Candidate characteristics driving initial impressions during rapport building: Implications for employment interview validity

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We examine the antecedents impacting interviewers’ initial impressions of candidates formed during the rapport-building stage of the interview and subsequent evaluations of answers to highly structured interview questions. Ratings for 130 mock interview candidates reveal a strong relationship between interviewers’ initial impression of the candidate and their evaluations of candidate responses to structured questions. These initial impressions correspond with candidate extraversion and verbal skill, controlling for job qualifications. Interviewers’ initial impressions mediate the effect of candidate characteristics, relevant for some jobs more so than others, on later evaluations. Thus, initial impressions formed during rapport building appear to influence subsequent evaluations whether they are clearly job-relevant or not. These findings have important implications for the validity of structured interviews.

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The employment interview requires interviewers to make decisions about candidates after only a brief social exchange. Interviewers are encouraged to limit ancillary

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information by restricting exchanges to standardized questions and candidate responses (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997). This systematic process focused on job-relevant information is advocated to eliminate decision errors and biases (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002). Thus, research has focused on ways to increase the structure, or standardization, of the interview. Yet, practitioners prefer subjective, personal evaluations such as those obtained from unstructured interviews more than methods known to improve selection (e.g., structured interviews, paper-and-pencil tests; Dipboye, 1994; Lievens, Highhouse & De Corte, 2005). Furthermore, there is a limit to the amount of structure that can be imposed upon the interview before it becomes an impersonal, mechanical process. Unstructured conversation can help put candidates at ease. Building rapport at the beginning of the interview, which consists of making light conversation (e.g., about weather or hobbies), is acknowledged as one of four dimensions of the interview process that influence the degree of interview structure (Barrick, Swider, & Stewart, 2010; Chapman & Zweig, 2005). In spite of the potential threat to interview validity, rapport building is viewed favourably by interviewers; even trained interviewers who structure other elements of the interview ignore researcher recommendations to reduce unstructured interaction (Chapman & Zweig, 2005).

Recent research by Barrick et al. (2010) demonstrated the influence of early impressions in the structured interview. Interviews were highly structured (i.e., standardized, job-relevant questions and rating scales), but they showed that candidates making better initial impressions received more internship offers and higher interview scores. Although research in social psychology has long suggested that individuals in interactions with strangers tend to make intuitive judgments quickly (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Willis & Todorov, 2006), Barrick et al.’s (2010) research is the first to empirically establish the link between initial impressions formed during rapport building and structured interview outcomes.

This finding was an important contribution because it provides empirical evidence supporting a commonly accepted but rarely researched assumption that initial impressions have an important influence on interviewer judgments. Indeed, major reviews of the employment interview continue to suggest that interviewers make hiring decisions early in the interview (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Judge, Higgins, & Cable, 2000; Mayfield, 1964), perhaps as soon as 4 min into a 30-min interview (Judge et al., 2000). These conclusions suggest initial impressions formed during rapport building may be critical, if decision-makers are arriving at such quick decisions. Yet, as Buckley and Eder (1988) assert, the research used as a basis for these conclusions was inadequately designed. Furthermore, in relation to our specific research questions, past studies have focused on how long it took interviewers to reach a final decision rather than whether initial impressions were related to later structured evaluations.

For example, Buckley and Eder (1988) report that claims of quick interview decisions are founded on a 1950s study, which was based on a small sample and a contrived setting. Springbett (1958) instructed interviewers to place an ‘X’ on a sheet of paper when they had made a decision to accept (or reject) the applicant, finding that interviewers made their minds up within minutes of beginning the interview. Buckley and Eder (1988) caution that interviewers may have made quick decisions simply because they were being observed. A series of follow-up studies examined how different types of information or interview characteristics (e.g., positive or negative information; candidate quality; how much the interviewer talked) influenced how quickly the interviewer reached a hiring decision (Anderson, 1960; Tucker & Rowe, 1977; Tullar, Mullins, & Caldwell, 1979; Webster, 1964). However, these studies did not address whether early decisions could
be changed as the interview progressed. Hence, conclusions that interviewers make quick hiring decisions (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Judge et al., 2000; Mayfield, 1964) are based on little sound empirical research. More importantly, these studies did not examine how initial impressions formed during rapport building influence interviewer structured evaluations.

Part of the confusion regarding initial impressions may result from a research stream that shows that pre-interview information obtained before a face-to-face interaction influences hiring recommendations (Dipboye, 2005; Hayes & Macan, 1997; Macan & Dipboye, 1988). These pre-interview impressions differ in two important ways from impressions formed during rapport building. First, the impressions examined by Dipboye and colleagues were formed prior to any interaction between the candidate and interviewer. Second, these previously studied impressions were clearly based on job-relevant information extracted from applications, references, resumes, and test scores. Thus, although there is evidence suggesting that interviewers’ first impressions based on job-relevant applicant materials influence hiring recommendations; only the recent Barrick et al. (2010) study has examined the magnitude of the relationship between initial impressions formed during rapport building and interviewer recommendations based on the structured interview.

Therefore, given the limited research on initial impressions formed during rapport building, our first objective is to replicate Barrick et al. (2010) by empirically re-examining the relationship between initial impressions of the candidate and interviewer evaluations during a highly structured interview. This is an important question as it is hard to imagine an interview that is so highly structured that the interviewer is not influenced, at least to some extent, by early impressions formed during rapport building. A meaningful relationship between initial impressions and structured evaluations can expose rapport building as a crucial yet under-studied aspect of the employment interview.

