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## Abstract

*The verbal behaviors of 25 corporate recruiters were content analyzed and compared to student applicants' postinterview evaluations of them. Qualitative and quantitative analyses identified and counted helper and other responses made by recruiters. Additional analyses indicated significant variability in the quality of interviews, the talkativeness of recruiters, and the relative impact of recruiter verbal behaviors on the applicants' ratings. Recruiters who paraphrased, asked questions, and made influencing statements tended to be rated significantly higher on their expertness, or competence. Recruiters who disclosed sometimes-irrelevant information tended to be rated significantly lower on Responsiveness. These results are discussed within the framework of both critical contacts and social influence theories. Suggestions are made for further research and for what constitutes "good" recruiting verbal style.*

## **The Critical Contact: A Study of Recruiter Verbal Behavior During Campus Interviews**

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Employment interviews vary widely in specific form and content but essentially have three purposes: to select potential employees, to solicit potential employees, and to give potential employees information about the organization (Street, 1986). During these interviews, both applicants and employers attempt to make a good impression on one another: applicants hope to elicit job offers; employers hope to attract top-quality employees.

One specific type of employment interview is the screening interview, used extensively by mid-sized to large organizations to attract and screen high quality prospective employees from university campuses. Screening interviews often result in follow-up interviews and subsequent employment. In fact, Ralston and Brady (1994) estimate that fifty percent of all managers and professionals with fewer than three years of work experience on entry are selected through a process that begins with a screening interview. These interviews are expensive, however. The average cost to the employing institution of attracting and selecting one of these new employees in the mid-1990s was over \$2000 (Ralston & Brady). Screening interviews are frequently the first contact between an employing institution and a prospective employee. Clearly, research that identifies factors contributing to successful screening interviews (i.e., attracting top-quality applicants) would be of practical use to business and industry.

Several authors have found that recruiter behavior affects applicants' perceptions of the company (Harn & Thornton, 1985; Harris, 1989; Rynes & Miller, 1983; Rynes, Heneman, & Schwab, 1980). A framework used to conceptualize this behavioral influence is critical contacts theory (Harn & Thornton; Ralston & Brady, 1994). Critical contacts theory suggests that "applicants are ... influenced by what transpires during interviews and, in particular, by the characteristics of organizational representatives" (Ralston & Brady, p. 63). Some researchers have argued that critical contacts theory is a particularly appropriate framework for conceptualizing campus recruiting (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Dipboye, 1992, Harris, 1989; Rynes, 1990), because students have limited information about and contact with potential employers and therefore may be especially likely to be influenced by the recruiter. Research done from this perspective indicates that applicants may view the recruiter as a salient representative of the company and use the recruiter's behavior as a model of what to expect from the organization (Turban & Dougherty, 1992; Rynes et al., 1980). In one study, "applicant perceptions of recruiter behaviors [were] the strongest predictors of attraction to firms" (Turban & Dougherty, p. 760). Rynes et al. found that recruitment experiences and recruiters were second only to job characteristics in their impact, both positive and negative, on applicant perceptions of "fit" with the company. They also found that "negative recruitment experiences were enough to completely eliminate the organization from further consideration" (p. 515).

If recruiter behavior influences applicants' perceptions of the company, what specific recruiter behaviors have the most positive impact on applicants? Social influence theory (Strong, 1968) suggests that when an agent has interpersonal influence (as the recruiter may have), certain behaviors by the agent will increase that agent's influence. Agent behaviors that exhibit expertness (e.g., competence), social attractiveness (e.g., likeability, warmth), and trustworthiness (e.g., credibility) are expected to positively influence the receiver and give the agent more power or influence over the receiver. Social influence constructs are very similar to the "positive regard" concepts in counseling research (e.g., Egan, 1990). Like "you-attitude" (e.g., Reinsch, 1979; Shelby, 1988; Shelby & Reinsch, 1995), they can cause the receiver to view the sender more positively. Although social influence theory has been widely and strongly supported by social psychological and counseling research (see monograph by Corrigan, Dell, Lewis, & Schmidt, 1980) it has not been previously applied to organizational recruiting.

Are behaviors that are influential in counseling interviews also influential in screening or recruiting interviews? Lewis (1980) has suggested that concepts and techniques drawn from counseling can serve as

