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"Don't Stigmatize": The Ironic Effects of Equal Opportunity Guidelines in Interviews

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The purpose of the current study was to examine how staffing policies (identity-conscious or identity-blind) and interview structure might lead to stigmatizing behavior, particularly subtle behavior that is not illegal. In a 2 (staffing policy: identity-conscious or identity-blind) × 2 (interview structure: structured or unstructured) factorial design, 87 participants interviewed a Black interviewee for an ostensible study on employment interviews and were led to believe they would interview a second Black interviewee. The results showed that participants guided by the identity-blind policy and using an unstructured interview format chose the largest social distance from Black interviewees in the subsequent interview.

Although the employment interview is one of the most widely used and researched methods for selecting employees, the interview is not free from biases, and in fact, research shows that stigmatized individuals often face discrimination in the employment interview (Dipboye, 1992; Dipboye & Colella, 2005). Because the interview involves a social interaction between interviewers and applicants, both members' verbal and nonverbal behaviors and physical characteristics influence each other (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002). In the current research, we focus on one stigmatizing factor that often leads to bias in interview, namely, that of race and in particular, of Black–White interactions.

Past social psychological research on dyadic interactions has shown that (a) interracial interactions can be threatening for both Black and White individuals, (b) Blacks' expectations of bias from Whites can lead to negative experiences for Blacks, (c) and the discomfort and anxiety of interracial interactions often leads both Black and White individuals to avoid interactions with each other (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Richeson

& Shelton, 2003; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005; Shelton, 2003; Shelton & Richeson, 2005; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). In addition, structuring interracial interactions reduces the discomfort and anxiety of interracial interactions (Avery, Richeson, Hebl, & Ambady, 2009).

One area of research that deals with reducing the ill effects of stigmatization in the workplace is the framing of staffing policies. Staffing policies are approaches or policies that organizations follow when trying to reduce stigmatization and address diversity in recruiting and selecting prospective employees (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). The first, referred to as "identity-blind" policies, adopts an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy in which employment decisions are made without regard to attributes such as an individual's race, religion, or sex. The second, referred to as "identity-conscious" policies, adopts an Affirmative Action policy in which decisions are made with open consideration of minority information (Highhouse, Stierwalt, Bachiochi, Elder, & Fisher, 1999; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; see also Brief, Butz, & Deitch, 2005).

Although these different approaches have been a topic of controversial legal decisions (Segal, 2003), little is known about how such staffing policies might influence the interview process. Thus, the purpose of the current

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study was to examine the influence of staffing policies (identity-conscious or identity-blind) and interview structure on stigmatization within an interview context. We directly address this issue, providing the first known empirical examination of behavioral outcomes associated with different staffing policies. In addition, this research identifies a potential mechanism explaining why certain staffing policies result in particular manifestation of stigmatizing behavior. Specifically, we point out that some staffing policies either implicitly or explicitly require interviewers to engage in thought suppression. By examining responses to this suppression, we extend knowledge of how ironic process theory (Wegner, 1994) might operate in the setting of a job interview and lead to stigmatizing behavior that is more subtle, interpersonal expressions that is not prohibited by the law (e.g., Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002; Hebl, King, Glick, Singletary, & Kazama, 2007; Hebl, Madera, & King, 2007; King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, 2006). As such, the current research advances the understanding of how stigmatization might be manifested in the workplace.

Finally, this study examines the moderating influence of interview structure. Our examination of interview structure in the current context provides further support for our ideas concerning thought suppression as well as offering a potential method by which these effects can be reduced or eliminated. Although it has been established that structure decreases racial group differences (Huffcutt & Roth, 1998), we suggest that the relatively scripted protocol of structured interviews provides cognitive benefits for staffing policies requiring thought suppression and that unstructured interviews add to the cognitive burdens of interviewers using these same staffing policies.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although there has been much discussion of staffing policies in the business realm, very little is known about how these staffing policies may influence interview outcomes.