Our second objective is to examine the nature of what is conveyed during the unstructured initial exchange. Barrick et al. (2010) called for research to examine the antecedents affecting the interviewer’s initial impressions. Specifically, we examine the role that a candidate’s personality, verbal skill, and interview experience have on the interviewer’s initial impression of the candidate (see Figure 1). We also explore the extent to which the relationship between these candidate attributes and the interviewer’s structured evaluation is mediated through impressions formed during rapport building. An understanding of the impact of initial impressions on interviewer evaluations and the drivers of these initial impressions has the potential to provide insight into both the criterion- and construct-related validity of the interview.

The relationship between initial impressions and subsequent evaluations
Barrick et al. (2010) were the first to show that candidates making better initial impressions during rapport building were more likely to receive internship offers ($r = .22$) and higher interview scores ($r = .42$). These impressions occurred in a structured interview context but are consistent with other research that suggests the importance of initial impressions. For example, social psychological research provides theoretical support and considerable evidence that judgments made based on brief social interactions are quite accurate. Research shows that social information processing is expectancy driven; initial impressions strongly influence expectations and behaviour judgments (Jones, 1990). Allport (1937) believed impressions formed based on brief interactions were indicative of personality and often verified upon further acquaintance. Goffman (1979) later wrote
Figure 1. Candidate characteristics driving initial impressions.

about the ‘glimpsed’ world (p. 20). In this world, individuals captured glimpses of strangers – imprecise, yet rich in social information. In explaining the accuracy of these impressions, Goffman referenced the ethological concept of ‘displays’, behaviours that signal inter- and intra-species information rapidly and efficiently. These observations were later confirmed in a meta-analysis on ‘thin slices’ of expressive behaviour. Ambady and Rosenthal (1992) found an overall correlation of .39 across 38 criterion variables, when comparing observations of less than 5 min to expert ratings based on considerable interaction (e.g., supervisory ratings of physician or teacher effectiveness). Further, this meta-analysis showed longer periods of behavioural observation did not yield greater prediction accuracy; under half-minute observations did not differ significantly from 4- to 5-min observations. Ongoing social psychological research has confirmed that upon meeting a person for the first time, individuals form reactions almost instantaneously and effortlessly based on minimal information (Bar et al., 2006; Borkenau & Liebler, 1993). Additionally, research in social perception has provided evidence of surprising levels of agreement in strangers’ social perceptions even after very brief encounters (Kenny & Albright, 1987; Watson, 1989). Still, it is important to re-examine Barrick et al.’s (2010) finding as it has been so rarely studied in the interview context.

This study focuses on how initial impressions formed during rapport building impact interviewers’ later structured evaluations. To date, with the exception of the recent study by Barrick and colleagues (2010), most research examining the impact of first impressions in the interview context has focused solely on interviewer evaluations at the end of the interview. Due to the limited amount of research on candidate characteristics affecting initial impressions during rapport building, we draw upon related research on how candidate characteristics influence end-of-interview evaluations. It is important to note that in our study, interviewers’ final assessment of the candidate was calculated based on their structured ratings of the interview dimensions. This method is considered to be a more structured way to make a hiring recommendation rather than making one overall judgment at the end of the interview (Campion et al., 1997). Although we cannot assume that the characteristics that affect end-of-interview evaluations will be the same as those that drive initial impressions, it is reasonable to presume that insights can be gained from this line of research. For instance, end-of-interview evaluations show that the candidate’s physical attractiveness influences perceptions of a candidate’s social and intellectual competence and personality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate Characteristics</th>
<th>Interviewer Evaluations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Extraversion</td>
<td>Initial Impression</td>
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<td>- Conscientiousness</td>
<td>during Rapport Building</td>
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<td>- Emotional Stability</td>
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<td>- Agreeableness</td>
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<td>- Openness to Experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>scores across all</td>
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<td></td>
<td>structured questions</td>
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Interview-Related Verbal Skill & Experience
- Verbal Skill
- Interview Experience
(Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992) and is positively related to
candidate ratings and selection (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003; Tews, Stafford, &
Zhu, 2009). An applicant’s clothing (Forsythe, 1990) and even a candidate’s handshake
at the beginning of an interview can influence an interviewer (Stewart, Dustin, Barrick, &
Darnold, 2008). Furthermore, meta-analytic evidence shows that use of self-presentation
tactics (appearance, impression management, and verbal/non-verbal behaviour) has a
meaningful influence on interviewer ratings, particularly in unstructured interviews
(Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009). Based on this research and Barrick et al.’s (2010)
recent finding, we expect that an interviewer’s initial impressions formed during rapport
building will affect the interviewer’s structured evaluation.

**Hypothesis 1:** Interviewer initial impression ratings obtained during rapport building are
positively related to interviewer evaluations provided during the structured
portion of the interview.

**Candidate characteristics driving initial interviewer impressions**

Given the expected relationship between initial impressions and interview outcomes,
it is critical to know what is driving them. Barrick and colleagues (2010) found
that initial impressions extended beyond liking and similarity to reflect perceived
candidate competence. However, they did not examine further the antecedents of
interviewers’ initial impressions, that is, the specific candidate characteristics influencing
the initial impression. One likely characteristic is personality. Social psychological
research suggests that personality significantly influences stranger evaluations during
first encounters (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Watson, 1989); in particular, observable
traits with a strong affective or interpersonal component (e.g., extraversion) can be
judged quickly and accurately. Personality – particularly extraversion – also appears to
influence candidate behaviour during the interview (Barrick, Patton, & Haugland, 2000;
Posthuma et al., 2002). Thus, personality should be predictive of initial impressions even
during the limited rapport-building interaction.