heuristics for interview research and practice. Empirical evidence for this suggestion includes research indicating that recruiters who use more *helper* behaviors (i.e., verbal behaviors that are emphasized by counselors in counseling relationships) have a more positive impact on applicants. For example, Harn and Thornton (1985) surveyed 105 students following their campus recruiting interviews and found that recruiter "listening skills" were significantly related to applicant willingness to accept a job offer. Consistent with critical contacts theory, they also found that this relationship was even stronger when the applicant viewed the recruiter as a representative of the company. Washburn and Hakel (1973) found that interviewers who nodded their heads, smiled frequently, and maintained eye contact were evaluated more favorably by applicants than interviewers who did not engage in these affiliative and reinforcing behaviors. In addition, a number of studies found that recruiters whose behaviors were rated as friendly, attentive, genuine and sensitive, and warm and sincere received the most favorable ratings by applicants (Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Barocas & Vance, 1972; Odirone & Hann, 1961; Sutton & Carleton, 1962). Harn and Thornton found that listening skills and non-directive counseling behaviors (e.g., summarizing, clarifying) contributed to the applicant's view of the interviewer as warm and empathic. They also found that opportunities for self-expression, as well as being asked open-ended questions, left applicants more satisfied with and more positive about the interview. Dougherty, Turban, and Callender (1994) found that the use of "positive regard" behaviors (e.g., supportive questions, verbal encouragers, positive vocal style) was significantly related to applicant and recruiter rapport. In other studies, applicants responded positively to empathic and sensitive interviewers (Dipboye, 1992; Harris, 1989). To summarize, empirical evidence suggests that applicants evaluate an interview (and perhaps a company) based on their interaction with the recruiter, and this interaction is more positively influential when the recruiter engages in helper behaviors that exhibit general attentiveness and positive regard.

Additionally, research indicates that warm and friendly recruiters elicit positive applicant impressions of the company (Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Schmitt & Coyle, 1976). In a study of 87 campus recruiters, Macan and Dipboye (1990) found that applicants who rated the recruiter positively also rated the job and company positively and were also more likely to accept an employment offer. Other studies have found that recruiter behaviors such as showing interest and concern were related to applicants' accepting offers (Rogers & Sincoff, 1978). Rynes, Bretz, and Gerhart (1991) found that students said their attraction to employers was positively influenced when they felt "specially" treated by the recruiter (p. 502).

Despite the consistency of these findings, existing research is limited because most of these studies relied upon analog situations or postinterview surveys to assess recruiter behavior. A handful of content analyses of actual in-vivo recruiter behaviors have been conducted (e.g., Dougherty et al., 1994; Jablin & Miller, 1990; McComb & Jablin, 1984; Tullar, 1989a, b). However, Dougherty used only three interviewers, and Tullar's data were obtained from 20 interviewers attending an interview training course. Another limitation of past content analyses has been the reliance on post-hoc global impressions rather than a coding system specifically designed to identify recruiter-initiated rapport building and other counselor-type behaviors; thus, some assertions about the importance of these behaviors could not be directly examined. In addition, although the series of content analyses by Jablin and his associates attempted to demonstrate a significant relationship between interviewer behavior and outcome (whether the company offered a second interview), none of their studies measured the applicants' perceptions about the recruiter. Finally, prior content analyses have lacked a theoretical framework which could help guide the interpretation of findings. To our knowledge, no theoretically-based content analyses have been conducted.

Smeltzer (1993) has pointed out that research needs to be grounded in theory, apply to "real world" phenomena, and provide directions for future research. In the present study, we sought to eliminate some of the limitations in past research and to study the use of helper behaviors and their impact on applicant perceptions during screening interviews. Specifically, this study was designed to address the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What types of verbal responses do corporate recruiters make, as measured by a quantitative, behavioral rating system developed for categorizing verbal behaviors in helping relationships?

**RQ2:** Can other verbal behaviors be identified when measured by a qualitative behavioral rating system, designed for verbal behaviors not assessed in question 1?

**RQ3:** Are any of these verbal responses related to ratings of the recruiter by the applicant?

Our review of the literature on critical contacts and social influence theories allowed us to develop two hypotheses related to Question 3:

**H1:** Helper verbal responses by recruiters would be related to higher postinterview evaluations by applicants.

**H2:** Recruiters who engaged in substantial amounts of talk which took the focus away from the applicant would be rated lower by applicants.

## Method

Campus recruiters were audio-taped during actual screening interviews, and college student applicants' perceptions of the interview and the interviewer were assessed immediately after the interview. Recruiter verbal behavior was later evaluated by a criterion-trained external judge, and we examined associations between recruiter verbal behavior and applicant perceptions.

### Participants

The sample for this study was obtained from the Career Development Office at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. The initial pool of participants included all of the business recruiters who interviewed liberal arts majors at the university for corporate jobs over a 5-month period ( $N = 40$ ; 26 male and 14 female voluntary participants). We picked liberal arts majors because they were the most numerous on campus, allowing the largest sample. Furthermore, many business-oriented students at the University of Minnesota actually major in the liberal arts because of severe restrictions on admission to the School of Business. Many of the recruiters who participated in this study also interviewed business students during the same period.

Prior to these interviews, the 40 recruiters received a letter explaining the purpose of the study and a copy of a demographic questionnaire to complete. They returned the questionnaire either by mail or by hand-delivery on the day they arrived on campus to conduct their interviews. Although 100% agreed to participate, 10 recruiters were excluded from the study because of company policies that prohibited the recording of interviews. Two more individuals were excluded from analyses because they conducted their interviews as a team. Another three were excluded due to mechanical difficulties with taping their sessions. The final sample consisted of 18 male and 7 female recruiters, representing 21 different corporations.

