Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology, May 2006, Dallas Texas

Do structured interviews eliminate bias? A meta-analytic comparison of structured and unstructured interviews

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We conducted a meta-analysis of studies investigating the extent to which structured and unstructured interviews are affected by such sources of potential bias as applicant attractiveness, pregnancy, weight, sex, race, and use of non-verbal cues. To be included in the meta-analysis a study had to use an experimental design and directly compare interviews scores of structured and unstructured interviews. On the basis of 24 effect sizes, we found that both unstructured (d = .59) and structured interviews (d = .23) were affected by sources of bias. Though both interviews were affected, unstructured interviews were significantly more susceptible to bias than were structured interviews.

Though the high costs of employee turnover and incompetent employees have resulted in the development of sophisticated and technologically advanced selection techniques, the employment interview continues to be used by virtually all organizations in making selection decisions. The employment interview has been defined as "an interpersonal interaction of limited duration between one or more interviewers and a job-seeker for the purpose of identifying interviewee knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors that may predict success in subsequent employment. The operational indicators of this success include the criteria of job performance, training success, promotion, and tenure (Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988, p. 276). Although the job interview remains the preeminent selection tool for most organizations, research has not found a strong relationship between scores from interviews low in structure and measures of job performance (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994). In addition to its lack of predictive validity, meta-analysis results indicate that interviews low in structure (d = .32) are more prone to adverse impact than are interviews high in structure (d = .23; Huffcutt & Roth, 1998). Furthermore, research has indicated that selection decisions based on interviews low in structure yield lower scores for applicants that are disabled (Wennet, 1994), obese (Kutcher & Bragger, 2004), or pregnant (Bragger, Kutcher, Morgan, & Firth (2002). The purpose of our research is to conduct a meta-analysis of research investigating the susceptibility of unstructured and structured interviews to biases against applicants on the basis of reactions to non job-related cues such as pregnancy and obesity.

The Predictive Validity of the Job Interview

To assess the utility of the job interview in predicting job performance, Hunter and Hunter (1984) conducted a meta-analysis comparing the mean validity coefficients (correlations with supervisory ratings) from studies that investigated any of 11 different predictors (e.g. cognitive ability tests, assessment centers, biodata) used in selection for entry-level jobs. The mean validity calculated for interviews ranked 6th at 0.14 (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). This finding suggests that less than two percent of the variance in job performance is explained by performance on the job interview.

Predictive validity and structure. Subsequent research has established that adding structure to the interview process can improve the predictive validity, as well as other psychometric properties, of the selection interview as a predictor. The term "structure", when referring to an interview, can be broadly defined as "any enhancement of the interview that is intended to increase the psychometric properties by increasing standardization or otherwise assisting the interviewer in determining what questions to ask or how to evaluate responses" (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997, p. 656).

Campion et al. (1997) presented a review of the many ways that structure can be integrated into an interview, and how these components of structure impact the validity and reliability of the interview. Among the 15 components of structure are the following: base questions on a job analysis; ask all candidates the same questions in the same order; limit prompting, follow-up questioning, and elaboration; ask questions that are situational, behavior-based, or focused on job knowledge; ask a greater number of questions; control ancillary information such as application forms, resumes, test scores, etc.; rate each answer on scales tailored for each question; use behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS); take detailed notes on applicants' responses; use multiple interviewers; use the same interviewers for all candidates; do not allow interviewers to discuss the candidates answers; provide extensive training to the interviewers; use statistical procedures to determine the best candidate.

While it would be ideal to incorporate all 15 components of structure, it is more likely to find a few components used at a time. Accordingly, any interview's overall degree of structure falls somewhere on a continuum, where any or all of the suggestions above are applied to some degree. That is, whereby some organizations implement the highest degree of a given component of structure (e.g., interviewers ask the exact same questions in the exact same order to all applicants), other organizations use a milder form (e.g., interviewers are given more flexible questioning guidelines). Because there are so many methods used to structure an interview, and such variability in the intensity with which each method is applied, there are innumerable ways to add more structure to an interview; hence, each additional structuring element applied will add incrementally to the interview's validity (Campion et al., 1997).