**Personality.** Extraverts are characterized as gregarious, friendly, talkative, assertive,
and socially adept (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Watson & Clark, 1997), characteristics
important for building rapport. Traditional views of extraversion (McCrae & Costa, 1987;
Watson, Clark, McIntyre, & Hamaker, 1992) and recent research emphasize the social–
interpersonal aspects of the trait. For example, Ashton and colleagues (Ashton & Lee,
2001; Ashton, Lee, & Paunonen, 2002) describe extraversion as a dimension of ‘active
engagement within social endeavors’ (Ashton & Lee, 2001, p. 345) and demonstrate
that the tendency to engage in and enjoy behaviour designed to attract or hold social
attention is central to the trait. Not surprisingly, extraverted individuals are especially
confident and effective in tasks with social interactions (McCrae, Costa, & Piedmont,
1993). Thus, the social interaction required in rapport building should give extraverts
an advantage.

Indeed, extraverts have been shown to use a variety of interpersonal tactics when
they want to get ahead in situations, such as when interviewing. In a study of the
five-factor model (FFM) and tactics used to increase status (i.e., ‘get ahead’), Kyl-Heku
and Buss (1996) found that extraverts used 21 of 26 tactics, a greater number than
was associated with any other FFM trait. Extraverts made greatest use of tactics related
to social display/networking and industriousness/knowledge. As illustrated by these findings, extraversion is associated with greater social skill (Riggio, 1986). Extraverts’ interpersonal and social skills help them attain more influence and respect in group settings (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Harms, Roberts, & Wood, 2007).

Furthermore, existing research on personality in the interview reveals extraversion as the most important personality correlate with end-of-interview evaluations (Barrick et al., 2000; Caldwell & Burger, 1998; De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999; Huffcutt, Weekley, Wiesner, DeGroot, & Jones, 2001b; Tay, Ang, & Van Dyne, 2006). For example, Caldwell and Burger (1998) show that of the FFM traits, only extraversion is consistently related to applicant success; it predicts both the number of follow-up interviews and job offers. Interviewers are positively influenced by the socially outgoing character of extraverted candidates (Fletcher, 1987). This may be because extraverts are more inclined to smile, prepare for the interview, and less likely to be nervous (Fletcher, 1990). Thus, rapport building provides a setting for extraverts to display their natural characteristics and tendencies (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Additionally, extraversion is one of the more easily observable personality traits, as evidenced by higher convergence among stranger and self-ratings as compared to other FFM traits (Connolly, Kavanagh, & Viswesvaran, 2007). These findings lead us to expect that, of the FFM, extraversion will have the greatest influence on candidate behaviour during rapport building, which is, after all, a social interaction. Extroverted applicants should be more talkative, expressive, active, and enthusiastic than introverted applicants. Consequently, we posit

Hypothesis 2: Extraverted candidates receive higher interviewer initial-impression ratings during rapport building.

Although extraversion is expected to be the FFM trait most strongly related to interviewer initial impressions, we do include other FFM traits—conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness to experience—that have correlated with interview success in at least one prior study (Barrick et al., 2000; Caldwell & Burger, 1998; De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999; Tay et al., 2006; Van Dam, 2003). Thus, we explore whether other traits have an incremental effect on interviewer initial impressions beyond extraversion.

Verbal skill. The interpersonal interaction inherent in the interview also creates an ideal situation for candidates to demonstrate their verbal skill as verbal behaviour is an important form of social influence (Ferris et al., 2002). Candidates with greater verbal skill are expected to influence the interviewer’s initial impression. In this study, we specifically focus on verbal skill as psychological research provides clear evidence of a link between the physiological characteristics of extraverts and differences in verbal behaviour (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999). In particular, research shows that extraverts have superior short-term memory (Kleinsmith & Kaplan, 1963), lower social anxiety (Matthews & Deary, 1998), lower language anxiety (Shapiro & Alexander, 1969), and better resistance to stress in environments with high-information flows (Eysenck, 1981). These characteristics are likely to positively influence extraverts’ speech production.

In defining verbal skill, it is important to note that verbal skill does not focus on the actual substance of the candidate’s responses (Barrick et al., 2009). Instead, verbal skill is reflective of both spontaneous and consciously controlled expressions of thoughts and emotions (Barrick et al., 2009). It includes both the candidate’s style of delivery (e.g.,
speech rate and pitch) and verbal fluency (DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999). A powerful style of speech results in positive attributions of competence and employability (Parton, Siltanen, Hosman & Langenderfer, 2002). Compared with personality, research focusing on candidate verbal skill is sparse. However, a meta-analysis by Barrick et al. (2009) found verbal skill to positively correlate with end-of-interview ratings.

The question remains, can verbal skill be accurately assessed in only a few minutes? As discussed above, research on thin slices of behaviour provides evidence that brief social interactions may be quite accurate. Ambady and Rosenthal’s (1992) meta-analysis measured the type of channel (face, speech, body, tone of voice) on which the ratings were based and found that the channel was not related to the accuracy of prediction. Results of this meta-analysis show that verbal behaviour can accurately be assessed within a few minutes and that judgments of verbal behaviour are similarly accurate to predictions based on other channels.