Most of the 18 male and 7 female recruiters were in their late 20s to early 30s ( $M = 31.68$ ,  $SD = 6.14$ ). The ethnicity of the majority was Anglo (92%;  $n = 23$ ), which was expected given the geographic region of the United States from which this sample was taken; 8% ( $n = 2$ ) were African American. Most recruiters (88%;  $n = 22$ ) had completed a four-year college degree in either business (36%;  $n = 8$ ) or liberal arts (32%;  $n = 8$ ); one (4%) had a master's degree. Of the rest of the recruiters, 8% ( $n = 2$ ) had completed some college coursework. The range of recruiting experience was quite varied, from 0 to 12 years ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 3.32$ ). Only 52% ( $n = 13$ ) of the recruiters reported that they had received interview training, and the length of training varied. Of those who reported training, most stated they had received very little, i.e., one to two days (64%) and that the training was provided by

their company (69%). For 23%, training was conducted by outside consultants; 8% did not specify their type of training. Most recruiters (So%;  $n = 20$ ) stated that they conducted structured interviews.

As is typical in campus recruiting, interviews were scheduled at 30-minute intervals, and the recruiters typically interviewed 5 to 12 applicants a day. The interviews in the present analyses were conducted with 25 different applicants (12 men and 13 women). According to information reported on a brief demographic questionnaire, the applicants' mean age was 23.4 ( $SD = 3.0$ ). Most were Anglo (92%;  $n = 23$ ); 1 was Hispanic and 1 was African-American. Most of the applicants were college seniors (84%;  $n = 21$ ); 1 was a college junior and 3 were alumni. Their most common majors were economics (28%;  $n = 7$ ), math (24%;  $n = 6$ ), and speech communication (16%;  $n = 4$ ). For 88% ( $n = 22$ ), these interviews occurred in their first season of campus recruiting; the interview we analyzed may or may not have been their first interview. Most applicants (76%;  $n = 19$ ) were interviewing for entry-level retail sales, business sales, insurance sales, or management training positions. The rest (24%;  $n = 6$ ) were interviewing for entry-level actuarial positions in the insurance industry.

## Instruments

We used the Counselor Rating Form - Short Version (CRF-S; Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983), which was designed specifically to assess the counselor influence-bases predicted by social influence theory. The short version was derived from a successful, longer version (Barak & LaCrosse, 1975). It consists of 12 adjectives that respondents use to rate their perceptions of the counselor by using a 7-point scale with anchors of 1 (not very) and 7 (very). Summing the appropriate items yields three separate subscale scores (derived by factor analysis; Barak & La-Crosse): (a) Expertness, assessed by the adjectives *experienced*, *expert*, *prepared*, and *skillful*; (b) Attractiveness, assessed by the adjectives *friendly*, *likeable*, *sociable*, and *warm*; and (c) Trustworthiness, assessed by the adjectives *honest*, *reliable*, *sincere*, and *trustworthy*. Subscale scores can range from 4 to 28. The CRF-S has consistently demonstrated strong psychometric properties of test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and both content and construct validity (e.g., Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983; Epperson & Pecnik, 1985; Tracey, Glidden, & Kokotovic, 1988). In the present study, the CRF-S had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = .85) and only its title was altered for participants (it was called the "Recruiter Rating Form").

We used the Recruiter Evaluation Form, the standard recruiter evaluation form used at the field site at which this study was conducted. Applicants rate recruiter behavior on nine items using a five-point Likert scale with anchors at every point, from *definitely no* (1) to *definitely*

*yes* (5). Item examples are: "Recruiter was attentive and responsive and showed an interest in me as an applicant"; "Recruiter asked questions relevant to my interests, abilities, and background"; and "Recruiter adhered to the schedule and made effective use of the interview time." Reliability on these nine items was moderate (Cronbach alpha = .75). Scores on the Recruiter Evaluation Form can range from 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating a more favorable rating.

The Recruiter Evaluation Form also contained two validity-check questions, answered *yes* or *no*: "I have a career interest in this organization," and "The recruiter impressed me as a professional representative of this organization." All applicants in the present study responded "yes" to both questions. Although these are self-report data that contain some demand characteristics, responses to these questions suggest that applicants were serious interviewees and support the critical contacts theory claim that applicants view the recruiter as representing the organization.

The Helping Skills Verbal Response System (HSVRS; Danish, D:Augelli, & Brock, 1974) was used to rate recruiter verbal behaviors. Past research has found that the HSVRS discriminates between paraprofessional helpers and untrained individuals (McCarthy, Danish, & D:Augelli, 1979) and among crisis interveners, psychotherapists, and nursing students (McCarthy & Knapp, 1984; Ryden, McCarthy, Lewis, & Sherman, 1991). It has also been used to assess the verbal behavior of individuals in diverse occupations, such as bartenders, beauticians, dietitians, and social services workers (S. J. Danish, personal communication, 1980).

