

The Uniqueness Effect in Selection Interviews

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Abstract. Today's job market is competitive, leading applicants to try and "stand out from the crowd." The job interview is an ideal situation for doing so, for instance by preparing original or *unique* answers to traditional interview questions. This study tested empirically how an applicant providing a unique answer was evaluated relative to applicants providing qualitatively equivalent but nonunique answers. Applicants providing unique answers obtained higher evaluations and improved their chances to get a job offer. Our results suggest that interviewers may be influenced by the uniqueness of applicants' answers, irrespective of applicants' true abilities to perform on the job.

Keywords: personnel selection, job interview

Contrast effects are well known in personnel selection (Hakel, Ohnesorge, & Dunnette, 1970; Maurer & Lee, 2000; Wexley, Yukl, Kovacs, & Sanders, 1972). Here we explore a related phenomenon, the *uniqueness effect*. Independently of applicants' quality and order of evaluation in the selection process, uniqueness can offer applicants an advantage over their rivals in an increasingly standardized and competitive job market (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). We show how applicants providing unique answers to interview questions get better outcomes than those who do not.

Judgments of Applicant Quality and Contrast Effects

Recruiters' evaluations of applicants are typically based on applicants' academic achievements and job experience (Singer & Bruhns, 1991), but also on knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). Recruiters generally evaluate applicant's ability in terms of person-job fit and values in terms of person-organization fit (Adkins, Russel, & Werbel, 1994). But irrelevant factors like gender, attractiveness, or race (Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996; Sacco, Scheu, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2003; Tews, Stafford, & Zhu, 2009) can influence evaluations during interviews. Recruiters also prefer applicants who resemble them or their profile of the ideal applicant (Adkins et al., 1994). Evaluation of applicants is also influenced by the quality of preceding applicants (the so-called contrast effect). Average individuals are evaluated more favorably when met after unpleasant than pleasant ones

(Rowe, 1967). Resumes of average applicants are better evaluated when they follow those of poor rather than good applicants (Hakel et al., 1970). In selection interviews (Wexley et al., 1972), average applicants get significantly higher ratings when preceded by poor rather than good applicants.

Being Unique in Competitive Job Markets

With the development of mass higher education, more people enter the job market with university degrees (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). A degree is by itself often insufficient to match employers' expectancies. It is applicants' responsibility to demonstrate the KSAOs valued by prospective employers (Fugate et al., 2004). Applicants thus need to distinguish themselves from other job seekers (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), an aspect that may lead to a uniqueness effect. Uniqueness, or individuation (Maslach, 1974), is "a positive striving for differentness relative to other people" (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, p. 518). Unique individuals are treated differently from conventional ones and benefit from this uniqueness when it is positive. They are easily identified by other people to receive prestige, aid, or love (Maslach, 1974). People differ in their uniqueness motivation. People with a high need to be unique are more willing to create a particular social image and stand out from the crowd (Maslach, Stapp, & Santee, 1985). But uniqueness motivation may also be higher in situations where individuals see themselves as highly similar to others (Imhoff & Erb, 2009; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977).

The Uniqueness Effect in Personnel Selection

In selection situations, applicants are motivated to distinguish themselves from others because they know they will not only be judged on their absolute qualities, but also their relative qualities compared to others (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson, 2007). Few studies have explored the strategies applicants use to distinguish themselves, and we are aware of none examining how recruiters' decisions are influenced by uniqueness.

Adapting Snyder and Fromkin (1977), we define the uniqueness effect in personnel selection as *the effect of an applicant's distinctive characteristics or answers on recruiters' evaluations and decisions in the selection process*. Uniqueness is thus different from contrast effects because it is independent of applicants' answer quality and their sequential positioning relative to others.

During interviews, applicants try to display their knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics while providing original answers. To do this, they can prepare themselves for interviews, for instance, by reading advice books providing ready-to-use answers to interview questions (Palmer, Campion, & Green, 1999). Take the example of the traditional question *what is your main weakness?* Several books suggest answers that are not real weaknesses, like being "impatient" or "a perfectionist" (Gerstmann, 2002). Applicants may go to interviews with prepared answers (Martin & Pope, 2008) and, ironically, end up providing similar answers to each other. In such a situation, providing a different answer can be a valuable strategy to stand out from the crowd. Note that this uniqueness effect may hold independently of the quality of the answer. Thus a unique but not qualitatively better answer (e.g., *I am impatient* as compared to *I am a perfectionist*) can be salient for interviewers. Moreover, uniqueness may sometimes be related to qualities valued by organizations, like having independent opinions (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Therefore uniqueness can cause applicants to be more positively evaluated:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Applicants providing unique answers to interview questions will be better evaluated than applicants providing nonunique answers.

