The Integration of Self-Descriptions and Descriptions by Outside References in the Evaluation of Job Applicants

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The Integration of Self-Descriptions and Descriptions by Outside References in the Evaluation of Job Applicants

JEANETTE M. DOLEZAL and IRWIN P. LEVIN

A study was conducted to determine how different types of information are combined to arrive at evaluations of hypothetical job applicants. Sixty subjects were asked to evaluate nine applicants for the position of elementary school principal. The information describing each applicant included a letter of self-description and from one to three letters from outside references. Results can be summarized as follows: (1) evaluative ratings of job applicants were directly related to the value (level of favorability) of the information contained in the outside letters of reference and the value of the information contained in the self-description; (2) the greater the number of favorable outside letters, the higher was the evaluation; (3) the relative weight or importance of a given self-description or outside reference was dependent upon the other pieces of information with which it was combined. A mathematical model which assumes that subjects average the values of the various types of information provided a good description of the applicant evaluation process.

INDEX DESCRIPTIONS: Evaluation of Job Applicants; Self-Descriptions.

Predictions and Empirical Questions

In some cases, the effects of the variables of interest can be predicted directly on the basis of previous research and common-sense intuition. In other cases, predictions are not so straightforward. Pigeage and Tucker (1952) studied job evaluations and found that the more positive the information contained in letters of reference, the more favorable was the response. Brewer (1968) found that an increase in the number of favorable letters of reference produced a more positive response. The same effects were predicted for the present study. However, previous studies of job applicant evaluations have not included self-descriptions as a factor. This is a novel aspect of the present study and a number of outcomes are possible. Subjects evaluating hypothetical job applicants may give higher ratings to applicants with more favorable self-descriptions than to those with less favorable self-descriptions. On the other hand, subjects may tend to discredit persons who appear to be overly self-praising. The information contained in a self-description may be evaluated in terms of whether or not it is supported by the information contained in the other-descriptions, and the effect of this variable would then depend on how the two types of information are combined.

Method

Design

A 2 X 3 X 3 factorial design was employed, with variations in content of self-descriptions and other-descriptions, and number of other-descriptions (outside letters of refer-

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1 This paper was based on a master's thesis by the first author under the supervision of the second author. Portions of the paper were presented at the meeting of the Iowa Academy of Science, 1974, Fayette, Iowa. Requests for reprints should be sent to Irwin P. Levin, Department of Psychology, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.
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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean for each cell of the design is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. MEANS FOR EACH CELL OF THE DESIGN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Praise Self-Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H  12.600  16.033  17.067  15.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N  10.400  12.300  12.133  11.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Good Self-Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H  13.567  13.867  17.367  14.933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M  11.133  11.733  13.490  12.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N  6.300    6.333   7.767    6.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-Descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The effect of level of other-description was statistically significant, $F(2, 116) = 98.84$, $p < .01$, and confirmed predictions. It can be seen in Table 1 that as the favorability of the information in the other-descriptions increased, the subjects' ratings of the applicant also increased.

The effect of level of self-description was also statistically significant, $F(1, 58) = 10.46$, $p < .01$. From an examination of Table 1, it appears that subjects tended to take the self-descriptions at face value rather than discrediting them, since higher ratings tended to be assigned to applicants presenting high praise self-descriptions than to those presenting moderately good self-descriptions. An exception can be seen for H other-descriptions at set size 1. This will be discussed later.

The interaction of other-description and self-description was significant, $F(2, 116) = 14.54$, $p < .01$, and is illustrated in Figure 1. The converging curves show that as the degree of favorability of the other-descriptions increased, the difference between the ratings given to applicants who present different types of self-description decreased, and vice versa. This finding can be explained by assuming that subjects average the information contained in self-descriptions and other-descriptions, thus leading to a tradeoff relationship or balance between the two types of information. When one type of information is extreme in value, that type of information has an increased effect and the other type of information has a diminished effect. This is con-
sistent with Anderson's (1967) conclusion that neutral or moderate information has less weight than more extreme information when information of differing values is averaged.