To use the HSVRS, researchers first break all of the statements into thought units, or independent clauses that contain a subject and a verb. Every thought unit is then classified into one of nine types of responses listed in Table 1. (Some of the verbal behaviors measured by the HSVRS were re-named for this study to make their meaning more accessible to a business communication audience.) Recruiter thought units were the basic unit of analysis. The third author, a criterion-trained rater with extensive experience in using the HSVRS to assess interpersonal communications in a variety of dyadic contexts, categorized the statements. The percentage of agreement between the rater's categorization of 140 specific responses (into the types listed in Table 1) on a training audio-tape and the HSVRS authors' unanimous judgment of each response constituted the reliability check. Rater agreement with the HSVRS authors for the 9 categories of responses ranged from 80% to 100%.

A second reliability check was done by having a second criterion-trained rater (a doctoral student) independently rate a subset of



tapes ( $n = 9$ ). Cohen's (1960) kappa for the two raters for each of the nine categories ranged from .81 to 1.0.

In order to gain additional descriptive information, the audiotapes were qualitatively analyzed by the first and third authors, who identified seven variables. Three of these variables were selected a priori, based on literature suggesting that they may affect applicant perceptions of the recruiter: (a) uses resume (Rynes & Miller, 1983), (b) interrupts (McComb & Jablin, 1984), and (c) invites questions (Harn & Thornton, 1985). The other four recruiter behaviors were identified by having the raters listen to a subset of tapes ( $n = 4$ ) and develop the categories based on their occurrence in the interviews: (d) engages in pre-interview small talk, (e) engages in postinterview small talk, (f) provides advance organizers, (g) provides follow-through. A Recruiter Behavior Protocol was developed to assess the presence or absence of these seven recruiter behaviors in each interview (see Table 2). The third author coded the tapes, and a second rater (a doctoral student) independently rated a subset of tapes ( $n = 9$ ). The percentage of agreement for the two raters for each of the seven categories ranged from 90% to 100%.

Finally, the third author and the doctoral research assistant rated the quality of each interview. Raters identified "high" and "low" quality interviews based on the raters' subjective impressions of generic interview communication skills (e.g., Goodale, 1982).

### **Interview Procedures**

When the recruiters arrived on campus, the placement center staff gave them their schedules for the day and the resumes of the applicants they would interview. Recruiters were given a standard set of instructions that oriented them to the office. Next, the recruiters conducted their interviews which were audiotaped with the knowledge of both the recruiter and the applicant.

Immediately following the interviews, placement center staff asked applicants to complete the two postinterview assessments: the Recruiter Evaluation Form and the CRF-8. Center staff also collected these assessments to assure the applicants that their responses would be confidential. As is typical with campus recruiting, these were screening interviews. Recruiters contacted selected students later for follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews were not part of the present study.

One tape for each recruiter was randomly selected in a stratified manner in order to obtain approximately equal numbers of male and female applicants. Because some recruiters had only one tape that met our inclusion criteria, multiple interviews per recruiter could not be analyzed without seriously restricting the sample size of recruiters.

Since 76% of the 25 recruiters reported conducting structured interviews, we believe that one randomly selected interview was reasonably representative of the behaviors of that recruiter.

## **Results**

The three most common recruiter verbal behaviors were statements disclosing company information, self-disclosures, and Helper Responses - asking applicants questions, equally divided between open and close-ended types. Verbal influencers (e.g., typically encouragers) occurred with moderate frequency.

Our results from the Recruiter Behavior Protocol indicated that most recruiters engaged in the types of structuring behaviors and small talk that are generally expected in interviews.

As our hypotheses predicted, Helper Responses were related to higher postinterview evaluations by applicants, and Disclosure Responses, which involved substantial talking by recruiters, were related to lower postinterview evaluations by applicants.

In the following sections, we will first report data about recruiter verbal behavior, grouping similar behaviors. We will then report observations and data about how the recruiters appeared to structure the interviews, using data from both the HSVRS and the Recruiter Behavior Protocol, as appropriate. While this section will focus primarily on the entire recruiter sample, two distinct groups of recruiters emerged during content analysis: high talkers and low talkers. We will report differences between these two groups.

### **Factor Structure of the HSVRS**

Two behaviors measured by the HSVRS occurred with very low frequency and were not analyzed in this study: asides and reflections of feeling. In response to Research Question 2, the remaining categories were subjected to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation to determine the factor structure of the remaining verbal behaviors measured by the HSVRS. Three factors that explained 68% of the variance in the HSVRS ratings were retained: Helper Responses (questions, paraphrasing, and influencers), Disclosure Responses (information-giving and self-disclosure) and Guiding Responses (personal feedback and advice).

### **Helper Responses: Questions, Paraphrasing, and Influencers**

The recruiters used several Helping Responses. As Table 1 shows, the recruiters used a moderate number of influencers as defined by the HSVRS. These were brief, often positive responses to applicant statements, as well as recruiter personal opinions about the company and/or job for which an applicant was interviewing. Paraphrasing appli-

cant statements accounted for a relatively small proportion of the recruiters' total behavior.

