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THE INTERACTIVE INFLUENCE OF AMBITION AND SOCIABILITY ON PERFORMANCE IN A BEHAVIOR DESCRIPTION INTERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

job applicant
interviews, behavior
description interview,
ambition, sociability

The purpose of this study was to present and empirically test the potential influence on ratings in a behavior description interview (BDI) of the personality traits ambition and sociability, two facets of extraversion. Results suggest a relatively strong role for ambition in the administration and outcomes of BDIs in organizational selection, particularly when its interaction with sociability is taken into consideration. In a sample of 85 participants working in entry-level positions, the correlation with BDI ratings was .22 for ambition alone, which increased to .44 when sociability and its interaction with ambition were added. Adding sociability by itself to ambition without the interaction term resulted in a minimal increase in predictability of BDI ratings. Implications of these results include the possibility of a general BDI performance factor, one that may tend to capture maximal (rather than typical) behavior.

Formally introduced by Janz (1982), behavior description interviews have become a mainstream approach to modern structured interviewing. In a behavior description interview (BDI), candidates are asked to relate significant experiences from their past that illustrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities important for that position. Research suggests that they are one of the best available predictors of job performance (Taylor & Small, 2002), tend to have minimal impact on racial groups (Huffcutt & Roth, 1998), and maintain their accuracy across the spectrum of job levels (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Klehe, 2004). Indeed, there are few predictors that can claim all of these advantages.

However, the issue of what these interviews actually measure remains unclear. There have been several summary-level (meta-analytic) efforts to identify cognitive (e.g., Roth & Huffcutt, 2013) and personality (e.g., Roth, Van Iddekinge, Huffcutt, Eidson, & Schmit, 2005) correlates of all interviews and/or structured interviews in general, but there is surprisingly little research specific to behavior description interviews. In a rare exception, Huffcutt, Roth, and McDaniel (1996) found a fully corrected (for range restriction and measurement error in both measures) correlation of only .18 with cognitive ability. The implication of this research is that the BDI process is not strongly influenced by (or saturated with) cognitive ability.

Further complicating the BDI construct landscape, the handful of studies that have looked at internal properties of

the ratings themselves tend to find high homogeneity including a single underlying factor (e.g., DeGroot, 1998; Little, Schoenfelt, & Brown, 2000; Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995). Based on these findings, it has been suggested that there may be some type of general factor that drives performance in these interviews (e.g., Huffcutt, Weekley, Wiesner, DeGroot, & Jones, 2001).

The purpose of this investigation is to present (and empirically test) a potential source of influence on ratings in a behavior description interview. We note this source is rooted in personality, specifically the interaction between the two extraversion facets of ambition and sociability. We begin by presenting the very limited empirical evidence available for the influence of extraversion, after which we develop a theoretical case where we argue that extraversion would be more meaningful as a correlate of BDI ratings if its two main facets (ambition and sociability) were considered separately.

Empirical Evidence for the Influence of Extraversion

We could not find any summary-level analysis of personality specifically in relation to BDIs. Turning to primary research, we could only find one primary association that

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was readily available. In a study of retail district managers, Huffcutt et al. (2001) found a correlation of .30 between BDI total scores and the extraversion portion of a custom-developed Big-Five measure of personality. A potential explanation put forth by these authors is that typical extraverted attributes such as warmth, energy, talkativeness, and positivity (see Costa & McCrae, 1992) affected the interviewers and/or their ratings.

As a potential influence on behavior description interviews, we believe that extraversion is best considered via its two main facets: ambition and sociability (Hogan & Hogan, 1992). The BDI is unique among interview types given its *exclusive* focus on description of past experiences, responses that should be more extensive and verbally involved given that they typically include a description of the context and the problem, the actions taken, and the outcome of those actions. Some have even described the BDI process as akin to storytelling (Bangertner, Corvalan, & Cavin, 2014). Being talkative and gregarious (the sociability aspect) by itself should not necessarily translate into more effective reporting of experiences and, in fact, could be counterproductive. To illustrate, the interviewer may have to interrupt frequently to keep things on track, possibly because these candidates are presenting too much information and/or have wandered off on a tangent.

In contrast, consider candidates who are highly ambitious. Ambition is characterized by taking initiative, being competitive, and seeking out opportunities (Hogan & Hogan, 1992; Wicker, Lambert, Richardson, & Kahler, 1984). These individuals should be much more focused on maximizing the interview dynamic and outcome, including strategic choice among past experiences, presenting experiences to sound maximally favorable, and maintaining greater awareness of the reactions of the interviewer. Further, these individuals may have a tendency to come into the interview with a more extensive and rich bank of successful experiences from which to draw. There is a caveat addressed next, but for now we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Higher ambition will be associated with higher ratings in a behavior description interview.