Staffing Policies and Ironic Process Theory

We believe that thought suppression may be triggered under identity-blind or EEO staffing policy conditions. For instance, interviewers may be instructed to suppress information about ones' own or the applicant's minority status. These instructions rely upon one's ability to successfully engage in active thought suppression. Previous research suggests that people are generally capable of suppressing their thoughts when they are motivated to do so and their cognitive resources are not otherwise

engaged. Such suppression, however, comes at a cost. In particular, Wegner and colleagues have shown that if people deliberately try not to think about a particular topic (e.g., the minority status of a job applicant), the frequency of thinking about that topic ironically will increase when they stop active suppression (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987).

Time pressure, stress, and/or cognitive busyness can interfere with the goal of suppressing thoughts (e.g., racial stereotypes), resulting in an inability to conduct an effective search for distracters (i.e., the controlled operating process). But, because the monitoring process is initiated automatically and usually is not part of one's conscious awareness, it continues with little disruption. We believe that identity-blind staffing policies might encourage interviewers to actively suppress thoughts concerning the racial identity of the interviewee. Such suppression therefore is subject to the ironic processes involved in typical forms of thought suppression, and in situations that carry a relatively large cognitive burden, the result will be greater amounts of bias despite active efforts to avoid such bias.

Interview Structure

A large body of research has attempted to determine interview strategies that decrease interviewer bias (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Lin, Dobbins, & Farh, 1992). Previous reviews have concluded that structuring employment interviews by using predetermined questions for every applicant produces an assessment of job candidates that is less open to interviewer bias (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997). In contrast to the structured interview, the unstructured interview is characterized by a lack of advanced planning (Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988), resulting in lower validity and reliability.

Although the benefits of using structured interviews are an obvious means by which employers can reduce bias, it is unclear exactly *why* structure results in reduced bias. We suggest that one reason why structure has this effect is through the cognitive costs associated with the lack of structure and the cognitive benefits associated with the use of structure. That is, because unstructured interviews involve less planning and require the spontaneous creation of interview content and protocol (Campion et al., 1988), they are likely to represent a substantial burden on the cognitive resources of the interviewer (Posthuma et al., 2002). This has interesting implications for the control of race-related thoughts during an interview. As Wegner (1994) pointed out, "Anything that distracts the person's attention from the task of mental control will undermine the operating process and so enhance the effect of the monitoring process" (p. 40). Thus, if an interviewer is engaged in thought suppression during the interview (i.e., is operating under

an identity-blind staffing policy), then the cognitive burden associated with having no structure may result in an ironic process whereby increased amounts of stereotypic thoughts will occur. This scenario is particularly problematic given the ubiquity of unstructured interviews used in the selection process (Van Der Zee, Bakker, & Bakker, 2002).

At the same time, the use of a highly structured interview not only eliminates the need to plan and order questions but also alleviates cognitive and regulatory resources by suggesting well-scripted behaviors (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). These features become important when considering the process of thought suppression in interviews guided by identity-blind staffing policies. By providing scripted behavior, the interviewer need not engage in a controlled and effortful operating process, as the interview protocol provides a standardized guideline.

Stigmatizing Behavior in the Workplace

To distinguish the way in which people express bias against stigmatized individuals at the workplace, Hebl et al. (2002) conducted a study and differentiated between two forms of discrimination, *formal discrimination* and *interpersonal discrimination*. Formal discrimination involves behaviors that are often obvious, overt, and illegal and include examples such as rating ethnic minority applicants as less suitable for "professional" jobs than White applicants (King, Madera, Mendoza, Hebl, & Knight, 2006), spending less time in the hospital with obese than with average-weight patients (Hebl & Xu, 2001), and calling back African American applicants significantly less than Euro-American applicants despite the exact same credentials (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Such forms of exclusion often involve conscious or overt intentions to discriminate against stigmatized individuals (see Dovidio et al., 2002).