While the conventional wisdom about interviews is that they are predominantly made up of interviewer questions to the applicant, this is not always the case (e.g., DeBell & Dinger, 1997). In this sample, as well, recruiter questions (both open and closed) were only the third most common verbal behavior we found with the HSVRS. The relative proportion of closed and open questions was equal. Examples of recruiters' closed questions were "Do you graduate in August?" "Have you sat for any of the exams?" "So did you get a chance to read through the material?" "Just happy to be there, right?" Examples of open questions were: "If I ran into someone who knew you, what would they say about you?" "What are some things you want to change?" "What are some of your qualities?" "Where do you see yourself in [X] years?"

**Table 1**  
**Recruiter Verbal Behaviors in 25 Screening Interviews**

Verbal Behavior	n	<i>M</i>		
		Proportion	Range	<i>SD</i>
<i>Helper Responses</i>				
Asks closed questions	24	.08	.00-.27	.06
Asks open questions	23	.08	.00-.28	.07
Uses influencers: encouragers, opinions	24	.12	.00-.28	.07
Paraphrases applicant statements	23	.02	.00-.08	.02
<i>Disclosure Responses</i>				
Provides facts or resources	25	.43	.25-.63	.12
Provides factual self-information (self-disclosure)	25	.21	.05-.54	.13
<i>Guiding Responses</i>				
Suggests alternative behaviors (advice)	23	.03	.00-.07	.02
Gives personal reactions (feedback) to applicant	22	.01	.00-.05	.01

As Table 2 shows, 92% of recruiters invited the applicant to ask questions. This result is consistent with the results of Babbitt and Jablin (1985), who found that 80% of the recruiters in their sample invited applicant questions.

### **Disclosure Responses: Information-Giving and Self-Disclosure**

The most common HSVRS response was information-giving. Recruiters provided detailed descriptions of their companies and the positions for which applicants were interviewing. For example, they provided facts about the nature of the job and company atmosphere, history, and structure. Even when applicants had received informa-

tion pamphlets and/or attended orientation sessions prior to the interview, recruiters reviewed much of this material with them. The amount of information-giving suggests that a major goal of these recruiting interviews was to "sell" the company.

Self-disclosure was the second most common type of verbal response we measured. All of the recruiters made self-disclosing responses; some, a great many. The raters identified three goal-related kinds of disclosures: (a) to "sell" the company- e.g., "I made it there; they really helped me learn the ropes!" and "I've always found them to be fair"; (b) to establish rapport - e.g., "You're from up north? I am too!" This type of self-disclosure was often part of the pre-interview small talk engaged in by the recruiters; and (c) tangential self-disclosure. This type of disclosure typically occurred well into the interview, after initial rapport-building remarks had been made. With these responses, the recruiters seemed to be pursuing issues of personal interest, rather than areas of central concern to employment decisions, e.g., "I used to play hockey, too, ... but I found that ... and then ... " These disclosures tended to be lengthy and shifted the focus from the applicant to the recruiter.

### **Guiding Responses: Personal Feedback and Advice**

The recruiters used very few personal feedback statements, i.e., direct statements of their feelings about or personal reactions to the applicant. The few personal feedback statements that were made occurred at the end of the interview when some recruiters said they enjoyed talking to or meeting an applicant.

Recruiters also gave very little advice, primarily directions to applicants about what they should do next (e.g., "You should call us if you don't hear by .. :').

### **Interview Structuring**

As Table 2 shows, recruiters used several different verbal behaviors to structure the interview. Most recruiters, 75%, began and ended the interview with small talk (e.g., comments about the weather, campus events, etc.). Sixty-four percent used advance organizers to explain the interview process to the applicant, and 88% engaged in follow-through- explaining to the applicant what would happen after the interview. Another structuring technique used by 64% of the recruiters involved working from the applicant's resume during the interview. Finally, although we did not formally analyze it, one rater noted the use of silence by several recruiters. Recruiters appeared to use silence either to review the applicant's resume (inferred from recruiter comments such as "I see here on your resume that ... ") or to select the next interview question.

**Table 2**  
**Interview Procedures in 25 Screening Interviews**

Procedure	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Opening the Interview:</i>		
Engages in pre-interview small talk	19	76
Uses advance organizers to explain interview process	16	64
<i>Body of Interview:</i>		
Invites applicant to ask questions	<b>23</b>	92
Refers to information on applicant resume	<b>16</b>	64
Interrupts applicant	<b>5</b>	20
<i>Closing the Interview:</i>		
Describes the follow-through process after the interview	22	88
Engages in postinterview small talk	18	72

In our sample, both male and female recruiters were twice as likely to engage in small talk with female applicants as with male applicants. However, the sample was too small to conduct statistical tests of this result with adequate power.