Although ambition can be a powerful force, a potential caveat is that highly ambitious individuals do not always come across well. In particular, these individuals can appear somewhat cold and calculating, which could negatively impact the interviewer and/or decrease the probability of them having obtained a rich array of high-caliber experiences. For instance, Dancer and Woods (2006) found that the warmth scale on the 16 PF (Personality Factor) measure correlated only .139 with the dominance scale (which, while not reflecting ambition exactly, nonetheless has very similar tendencies). In short, it appears that being aggressive and assertive is not automatically done so with social grace.

Consequently, it is quite possible that ambitious individuals tend to be more successful *when* their ambition is coupled with some type of capability to interact more effectively with other people. For instance, consider an individual who, while being driven by the need for status, recognition, achievement, and power, is also high on sociability. This person has an underlying desire to be around and interact socially with others, which can inspire and lead them to new heights. Within the organizational leadership realm, this type might be considered a transformational leader, one who is capable of inspiring others in part through their concern for them (i.e., individualized consideration; Bass, 1985). We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Ambition will interact with sociability in terms of predicting ratings in a behavior description interview, with high ambition / high sociability types receiving the highest ratings.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

A total of 85 participants (31 male, 54 female) were recruited from two midwestern universities in the central United States. All participants were students who were either currently employed or had been employed within the past 3 months, most outside the university environment. Participants received extra credit or course credit for their involvement in the study. Many worked in retail for example.

BDIs were conducted by the first two authors at their respective institutions, both of whom have extensive training and experience in the development and administration of highly structured employment interviews, including a demonstrated history of research publication in this area. In order to increase realism, participants were asked to dress professionally and to prepare as if it were an actual job interview. Furthermore, in order to increase motivation, a monetary incentive was offered for the top two interviewees (in terms of ratings) at each institution. After the interview, participants completed a personality measure, which is described below and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. In order to prevent any mean differences from affecting the results, total BDI scores were standardized within institution.

Measures

Behavior description interview. The BDI was developed from analysis of over 200 critical incidents for a general array of entry-level positions (a majority of which were retail oriented). Incidents were sorted together based on similarity, with the result being seven overall groupings representing (a) *self-control/diplomacy*: remaining calm

and in control when customers display irritation and anger); (b) *initiative/problem solving*: taking the initiative to fulfill customer needs and/or resolve problems; (c) *concern for others/altruism*: having a sincere desire to help customers; (d) *honesty/integrity*: being honest and ethical in all matters, including merchandise and company policies; (e) *dependability*: fulfilling all job duties, including covering assigned shifts, in a timely manner; (f) *respect for authority*: accepting and following direction from superiors including criticism; and (g) *persistence*: maintaining effort even when tired or experiencing frustration or setbacks.

One BDI question was written for each dimension, which is common practice in organizational selection. 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,” whereas the question for *persistence* was “Tell me about a situation where you were unsuccessful at first but were able to become successful. In addition to describing the situation and the outcome, be sure to explain what you did to turn things around.”

A five-point behavioral rating scale was developed for each question, with behavioral descriptions provided for the 1, 3, and 5 scale points. For example, the behavioral scale for the persistence question was: 1 = *minor accomplishment or failed to take any real action*; 3 = *put forth reasonable effort, achieved a positive outcome*; 5 = *showed exceptional perseverance, found a way to achieve very significant results*. To further provide a common frame of reference, interviewers were provided with key elements for each question to help explain what to look for when making ratings. To illustrate, key elements for the perseverance question included the following: willingness to keep trying, looks for ways around obstacles, and does not get discouraged.

Ratings were summed to create overall scores on the interview, which had a possible range from 7 to 35. Consistent with the original methodology outlined by Janz (1982) for conducting these interviews, the interviewers were allowed limited probing when an experience related by a participant was unclear and/or incomplete. The alpha for the seven question ratings was .81.

Personality. We assessed personality using the online version of the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI; Hogan

& Hogan, 1992), a measure containing 206 items that are keyed true and false and has 13 scales, seven of which are primary. See Table 1 for primary scale descriptions. Originally developed for use in personnel selection (Hogan, 1986), the HPI emphasizes constructs relevant to performance at work and within one's career and occupation. The average alpha for the scale scores has been reported as being .80, with test-retest reliabilities ranging from .74 to .86 (Hogan & Hogan, 1992; Meyer, Foster, & Anderson, 2006). (We did not have access to participant responding for the individual items, and thus could not compute our own alphas.)

