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“Culture”—The elephant in the room in structured behavioral selection interview

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the popularity of the structured behavioral selection (SBS) interview in the candidate selection process, little is known about its suitability in an intercultural context. Informed by attribution theory and analyzed through an inductive qualitative approach the study calls into question the suitability of the SBS interview as a means of recruiting candidates from another culture. The research presents the findings from a study of 11 job interviews for entry-level positions in an Australian financial institution. A total of 11 live interviews, 11 candidate debriefs and 12 interviewer debriefs were recorded and analyzed to identify the significant factors that impacted the outcomes in an intercultural SBS interview. The major findings highlight the imperceptible impact of culture on candidates' performance, and the obliviousness of interviewers to this phenomenon of “culture” and its effect on the interview outcome. The interview debriefs identified differences in perceptions where interviewers attributed much of the successes and failures of candidates to internal factors whereas candidates attributed them to external factors. The findings indicate that the SBS interviews may not be as robust as many researchers claim because they tend to focus on required behavioral traits and characteristics essential for the job and do not have the mechanisms to identify these in the culturally coded candidates from another culture, thereby missing out on suitable candidates. The outcomes suggest the need for a cultural expert on the SBS interview panel and a hands on mechanism to test the job fit suitability of candidates from another culture.

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1. Introduction

While the selection interview continues to be widely used by practitioners for interviewing a broad range of candidates from different cultural backgrounds (Lievens, Highhouse, & de Corte, 2005), researchers are rightly concerned that we still do not know much about the application of the structured behavioral selection (SBS) interview across cultures (Hough &

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Oswald, 2000; Macan, 2009). Yet, there is some evidence from previous research that differences in the perception and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal communication pose significant challenges to the interviewer and candidate by virtue of their being from different backgrounds (Lai & Wong, 2000). In fact, Hall and Hall's (1990) theory of cross-cultural communication explains that individuals from low and high context cultures tend to emphasize on different aspects of communication, which can result in mis-communication. In particular, these negative intercultural encounters frequently lead to wrongful perceptions by the interviewer and refusals when it comes to job offers (Otlowski, 2008). Thus, in the context of a SBS interview does culture play an important role in the success or failure of Chinese candidates who are securing a job offer?

The "interview" in general will always be significant for recruiting despite the speed of technology and communication and the spate of cybervetting because of the privacy concerns and employment laws restricting employers from accessing the public records available online (Ghoshray, 2013). Moreover it is important to establish effective adequate objective criteria when assessing applicants to show the interview outcomes were made relying on legal criteria which makes the interview process a necessity as there is always a risk where a rejected applicant may claim he or she was illegally discriminated against (Ababneh, Hackett, & Schat, 2014). The interview process though, in general, is not the most efficient method of recruiting due to the asymmetries of power that emerge in interview situations and it is most certainly a poorly understood communicative phenomena. It is a potential site of inequity despite its presumably uniform application and performance in SBS and research to test for national and ethnic inequities have been conducted in a variety of countries (Ariijn, Feld, & Nayer, 1998; Bertrand and Sendhil, 2004; Carlsson & Rooth, 2007; Fix & Struyk, 1993; Riach & Rich, 1991). In Britain the first study of inequity was carried out by matching a White applicant with a non-White applicant whereby the applicant name denoted the applicant's culture (Riach & Rich, 2002). Research on racial or ethnic discrimination during the interview has been supported by studies carried out in Australia and Canada (Riach & Rich, 2002).

Since the first intercultural interview study in 1955, three cohorts of literature have emerged. First, there are the macro-analytic studies that focus on identifying factors influencing interview outcomes and/or ways and means to strengthen the psychometric properties of the interview as a selection device (Buckley, Jackson, Bolino, Veres, & Field, 2007). The lack of consistency in the findings of these empirical studies for the influence of culture on the interview outcomes point to the subtle nature of the influence of culture in the SBS interview (Macan, 2009; Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002) and this leads to more research on exploring underlying factors and processes. As a result, two other cohorts of research have clearly emerged, namely, the more micro-analytic studies on interview communication (Becton, Feild, Files, & Jones-Farmer, 2008; Lai & Wong, 2000), and those on interview discrimination (Purkiss, Perrewe, Gillespie, Mayes, & Ferris, 2006). Unfortunately, as seen from a review of studies between 2002 and 2009 (Macan, 2009), more recent work continues to focus on the quantitative validation of SBS, and so there continues to be a lack of in-depth qualitative inquiries in intercultural SBS interviews, where the interviewer and candidate are from different cultures.

Informed by attribution theory this study seeks to explain the dynamic intercultural SBS process (Heider, 1958; Knouse, 1989). By using an inductive qualitative approach, we seek to answer the 'what' and 'how' of non-Chinese interviewer's and Chinese candidate's abilities to communicate effectively in an intercultural SBS interview context for entry-level positions in an Australian financial institution. The primary motivating factor for choosing these two groups of people is that there is heightened awareness that the Chinese are gradually making up the largest wave of new immigrants to Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010–2011; Smith, 2011), which provides a pool of potential employees to draw from and an opportunity for financial institutions to better serve this group of new Australians. Also, most of the Chinese immigrants are from mainland China and Hong Kong (Ho, 2008). About half of them decide to settle down in Sydney, which makes the study practically relevant to the Australian employment marketplace. A secondary reason for this study is that despite the availability of skilled immigrants, Australia still claims to be facing skills shortages (McGrath-Champ, Rosewarne, & Rittau, 2011). This contradiction hints at the possibility of an under-utilization of the skilled immigrants in the Australian workforce. The financial services industry offers a unique setting as it is one of the largest industries in Australia and employs a large number of workers, particularly for its retail networks. Therefore, this study contributes to the extant literature by shedding some light on the dynamics between non-Chinese interviewers and Chinese candidates in an Australian financial organization setting. The overarching objective is to identify the factors impacting the SBS interview process and explore the suitability of the SBS interview as an appropriate interviewing and recruiting method for candidates from another culture.

2. Theoretical framework

A major purpose of the SBS interview is to evaluate the suitability of a candidate's behavioral characteristics for the job being applied to (person–job fit) and the compatibility between a candidate and the organization (person–organization fit) (Kristof-Brown, 2000). In most cases, the interviewer determines the extent of fits, but other studies have shown that it is also possible for job applicants to assess how well they fit (Lyons & Marler, 2011). Whether fit is perceived to be present or lacking, the reasons given by the interviewers and the candidates can be attributed to something about the candidates (i.e., the reasons for fit or lack of fit are internally attributed or something that is externally attributed to the candidates). Hence, there are important pragmatic and theoretical reasons for identifying the factors that the interviewers and candidates are attributing to their positive and/or negative perceptions of any single SBS interview event. In the case of identifying the internally attributed factors, positive perceptions will highlight the strengths of the candidates and negative perceptions will highlight the weaknesses of the candidates. Identification of the externally attributed factors influencing perceptions

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