### **Length of Interviews and Recruiter Thought Units**

These interviews varied considerably in length, from **18** to 50 minutes. The average interview lasted 28.84 minutes ( $SD = 7.96$ ). The number of recruiter thought units expressed was also variable, ranging from 64 to 730 ( $M = 207.76$ ;  $SD = 132.20$ ). High numbers of thought units were the result both of the recruiter taking more turns to talk and taking longer turns. However, thought units and length of interview were not related to each other.

### **High versus Low Talkers**

Given the variability in recruiter verbal activity levels, we conducted a post-hoc quantitative analysis on recruiter talkativeness. Because recruiter verbal activity appeared to constitute a bi-modal distribution, we created a median split, based on the number of thought units divided by interview length, to establish one group of high talkers ( $n = 12$ ) and one group of low talkers ( $n = 13$ ). These two groups did not differ significantly on any of the demographic variables assessed in this study, but their verbal behaviors did significantly differ, as would be expected. The results of *t*-tests revealed that, as expected, high talkers used significantly more thought units ( $M = 281$ ;  $SD = 158.12$ ) than low talkers ( $M = 140.15$ ;  $SD = 41.50$ ;  $t(23) = -3.10$ ;  $p < .005$ ). Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the two groups in length of interviews. These results suggest that while the recruiters in the two groups generally spent the same average amount of time with applicants, the high talkers used twice as much interview

time speaking as did low talkers, who used significantly more interview time listening. A related finding was that, as measured by the Recruiter Behavior Protocol, only 20% of the recruiters interrupted applicants when they were speaking. These recruiters were all from the high-talk group.

A phi coefficient revealed that high talkers were significantly more likely to be women than men ( $r = .47, p < .02$ ). In addition, high talkers were significantly less likely to use Helper Responses (questions, paraphrases, and influencers) than were low talkers ( $r = -.64, p < .001$ ).

### **Best Interviews**

A phi coefficient revealed that high-quality interviews (based on raters' global impression of the quality of recruiter verbal behavior) tended to involve significantly less talk by the recruiters than did low-quality interviews ( $r = -.44, p < .05$ ). In addition, a point-biserial correlation indicated that high quality interviews also tended to use more Helper Responses ( $r = .71, p < .001$ ). Both of these findings support our hypotheses.

### **Applicants' Ratings of Recruiters**

In response to Research Question 3, a number of simple Pearson correlations were calculated to measure the relationship between the HSVRS categorizations of recruiter verbal behaviors and the evaluations of recruiters by the applicants. All correlations were rounded to two decimal places. Because we used these correlations to investigate one research question (Question 3, with two underlying hypotheses), we considered these "one family" of analyses (Marsculio & Serlin, 1988) and set alpha at .05.

Ratings on the Recruiter Evaluation Form ranged from 27 to 45, with a mean of 41 ( $SD = 4.0$ ). These data indicate a negative skew on the instrument, suggesting that applicants generally rated recruiters favorably.

Reliability (Cronbach alpha) for the Recruiter Evaluation Form was .75. Because this indicates only moderate internal consistency, we conducted a principal components analysis with varimax rotation to determine the underlying factor structure of the rating form. We retained three factors, accounting for 76% of the variance in the instrument: Responsiveness (consisting of items indicating that the recruiter answered questions, asked applicants if they had questions, gave a timeline for the interview process, and gave applicants sufficient time to express themselves in the interview); Informative (recruiters gave general and specific company information to the applicant); and Professionalism (recruiters asked relevant questions, showed interest in the applicant, and stuck to the schedule).

We then correlated these three factors with the categories on the HSVRS. The one significant relationship supported hypothesis 2. Recruiters who engaged in more Disclosure Responses (as measured by the HSVRS) tended to be rated significantly lower on Responsiveness ( $r = -.48, p < .02$ ). A trend in the data also supported hypothesis 1: Recruiters who were rated high on Professionalism were more likely to use Helper Responses ( $r = .35, p < .10$ ).

Additionally, point-biserial correlations revealed significant relationships between quality of interviews, talkativeness, and ratings by applicants. Applicants tended to rate high-quality interviews significantly higher on Professionalism ( $r = .41, p < .05$ ). Finally, recruiters who were high talkers tended to be rated lower by applicants on Responsiveness ( $r = -.42, p < .02$ ). Although this latter finding was post-hoc, it does support hypothesis 2.

Ratings of recruiters on the CRF-S ranged from 54 to 84, with a mean of 73.83 ( $SD = 9.23$ ). These data also indicate a negative skew on the instrument, suggesting that applicants generally rated recruiters favorably.

Correlations between the HSVRS categories and ratings on the CRF-S show a strong positive relationship between ratings of Expertness and the use of Helper Responses ( $r = .72, p < .001$ ). Recruiters who paraphrased, asked questions, and made influencing statements tended to be rated significantly higher on their Expertness, or competence. In addition, a trend in the data suggests that recruiters who were rated high on Attractiveness tended to use more Guiding Responses ( $r = .37, p < .08$ ). These results support hypothesis 1.