A prime driving force behind our use of the HPI rather than a more traditional five-factor measure was the division of extraversion into separate ambition and sociability facets (see Hogan, Davies, & Hogan, 2007). As is evident from the hypotheses, we believe this separation to be crucial to understanding influences on BDI performance. Granted, these two facets tend to have some natural covariation, but someone who is higher on dominance and lower on sociability could come across very differently in the workplace than someone with the reverse pattern. Yet, because of averaging effects, both could appear highly similar on a global measure of extraversion. To illustrate, Minbashian, Bright, and Bird (2009) found that sociability was unrelated to either getting along or getting ahead in the workplace. In contrast, dominance was positively related to getting ahead and related in an inverted-U pattern with getting along. Yet, when sociability and dominance were combined into a global rating of extraversion, no relationships were found.

We note that the ambition–sociability separation has a precedent in the personality literature. In the formative days of the establishment of the Big Five structure and measures, there appeared to be considerable debate on the constitution of extraversion. For instance, Goldberg (1982; who preferred the term “surgency”) focused on dominance and activity as its primary definers. Hogan (1983) called for extraversion to be split into sociability and assertiveness. Hough (1992) outlined a nine-factor model of personality where the closest link to extraversion appears to be the two separate factors affiliation (which she defined in terms of sociability) and potency (for which her definition included being forceful and persuasive).

TABLE 1.
The Seven Personality Dimensions in the Hogan Framework

Dimension	Typical behavioral patterns
Adjustment	Confident, high self-esteem, remains composed under pressure
Ambition	Takes initiative, competitive, seeks out leadership or other high-visibility positions
Sociability	Gregarious (talkative), high need for social interaction
Interpersonal sensitivity	Tactful, perceptive, able to maintain relationships
Prudence	Self-disciplined, responsible, thorough
Inquisitive	Imaginative, curious, creative
Learning approach	Achievement-oriented, values education

It is interesting to note that the NEO-PI, an extremely popular measure of the Big Five in general personality research (Costa & McCrae, 1995), retained a broader view with its six facets of warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking, and positive emotions. Analysis of facet factor loadings suggests that assertiveness has the lowest loading (.45), and warmth, gregariousness, and positive emotions have the highest (.72, .61, and .68 respectively). In short, there appears to be ample justification to separate extraversion into a dominance/ambitious/assertiveness factor and a general sociability/gregariousness factor.

RESULTS

A full correlation matrix is presented in Table 2. Both uncorrected values (lower diagonal) and values corrected for measurement error in both measures (upper diagonal) are shown. Although we were primarily interested in only two of the primary HPI traits (ambition and sociability), we present results for all seven for the sake of reporting completeness. These traits were corrected for unreliability using the internal consistency estimates noted earlier, which are shown in the diagonal of the matrix. No correction was made for range restriction because of the lack of necessary information.

As shown in Table 2, ambition was the only trait that by itself correlated significantly with BDI ratings ($r = .22$, $p < .05$; $r = .27$ corrected). Thus, there does appear to be support for Hypothesis 1, that ambition would be associated with higher behavior description interview ratings.

To test the second study hypothesis, we formed two multiple regression models. In Model 1, we added sociability as a main term to ambition, which allowed verification that sociability did not contribute incrementally to the prediction of BDI ratings by itself. In Model 2, we included the ambition by sociability interaction as well. (The bivariate correlation with the interaction term was .89 for ambition,

.65 for sociability, and .29 for BDI ratings. Bivariate correlations among these three variables are shown in Table 2.)

Results are presented in Table 3. The multiple correlation for Model 1 was .22, which is identical to the bivariate correlation for ambition alone (as shown in Table 2). Thus, adding sociability did not appear to increase predictability of BDI ratings. The multiple correlation for Model 2 was .44 ($R^2 = .20$), which did appear to be noticeably higher than the bivariate value for ambition alone (i.e., .22). Thus, there does appear to be support for Hypothesis 2, with a caveat described next and observed visually in Figure 1. In regards to the negative signs of the individual ambition and sociability terms in Model 2, it is important to note that main effects are somewhat uninterpretable because of the presence of their interaction term (Howell, 2013).