Interpersonal discrimination involves the display of behaviors that tend to be subtle and are often nonverbal. In addition, interpersonal discrimination may be the result of unconscious intentions to discriminate and/or may result when individuals' are trying to consciously control their verbal reactions and hence, their nonverbal reactions "leak out" prejudicial reactions. For example, individuals might stand farther distances away from, spend less time with, or smile less often at stigmatized (vs. nonstigmatized) targets (Hebl et al., 2002; Hebl, Madera, et al., 2007; King, Madera, et al., 2006). Although interpersonal discrimination often involves nonverbal behavior, it may include nonverbal, verbal, and paraverbal expressions, such being ruder, asking fewer questions of, giving shortened responses to, or using an unfriendly tone of voice with stigmatized (vs. nonstigmatized) targets (Hebl et al., 2002).

Current Research

The purpose of the current study was to examine the influence of staffing policies (identity-conscious or identity-blind) on bias against stigmatized individuals in the interview and how interview structure might moderate this relationship by decreasing bias through more structured interviews. Our initial attempt to examine these processes occurred in a simulated interview context. Participants in the study acted as interviewers, and Black confederates played the role of interviewees. We anticipated that the use of an identity-conscious staffing policy would result in relatively unbiased outcomes associated with the interview. In contrast, we anticipated that the use of an identity-blind staffing policy would create the potential for ironic processes to occur, resulting in biased interview outcomes. In addition, we examined how interview structure might moderate the effect of staffing policy. We anticipated that the use of structured interviews would reduce or eliminate the biasing effects of identity-blind staffing policies, whereas the use of unstructured interviews would allow for ironic reversals to occur.

Using the interpersonal discrimination framework (Hebl et al., 2002; Hebl, King, et al., 2007), we used social distance as a measure of manifesting bias against a stigmatized individual. This measure is akin to the rebound effect observed in the thought suppression and stereotyping literature (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994). The seminal work by Macrae et al. established that a common ironic effect of suppressing stereotypes occurs soon after one stops engaging in active suppression. That is, because the automatic monitoring process continues for some time after one consciously stops suppressing, stereotypical thoughts and behaviors become more likely to occur. Macrae and colleagues demonstrated these effects by asking some participants to suppress stereotypes of skinheads while writing a story about a day in the life of one particular skinhead. Others wrote about the same skinhead but were not given any instructions about suppression. After the story-writing task, the experimenter led the participants to a room where they would ostensibly meet the skinhead who was the target of their story. Instead, participants found an empty room with a row of chairs. One of the chairs held a jacket and bag, which, according to the experimenter, belonged to the skinhead, leading the participants to believe that he must have just left the room for a minute. Participants were then asked to take a seat in one of the remaining chairs. Congruent with ironic process theory, participants who had previously been instructed to suppress their stereotypes selected a seat that was farther away from the skinhead's seat than participants who had not been instructed to suppress. In addition to verifying the rebound effect, these results also confirmed that ironic

thought suppression effects extended to a larger class of physical behaviors.

In the current study, we examined if identity-blind staffing policies function as a thought suppression task by demonstrating interpersonal discrimination as a rebound effect after the interview concludes. In particular, we anticipated a main effect of staffing policies on the interpersonal discrimination (i.e., the social distance from the minority applicant) and that the interview structure would moderate this relationship. Formally,

H1: Interviewers using the identity-blind policy will choose to seat themselves farther away from the minority applicant than those following the identity-conscious policy.

H2: Interview structure will moderate the relation between staffing policy and the social distance from a minority applicant, such that interviewers using unstructured interviews and the identity-blind policy will choose to seat themselves farther away from the minority applicant than those in the other conditions.

METHOD

Participants

Eighty-seven students from a southern university participated in this study in exchange for course credit. The mean age of the sample was 19.91 years; 56% were women and 44% were men. The resulting ethnic distribution was 50.6% White, 29.9% Asian, and 19.5% Latino/Hispanic.