More recent related research findings show that candidates’ strong, positive non-verbal and verbal behaviours lead to positive end-of-interview ratings (Burnett & Motowidlo, 1998; DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999; Dipboye, 2005, Howard & Ferris, 1996). For example, Motowidlo and Burnett (1995) found that both aural and visual cues in structured interviews predict supervisors’ ratings of job performance; furthermore, valid predictions can be made from either visual or aural cues alone. The effects of these behaviours have been found to extend below the level of consciousness (Neu & Graham, 1994). We therefore hypothesize

Hypothesis 3: Candidates who have greater verbal skill receive higher ratings from the interviewer during rapport building.

Interview experience. Additionally, candidates with interview experience are likely to be more effective at interviewing and should make more favourable initial impressions. Experience within a domain is necessary to reach high levels of performance (Ericsson, 2006). Beginners are simply trying to understand what is required of them and act in accordance with these requirements without making serious errors; in contrast, individuals with more experience achieve smoother performance with less effort, rarely making noticeable mistakes (Ericsson, 2006). Meta-analytic results support, for example, a positive relationship between experience and performance on the job (Quiñones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995; Sturman, 2003). Results show the strongest relationship between experience and performance, when experience is measured as the number of times performing a particular task (Quiñones et al., 1995), as it is in this study (number of interviews in which participants have engaged). Experience enhances performance through knowledge of the performance domain (Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986); in particular, individuals develop patterns and knowledge about how to react in situations (Simon & Chase, 1973).

Within the interview context specifically, several studies have explored whether training candidates results in more favourable end-of-interview ratings (Macan, 2009; Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, & Troxel, 2001; Posthuma et al., 2002), but few have measured whether candidates’ prior interview experience affects interviewer evaluations. Fletcher (1990) examined the extent to which interview experience shaped candidate self-presentation strategies. Experienced candidates were more likely to maintain eye contact, project a good image, ask questions, be assertive, and prepare for the interview – behaviours that are important for building a positive initial impression. These results are
consistent with findings in other contexts that non-verbal self-presentational abilities improve with practice and experience (DePaulo, 1992).

Because of their greater knowledge of the situation, experienced individuals can better prepare to perform successfully in the interview. Irrespective of preparation, however, we expect that candidates with more interview experience enter the interview with greater skill and confidence due to their greater knowledge of what to expect. Increased skill and confidence may result in more positive non-verbal communication (McShane, 1993), a firmer handshake (Stewart et al., 2008), greater ability to convey competence (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003), and increased use of impression-management tactics (Delery & Kacmar, 1998), all of which should affect initial impressions. Therefore,

**Hypothesis 4:** Experienced candidates receive higher ratings from the interviewer during rapport building.

Given that candidates’ extraversion, verbal skill, and interview experience are hypothesized to result in favourable impressions during rapport building, it is possible that the effect of these characteristics on interviewers’ structured evaluations is mediated by the initial impression. Since interviewers focus on personality traits (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Stone, 2001a), and because characteristics such as extraversion can impact interviewers even with short exposure to a candidate (Barrick et al., 2000), it seems likely that interviewers are quickly influenced by these characteristics. Similarly, the influence of verbal skill and experience on interviewer evaluations should emerge early in the interview. Thus, we propose a mediated model; however, as this hypothesis is exploratory in nature, we do not specify full or partial mediation.

**Hypothesis 5:** Relationships between candidate characteristics and interviewer evaluations provided during the structured portion of the interview are mediated by initial impressions formed during rapport building.

**Methods**

**Procedure**

We developed a structured interview to assess candidates for a management-training programme. Three of the four dimensions that influence interview structure (Question Consistency, Question Sophistication, Standardized Evaluation; Chapman & Zweig, 2005) were structured (the fourth dimension, Rapport Building, is unstructured according to the purposes of the study). That is, standardized, behavioural questions and rating scales (Janz, 1982) were used to target nine competencies: work ethic, drive for results, planning and organizing, analysis and judgment, communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, adaptability, and motivational fit. Interviewers were instructed to limit any follow-up questions. Seven subject matter experts (SMEs) reviewed the interview questions and rating scales to establish content validity. SMEs were educated and experienced in selection (education: 1 B.S., 1 M.S., 5 Ph.D.; work experience: $M = 10$ years, $SD = 6.56$; interviewing experience: $M = 9.5$ years, $SD = 5.06$). SMEs rated whether the targeted competencies were important to the management trainee job, using a scale from $1 = ‘not necessary for job performance’$ to $3 = ‘essential to the job’$ ($M = 2.95; SD = .10$). SMEs also strongly agreed that the questions assessed the competencies (mean of retained questions $= 4.67, SD = .52$) and that the rating scales
enabled the interviewer to accurately evaluate the candidate’s answers \( (M = 4.70, SD = .54, \text{ using a } 1 = \text{‘strongly disagree’ to 5 = ‘strongly agree’ scale for both assessments}) \). Interview questions and rating scales are available from the authors upon request.

Business professionals served as interviewers. All were managers with selection responsibilities who volunteered to participate to improve their interviewing skills. Before meeting candidates, interviewers attended a 2-hr training session on conducting a structured interview (e.g., question consistency, evaluation; Campion et al., 1997; Chapman & Zweig, 2005). The job description and interview questions and ratings scales were reviewed during training. We also briefly discussed the rapport-building phase of the structured interview (Chapman and Zweig, 2005). Interviewers were instructed to learn and use the candidate’s name as well as introduce themselves and briefly describe their own background. Interviewers were instructed not to ask job-related questions during this 2- to 3-min introduction.