The identification of structure as a way to improve the interview has led to numerous research studies, and some meta-analyses, documenting the structured interview as a more valid selection tool than originally thought, as well as a vast improvement over the unstructured interview. Wiesner and Cronshaw (1988) conducted a meta-analysis comparing structured vs. unstructured interviews. The structured interview corrected validity coefficient (ρ = .62) was twice that of the unstructured interview (ρ = .31). Wright, Lichtenfels and Pursell (1989) found a meta-analytic estimated effect size for structured interviews of r = .39, though the analysis did not compare this to unstructured interviews. A third meta-analysis by McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, and Maurer (1994) found the mean corrected validity (ρ)for the unstructured interview to be .33, the mean corrected validity (ρ) for the structured interview to be .44, and the mean corrected validity for the situational interview (a type of structured interview) to be even higher at .50. Recognizing that structure can be applied to different degrees, Huffcut and Arthur (1994) coded 114 interview validity coefficients into four categories of structure, ranging from (1) no formal structure to (4) structured questioning and scoring. The resulting meta-analytic validity coefficients ranged from ρ = 0.20 (no structure) to ρ = 0.57 (greatest structure). Similarly, Conway, Jako, and Goodman (1995) coded interviews along a structured continuum of high, moderate and low structure. The mean validities were r = 0.67, 0.56, and 0.34 respectively,

indicating that (a) the predictive validity of the structured interview was almost twice that of the unstructured interview and (b) that increasing degrees of structure incrementally add to its utility.

All of the above meta-analyses found improved psychometric properties of the structured interview, identifying it as a more valid tool for predicting job performance than the unstructured interview. A structured interview incorporates more standardization and decreases or eliminates subjectivity leading to a greater reliance on job-related criteria (Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988). Therefore, besides increasing predictive validity, the structured interview should also reduce the effect of bias in employment decisions.

Bias in the interview. Many research studies (e.g. Latham & Saari,1984; Latham, Saari, Pursell, Campion, 1980) have explored the relationship between structuring the job interview and resulting predictive validity. Relatively fewer studies have introduced specific systematic sources of bias into the job interview, and then systematically investigated the influence of bias on structured and unstructured interviewer ratings. Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale, and Spring (1994) considered the influence of weight and gender bias by having participants watch mock employment interviews of male and female normal-weight vs. overweight job applicants and rate whether they would hire the applicant. Through the use of costumes and scripts, the qualifications of the applicants remained constant across conditions. Ratings portrayed a significant effect of both weight and gender, where both overweight and female applicants were recommended for hire significantly less than their normal-weight and male counterparts, respectively. Additional research has also found an obvious selection bias against physically unattractive and overweight job applicants (Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Morrow, 1990; Kutcher & Bragger, 2004). Other biases that have been found to influence interviewer scores include disability (Bricout & Bentley, 2000; Miceli, Harvey, & Buckley, 2001; Ravaud, Madiot, & Bille, 1992), attire (Forsythe, Drake, & Cox, 1985), age (Perry, Kulik, & Bourhis, 1997), and non-verbal expression (Burnett & Motowidlo, 1998; DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999).

If predictive validity is the relationship between a job applicant's score on a pre-employment selection test (i.e., the interview) and an ultimate measurement of job performance, then bias refers to all sources (systematic and random) that influence the selection test scores (and decisions) but are not related to how the applicant would perform on the job. Though it is important to assess the predictive validity of the structured and unstructured interview, a problem with doing so is that criterion measures of job performance (i.e. sales, goals met, performance appraisal ratings) are also associated with bias. The sources of bias in job performance measurement may be the same as or similar to the sources of bias in the job interview measurement, causing inflated correlations between the two scores. This may be especially true when the same people are involved in both measurement events. This is particularly problematic when the sources of bias are the age, race, gender, ethnicity or disability of the job candidate. Can structure actually eliminate this bias? Several research studies indicate that structure seems at least to reduce it (e.g., Bragger, Kutcher, Morgan, & Firth, 2002; Brecher, Bragger, Kutcher, & Miller, 2004; Kutcher & Bragger, 2004).

Experimental studies that research bias in the job interview can control the credentials of the job candidate as determined by their interview responses; this establishes a candidate's "true score", which can then be compared to an interviewer's ratings. This "true score" would not be influenced by measurement bias in job performance. We therefore see an importance in determining the influence of specific sources of bias on interviewer ratings and the influence of structuring the job interview in reducing rating bias. The purpose of our research is to conduct a

meta-analysis of those studies that introduce and investigate bias against candidates in structured versus unstructured job interviews. Accordingly, we present the following predictions regarding the literature studying bias in interviews:

Hypothesis 1: Potential sources of bias will significantly affect unstructured interview scores.

Hypothesis 2: Potential sources of bias will not significantly affect structured interview scores.

Hypothesis 3: Potential sources of bias will have a greater affect on unstructured interview scores than on structured interview scores.