Results of the interaction between ambition and sociability are portrayed graphically in Figure 1 (using a median split for both traits). The most relevant aspect is the solid line, which shows that high ambition is associated with substantially higher BDI ratings when coupled with high sociability rather than low sociability. In fact, the combination of high ambition and low sociability appears to result in the lowest possible BDI ratings, even lower than the ratings for individuals with low ambition (coupled with either level of sociability). Such a finding lends support to the notion that highly ambitious individuals without some form of people skills don't necessarily come across well in the workplace.

The caveat alluded to earlier pertains to low ambition (the dashed line) coupled with low sociability, the combination of which was associated with much stronger BDI ratings than one would expect. Intuitively, these individuals have little going on for them, at least in terms of being assertive and interacting effectively with others. A possible reason for their higher ratings is provided in the Discussion.

TABLE 2.
Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. BDI	23.2	4.9	.81	.01	.27	.05	-.04	-.04	.25	.19
2. Adjustment	37.6	26.7	.01	.80	.46	-.08	.51	.58	.20	.01
3. Ambition	42.8	26.3	.22*	.37***	.80	.43	.18	.16	.49	.40
4. Sociability	66.3	24.6	.04	-.06	.34**	.80	.33	-.54	.51	.06
5. Interpersonal sensitivity	55.1	31.0	-.03	.41***	.14	.26**	.80	.35	.21	.06
6. Prudence	42.7	28.7	-.03	.46***	.13	-.43***	.28**	.80	-.11	.09
7. Inquisitive	56.3	28.1	.20*	.16	.39***	.41***	.17	-.09	.80	.45
8. Learning approach	51.2	28.2	.15	.01	.32**	.05	.05	.07	.36***	.80

Note. The lower triangle presents uncorrected correlations, and the upper triangle shows correlations corrected for unreliability on both measures. The diagonal contains the reliability coefficients used for the correction. Significance level: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The correlation between behavior description interview and ambition was assessed as one-tailed; all other correlations were assessed as two-tailed.

TABLE 3.

Regression Models Predicting Behavior Description Interview Ratings

	Model 1	Model 2
Variable	β	β
Ambition	0.24	-0.73
Sociability	-0.04	-0.65
Ambition x sociability		1.46
Model <i>R</i>	0.22	0.44
Model <i>R</i> ²	0.05	0.20

Note. Uncorrected correlations were used to compute both models, and standardized regression coefficients are reported.

DISCUSSION

Our empirical results suggest a relatively strong role for ambition in the administration and outcomes of behavior description interviews in organizational selection, particularly when its interaction with sociability is taken into consideration. We strongly encourage future research to help clarify the specific nature and mechanisms by which it exerts influence. For instance, it would be helpful to know if ambitious, sociable individuals actually do come into the interview with a richer and more extensive array of successful experiences from which to draw. They very well could. Then again, it is also possible that their bank of experiences is not superior, but rather it is their unique combination of assertiveness and people skills that allows them to make their experiences sound more engaging and convincing. In this vein, it might be helpful to develop a conceptual model that identifies all of the potential paths by which these individuals tend to walk out with the highest ratings.

Results also suggest that sociability by itself contributes negligibly to the prediction of behavior description interview ratings. That it does is interesting because the strongest facets of extraversion in a number of current personality measures tend to be those associated with sociability. To illustrate, the developers of the NEO-PI, a flagship measure of the Big Five, acknowledged that the typical facets of extraversion (sociability, cheerfulness, activity level, assertiveness, and sensation seeking) tend to covary “however loosely” (McCrae & Costa, 1987, p. 87) and go on to note that “the enjoyment of others’ company seems to be the core” (p. 87) of the extraversion construct and their measure. Early admonitions to separate the assertiveness factor (e.g., Hogan, 1983) appear to have gone unheeded, as have more recent calls to include narrow traits in organizational research (e.g., Tett, Steele, & Beauregard, 2003). Perhaps it is time to make better use of this separation, at least in organizational research.

In regard to limitations, we openly acknowledge the modest nature of our sample, both in terms of size and composition. With a small sample size, the possibility of

FIGURE 1. The interaction between ambition and sociability in the prediction of overall Behavior Description Interview (BDI) ratings. The number of data points was 30 for low sociability with low ambition, 12 for low sociability with high ambition, 12 for high sociability with low ambition, and 30 for high sociability with high ambition (totaling 84). One data point was not utilized because of the median split.

a false positive effect cannot be ruled out. By focusing on entry-level positions, it is uncertain whether our results will generalize to other job sectors, particularly those of higher complexity (e.g., technical, managerial, healthcare). Further, even if the results do generalize, it is unclear whether all four combinations of ambition and sociability (e.g., low sociability, low ambition) would be present in those other job areas.