Immediately following the training, interviewers conducted the mock interviews. Once the rapport-building phase of the interview was completed, but before interviewers began to ask the standardized questions, interviewers stopped and completed the initial impressions rating form. The interviewer then completed the structured interview using the standardized questions and rating scales.

Participants

Candidates were 135 undergraduate students who participated in practice interviews in an elective class focused on career placement skills. Their mean age was 20.8 years \( (SD = 2.32) \). Many students were looking for a job or internship. Fifty-four percent of the participants were women, and 97% were Caucasian. Analyses are based on the 130 students with complete data.

We instructed students to treat this experience just as they would a ‘real’ interview – dressing appropriately and preparing for the interview. Students reported that they were motivated to appear competent throughout the interview. For example, even though these were practice interviews, students reported a high desire for the job \( (M = 4.25, \text{ based on a five-point scale from 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 = ‘strongly agree’}) \). Informal conversations with students and interviewers indicated that the students dressed appropriately and took the opportunity seriously.

Sixty-two business professionals conducted the 30- to 45-min interviews. Interviewers generally had at least 1 year of experience interviewing \( (M = 7.76 \text{ years}; SD = 8.62) \) and had conducted an average of four interviews per month over the last year \( (M = 4.15 \text{ interviews per month}; SD = 8.90) \). The group was largely female and Caucasian. On average, each participant interviewed four candidates \( (M = 4.29, SD = 0.93; \text{ range from 1 to 6}) \).

In order to isolate the effect of the rapport-building stage, interviewers did not have any ancillary information prior to the interview (e.g., resume, test scores). The authors observed the interviewers to assure they followed the prescribed interview script and format. Each applicant engaged in two interviews and received two independent ratings from separate interviewers. We assessed agreement among raters with a number of indices. Both the \( r_{wg} \) (James, Demaree & Wolf, 1984, 1993) and average deviation (AD) index (Burke & Dunlap, 2002) indicate acceptable rater agreement; values meet recommended cutoffs (for initial impression, mean \( r_{wg} > .70 \text{ and AD} < .83 \text{ for five-point scale}; \text{ for structured evaluation, } r_{wg} = .81 \text{ and AD} = .39 \text{ on four-point scale, recommended...} \)
values are $r_{wg} > .70$ and $AD < .67$ for four-point scale). We also calculated intraclass correlation (ICC) values. ICC(1) was 0.07 for initial impression and 0.21 for structured evaluation, which – consistent with the $r_{wg}$ and $AD$ values – indicates expected agreement among ratings from the two raters (Bliese, 2000). ICC(2) was 0.14 for initial impressions and 0.34 for structured evaluation, which are lower than desired but not unexpected given that ratings were obtained from only two raters. These low ICC(2) values highlight potential difficulty differentiating applicants on the variables of interest and reduce the likelihood of finding support for hypothesized effects. Nevertheless, given adequate support for agreement among raters, we used the mean value of initial impressions and structured evaluations in all subsequent analyses.

**Measures**

**Initial impressions from rapport building**

At the end of the rapport-building stage but prior to starting the structured interview (2 to 3 min into the interview), interviewers completed a measure of their initial impression of the candidate. The initial impression rating ($\alpha = .93$) consisted of five questions previously used to assess perceived applicant suitability (Cable & Judge, 1997; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Questions were rated on a five-point scale. Example items are ‘How satisfied do you think you would be if you were to hire this candidate for a full-time position?’ and ‘On the basis of all the information I’ve received, I would extend this student a job offer if he/she applied with my organization’.

**Structured evaluation**

Interviewers evaluated candidate responses to nine job-related, behavioural questions (Janz, 1982) asked during the structured interview. The structured evaluation ($\alpha = .84$) was calculated as an average of the interviewer’s ratings for the nine questions. The questions and response scales were developed using SME judgments of job relevance. An example question was ‘Tell me about a time when you had to make a difficult decision and how you made that decision (analysis and judgment)’. Interviewers evaluated responses using a four-point scale anchored by behavioural descriptions of each competency at each level.

**Candidate characteristics**

**Personality**

Personality was measured using the Personal Characteristics Inventory (Mount, Barrick, & Wonderlic Consulting, 2002). Coefficient alphas for extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness were .89, .90, .89, .85, and .80, respectively.

**Verbal skill**

Verbal skill was measured with a peer assessment, using a four-item scale ($\alpha = .79$) developed for this study based on measures used to assess self-promotion (e.g., Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Independent of the interviews, each student engaged in a simulated exercise designed to assess and practice verbal skill in an interview context. Participants
Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job qualifications</td>
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<td>(.79)</td>
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<td>Conscientiousness</td>
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<td>.31</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>(.90)</td>
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<td>Emotional stability</td>
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<td>.52</td>
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<td>(.89)</td>
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<td>3.34</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal skill</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview experience</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial impression during rapport building</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured evaluation</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Reliabilities are on the diagonal in parentheses. N = 130. The 95% confidence interval for correlations greater than or equal to .18 does not include 0 (95% CI: .01 ≤ .18 ≤ .35).

interacted with three peers in quick succession. Items include, ‘was able to express ideas and information clearly, accurately, and convincingly’, and ‘responded confidently’. Once again, we calculated indices to assess rater agreement. Both $r_{wg}$ and AD support a high level of agreement ($r_{wg} = .88$ and AD = .33 on four-point scale, recommended values are $r_{wg} > .70$ and AD < .67 for four-point scale; Burke & Dunlap, 2002, James et al., 1984, 1993). ICC(1) was .08 and ICC(2) was .21, suggesting adequate agreement but potential difficulty differentiating assessments across individuals. Given acceptable agreement, the final score for each item averages the ratings from the three peers. Higher scores indicate stronger verbal skill.

