

# Reacting to Applicant Perspectives Research: What's next?

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**In this article, we discuss the six studies appearing in the 'Applicant Perspectives in Selection' special issue of *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* and identify three overarching themes. The first involves, how applicants work to control the impressions employers have of them, highlighting how applicants are active impression managers in selection contexts. The second involves, the broad theme of the kinds of information applicants get, how they get it, and how they react to it. The third involves, how context might shape applicant reactions. We highlight areas of future research consistent with these themes and close with some recommendations for practice.**

## 1. Introduction

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss the articles being published in the 'Applicant Perspectives in Selection' special issue of the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*. This special issue is both timely and needed. Considerable research has accumulated since the early 1990s when scholars began to systematically consider the applicant perspective in selection processes. This research tradition moved us from a focus on issues of reliability and validity in selection processes to a consideration of how applicants react to different kinds of selection systems. We view the six articles in this special issue as helping us identify and take the next steps in advancing this body of research.

In discussing these articles we bring a dual perspective as both authors who conduct research in this area as well as editors who have worked with many manuscripts in this research domain. Our discussion is structured in three sections. First, we briefly review each of the articles, summarizing their methodology and main findings. Second, we identify some overarching themes across the studies, particularly as they

pertain to key issues identified in the broader research literature. Third, we highlight a handful of practical implications of this set of articles in terms of what organizations can or should do as a result of these studies and identify some potential areas of future research that this set of articles brings to the fore.

## 2. Review of special issue articles

The six articles that comprise the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* special issue are a diverse lot, focusing on different aspects of applicant perspectives in selection. Truxillo, Bodner, Bertolino, Bauer, and Yonce (2009) offer a meta-analysis of explanations on applicant reactions; Anseel and Lievens (2009), Brooks, Guidroz, and Chakrabarti (2009), and Sieverding (2009) report the results of original empirical investigations; and Ford, Truxillo, and Bauer (2009) and Marcus (2009) offer two different theoretical models.

Truxillo and colleagues meta-analytically summarized ( $k = 26$ ) the relationships between explanations given to job applicants and a host of outcome variables and

explored potential moderators and mediational mechanisms. They found that explanations were positively related to fairness perceptions, organizational perceptions, test-taking motivation, and cognitive ability test performance, although the effect sizes were fairly small ( $r$ 's ranging from .06 to .21). They also found that test-taking motivation mediated the relationship between explanations and cognitive ability test performance. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the types of explanations given (justification vs excuse type; structural vs social fairness). Although one might take this to suggest that it is simply the mere act of providing an explanation that is important, social justice research on explanations has indicated that the adequacy of an explanation is important, not just the provision of one (Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). Also, what constitutes adequate and inadequate explanations in a selection context may not fall neatly into the types of explanations summarized in this study, and may require consideration of other dimensions unique to selection contexts [e.g., there are common variants of justifications used by employers (efficiency, job relatedness)].

Anseel and Lievens conducted two studies. The first study involved 125 Belgian University master students who were put through a hypothetical selection simulation in which they read a position description and then completed a personality test. Two weeks after the simulation, participants received 'reject' or 'pass' feedback and indicated their acceptance of the feedback and attitudes toward the organization. The second study involved 252 Belgian University master students who participated in job preparation training sessions. As part of the training session, participants completed a computerized in-basket exercise. After completing the in-basket, participants received (true) feedback about their skills as well as a questionnaire measuring acceptance of this feedback. Participants then completed another in-basket exercise.

The results were consistent across studies, in that perceptions of feedback acceptance mediated the relationship between outcome feedback and attitudes toward the organization (study 1) and test performance (study 2). The fact that Anseel and Lievens were able to replicate these results across different dependent measures is a strength of the study. Feedback acceptance is an interesting construct, but it is not entirely clear whether it represents a perception of the accuracy of the feedback (as reflected in one of the items in the two-item scale) or whether it represents some other kind of cognitive or affective reaction to the feedback (as reflected in the overall judgment of the other scale item). In addition, in both studies participants received fairly detailed feedback and thus have considerable information upon which to base their feedback acceptance judgments. Yet, in many selection settings the

feedback received is fairly minimal (i.e., you are given a test score or are told you did not pass an exam), so future research is needed to understand how this kind of feedback is received. Schinkel, Van Dierendonck, and Anderson (2004) found that more specific feedback did not lead to as positive a reaction as more general feedback, possibly due to the fact that more general feedback gives the receiver greater latitude in making self-serving attributions. Feedback acceptance might also be further investigated in the broader frame of sense making. That is, how do individuals interpret information received and how does it fit in with their thinking about their selves and about hiring processes? Finally, it is also common to receive 'mixed message' feedback (e.g., you did well on a job knowledge test but did poorly on the interview). How might such feedback shape feedback perceptions?

