

Interviewer Resistance to Structure

JAMES O'BRIEN
University of Western Ontario

Highhouse (2008) encourages informed discussion about the interactions between selection decision makers and aids designed to support them. This discourse may apply with particular force to interviewing because this is where the human decision maker is perhaps most intimately involved in the selection process. Ultimately, this project serves both the interests that the author specifically identifies—designing more effective selection interventions (p. 333)—and the interests of contributing to selection theory generally.

However, characterizing the inconsistent adoption of these aids by employers as “arguably the greatest failure of I–O psychology” (p. 333) seems like overstatement for effect. Further, although the problem of probabilistic reasoning is a likely source of resistance here, there are available strategies to remediate this. The “myth of expertise” (p. 337) may also be more of an open question than this analysis suggests. Finally, motivation may also help explain observed resistance to selection decision aids in concert with the implicit beliefs that are described in the focal article.

The position that industrial and organizational psychology has *failed* to convince organizations to use decision aids is chal-

lenged by the existence of meta-analytic evidence that shows successive increases in the predictive validity of the interview as the level of structure increases (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994). Such a study depends on the existence of variability in selection procedures in use. Chapman and Zweig's (2005) study, in seeking to establish the nature of interview structure, also showed meaningful differences in organizational practices related to the interview, including interviewer training. On balance, it might be more precise to assert that there is variance in the adoption of selection decision aids like the structured interview. By implication, we ought to be as interested in those who stubbornly resist our interventions as those who may have profited by implementing them.

The misapprehension of the “irreducible unpredictability” (p. 335) embedded in selection is another strand of Highhouse's argument that merits critical attention. Selection decision making construed in this way is an instance of the general case of what has been described as “The Achilles' heel of human cognition: probabilistic reasoning” (Stanovich, 2007). Students struggle with technical issues of sampling and statistical inference, physicians have difficulty interpreting the results of probabilistic medical tests, and managers in Muchinsky's anecdote reported by Highhouse (p. 340) are unimpressed with 25% of variance explained. In the judgment and decision-making literature, such threats to valid statistical reasoning have been explored, and in some cases controlled or corrected, under the broad rubric of debiasing judgment (Larrick, 2004). This literature

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James O'Brien. E-mail: jobrie3@uwo.ca

Address: University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2

James O'Brien, Aubrey Dan Program in Management and Organizational Studies, Faculty of Social Science, University of Western Ontario.

suggests remedies to improve the decisions of human judges based on social accountability or even familiar psychometric concepts like test–retest reliability. Expressing selection outcomes as natural frequencies (Gigerenzer & Hoffrage, 1995) rather than probabilities or correlations may in particular help to better “sell” these interventions.

Highhouse also characterizes expertise in the unaided prediction of human behavior as myth. In other words, intuition does not tend to improve with practice. Echoing Gehrlein, Dipboye, and Shahani (1993), an alternative explanation for the absence of an observed experience effect here is that performance of human judges does not tend to improve in the absence of meaningful feedback from the environment, which is a necessary condition for learning to occur. In organizations, selection interviewers may not be able to systematically collect or interpret data on the performance of those whom they assess. It is a virtual certainty that they are unable to estimate their Type II error rates. In the absence of such feedback, what may be learned over time is how to conduct selection procedures in less personally taxing—and ultimately less valid and reliable—ways. Thus, experience in the absence of feedback may actually have neutral or possibly even detrimental effects on decision quality, in the latter case consistent with findings reported in Gehrlein, et al. (1993).

Highhouse also invokes Pulakos, Schmitt, Whitney, and Smith (1996) in relation to his expertise myth. This study used the residualization approach in meta-analysis and found that observed variance in interviewer validities was explained to a great extent by sampling error. But using these results to rule out the existence of interviewer individual differences in validity has been critiqued on methodological grounds (Graves & Karren, 1999), including statistical power. More recently, Van Iddekinge, Sager, Burnfield, and Heffner (2006) reported more qualified results, where the existence of individual differences in validity was to some extent a function of the criterion interviewers sought to predict. The 10% of the variance predicted by interviewers that is described in the focal paper (p. 337) is

also an average that collapses variance that may exist in the set of interviewer validities. Ultimately, the existence, magnitude, and prevalence of individual differences in validity are empirical matters that have not been conclusively settled. We ought not to conclude whether this variance exists or is meaningful on the strength of a small collection of equivocal studies. As the epidemiological maxim goes, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (Altman & Bland, 1995).

Campion, Palmer, and Campion (1997) offer an insightful conjecture about interviewer resistance to structure that competes with the arguments advanced in the focal article. Constraining interviewers with structure, they argue, may amount to deskilling the selection task. Among those who may have been attracted to management in the first place for the sake of opportunities to exercise judgment, such obligatory practices are very likely to induce reactivity, with negative consequences for the selection procedure overall.

Overall, Highhouse likely overstates the problem, neglects available remedies for resistance as a function of poor probabilistic reasoning, and draws arguably premature conclusions in relation to the issue of interviewer expertise. Yet, many important and interesting issues are raised. Selection is a particular domain of managerial decision making, which is supported by a large body of potentially useful evidence. But selection decision making may have become routinized in organizations and thus resistant to evidence. The contribution of formal methods is perhaps not so apparent or welcome to those practiced in making unstructured decisions, including quite serious and consequential ones, often without aids and often successfully. Implicit beliefs of managers may account in part for the inconsistent adoption of selection decision aids, but there is likely more to this story than meets the eye.

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