**Interview experience**

Participants reported the number of interviews they had participated in prior to the mock interviews.

**Control variable**

Prior interview research has shown that non-job-related, ‘biasing’ effects often disappear after accounting for candidate job qualifications (Schmitt, 1976). Thus, to better isolate the effect of initial impressions, we included job qualifications as a control variable. After examining the job description, students evaluated their qualifications for the position. The four-item scale used four response options, from 1 = ‘not at all qualified’ to 4 = ‘very qualified’. A sample item is, ‘Based on any previous work experience that you have, how qualified are you for this position?’ Another item asked, ‘Overall, how qualified are you to successfully perform this job?’ Higher scores indicate stronger qualifications for the job ($\alpha = .79$). Although undergraduates are often thought to have fairly homogenous credentials (degree type, experience, etc.), our results do indicate variance ($SD = .69$) on this measure.

**Results**

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables. The 95% confidence interval for correlations greater than or equal to .18 does not include
Hypothesis 1, predicting that initial impressions formed during rapport building would be related to interviewer evaluations during the structured interview, was strongly supported ($r = .49$).

Initial impressions significantly correlated with extraversion ($r = .40$), although other FFM personality traits were also significantly related ($r = .27$ with conscientiousness; $r = .20$ with emotional stability; $r = .22$ with agreeableness). Verbal skill ($r = .22$) and interview experience ($r = .24$) also correlated with initial impressions. All of the personality traits, with the exception of openness to experience, significantly predicted interviewer-structured evaluations, as did verbal skill. Interview experience was not correlated with structured evaluations. Students viewing themselves as more qualified for this job received more favourable initial impression ratings ($r = .29$) and structured evaluations ($r = .28$).

Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were tested using multiple regression to determine the amount of variance in interviewers’ initial impressions explained by sets of antecedents individually and collectively. In the first step, the control variable – job qualifications – was entered. Next, regression models were assessed by separately entering different sets of predictor variables in subsequent steps. Results are shown in Table 2. Model 2 shows that extraversion ($\beta = .34$) accounts for significant variance beyond job qualifications ($\Delta R^2 = .10$). Conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness to experience were entered as a block in Model 3 but did not explain significant variance in initial impressions beyond job qualifications and extraversion ($\Delta R^2 = .01$). Hypothesis 2 was, thus, supported as extraversion was clearly linked to initial impressions. Results in Model 4 show that verbal skill adds significant incremental variance over job qualifications ($\Delta R^2 = .05$) to predict initial impressions, thus, supporting Hypothesis 3. Model 5 shows that interview experience does not add significant incremental variance over job qualifications; thus, Hypothesis 4 is not supported. Model 6 shows that all predictors (job qualifications, FFM traits, verbal skill, and interview experience) accounted for 23% of the variability in initial impressions. The coefficients in Model 6 illustrate that extraversion ($\beta = .24$) and verbal skill ($\beta = .20$) are the characteristics most closely linked with initial impressions.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that the relationship between candidate characteristics and the interviewers’ structured evaluations is mediated by initial impressions formed during rapport building. To test this hypothesis, we examined several latent variable models with each construct measured by a single composite indicator. The error variance of each indicator was set to the product of one minus the coefficient alpha reliability and the variance of the indicator. Model 1 in Table 3 represents the fully saturated model with paths from candidate characteristics to the initial impression and the structured evaluation. We examined two nested models. One alternative model represents no mediation (Model 2) and the other full mediation (Model 3). In Model 2, all paths leading from candidate characteristics to the initial impression were removed and these characteristics were only linked by direct paths to the structured evaluation. The results of a nested model comparison of Models 1 and 2 [$\Delta \chi^2 (8, N = 130) = 34.48, p \leq .05$] show that Model 2 did not fit the data as well as the saturated model (Model 1), supporting at least some mediation. The full mediation model (Model 3) begins with the saturated model and removes direct paths between candidate characteristics and structured evaluation, so that only indirect effects are included in the model. Results of a nested model comparison of Model 3 and the saturated model show that removing these paths does not significantly alter model fit [$\Delta \chi^2 (8, N = 130) = 11.31, ns$]. Thus, Model 3 – the direct-effects-only model – is the more parsimonious model and should be chosen.
Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses with interviewer impressions during rapport building on candidate characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job qualifications</td>
<td>.29 (.12, .46)</td>
<td>.17 (−.01, .34)</td>
<td>.15 (−.03, .33)</td>
<td>.29 (.13, .46)</td>
<td>.25 (0.07, .42)</td>
<td>.15 (−.03, .32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.34 (17, .51)</td>
<td>.32 (.11, .53)</td>
<td>.15 (−.07, .36)</td>
<td>.24 (0.03, .46)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.09 (−.12, .30)</td>
<td>.02 (−.18, .23)</td>
<td>.02 (−.21, .18)</td>
<td>.02 (−.21, .16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
<td>−.04 (−.26, .18)</td>
<td>−.02 (−.21, .18)</td>
<td>−.02 (−.21, .16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.02 (−.18, .23)</td>
<td>.02 (−.18, .23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>−.02 (−.21, .18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal skill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.23 (.06, .39)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview experience</td>
<td>R²: .08</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ΔR²: .10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 130. Coefficients shown are standardized beta weights. 95% Confidence Intervals are shown in parentheses. a ΔR² between Models 1 and 2, b ΔR² between Models 2 and 3, c ΔR² between Models 1 and 4, d ΔR² between Models 1 and 5, e ΔR² between Models 1 and 5.
Table 3. Fit Indices for path models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>$\chi^2$ difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saturated model (partial mediation)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removed paths to initial impression (no mediation)</td>
<td>34.48</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>34.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removed paths to structured evaluation (full mediation)</td>
<td>11.31</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>11.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 130$. Models 2 and 3 compared to Model 1. Fit indices are as follows: RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; CFI, comparative fit indices.