Brooks and colleagues conducted two experimental studies using undergraduate students from a US university. In the first study, 285 participants were randomly assigned to two different selection approach conditions (mechanical or holistic) and two different evaluation mode conditions (separate or joint). Participants were asked to imagine they were searching for a job in their field and read a job advertisement, which manipulated evaluation mode. After being presented with the experimental stimuli, participants indicated their general reaction to the organization and its selection policy. Although similar to the first study, the second study (348 participants) differed in that it used a web-based survey, added another independent variable (diversity, which represents another experimental condition), and operationalized the selection approach condition in a slightly different way.

They found that participants preferred holistic approaches (treating diversity in a non-systematic manner) to incorporating diversity in selection and that this preference was greater when holistic and mechanical approaches were evaluated together. This raises an interesting question as to whether applicants prefer policies where they know how much different elements of the selection process are weighted compared with ones where this information is unavailable. For example, Maynard and Ryan (1995) examined differences in reactions to compensatory and non-compensatory policies and found more positive perceptions for compensatory; reactions are also likely affected by whether one perceives the weighting as favoring one's own strengths (Imus & Ryan, 2005). We also suspect that there are likely to be individual differences in favorability of use diversity information in selection. For example, minority candidates are likely to react very differently than non-minority candidates to the use of this information (see Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006 for a meta-analytic review). Future research should control for these effects. Finally, a

potential area to extend this work is to look at other forms of preferential treatment such as gender (for stereotypically male or female jobs), age, and disability status.

In a sample of 74 university students from the Free University of Berlin, Sieverding examined performance in simulated job interview. Participants were presented with 10 general interview questions (via audiocassette) and then given 1 min to answer the question. Before and after the interview participants reported on their emotional states as well as reporting whether they had tried to hide (i.e., suppress) their feelings during the interview. Trained raters viewed a videotape of the participants and evaluated their emotional state and interview performance. Sieverding found that more men stated they had tried to hide or suppress their feelings than women and that suppressors were judged to be more competent than non-suppressors. Interestingly, for women emotional suppression was associated with increased self-reports of a depressed state whereas there was no increase for men. These results suggest that emotion regulation strategies vary by gender and that the effective use of such strategies translates to positive interview outcomes. Yet, there appear to be some costs associated with the use of these emotion regulation strategies for women. Because the interview questions were fairly general and open-ended in nature, we wonder whether the same effects would be obtained in a more structured interview process. Increasing interview structure might make it more difficult to effectively suppress one's emotions.

In the first of the final two conceptual articles, Ford and colleagues enumerate how applicant reactions in an internal selection context (i.e., promotional contexts) might differ from applicant reactions in external selection contexts (i.e., hiring from outside the organization). This is an important addition to applicant reactions research in that it explicitly incorporates the hiring context into applicant reactions research. Organizational research has generally ignored the role of context (Johns, 2006) and selection research in particular has infrequently assessed the role of context, as many research questions are addressed in single target job, single organization situations. As Ford and colleagues note, the promotional context has several unique features that make applicant reactions potentially more important. These include (a) the fact that promotional candidates have an existing relationship with the organization and are likely to continue to have a relationship with the organization regardless of the promotional decision; (b) promotional candidates are aware of the outcomes of an assessment process as well as the inputs the other promotional candidates bring, both of which have implications for distributive justice perceptions; (c) promotional candidates are

more likely to have much stronger attitudes and reactions to promotional processes and decisions; and (d) reactions to promotional processes and decisions are likely to impact a much broader set of outcomes that would be the case in external hiring contexts. All of these factors suggest the importance of extending applicant reactions research and theory to the promotional context, something which has already begun (see McCarthy, Hrabluik, & Jelley, in press).

In the second conceptual article, Marcus offers a theory of faking that takes the applicant's perspective (rather than the organization's perspective). By taking the 'actor's' perspective and viewing 'faking' as an attempt on the part of an applicant to project a self-image in response to the situational demand of attracting potential employers, Marcus offers a potentially useful switch in perspective in an area that is dominated by organization-centric views. In addition, by focusing on how applicants are responding to situational demands, this theory also incorporates context as an important factor influencing applicant behavior. Consistent with this perspective, faking is defined as '... deviations in self-presentation from the true self-concept' which suggests that there is no clear demarcation as to when a response is considered 'faked.' Although this is undoubtedly true, it does represent something of a challenge to organizations, who typically want to know who is responding in a truthful manner during a selection process. Another important distinction made by Marcus concerns the differentiation between analytic and behavioral skills, in that there is a difference between knowing what to do to effectively self-present and actually being able to do it in a selection context (see also König, Melchers, Kleinmann, Richter, & Klehe, 2006, 2007). This would seem to be an important area of future research, as recent research has suggested that although applicants high in cognitive ability are less likely to engage in faking, when they choose to fake, they are more effective at it (Levashina, Morgeson, & Campion, in press).