Procedure

Participants, assigned randomly to one of four conditions, arrived at a study named "MBA interview studies" at the university's business school. An experimenter described the ostensible purpose of the study by saying that "this study gives MBA students practice in interviewing—this practice is a very effective way for training students and collecting data on interview settings for the MBA program." Participants learned that they would be interviewing two MBA students and that the first one had already arrived and was waiting in an adjoining room for the interview to begin. The participants were told that the MBA students were planning to apply for marketing positions and were provided with resumes. The MBA students were one of two Black confederate men,[1] both of whom were approximately the same age as the MBA students and did not know any of the study participants.

The confederates playing the role of the MBA student memorized a verbal and behavioral script for the interviews to minimize the possibility that any differences that emerged between conditions were due to the interviewees' idiosyncratic answers. Although participants asked different questions in the unstructured interviews than in the structured interviews, the confederates were able to follow the same script for all the interviews.[2]

The experimenter led the participants to a room, where they received the first manipulation adopted from previous research (e.g., Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008; Highhouse et al., 1999; Holoien & Shelton, 2011; Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Specifically, they were instructed to read the business school's "human resource policy" for recruitment to guide them in the interviews they would be conducting. We manipulated staffing policy in the "human resource policy" by instructing half of the participants *not* to think about race, ethnicity, or skin color during the interview because it was against the school's policy to use race as a factor for recruitment (identity-blind condition). The other half of the participants were instructed to think about race, ethnicity, or skin color during the interview because it was the school's policy to use race as a factor for recruitment (identity-conscious condition); this manipulation was an attempt to make the interracial interaction less threatening for the participant so that they would not engage in thought suppression. Thus, participants had clear directions on how to use race—either (a) think of about it, or (b) do not consider it for recruitment.

Then, participants received the second manipulation. For half of the participants, the experimenter defined and instructed them to use a structured interview, and then gave them the list of standardized questions. For the other half of the participants, the experimenter instructed the participants to produce whatever questions they felt suited for the interview in line with an unstructured interview (Campion et al., 1997). Following these instructions, the experimenter escorted the participants to the "interview room" where the ostensible MBA student (i.e., a Black confederate) was waiting. They were told that they would have exactly 10 min to conduct the interview, and the experimenter left the room and the interview proceeded. After the passage of 10 min, the experimenter entered the interview room and asked the MBA student (i.e., confederate) to stay and ostensibly fill out a questionnaire, whereas the experimenter escorted the participants back to the original room.

The experimenter prepared the participants for the second interview by giving him or her the second MBA's

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[1]As a first attempt to investigate these phenomena, we used only Black men (rather than women too) so as to reduce the design and not confound race and gender effects.

[2]One participant asked unanticipated questions in which the confederate could not follow his script and was subsequently not included in the analyses.

resume. This second resume contained information (e.g., the name "Roydell Jenkins"), which was pretested to ensure that the second MBA was interpreted to be another Black man. The same procedure for the first interview was used for the second interview, except that in the second interview the participant was led to a room that was not yet set up for the ostensible interview. This room contained two chairs touching each other, and upon entering the room the researcher asked the participant to "set up the chairs for the next interview" while the researcher said he would go get the MBA student. This seating preference task provided a measure of social distance and served as a measure of the rebound effect. After a couple of minutes, the researcher returned and informed the participant that the second MBA student had a parking problem and was moving his car, so he was not going to be able to participate. The experimenter then fully debriefed, thanked, and dismissed the participant.

Measures

Social distance. Our measure of the rebound effect conformed closely to past research (e.g., Bos, Dijker & Koomen, 2007; Bromgard & Stephan, 2006; Kawakami, Phills, Steele, & Dovidio, 2007; Macrae et al., 1994; Norman, Sorrentino, Gawronski, Szeto, Ye, & Windell, 2010). After the initial interview, participants were led to another room containing two chairs. The same two chairs and room were used for all the experiments, and the chairs were always placed in the same initial spot, touching each other. Participants were told that they were to set up two chairs for a second interview (also with a Black interviewee). The distance the participants moved the chairs apart was measured in inches. The average distance placed between the chairs was 42.69 inches ($SD = 4.98$).