## Discussion

This study analyzed empirical data from recruiting interviews, using constructs from critical contacts and social influence theories. Critical contacts theory suggests that applicants view recruiters as salient representatives of the corporation. The theory is supported in this study by the fact that all participating applicants stated that they did view the recruiter in this manner. The recruiting interview was a salient "first impression" of the corporation that impacted applicants. Our results suggest that recruiters who use certain types of verbal -- behaviors create impressions on the applicants, both positive and negative. Past research has shown that these impressions constitute part of the information that applicants use to determine their interest in a company (Harn & Thornton, 1985). Thus, recruiters' verbal behavior in screening interviews affects companies' abilities to attract quality employees.

Social influence theory suggests that interviewers who are seen as expert, socially attractive, and trustworthy will have a more positive

impact on interviewees. This theory has received strong support in counseling research and indirect support in past recruiting research. The results of the present study highlight the link between recruiter behaviors of Expertness and Attractiveness to applicants' positive appraisals of recruiters, underscoring the importance of particular interpersonal skills for interviewers.

A limitation of this study was the small sample size. One result of this was that only large effects obtained statistical significance; many trends and moderate effects were obtained in the data but were not significant due to the small sample. Furthermore, we focused on Anglo college undergraduate students. Further studies with larger and more heterogeneous samples are warranted. In addition, multiple interviews with different interviewees perhaps could provide stronger evidence of the stability of recruiter behaviors. Finally, although the use of audiotapes in the present study had the advantage of being unobtrusive, their use precludes any real analysis of recruiter nonverbal behavior.

Verbal behaviors that occurred with low frequency were Helper Responses of paraphrases, and Guiding Responses of personal feedback and giving advice. Recruiters may have been cautious about using Guiding Responses so as not to appear to make misleading statements. Finally, recruiters in this sample gave no attention to applicant affect - not surprising since this was a business setting - nor did they make "aside" comments.

Our finding that helper-type responses by the recruiters were related to higher ratings by the applicants on the Professionalism of the recruiter implies two things: (a), that applicants positively evaluated the recruiters who asked relevant questions, stuck to the schedule, and demonstrated interest in them as applicants; and (b), that Helper Responses, which in this study consisted of paraphrasing, questions, and influencing comments, appeared to have positively impacted the rating of the recruiter as professional.

In support of our prediction, we found that high ratings in Expertness were strongly and positively associated with high levels of Helper Responses. Recruiters who used more Helper Responses tended to be rated as more Expert, i.e., competent. This is an interesting finding. It may imply that applicants expect competent recruiters to use Helper Responses. In other words, they may expect that the interview will include recruiter listening, questions, and influence or encouragement. The fact that Helper Responses were not related to recruiter social attractiveness suggests that interviewees have criteria for evaluating a recruiter's performance as a professional that are distinct from their criteria for evaluating social attractiveness. In other words, using Helper Responses did not make the applicants "like" the



recruiter more; rather, they seemed to make the applicants respect the recruiter more as a professional. These results are consistent with previous research drawn from social influence theory (Corrigan et al, 1980).

Interestingly, there was a trend in the data indicating that the use of Guiding Responses was related to perceptions of the recruiter as attractive. Guiding Responses involved recruiters' giving advice and also telling applicants how they felt about them (i.e., personal feedback, predominantly positive). Recruiters who made Guiding Responses tended to be seen as more attractive. These findings are consistent with social influence theory (Strong, 1968), which suggests that getting advice or feedback from a powerful authority figure, such as being told "I enjoyed our interview," would elicit liking for that authority figure. The implications of this for recruiting are that Helper and Guiding Responses may be particularly important in creating a positive first impression on college student applicants.

We also predicted that recruiters who engaged in substantial amounts of talk that took the focus away from the applicant (as would be involved in both information-giving and self-disclosure), would be rated lower by applicants. Consistent with our expectation, large amounts of Disclosure Responses were significantly related to lower ratings by the applicants on Responsiveness. This means that recruiters who did excessive self-disclosure or information-giving were seen as less responsive to and less interested in the applicant.

Three recruiter behaviors that occurred with great frequency in this sample were self-disclosure, information-giving, and talking, in general. We were surprised at both the frequency of these behaviors and how generally detrimental they were to applicant perceptions. When Disclosure Responses were used frequently by recruiters, they tended to result in lower interview ratings by applicants. In addition, highly disclosing recruiters were less likely to use Helper Responses, a type of response applicants appeared to like. Recruiter disclosure shifts the focus from the applicant to the recruiter and seems counterproductive when the goal of the interview is to assess applicant suitability for further interviewing. High levels of recruiter disclosure could have been related to a lack of interview skill, anxiety, or poor listening skills. The results of this study suggest that recruiter training might benefit from more focus on the disadvantages of extensive disclosure in the screening interview.