Method

Finding Studies

The first step in the meta-analysis was to locate studies directly comparing the effect of a source of irrelevant information (e.g., attractiveness, pregnancy, obesity) on structured and unstructured interview scores. The search for such studies was concentrated on journal articles, theses, and dissertations published between 1970 and 2005. To find relevant studies, the following sources were used:

- *Dissertation Abstracts Online* was used to search for relevant dissertations.
- *WorldCat* was used to search for relevant master's theses, dissertations, and books. *WorldCat* is a listing of books contained in many libraries throughout the world and was the single best source for finding relevant master's theses. There were a few theses that could not be obtained because their home library would not loan them and they were not available for purchase.
- *PsycInfo*, *InfoTrac OneFile*, *ArticleFirst*, *ERIC*, *Periodicals Contents Index*, *Factiva,* and *Lexis-Nexis* were used to search for relevant journal articles and other periodicals.
- Hand searches were made of the *Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, Applied H.R.M. Research,* and the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment.*
- Reference lists from journal articles, theses, and dissertations were used to identify other relevant material.

Keywords used to search electronic databases included combinations of interview terms (e.g., structured, situational, behavioral, interview, unstructured) with potential sources of bias (e.g., sex, race, attractiveness, obesity, pregnancy, first impressions, contrast effects).

The search for documents stopped when computer searches failed to yield new sources and no new sources from reference lists appeared. To be included in our meta-analysis, a study had to directly compare structured and unstructured interviews article and had to include a *d* score, another statistic that could be converted to a *d* score (e.g., *r*, *t*, *F,* χ^2), or tabular data or raw data that could be analyzed to yield a *d* score. Studies that investigated a source of bias on only one type of interview were not included. The literature search yielded nine relevant studies: 5 journal articles, 2 master's theses, and 2 conference presentations. From these nine studies, 24 independent effect sizes (12 structured, 12 unstructured) were used in the meta-analysis.

Converting Research Findings to d Scores

Once the studies were located, statistical results that needed to be converted into *d* scores were done so using the formulas provided in Arthur, Bennett, and Huffcutt (2001). In some cases, raw data or frequency data listed in tables were entered into an Excel program to directly compute a *d* score. If a study provided more than two levels of structure, we categorized the highest level as being structured, the lowest level as being unstructured, and ignored the levels in between.

Cumulating d Scores

After the individual *d* scores were computed, the effect size for each study was weighted by the size of the sample and the coefficients combined using the method suggested by Hunter and Schmidt (1990) and Arthur, Bennett, and Huffcutt (2001). In addition to the mean effect size, the observed variance, amount of variance expected due to sampling error, and 95% confidence interval were calculated. All meta-analysis calculations were performed using *Meta-Analyzer 5.2*, an Excel-based meta-analysis program.

Searching for Moderators and Generalizing Results

Being able to generalize meta-analysis findings across all similar organizations and settings (validity generalization) is an important goal of any meta-analysis. In this meta-analysis when variance due to sampling error accounted for less than 75% of observed variance, the next step was to remove outliers. Outliers were defined as effect sizes that were at least three standard deviations from the mean. Outliers are removed from meta-analyses because the assumption is that a study obtaining results that are very different from those found in other studies did so due to such factors as calculation errors, coding errors, or the use of a unique sample. After removing outliers, if the variance accounted for was still less than 75%, a search for such potential moderators was conducted. Potential moderators explored included in this meta-analysis were the type of potential bias (priming, nonverbal cues, disability, pregnancy, race, disability, weight, sex), interview medium (face-to-face, video), provision of other information about the applicant (no, yes), interview scoring method (sum of question ratings, overall rating), and question type (situational only, situational and behavioral, general conversation).

Results

Meta-analyses were conducted separately for the structured and unstructured interview effect sizes. We hypothesized that unstructured interviews would be significantly affected by potential sources of bias. As shown in Table 1, the mean effect size for unstructured interviews is not significant as the confidence interval included zero. Because less than 75% of the observed variance in unstructured interviews could be expected by sampling error, we looked for outliers. The *d* of 2.24 from Study 2 of Kutcher and Bragger (2004) was removed as it was more than three standard deviations from the mean effect size. As shown in Table 1, after removing this study, the mean effect size for unstructured interview was significantly different from zero and 100% of the observed variability in effect sizes would have been expected by sampling error.

Thus, hypothesis one was supported and these results can be generalized as there is no need to search for moderators.

Our second hypothesis was that structured interviews would not be significantly affected by potential sources of bias. As shown in Table 1, this hypothesis was not supported as the mean effect size for structured interviews was significantly different from zero.

Our third hypothesis that structured interviews would be *less susceptible* to sources of bias than unstructured interviews was supported. We tested this hypothesis by comparing the effect size for structured interviews (d = .23) with the effect size for unstructured interviews (d = .59). Because the 95% confidence intervals surrounding the two effect sizes do not overlap, we can conclude that they are significantly different from one another.