Interviewers assess applicants during or after interviews, either globally or using rating scales. But hiring decisions take place after all applicants have been interviewed. Interviewers base their decision on their evaluations, the notes they may have taken, and what they remember of each applicant. Each of these elements may favor uniqueness. Therefore, when one applicant has to be chosen for the job, those providing a unique answer may be preferred to nonunique applicants:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Applicants providing unique answers to interview questions will be offered a job more often than applicants providing nonunique answers.

The uniqueness effect could be moderated by job type. For instance, uniqueness is related to creativity (Gruber & Wallace, 1998). Thus, appearing unique may be more important for stereotypically creative jobs (e.g., marketing) than for stereotypically less creative jobs (e.g., accounting):

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The effect of unique answers to interview questions will be greater for a stereotypically creative job than for a stereotypically less creative job.

We report an experiment testing the effect of applicant uniqueness and job type on recruiters' evaluations and hiring decisions. We operationalized uniqueness as whether an answer is only given by one applicant in a set or by several.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 business and economics students of Swiss universities. Eighty-five percent were Master students, and 15 percent were senior Bachelor students. Fifty-six percent were men (mean age: 24.7 years).

Procedure

Participants played the role of a recruiter for a 15-min study on personnel selection. They read one of two types of job description, either for a stereotypically creative position (marketing) or a stereotypically less creative one (accounting). Both job descriptions were one page long and contained job responsibilities (e.g., developing communication or advertising strategies or managing costs and financial accounting, respectively). Participants then read purportedly transcribed answers to interview questions from four experienced male applicants who had been purportedly preselected based on their resume. All answers were built based on transcripts of mock interviews with actual job seekers. For each applicant, participants read answers to two questions. As an introduction, they read each applicant's answer to the question *tell me about yourself*. All four applicants provided answers of similar quality. They then read answers to the question *what is your main weakness?* Answers to this question featured our uniqueness manipulation. Three of the applicants gave nonunique answers to this question (e.g., different versions of an answer like *I am impatient*) while the fourth one gave a unique answer (e.g., a version of an answer like *I am a perfectionist*). We counterbalanced the type of the unique answer (i.e., *impatient* in half of the cases and *perfectionist* in the other half) and the position of the unique applicant to exclude confounds due to answer type and order effects. We thus built three possible *I am impatient* answers and three possible *I am a perfectionist* answers.

For instance, one of the *impatient* applicant answers was *Well ... my greatest weakness so I'll say that sometimes I have a tendency to be impatient. I'm someone who is active and dynamic and I like when things progress ... and when they don't then I lose patience pretty quickly [...]*.

Design

The design was a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial plan with uniqueness (unique vs. nonunique applicant) as a within-subjects variable, job type (stereotypically creative vs. noncreative) as a between-subjects variable, and answer type (impatient vs. perfectionist) as a within-subjects control variable.

Dependent Variables

After reading all transcripts, participants evaluated answer quality, job-related competence, and chances of getting hired of each applicant on 6-point Likert scales. These three items were averaged to create a global score ($\alpha = .88$) for each applicant. We then computed a nonunique-applicant evaluation score as the mean of the global scores of the three nonunique applicants. Finally, participants selected one applicant to hire.

Manipulation Check

To measure a uniqueness effect and not a contrast effect, all answer versions have to be of similar quality. We pretested the quality of the four answers to the introductory question and the three *impatient* and *perfectionist* answers to the manipulated question on 12 doctoral students. All answers to the introductory question were of similar quality, $F(3, 44) < 2.46$, *ns*. There were no differences among versions of the *impatient*, $F(2, 33) < 1.20$, *ns* and *perfectionist*, $F(2, 33) < 1.95$, *ns*, answers, nor were there differences between *impatient* ($M = 3.32$) and *perfectionist* ($M = 3.29$) answers, $F(2, 94) = 0.92$, *ns*.

To check that our manipulations of answer type were correctly perceived by study participants, we checked that *impatient* answers were perceived as more impatient than *perfectionist* ones, $M = 5.03$ versus $M = 2.86$, $F(1, 78) = 206.41$, $p < .001$. Similarly we checked that *perfectionist* answers were perceived as more conscientious than *impatient* ones, $M = 4.93$ versus $M = 3.83$, $F(1, 78) = 87.89$, $p < .001$. Correlations between evaluations of unique applicants and their position showed no order effect, $r = .10$, $N = 79$, *ns*. Evaluations of unique and nonunique applicants were unrelated to participants' age, gender, or education level, $r_s < .16$, $N = 79$, *ns*.