### 3. Overarching themes

Although this set of six articles is diverse, there are at least three overarching themes that connect them. In identifying and discussing these themes, we seek to highlight the contributions this set of articles make to the literature as well as identifying some unanswered questions and areas of future research.

#### 3.1. Controlling reactions and impressions

Two of the articles (Marcus, 2009; Sieverding, 2009) focus on how applicants work to control their reactions

to different selection procedures and the subsequent impressions they create. Sieverding empirically examined the costs of emotional regulation whereas Marcus developed a conceptual model that suggested that applicants actively self-present with the goal of obtaining an offer of employment. These papers highlight the need for more research on how applicants work to control their impressions. This has typically been studied in selection contexts under the umbrella term 'impression management' and draws from the large social psychological literature on self-presentation. Despite the wealth of research investigation on the topic, however, there are still many unanswered questions.

In this research the focus is often on making a positive impression but not on 'avoiding a negative one.' Are both processes the same? For example, is the individual who is concentrating on appearing confident and highlighting his or her skills engaged in similar cognitive processes as the one who is concentrating on 'don't appear nervous' and 'avoid talking about getting fired at my last job?' Indeed, one of the primary categorizations of impression management strategies in the broader social psychological literatures is as assertive behaviors (portraying a favorable image) and defensive behaviors (protecting or repairing one's image; Schlenker, 1980; see Peeters & Lievens, 2006; Van Iddekinge, McFarland, & Raymark, 2007 for consideration of this distinction in interview contexts). Taking a closer look at applicant behavior from a motivational perspective may yield insights in this area. As Marcus suggests, applicants are motivated to leave a certain impression. This suggests that we seek to understand exactly what an applicant is trying to do. In other words, what are his or her goals? As Ford and colleagues suggests, internal promotion candidates have different goals than external candidates, as well as different valence for outcomes, and so on. As another example, a performance avoid orientation to a selection context might lead to different applicant behaviors and reactions to the same selection process as a performance approach orientation.

Future research could focus on some the goals and regulatory strategies employed by candidates to achieve their goals. Drawing from motivational theories of self-regulation might provide new insight into this research area, in part because these theories suggest that applicants would have limited cognitive resources to effectively self-regulate (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). As suggested by the Sieverding article, the cognitive load from suppression might be different than the cognitive effort for expression and this might have implications for the effectiveness of these different regulatory strategies. Further, as research on impression management and interviews has indicated, interview format (behavioral description vs situational questions) affects both strategies individuals employ as well as the effective-

ness of those strategies (Lievens & Peeters, 2008; Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2007) it seems likely that any consideration of applicant self-regulation should consider selection tool format and content as important influences on what regulatory strategies candidates employ and their effectiveness *vis-à-vis* applicant goals.

### 3.2. Information given and received

The next set of articles (Anseel & Lievens, 2009; Brooks *et al.*, 2009; Truxillo *et al.*, 2009) focus on the broad theme of the kinds of information applicants get, how they get it, and how they react to it. The research need here is for greater attention to the characteristics of the information (e.g., specificity, source, timing). For example, there are considerable differences from explanations that focus on procedures (e.g., why an organization is using a certain selection tool, how long the process takes) compared with those that focus on outcomes (e.g., why you were rejected). However, these two types of explanations may be intertwined. For example, an organization might explain why a candidate was rejected by describing how a cognitive ability test is a good tool to use. The justice literature would suggest that it is important to really try and tease the kinds of explanations apart, as they may relate to procedural and distributive justice differentially.

Although Brooks and colleagues focus on holistic judgment and diversity information, it might be useful to back this up a step and ask whether applicants overall prefer policies where they know how much different elements are weighted as compared with ones where they do not know this. Individuals seem to like holistic better where diversity is concerned, but is this true for information in general about the selection process? This suggests several potential research questions. How do holistic vs mechanical explanations for decisions affect applicant reactions and behavior more broadly? Are there more complaints when a holistic approach is used? For which jobs is a more holistic approach considered a more acceptable way of hiring and for which is the expectation that there will be a mechanical process?

Another important issue is developing a greater understanding of what information is best *not* to provide to applicants. Although Truxillo and colleagues focuses on when explanations are more or less effective, one can also view explanations as existing on a continuum from effective, makes no difference, to do harm. Similarly, Anseel and Lievens work can be extended to a more in-depth investigation of feedback content on a similar continuum. In addition to looking at a full range of outcomes, researchers need to consider that there may be simultaneously positive

and negative outcomes (e.g., more positive applicant self-perceptions but lessened organizational attraction). These issues would obviously be of potentially greater impact when you have internal candidates that will remain with the organization (Ford *et al.*, 2009).