Table 1: Meta-analysis results

Interview type	K	N	d	95% Confidence Interval		SE%	Q_w
				Lower	Upper		
Overall	24	1,359	.47	- .19	1.13	40%	60.4*
Structured	12	663	.23	.23	.23	100%	3.2
Unstructured	12	696	.70	- .08	1.50	32%	37.6*
Outlier removed	11	648	.59	.59	.59	100%	10.7

K=number of studies, N=sample size, d = mean effect size, SE% = percentage of variance explained by sampling error

* Effect sizes are not homogeneous

Discussion

Since the introduction of structured interviewing in the personnel selection literature, several studies have attempted to show its superiority over traditional interviews. Meta-analytic reviews have demonstrated how more structure in the collection and evaluation of interview information effects greater validity coefficients. One of the primary mechanisms through which this greater validity operates is the reduction of contamination by irrelevant biases. The current meta-analysis contributes to the literature by specifically comparing the effect sizes of interviewer biases during structured and unstructured interviews.

The evidence from the current investigation clearly shows that bias affects interviews. In both structured and unstructured interviews, the estimated effect size of biases is considerable (d = .23, .59 respectively). While the support of Hypothesis 1 (that bias is indeed significantly associated with unstructured interviews) was expected, the lack of support of Hypothesis 2 (that bias would not be associated with structured interview scores) was not. This indicates that biases also affect the decision making when the collection and evaluation of information is guided by stricter standardization and guidance. Hypothesis 3 was also supported; while bias does appear to have a meaningful affect on structured interviews, it is even stronger in unstructured interviews.

Although counter to our hypotheses, it is understandable that biases may impact a highly structured situation. One of the more common structuring elements in an interview setting is the nature of the decision making. Whereas in an unstructured interview, a single holistic hiring decision is formed, in a structured interview, several question-level or dimension-level decisions or evaluations are made. Although other structuring elements would ideally be encouraging more thoughtful and careful processing of relevant information only, it is possible that interviewer

biases are simply affecting more decisions. The finding of a small but significant bias/structured interview effect size should be considered along with the support for the final hypothesis – that there is a larger association between biases and unstructured interviews. New research may seek to investigate which of the many structuring elements are most efficacious at reducing the impact of interviewer bias.

Some limitations should be noted with the overall conclusions. In our method, we discarded any data representing intermediate or partially structured interviews. Many studies present the interview structure variable as dichotomous, where interviews are either completely unstructured or highly structured. The reality is that most interviews, when conducted in practice, are likely mildly structured. Furthermore, there has been a call for research in structured interviewing to represent more than two levels of structure (Lievens & DePaepe, 2004). Therefore, the studies that attempt to represent more than two levels of structure are probably the most informative in terms of generalizability to practice. In our study, we looked solely at unstructured and structured interviews to establish the main effect finding that bias has a greater impact on unstructured interviews. Other primary studies, and ultimately other meta-analyses, would benefit from the incorporation of intermediately structured interviews.

Although the findings did not point toward a need for tests of potential moderating variables, the different biases examined in the collection of studies were diverse. Biases were related to demographic features, behaviors, and appearance factors in the applicant (e.g., Bragger et al., 2002; Martin & Stockner, 2000), orientations of the interviewer (e.g., Gousie, 1993), and properties of the interview or format (e.g., Beech, 1996). One might expect that a significant moderation effect would have appeared, but no such heterogeneity in effect size distribution was evident. This lends both more confidence to the effect size estimates found, and motivation to test additional biases in structured interview settings. For example, although some studies have linked structured interviews to more legally defensible hiring practices with respect to racial discrimination (Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling & Campion, 1997), no laboratory studies have manipulated interview structure to examine racial biases across interviews. Other biases that have yet to be examined alongside interview structure include religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and deeper psychological biases such as similarity (between the interviewer and interviewee) and order effects.

Furthermore, there is the potential for the file-drawer problems or secondary sampling error. The researchers undertook the steps necessary to identify and locate presentations, theses, and dissertations. In fact, four of the nine studies included in the meta-analysis were not published in peer-reviewed journals. The fact that these source studies were not subjected to the strict peer-review process should not detract from the results. Rather, it should serve as evidence that common criticisms of meta-analyses were addressed and, with no evidence of heterogeneity in effect size distributions, that the effects of bias in these studies were not materially different from those in published studies.

A main purpose of meta-analysis is to collect relevant studies on a common topic, and accumulate data to represent the nature and strength of important relationships. From here, additional qualification and generalization can be suggested and pursued. In the current study, we have recognized that biases have a small but significant effect on structured interviews, and a larger effect on unstructured interviews. Perhaps the most clear next steps are to test for the influence of bias in intermediately structured interview contexts, to determine the specific structuring elements that may allow for these biases to emerge, any additional biases that are

generally recognized to affect interview situations, and most importantly – any interventions or behaviors that may inhibit the impact of interviewer biases.

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