Results

Applicants providing unique answers get better evaluations and are chosen more often than applicants providing nonunique answers (Figure 1). These results were consistent across answer types and job types. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed-model ANOVA was used to test H1 and H3, with the evaluations of the unique and nonunique applicants as a within-subjects factor and answer type and job type as between-subjects factors. Results showed a main effect of uniqueness on evaluations, $F(1, 75) = 8.94$, $p < .01$, and a main effect of job type, $F(1, 75) = 10.0$, $p = .002$, but no main effect of answer type, $F(1, 75) = 1.38$, $p = .25$. Unique applicants ($M = 4.25$) were better evaluated than nonunique applicants ($M = 3.88$). Applicants for creative jobs got lower evaluations ($M = 3.81$) than for noncreative jobs ($M = 4.14$). These results support for H1. Furthermore, there was no interaction between uniqueness and answer type, $F(1, 75) = 1.09$, $p = .30$, no interaction between uniqueness and job type, $F(1, 75) = 0.04$, $p = .84$, and no three-way interaction, $F(1, 75) = 0.01$, $p = .96$. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

The unique applicant was chosen for the job by 48.1% of participants. A binomial test revealed that this was significantly higher than chance (25%), $z = 4.671$, $p < .001$, supporting H2. The unique applicant was chosen more often for noncreative jobs than for creative jobs (57.5% vs. 37.8%),

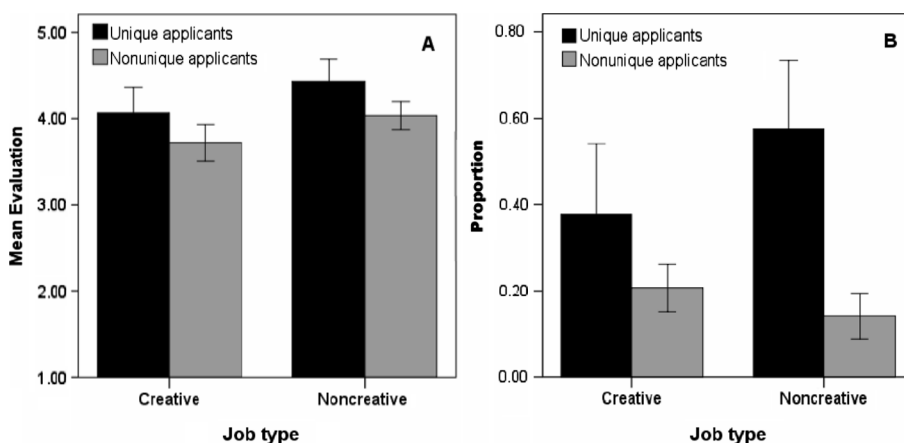


Figure 1. Evaluation (A) and hiring choice (B) for the unique applicant and the mean of nonunique applicants applying for creative and noncreative jobs.

but the difference was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 77) = 2.98$, $p = .084$, providing further evidence against H3.

Discussion

Applicants providing unique answers to interview questions get higher evaluations and get a job offer more often than applicants providing nonunique answers. This effect was independent of evaluators' age, gender, or education, the type of unique answer, and job type. Unexpectedly, applicants got better evaluations when applying for noncreative than creative jobs. This result may be due to the fact that evaluators may have had higher expectations for stereotypically creative jobs than for noncreative ones.

Because applicants need to distinguish themselves from each other (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), interviews may become situations where they try to appear unique by preparing original answers. Our results suggest that interviewers may be influenced by the uniqueness of these answers, even if they do not provide information about the applicant's true abilities.

Results were obtained with a student sample evaluating paper applicants. This design is sufficient to demonstrate the uniqueness effect, but limits the external validity of our results (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Moscoso, 2000). Students and experienced interviewers may differ in their way of evaluating applicants' answers (Barr & Hitt, 1986). For instance, student evaluators give more importance to academic qualifications but less to job experience than experienced evaluators (Singer & Bruhns, 1991). Experienced interviewers may thus weight answer uniqueness less than students and focus more on the detailed content of applicants' answers. Similarly, different results may be found in a real interview context. For instance, interviewers may look for other sources of information that were not available here (e.g., gender, age, attractiveness) to differentiate applicants with similar qualifications and minimize the effect of answer uniqueness. Therefore, further studies should test the robustness of the uniqueness effect in real job interviews with professional interviewers. We tested uniqueness based on answers to two traditional questions. Interview characteristics may moderate this effect. For instance, structured interviews, which involve asking the same questions to all participants in the same order (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997), may make unique applicants more salient and trigger uniqueness effects. Conversely, questions about past behavior (Motowidlo et al., 1992) require applicants to provide well-developed answers based on past experiences and thus affect the opportunity to prepare a unique answer. Future research could test the uniqueness effect in structured interviews and using behavioral questions, as well as whether uniqueness also affects outcomes in other selection situations like resume screening. Future research could also explore the mechanisms by which uniqueness affects selection decisions, for example, whether it facilitates encoding of information during the interview or recall after the interview.

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