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Walking the Walk and Talking the Talk

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE IMPACT OF INTERVIEWING SKILLS ON APPLICANT ASSESSMENTS

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The first aim of this study was to investigate the unique contributions (beyond objective qualifications) of verbal and nonverbal interviewing skills to recruiters' assessments of applicants. The second aim was to examine whether applicant gender moderates these relationships. Using a sample of 311 recruiter-applicant dyads, we found that interviewing skills explained assessments beyond objective qualifications. Further, nonverbal skills were more strongly related to interview assessments than were verbal skills. Finally, we predicted that rational verbal skills would be more important for females than for males and that nonverbal skills would have a greater impact for males than for females. The former proposition was not supported; the latter was marginally supported.

Keywords: interview skills; impression management; applicant gender; verbal skills; nonverbal skills

Despite the increased reliance on technology, the employment interview continues to be the key procedure for collecting information about job applicants and for making selection decisions in organizations. Although the selection interview has received considerable attention in the past half century, studies directed at investigating how decisions are made in the interview continue to uncover valuable information. Surprisingly, few such studies have examined the impact of these interviewing skills on recruiters' assessments in real selection situations. Thus, one objective of this study is to examine the extent to which verbal and nonverbal interviewing skills affect interviewers' assessments of applicants in an applied setting.

In addition, applicant gender may play an important role in the impact of interviewing skills on recruiters' assessments. Some researchers have suggested that the effectiveness of upward influence tactics is a function of the

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influencer's gender (Ferris & Judge, 1991). There is also some empirical evidence that men and women may be evaluated differently, based on the influence strategy they pursue (Buttner & McEnally, 1996; Johnson & Scandura, 1994). Thus, a second goal of this study is to examine the interactive effects of gender and verbal and nonverbal interviewing skills on real job applicants.

THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF INTERVIEWING SKILLS VERSUS RÉSUMÉS

Landy, Shankster, and Kohler (1994) lament that "after 50 years of programmatic research on the selection interview, it is still worth asking, 'exactly what is being measured in the interview?' . . . Does the interview tap process or substance?" (p. 276) Consistent with the impression management literature which suggests that individuals influence others' opinions of them through verbal and nonverbal gestures, there is abundant evidence that applicants may improve the outcome of the job search process through various verbal influence tactics (Buttner & McEnally, 1996; Gifford, Ng, & Wilkinson, 1985; Kinicki & Lockwood, 1985; Stevens & Kristof, 1995), and/or nonverbal cues (Baron, 1986; Einhorn, 1981; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Forsythe, 1990; Howard & Ferris, 1996).

Other researchers (Dipboye, 1992; Landy et al., 1994) have posited that the value of the interview stems from its ability to assess applicants' interpersonal skills or other job-related behaviors. For example, Gifford et al. (1985) found that nonverbal cues provide valid performance information. Specifically, interviewers used these cues to appropriately judge applicants' social skills. Moreover, Harris (1989) suggests that the higher validity coefficients observed for behavior description interviews and situational interviews, as compared with so-called traditional interviews, may be attributable to the fact that the former appear to tap practical and social intelligence.

Whether one subscribes to the view that applicants' verbal and nonverbal skills affect interview outcomes directly, because of their link to job-related behaviors, or indirectly, through their link to impression management (or both), the literature is fairly clear that these behaviors affect the selection process. However, the literature is less clear as to exactly what impact these skills have in an applied setting. The great majority of research that has examined both objective and subjective qualifications has been conducted in the laboratory (see Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Wade & Kinicki, 1997 for exceptions). In light of Barr and Hitt's (1986) results showing that students and managers consider different factors in making assessments of applicants, it is important to examine the relative impact of objective and subjective qualifications on managers' evaluations in an applied context. Despite the

limited generalizability of most prior studies, the strong theoretical bases on which they are grounded lead us to propose similar effects here:

Hypothesis 1: Interviewing skills (verbal and nonverbal) will predict recruiters' assessments of applicants.

THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF VERBAL SKILLS VERSUS NONVERBAL SKILLS

There is an abundance of evidence that the nonverbal behavior of interviewees, such as eye contact, smiling, hand gesturing, and head nodding, have a positive impact on interviewers' decisions in the selection interview (Gatewood & Field, 1998; Gifford et al., 1985; Imada & Hakel, 1977; McGovern, Jones, & Morris, 1979; McGovern & Tinsley, 1978; Rasmussen, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988). Additionally, there is consistent evidence that suggests that physical appearance is positively related to interviewer evaluations (Baron, 1986; Gatewood & Field, 1998) and "fit" assessments (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). Nonverbal factors, broadly defined, have been shown to play a significant role in the recruiter decision-making process. For example, Kinicki and Lockwood (1985) concluded that recruiters tended to rely on impressionistic cues rather than concrete information in making employment recommendations. Gifford et al. (1985) found that recruiters relied heavily on nonverbal cues to make inferences about applicants' social skills (which were deemed desirable for most positions).

In addition to nonverbal behaviors such as gestures, and other physical movements such as eye contact and posture (Einhorn, 1981; Hollandsworth, Kazelskis, Stevens, & Dressel, 1979; Parsons & Liden, 1984), interviewing skills also comprise a verbal component. The verbal component includes such factors as the ability to answer questions and clearly communicate information, the use of technical jargon, and the general content of one's responses (Bradac & Mulac, 1984). Although far less research has examined the verbal component of the interview, there is some evidence that suggests that it contributes to recruiters' overall impressions of applicants (Hollandsworth et al., 1979; Howard & Ferris, 1996; Rasmussen, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988; Stevens & Kristof, 1995).

A handful of studies have explicitly examined the extent to which recruiters' assessments of applicants are influenced by verbal versus nonverbal skills (Hollandsworth et al., 1979; Howard & Ferris, 1996; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Although Howard and Ferris's (1996) laboratory study found that nonverbal behaviors had a greater impact on subjects' perceptions of applicants than did verbal (self-presentation) behaviors, other laboratory (Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988) and

applied (Hollandsworth et al., 1979; Stevens & Kristof, 1995) studies have shown consistently greater effects for verbal behaviors than for nonverbal behaviors.

There are two limitations in the prior research on how interview skills impact recruiters' assessments of applicants. First, prior studies have focused on a variety of cues. Thus, one potential reason for the inconsistent findings is that researchers may be measuring very different things while still calling them nonverbal behaviors. Although some nonverbal cues, such as appearance and poise, are mentioned in almost every study of nonverbal behaviors, others, such as cleanliness and interpersonal distance, are included with less consistency. Particularly troublesome is the fact that several studies that purport to assess the impact of nonverbal behaviors on interview outcomes include verbal qualities such as voice intensity, verbal pauses, speech disturbances (e.g., "um" and "uh"), and time talked in their predictor list (Gifford et al., 1985; McGovern & Tinsley, 1978; Parsons & Liden, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988).

Second, it is not clear whether the nonverbal gestures that researchers are considering are the same as the nonverbal behaviors that subjects are considering. Because it would be impossible for researchers to identify a complete list of nonverbal behaviors that may impact subjects' evaluations, a more promising approach would be to ask more global questions about applicants' nonverbal cues during the interview. This is analogous to the arguments made by job satisfaction researchers regarding the use of global satisfaction over facet-specific satisfaction (c.f., Scarpello & Campbell, 1983). In short, these two issues together suggest that prior studies have not adequately addressed problems of unreliability of nonverbal cues measures. Indeed, the only study that reported a coefficient alpha noted that it was only .46 (Stevens & Kristof, 1995). We feel that using broad assessments, such as "appeared confident and professional" and "had a pleasant appearance," will help address this limitation. Moreover, the more specific facets of nonverbal behavior, such as eye contact, attentive posture, and head nodding, that have been used in prior research ostensibly signal the presence of the broader components used in this study.