The high-talking recruiters in this sample tended to be rated lower in the interviews by both applicants and the data coders. Additionally, the high talkers were the only recruiters in the sample who interrupted the applicants. While interruptions can be seen either as attempts to wrest the floor away from the speaker or as affirmations of what the

speaker is saying (Tannen, 1994), our results suggest that interruptions were associated with less positive impressions of the recruiter. Interruptions generally appear to be an undesirable recruiter behavior, decreasing rapport and perhaps conveying an impression that the recruiter would rather speak than listen. In this study, high talkers also tended to be women recruiters. There is no obvious reason for this finding, and it was the only gender difference we found. It is probably premature to speculate about this finding, since the number of women recruiters in this sample was small ( $n = 7$ ).

### **Implications for Pedagogy and Practice**

In summary, these results provide a tentative profile of "high quality" versus "low quality" screening interviews. Good interviews appear to include substantial amounts of questioning and basic listening skills such as paraphrasing and minimal encouragers or influencers such as "good idea," or "I like the way you put that." Good interviews appear to include limited amounts of personal self-disclosure and talking in general. Our results suggest that the amount of information given should be screened and moderated. In general, this study provides additional empirical support for prior research that has suggested that helper skills are important in screening interviews (e.g., Dipboye, 1992; Harn & Thornton, 1985; Harris, 1989).

Although the high amounts of disclosure in these interviews, particularly information-giving, led us to think the recruiters were using the interview to "sell" the company, we suggest that a balance between recruiting and interviewing might be more productive. The information-giving in some interviews seems to have been overdone -for example, repeating information that applicants already had. Also, the raters noted that the information given included not only facts but also irrelevant details. We perceive that applicants did not expect this, they certainly did not need it, and they seemed not to like it. Perhaps the recruiters came to the interviews unclear about the goals of recruiting due to a lack of training. Poor listening skills may also have been a factor. These issues could be addressed explicitly during recruiter training and would likely improve interviewing technique, thereby supporting the purpose companies have for screening interviews - identifying and recruiting quality applicants.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Certain extensions of the present study might be informative. To further study critical contacts theory, researchers could replicate this study and compare the interviews of applicants who accept job offers and those who do not. Other extensions of this study might be to compare the behaviors of recruiters in screening interviews to interviewers in selection interviews.

One limitation of the present study was the sole focus on the behavior of the recruiter. Obviously, communication is an interpersonal process, and research that investigated the interaction between recruiter and applicant verbal exchanges could be informative.

Other ways in which recruiters may benefit from better listening skills could be examined. For example, recruiters could be trained in listening skills, and then their interviews could be compared to those of recruiters who were not trained. Video rather than audiotapes could be used so that nonverbal behaviors could be analyzed and their relative impact could be assessed. Such research might provide further support for the importance of helper behaviors in screening interviews.

The present findings suggest that researchers need to identify more appropriate models for understanding the recruiting interview. Critical contacts theory, while not without its critics (Ralston, 1993; Rynes, 1990) offers promise. In addition, social psychological theories such as social influence theory (Strong, 1968) have been demonstrated in this study to perhaps have relevance to recruiting interviews. Another model which might be theoretically applicable to interviews is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). This model identifies three central factors in persuasion - impression management tactics, the attractiveness of the message's source, and the social role of the individuals involved. This model focuses on how persuasion occurs in situations that lack time for deep processing of information, and it may be particularly suited to recruiting interviews. Finally, interpersonal attraction models such as social exchange theory (Blau, 1968) may offer useful constructs for future research.

More behavioral assessments of actual interviews need to be done. Content analyses, such as those conducted in the present study and others in the literature (e.g., Jablin and associates) are rare in the literature and tedious to conduct, but they provide a wealth of information not available in survey or analog studies. Martin's (1992) methodology offers one promising approach. In assessments of counseling interviews, counselors and clients were asked to review taped portions of their sessions and to discuss their own behaviors and intentions and those of the partner. This methodology would help to clarify why -- recruiters behave the way they do and would assess directly the impact of their behaviors on applicants. The use of tapes would stimulate recall and perhaps increase agreement about what occurred. This research could be a tandem step, along with studies like the present one, towards identifying "effective" recruiter behaviors.

Additional research is needed to clarify the impact of individual difference variables on employment interview process and outcome. Harris (1989) argues that there may be significant individual differences

between recruiters. Of special interest is recruiter and applicant gender. Our finding that both male and female recruiters were twice as likely to engage in small talk with female applicants as with male applicants suggests that female applicants may be treated differently and, perhaps, behave differently than males. Gender effects should be evaluated in future studies.

More research could also be done to further distinguish between recruiters who are high talkers and those who are low talkers. Studies using larger samples might identify demographic and other differences that differentiate these two types of recruiters. Studies could also further assess the differential effectiveness of low versus high talkers to corroborate or challenge our finding that high talkers, who used twice as much interview time speaking and used significantly fewer Helper Responses, tended to be rated lower by applicants. An important issue is how adequately a recruiter can evaluate an applicant using this interview style. Such research should have implications for recruiter training programs and ultimately improve the validity of the screening interview as a recruiting and selection instrument.

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