RESULTS

A 2 (staffing policy: identity-conscious or identity-blind) × 2 (interview structure: structured or unstructured) analysis of variance was performed on the Social Distance measure. A main effect of staffing policy, $F(1, 83) = 6.30$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, emerged, revealing that participants in the identity-blind ($M = 43.79$, $SD = .69$) condition were more likely to place a greater distance between the two interview chairs than were participants in the identity-conscious ($M = 41.25$, $SD = .75$) condition, thereby supporting H1. There was no significant main effect for interview structure, $F(1, 83) = 2.56$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$ ($M_{structured} = 41.72$, $SD = .71$ and $M_{unstructured} = 43.33$, $SD = .73$) on the social distance measure. In support of H2, a significant two-way interaction also emerged, $F(1, 83) = 4.06$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. A planned comparison between participants in the unstructured interview and
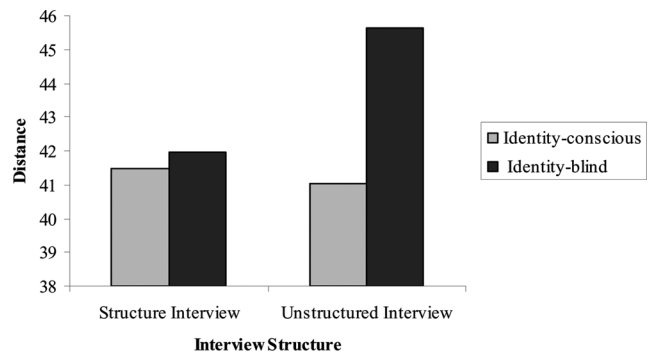

FIGURE 1 Two-way interaction of staffing policy and interview structure on distance.

identity-blind condition with participants in the other three conditions showed that those guided by the identity-blind policy and using an unstructured interview format chose the largest social distance from Black interviewees in the subsequent interview, $t(83) = 3.72$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1).[3]

To examine any differences between the two Black confederates, we ran a 2 (staffing policy: identity-conscious or identity-blind) × 2 (interview structure: structured or unstructured) analysis of covariance on the social distance measure, with confederate as the covariate. The results showed that the confederate variable was not a significant covariate and did not change the pattern of results. Thus, regardless of the confederate, the participants in the identity-blind condition were more likely to place a greater distance between the two interview chairs than were participants in the identity-conscious, and participants guided by the identity-blind policy and using an unstructured interview format chose the largest social distance from the Black interviewee.

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study demonstrated that both interview structure and staffing policies are related to interpersonal discrimination against stigmatized individuals within an interview context. Identity-blind hiring policies appear to have the potential for encouraging thought suppression and therefore are susceptible to ironic effects

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[3]We ran a 2 (staffing policy: identity-conscious or identity-blind) × 2 (interview structure: structured or unstructured) analysis of covariance on the social distance measure, with participant gender as the covariate. Adding gender as a covariate changes the results by reducing the significance of the interaction; $F(1, 82) = 3.23$, $p = .08$. Although the main effect of gender was not significant, $F(1, 82) = 3.58$, $p = .06$, consistent with past research using the social distance measure (see Bos et al., 2007), the means were in the expected direction in that men sat further away from the target ($M = 43.88$, $SD = 5.13$) than did women ($M = 41.85$, $SD = 4.74$).

resulting in interviewer bias. We found support that interview structure reduces the interview biases that occur at the hands of identity-blind staffing policies. In particular, interviewers using the identity-blind policy and an unstructured interview format chose the largest social distance from Black interviewees on a subsequent interview. This finding reveals that, despite the fact that certain policies may produce negative interview outcomes, organizations that adopt structured interviews may be protecting themselves and their stigmatized applicants from bias.