Related to this, there is likely a difference in reactions between being told you lack an experience or a skill than being told you lack a personality characteristic (Imus & Ryan, 2005). If you are told that you do not possess some job-related competencies that are relatively fixed and stable over time, your reaction is likely to be different than if you are simply told that you need to acquire more experience or a particular job-related skill. Relatively little research has sought to explore how explanations about knowledge, skill, ability, and other characteristics might impact different applicant reactions (Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999).

Circling back to the earlier discussion of applicant goals, reactions to information are likely influenced by the goals and aims of applicants. For example, if applicants thought they were not an exact fit for a job but thought it worth trying by applying, they may not be disturbed by being told they lack something vs if this was their 'ideal job' they had long prepared for and they are told they lack something necessary. Ployhart, Ehrhart, and Hayes (2005) noted that applicants are active information processors, and information given will be attended to and interpreted in the context of an individual's pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and motives.

### 3.3. Influence of context

The final theme concerns how context might shape applicant reactions. This is addressed directly by Ford and colleagues and indirectly in some of the other articles (Brooks *et al.*, 2009; Marcus, 2009). We agree with Ford and colleagues that it is important to consider how internal vs external contexts differ and the implications of these differences. Clearly the context influences what information individuals get as well as how it is processed (e.g., applicants will have more information and process it differently in a promotional setting than external selection).

Yet, there are many other contextual elements that are likely to shape applicant reactions. For example, in focusing on diversity, Brooks and colleagues explored their research questions in a US context in which there is a considerable history of and strong opinions about using ethnicity information in hiring (as well as numerous legal considerations). It is not clear if these same contextual features would exist in other cultural contexts, in part because countries have different histories and treatment of minority groups (see Myers *et al.*, 2008). It may be that the same underlying processes are operating, but the type of diversity might be different

(e.g., gender; religious affiliation) and the prototypical processes in a given culture might be different (Ryan *et al.*, in press). Future research should explore how these processes operate in different cultural contexts.

Beyond the cultural context, there are numerous other contextual aspects that could be investigated in terms of their impact on applicant perspectives in selection. Recent research has explored how elements of the omnibus occupational context and discrete task, social, and physical context can shape the nature of work roles (Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2007; Dierdorff, Rubin, & Morgeson, 2009). For example, how might occupational or industry norms shape applicant perspectives? If certain types of applicants are attracted to certain kinds of occupations (Schneider, 1987), how might that shape reactions to different selection or promotional processes?

The economic context is also likely a major influence on applicant perceptions (Ryan & Huth, 2008). Researchers have noted the importance of considering that applicants often interpret a selection process in the context of choosing among other offers, yet studies seldom assess the applicant's choice set or even account for broad economic condition indicators. Applicant perception studies might examine more joint evaluation tasks, where more than one job opening is being pursued by an applicant.

## 4. Practical implications

The themes noted above correspond to some practical implications. First, these studies suggest that there is value in attending to 'the details' when processing applicants. That is, there may be value in presenting an explanation for test use in a slightly different manner, there may be value in presenting feedback couched one way vs another, or there may be contextual cues that lead to more veridical responding. Pilot testing of materials is critical in global selection contexts, as small nuances have the potential to create more or less positive perceptions.

Second, organizations should facilitate candidate impression management in ways that are in keeping with selection goals. Marcus points out that much energy focuses on identifying 'fakers' rather than having a global awareness that all job applicants seek to create positive impressions. Organizations can examine their selection systems as to what can be done to allow candidates ample opportunity to put their 'best foot forward' while at the same time having valid tools for assessing whether they suit the job.

A third piece of advice is to take a hard look at the context of assessment and what elements in it might be critical to influencing applicant perceptions. As the authors of these articles acknowledge, the nature of selection

tools, the cultural and economic context, and the physical context of the assessment can impact perceptions.

## 5. Conclusions

As a set, these articles contribute to research and theory on applicant perspectives in selection in a variety of ways, addressing at least some of the areas for future research identified in past research (Chan & Schmitt, 2004). Yet, there is a major gap in applicant perceptions research that remains only partially addressed by this set of studies. Reviews of this area of research (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000; Sackett & Lievens, 2008) have called into question the importance of the research because of a lack of established links to actual applicant behavior (and often small effects when applicant behavior is studied). As researchers in this area, we recognize the challenges of obtaining data from actual applicants, and particularly the ethical issues any manipulations that might affect applicant performance would entail.<sup>1</sup> However, we would be remiss if we did not end with a reminder that to truly make a difference, this area of research needs considerably more studies with motivated applicants in high-stakes contexts, to support the psychological fidelity and generalizability of findings, and to show those links to outcomes of strong interest to organizations, actual applicant behaviors.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In some countries, the use of experimental manipulations or deception might actually contravene professional standards, thus suggesting some cross-cultural limitations in generalizability for research utilizing these techniques.

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