* $p \leq .05$.

Figure 2. Model with full mediation.

Note. $N = 130$, *$p \leq .05$. Coefficients shown are standardized beta weights.

over the saturated model. This suggests that the effect of the candidate characteristics were fully mediated through the initial impression formed during rapport building. The standardized path coefficients for this model are shown in Figure 2. The path between extraversion and initial impression was positive and significant ($\beta = .27, p \leq .05$) as was the path between verbal skill and initial impression ($\beta = .24, p \leq .05$). Initial impressions, in turn, were significantly positively related to structured evaluations ($\beta = .56, p \leq .05$). Results of a Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Sobel, 1982) also indicate that the indirect paths of extraversion ($Z = 2.00, p < .05$) and verbal skill ($Z = 1.99, p < .05$) through initial impression are significant, confirming mediation.
**Additional analyses**

A potential concern of our study design is a biasing effect associated with obtaining the initial impression rating. In other words, the design of our primary study may create a significant demand effect; that is, stopping to rate may unduly influence the interviewer’s attitude about or assessment of the candidate during subsequent evaluations. Although Barrick et al. (2010) did not find evidence of a demand effect, our different methodological design compelled us to evaluate this potential confound. Thus, we conducted a follow-up laboratory study not to replicate the findings of the primary study but rather to provide a very specific test of a possible demand effect. To isolate the effect of asking evaluators to rate initial impressions, we created two interview videos using actors as candidates and interviewers. One interview showed an actor portraying a good rapport-building phase followed by ineffective answers to the same structured questions used in the main study. A second video showed an actor portraying a poor rapport-building phase followed by effective responses to the structured questions. Actual measures of initial impressions were 3.5 for the good response and 1.6 for the poor response, suggesting that the scaling manipulation was effective.

We showed the videos to a separate group of 141 undergraduate students. One group of 71 students stopped at the end of the rapport-building phase and rated the candidates with the five-item initial impression scale used in the primary study (α = .93). Another group of 70 students did not provide ratings after rapport building. All students evaluated the structured interview questions, each of which targeted a competency (e.g., adaptability, teamwork), using the same four-point response scale anchored by behavioural descriptions of each competency at each level (α = .73). To assess potential bias, we compared structured evaluations across these two groups.

The candidate portraying poor rapport building combined with effective answers to the structured questions was not rated differently (F₁,₁₃₉ = 1.13, ns) by the two groups (M = 3.44 with early rating, M = 3.34 without early rating), nor was the candidate portraying good rapport building combined with ineffective answers to the structured questions (F₁,₁₃₉ = 0.00; ns; M = 2.79 with early rating, M = 2.78 without early rating). This pattern is not supportive of a biasing effect associated with obtaining the initial impression rating. Consequently, the design of our primary study does not appear to create a significant demand effect.

**Discussion**

Our results show the substantial influence initial impressions formed during rapport building have on interviewer structured evaluations. Interviewers made quick, intuitive judgments about candidates early in the interview and these initial impressions predicted subsequent evaluations in a highly structured interview. Thus, like Barrick et al.’s (2010) study, our results show that interviewers form evaluations of candidates within minutes and these evaluations make a lasting impression.

A second contribution is demonstrating the candidate characteristics that drive initial impressions. Our results show that candidates transmit information about their personality (specifically extraversion) and verbal skill during rapport building. Of these attributes, extraversion was most strongly related to the initial impression. This is not surprising, since an extraverted candidate will be more talkative, expressive, and enthusiastic, and generally, provide more information than introverted candidates.

Our results also show that there may be some additional disclosure or demonstration of job-relevant characteristics beyond extraversion and verbal skill, even in this short
social exchange. Specifically, interviewers’ initial impressions reflected the candidate’s self-ratings of job qualifications. This may imply that other job-relevant information is communicated during rapport building. Alternatively, candidates who perceive themselves as more qualified may have greater self-efficacy, and that self-efficacy is what is communicated and captured in the initial impression.

Our mediation analyses illustrate that the effect of extraversion and verbal skill on structured evaluations is fully mediated by the initial impression. These applicant characteristics, thus, appear to be observed very early in the interview. Job-relevant characteristics such as these may be meaningfully rated within the first few minutes of the social interaction, and more interaction may not substantially alter the influence of these particular characteristics.

