires were finished the experimenter explained to participants that they would engage in a mock job interview for an internship. Based on the day and time of their session, participants were assigned to one of two interview formats. Participants in the FTF condition were told that they would be in a traditional in-person interview, while those in the CC condition were told that the interview would be administered via a computer program that would provide them with instructions and questions.

Throughout the experiment, participants were seated in a comfortable chair facing a table with two laptop computers. The primary computer was placed in the center of the table and provided the personality questionnaire for both conditions and presented the interview program for the CC interview. The secondary computer was placed to the left of participants and was directed towards their seated position. This computer recorded audio and video for both conditions. Computer programs that are used by businesses to conduct automated interviews typically allow the interviewees to view themselves during the interview. To keep this consistent across conditions, all participants were able to view themselves via webcam on the secondary computer during the interview.

In the FTF condition, the interviewers sat across the table from the participant. The interviewers (one male and one female research assistant) alternated asking scripted questions (e.g., "Tell us about your work experience" and "What is the career path you envision for yourself?"). The interviewers were instructed to act naturally during the interview, but not to engage in small talk with the participant or their fellow interviewer. If the participant spent less than 20 s answering a question the interviewer who asked the question used a scripted phrase to prompt the participant to continue (e.g., "Please elaborate on that question a bit more"). Likewise, if the participant's response lasted longer than 2 min, the interviewer who asked the question used a scripted phrase to interrupt the participant and move to the next question (e.g., "If you don't mind, we should move on to the next question").

In the CC condition, the experimenter readied the primary computer and opened the interview program. The interview program

¹ These data come from a larger investigation examining physiological reactions to different interview formats.

² As part of the larger investigation we included measures of self-evaluation (self-esteem and narcissism) and social desirability, in addition to the Big Five. All measures were counterbalanced for participants.

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