Nevertheless, the potential implications of our results are too important to dismiss outright because of these limitations. For one thing, the influence of ambition (combined with sociability) could be taken to represent some type of method or general factor effect, a phenomenon that has been observed with other predictors. For instance, there appears to be a substantial general factor behind dimensional construct variance in assessment center (AC) ratings (e.g., Bowler & Woehr, 2006), another method-based technique. In fact, Kuncel and Sackett (2014) estimated that when there are five AC exercises, 43% of rating variance reflects a general performance factor, compared to only 11% for dimension-specific assessment (see their Table 1), and that it would take eight exercises just to reach the point where dimensional construct variance exceeds 50% of total variance.

Of particular interest to the present investigation is the underlying theory behind the Kuncel and Sackett (2014) estimates. Specifically, the theory of composites (Ghiselli, Campbell, & Zedeck, 1981) suggests that as the number of multiple measures of the same constructs increases, correlated (dimensional) variance gets larger while, simultaneously, uncorrelated (e.g., exercise specific) variance decreases. Given the common practice of including only one or two BDI questions per dimension, it would not be surprising to find that a method (general performance) factor captures more variance than the specific dimensions the

questions were intended to assess. Similar to the estimate of eight assessment center exercises, it might very well take considerably more BDI questions per dimension than is common practice currently to reach the point where dimensional variance becomes the majority source.

Furthermore, it is possible that this BDI performance factor is heavily saturated with maximal rather than typical performance (see Sackett, Zedeck, & Fogli, 1988). Given the exclusive focus on past experiences (and that the questions are derived from *critical* incidents), it seems logical to assume that the flashy, high-profile experiences that ambitious, sociable individuals seek out and gravitate toward tend to get higher ratings than typical efforts. For instance, someone who calms down an extremely irate customer and salvages the sale would have a great incident to report, whereas another employee who competently handles customers on an ongoing basis and prevents such outbreaks from ever occurring might not. Other interview types may include some maximal assessment but probably not to the same degree. To illustrate, questions tapping attitudes, goals, and/or opinions could easily capture elements of day-to-day tendencies (e.g., it is important to keep up and not get behind), as could questions presenting hypothetical scenarios (e.g., situational interviews; Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980).

The maximal premise has a potentially important practical (applied) implication. Specifically, it is at odds with the goal in most selection situations to assess how candidates would perform on a day-to-day (typical) basis. To illustrate, the two customer-related scenarios described above could represent different skill sets, a premise suggested empirically by the low correlation between typical and maximal performance (Sackett et al., 1988). Organizations who desire maximal performance would be fine using a BDI, and there may in fact be a number of job types where maximal effort is indeed the most important (e.g., sales, emergency medical care, military, fire and rescue). Conversely, organizations desiring more typical performance might want to use a different type of interview.

A number of ideas for future research emerged from this investigation, some of which have already been highlighted (e.g., a BDI conceptual model, the optimal number of BDI questions per dimension). More work is needed to understand the extent to which desirable (but not necessarily proactive) attributes such as intelligence and experience affect the attainment of successful workplace experiences. The role that knowledge, skills, and abilities play should also be explored, particularly in relation to ambition and its interaction with sociability, which could help disentangle method from construct-relevant competencies. For instance, it might be helpful to measure KSA competencies directly, which would allow assessment of covariation with ambition and its sociability interaction.

In addition, other bidding agents to ambition could be

explored in addition to sociability, including adjustment and interpersonal sensitivity (see Table 1) and perhaps even social psychological constructs such as self-esteem and an internal locus of control. Parallel research is needed on the situational interview, as there could personality and other patterns that influence those ratings. Finally, the higher than expected BDI ratings for the combination of low ambition with low sociability could be investigated. It could just be a study artifact. Alternately, it is possible that interviewers tend to give unassuming, socially awkward individuals the benefit of the doubt, perhaps even to the point of showing increased empathy and encouragement (i.e., some type of pity effect).

In closing, it is our hope that this work opens the door for enhanced understanding of the dynamics and intricacies of this very unique approach to employment selection. Janz (1982) identified the theoretical basis of behavior description interviews as the time-tested adage that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Although true, such a premise does not really capture the underlying mechanisms and processes that shape experiences in the workplace and the presentation of those experiences during the interview. It is our hope that this investigation, with its theoretical and empirical contributions, provides a springboard for that research, which should include replication and extension in other workplace settings (e.g., higher-level jobs, technical positions) and with larger sample sizes.

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