Our results also shed light on the importance of the first stage of Dipboye’s (2005) two-stage decision framework. According to this model, interviewers first categorize applicants in a relatively unthinking way. This stage is followed by a characterization process. During characterization, traits are inferred based on candidate behaviour and answers to interview questions. The model posits that if interviewers gain information that contradicts their initial categorization, they engage in a process of correction and change their initial impression to incorporate this information. In our study, the initial impressions interviewers formed are an example of the categorization stage. Candidate behaviours during the interview, such as the use of impression-management tactics (e.g., Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005), should impact the interviewers’ characterization process. Results of our study, in concert with findings in the impression-management literature, show that candidate characteristics and behaviour during both stages have a strong influence on structured evaluations.

**Limitations**

Our study has some limitations. First, use of students as candidates in a mock interview setting may limit the generalizability of these findings. However, both candidates and interviewers were highly motivated and had chosen to participate to improve their interviewing technique. Recent research on behaviours in the structured interview supports the validity of findings based on mock interviews (Levashina & Campion, 2007). In the Barrick et al. (2010) study, mock interview ratings predicted real-world outcomes. Thus, although relying on a mock interview may affect the magnitude of the relationships in this study, evidence suggests that our results reflect meaningful relationships that would be found in actual interviews.

Second, our study assesses two theoretically important predictors of initial impressions—extraversion and verbal skill—however, there are other possible predictors. Candidates’ non-verbal skill (Barrick et al., 2009) and physical attractiveness (Hosoda et al., 2003; Tews et al., 2009) may also influence initial impressions. Additionally, such variables may potentially correlate with our predictors. Because other variables such as these were not included in our study as controls, the magnitude of the relationships between both extraversion and verbal skill with interviewer initial impression may be overestimated.

Lastly, to control for job qualifications in our study, students rated their own qualifications for the job. Our results do indicate variance on this measure, but self-ratings are not ideal. For example, students oriented towards impression management may overrate their qualifications. An independent assessment of candidate qualifications is recommended in future research.
Implications

Our findings suggest a number of important implications for research and practice.

Theory of interview processes

Consistent with Barrick et al. (2010), our results underscore the importance of using a two-stage decision framework to study the structured interview. Further investigation regarding initial impressions formed during rapport building is needed. Future research should investigate other candidate characteristics impacting initial impressions as well as interviewer characteristics that affect how initial impressions influence decision making. In addition, future research should examine the mechanisms linking antecedents, initial impressions, and structured evaluations. For example, another avenue to explore is differential relationships between specific competencies and initial impressions; if the strength of the relationships does not vary significantly, this suggests a halo-type effect.

Validity of employment interviews

An important question is whether capturing extraversion and verbal skill in the initial impression enhances or detracts from the predictive validity of the interview. In both cases, the answer may depend on the type of job as extraversion and verbal skill are more valid in jobs that require extensive social interaction (e.g., sales, management) or teamwork (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Mount, Barrick, & Stewart, 1998). For positions where these predictors are not job relevant, favourable impressions formed during rapport building may introduce error into later interview evaluations, thereby reducing predictive validity.

Our results may help explain why the interview exhibits less construct-related validity than desired. Research indicates that structured interview evaluations are more strongly influenced by candidate and interviewer factors than by the construct being measured (Van Iddekinge, Raymark, Eidson, & Attenweiler, 2004). In our study, the structured interview was designed to assess nine constructs (e.g., adaptability); yet our findings show that initial impressions heavily influenced interviewer evaluations. Thus, initial impressions may bias interviewers’ structured evaluations and limit the discriminant prediction of specific questions and constructs. We would expect an even greater effect in unstructured interviews. Although we do not have evidence on this effect in an unstructured context, Dipboye’s work, which shows the influence of pre-interview information on post-interview outcomes, supports such an expectation (e.g., Macan & Dipboye, 1990; Phillips & Dipboye, 1989).

Hiring practices

Our findings can help organizations improve the effectiveness of the interview as a selection tool. One possibility for reducing the impact of initial impressions is to eliminate the rapport-building stage altogether. For example, at the outset of the interview, the interviewer could avoid small talk and read a script that explains the structured interview process. Yet, social–psychological research consistently shows that people engage in evaluations during first encounters in a matter of seconds (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Bar et al., 2006; Watson, 1989; Willis & Todorov, 2006). Thus, initial impression formation may be difficult to prevent. In addition, organizations might be reluctant to eliminate rapport building due to potential negative candidate reactions (Chapman & Zweig, 2005).

Another possibility for managing the influence of initial impressions is to formally evaluate, immediately after rapport building, a few candidate characteristics related to
job performance. This is similar to ‘speed interviewing’ techniques that some firms are adopting to reduce the time demands of interviewing candidates during early stages of the hiring process (Needleman, 2007). However, the predictive validity of initial impression assessments or ‘speed interviewing’ ratings has not been empirically determined. Even if future research shows that such interviewing tactics have predictive validity, the practice would be most successful in jobs where extraversion or verbal skill is relevant to performance. At a minimum, organizations should ensure interviewers are aware of the impact initial impressions have on structured evaluations.

The prevalence of the interview in selection requires an understanding of the factors impacting interviewers’ hiring decisions. Building on Barrick et al. (2010), our study shows that impressions that emerge during rapport building are significantly related to interviewers’ structured evaluation of the candidate. Furthermore, the candidate’s ability to convey a more positive initial impression is related to their level of extraversion and verbal skill. These findings underscore the importance of using a two-stage decision process when studying interviewer judgment processes, because information gleaned from the unstructured meet-and-greet stage influences interviewer evaluations during the structured interview. Further, these findings suggest candidate attributes affecting initial impressions formed during rapport building impact and potentially limit the criterion and construct validity of the structured interview.

References


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