Set size was found to have a statistically significant effect, $F(2, 116) = 34.50, p < .01$. As set size increased, the mean rating increased. However, the magnitude of this effect was found to vary depending on the type of other-description and the type of self-description being considered. These interactions are described below.

The interaction of set size and other-description was of borderline statistical significance at the .05 level, $F(4, 232) = 2.34$, and appears to be systematic in nature. The interaction is plotted in Figure 2. The diverging curves seen in Figure 2 illustrate the following two points: (1) differences in mean ratings for different levels of other-descriptions increased as set size increased; (2) the degree of increase in mean rating response as set size increased was greatest for high praise other-descriptions and least for neutral other-descriptions. Analogous results have been obtained in studies of personality impression formation and have been explained by assuming that a relatively neutral initial expectancy or response disposition is averaged with the values of the information presented the subjects (Anderson, 1967; Levin, Schmidt and Norman, 1971). The resulting average is thus increased as the number of favorable pieces of information presented is increased. This would account for the present finding.

The interaction of set size and self-description was statistically significant, $F(2, 116) = 7.34, p < .01$, and is illustrated in Figure 3. This figure shows that the difference between the high praise self-description group and the moderately good self-description group increased from set size 1 to set size 2 and decreased from set size 2 to set size 3. The decreased difference between groups as set size increased from 2 to 3 is consistent with the assumption that information presented in self-descriptions and information presented in other-descriptions is averaged. As the number of other-descriptions is increased, the relative effect of self-descriptions is diminished. A depressed mean rating at set size 1 for the high praise group (particularly for an H other-description) prevents this effect from occurring when set sizes 1 and 2 are compared. Subjects in the high praise group may have tended to discount the high praise self-description when only one other-description was given, resulting in a relatively low rating at that point.

The set size X other-description X self-description interaction did not approach statistical significance. The relevant graphs are shown in the top part of Figure 3.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present task both self-descriptions and references from outside sources were important in determining eval-
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and summed over other-descriptions (a, b and c) and the evaluative rating response; 

\[ R = \frac{w_O I_O + w_S I_S + n w_R I_R}{w_O + w_S + n w_R} \]

where \( R \) is the evaluative rating response; \( I_O, I_S, I_R \) are the favorability levels of the subject's initial expectancy, the information contained in the self-description, and the information contained in the other-descriptions, respectively; \( w_O, w_S, \) and \( w_R \) are the relative weights or levels of importance of these components of the rating response; and \( n \) is the set size. Note that the denominator is the sum of the weights and serves to "normalize" the model so that it has the form of an averaging model and implies that an increase in the influence (weight) of one factor (i.e., self-description or other-description) produces a concomitant decrease in the influence of the other factor. In this form, the model can account for the major findings of the present study. With additional constraints on the parameter values—e.g., by assuming that the weights \( w_S \) and \( w_R \) are directly related to the values of \( I_S \) and \( I_R \)—other details can be handled. The model can be used to provide a framework in which to study other variables affecting job applicant evaluations. For example, the credibility of the sources supplying letters of reference can be studied by examining changes in the weight parameter, \( w_I \), as a function of source credibility (Rosenbaum and Levin, 1968).

Studies of the present type are, of course, several steps removed from actual job selection procedures. For one thing, subjects in the present study were not actually evaluating real applicants. Rather, they were making paper-and-pencil responses in a laboratory setting. Secondly, the variables chosen for study represent only a portion of those that are operative in actual job selection. Evaluation of letters of reference is often a screening device to be followed by personal interviews, aptitude tests, etc. Nevertheless, the screening process is an important component of job applicant selections. Subjects in the present study responded systematically to the information presented by putting themselves in the role of an employer. The nature of the information was controlled to a far greater extent than would have been possible in a field setting. It remains for future research to determine the correspondence between laboratory-derived principles of information processing and those principles that apply to decision-making outside the laboratory.

Literature Cited