Thus, the current research advances the understanding of how stigmatization is behaviorally displayed in the workplace. Stigmatization often encompasses very overt forms of discrimination (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Major & O'Brien, 2005), but in the workplace, such formal discrimination is often illegal. Therefore, prejudice against a stigmatized individual may emerge in the display of subtle behaviors that are not illegal. Such findings support the interpersonal discrimination framework of Hebl and colleagues (Hebl et al., 2002; Hebl, King, et al., 2007). As such, the measure of social distance was a subtle and nonverbal measure of bias. Our findings are particularly important for applied settings because interpersonal discrimination has been largely ignored in the interview context, which is the most often used method to select employees.

Such results add to an existing body of research that reveals that structuring dyadic interactions between White and Black individuals reduces bias (Avery et al., 2009). Why are structured interviews so helpful in reducing bias? We believe there are two reasons. First, unstructured interviews place cognitive loads on the interviewers (Posthuma et al., 2002). It may be difficult to suppress prejudice while also spending the mental energy in developing and deciding on what questions to ask. Because a structured interview eliminates the task of generating questions, it is not as likely to fall prey to biases that result from cognitive load. Second, structured questions serve as a script or schema for interviewers, which can decrease the concern of suppressing stereotypical or prejudicial thoughts induced by the identity-blind policy. We tested this explanation by examining the rebound effect that occurs after suppression (Macrae et al., 1994). If structure helps release interviewers from suppression by providing a script, there should be no rebound, which is what we found in the structured interview condition using the measure of social distance.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the development of discrimination-reducing strategies for organizations. Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling, and Campion (1997) linked interview structure and litigation outcomes conceptually and empirically and found that structure enhances interview reliability and validity. Consistent with these findings, the current experiment also revealed that structure reduced interviewers' biased behaviors. We believe that this occurred because structure may have eliminated the mental load of suppressing race-related thoughts and/or it may have provided a script or schema to interviewers, thereby reducing the leakage of subtle interpersonal bias by directing and standardizing participants' behaviors.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is that the data were collected using a student sample, a sample that may have had little experience in conducting interviews. It is possible that student versions of structured and unstructured interviews differ from interviews given by professionals and that these differences are connected to the particular pattern of results that we observed. For several reasons, however, this possibility seems unlikely. First, students were informed that they would be interviewing MBA students well ahead of time and did not indicate confusion with the directions. Second, our manipulation of structure was consistent with the differences between structured and unstructured interviews that occur in more realistic situations. If, for example, our unstructured interviews were less structured than professionally conducted unstructured interviews, then it seems likely that our structured interviews were also less structured than professionally conducted structured interviews. Certainly, future research might examine the impact of staffing policies and structure in a more authentic setting, but we suspect that it might be fairly difficult to manipulate these variables in actual organizations.

Another concern with the current study is that such seemingly subtle effects that occur at a microlevel may not be prevalent enough to have implications at the organizational level. We anticipated, however, that although subtle, the effects documented in the current study would be pervasive and incremental enough across individuals in organizations that similar patterns would arise (see Hebl, Madera, et al., 2007). Recently, in fact, Singletary and Hebl (2011) have shown that subtle discrimination has more negative impacts on performance in organizations than does overt, illegal discrimination (see also King, Shapiro, et al., 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the current study was to examine how staffing policies (identity-conscious or identity-blind) and interview structure leads to interpersonal forms of stigmatization that are not prohibited by the law. The results demonstrated that interviewers using the identity-blind policy and an unstructured interview format chose the largest social distance from Black interviews on a subsequent interview and assigned the lowest salary to the applicant. These results have important practical implications for interracial interviews in the workplace.

Instructions given to interviewers do influence important recruitment decisions, so organizations must be aware how certain staffing policies may affect interviewers' treatment of stigmatized applicants. In particular, the findings of the current experiment suggest that identity-blind policies that are encouraged by EEO policies may lead to manifestations of interpersonal discrimination. Ironically, instructions to ignore race, which are sometimes provided in an attempt to be egalitarian, can backfire after the interview and negatively influence behavior and attitudes. Providing structure, however, can mitigate this problem.

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