However, even with a more reliable measure of nonverbal skills, it seems likely that verbal skills will have a greater impact on interview assessments than will nonverbal skills. This proposition is consistent with reviews of the literature on interviewing (see Arvey & Campion, 1982) and with the reasoning that the interview allows for the assessment of applicants' interpersonal (verbal) skills (Dipboye, 1992; Landy et al., 1994). Moreover, research suggests that people are often unaware of their own and others' nonverbal

behavior (DePaulo, 1992). The lack of awareness of others' nonverbal behaviors presumably portends greater salience for verbal skills relative to nonverbal skills. Therefore, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2: Verbal skills will be more strongly related to recruiters' assessments of applicants than will nonverbal skills.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN GENDER AND VERBAL INFLUENCE TACTICS AND NONVERBAL INTERVIEW BEHAVIOR

Prior research suggests that, given equal qualifications, women tend to be evaluated less positively than men in ratings of their paper credentials (Arvey, 1979; Parsons & Liden, 1984; Barr & Hitt, 1986; Hitt & Barr, 1989). However, Parsons and Liden (1984) found that female applicants were judged more favorably than were male applicants on nonverbal interview behaviors, such as posture and eye contact. Dipboye (1992) notes that most research on postinterview evaluations has failed to show a strong bias against women. It may be that the combination of the higher evaluations of males' paper credentials and the lower evaluations of males' nonverbal cues yields a net effect that is not very great.

Alternatively, it may be that gender impacts recruiters' assessments of applicants in a less straightforward manner. Specifically, certain influence tactics may have a stronger impact on males, whereas others may affect females more strongly. There is an abundance of research suggesting that women are perceived as being more adept at conveying nonverbal communication than are men (Buck, Miller, & Caul, 1974; Graham, Unruh, & Jennings, 1991; LaFrance & Mayo, 1979). Further, Zuckerman, DeFrank, Spiegel, and Larrance (1982) found that good nonverbal communication was positively related to femininity and negatively related to masculinity. This suggests that individuals view effective nonverbal communication as part of the female sex role stereotype. Moreover, in the present study, the nonverbal component of interviewing skills is linked to physical appearance, a central part of the feminine stereotype (c.f., Freeman, 1987). In contrast, research on sex role stereotypes has consistently found that men are seen as more rational in their presentation of ideas than are women (Burke, 1996).

Much of the research on stereotyping suggests a process in which raters evaluate person-stereotype matches more favorably than they evaluate mismatches (Perry, 1994). This research on prototype matching suggests that applicants whose gender matches the gender type of the skill (male for verbal and female for nonverbal) will be evaluated more favorably than will

applicants whose gender is inconsistent with that skill. Support for this view comes from Kipnis and Schmidt (1988), who found that men who used rational and assertive influence tactics were evaluated more favorably than were women who used such tactics, whereas women who used ingratiation tactics were evaluated more favorably than were men who used this tactic.

However, not all studies have found complete support for prototype matching theory's proposition that matches between the person and the stereotypes will lead to the most favorable evaluations, whereas mismatches will result in the least favorable evaluations. In the context of selection, Buttner and McEnally's (1996) laboratory study found that the type of influence tactic and the gender of the applicant interacted to influence recruiters' assessments, such that females using rationality were the most likely to be hired. Indeed, there is a good amount of empirical evidence that supports the notion that raters see targets who are counterstereotypic in a positive manner (i.e., "positive deviants") as very salient and different from the rest of their group (Duval, Ruscher, Welsh, & Catanese, 2000; Kunda & Oleson, 1997). Consequently, applicants who positively violate the stereotype associated with their sex (i.e., person-stereotype mismatches) may stand out in a favorable way. Taken together, the research on prototype matching and the research on positive deviance suggest that verbal skills will have a stronger impact on the overall interview assessments of females than of males, whereas nonverbal skills will have a stronger impact on the overall interview assessments of males than of females.

Hypothesis 3: Verbal skills will be a stronger positive predictor of interview ratings for females than for males.

Hypothesis 4: Nonverbal skills will be a stronger positive predictor of interview ratings for males than for females.

METHODS

SAMPLE

Data were collected from campus recruiting interviews at three schools in the southeastern United States. Because recruiters interviewed multiple applicants, each observation was composed of a recruiter-applicant dyad. Pairing the 41 recruiters with the 210 applicants yielded a total sample of 311 dyads.

The average age of applicants was 27.4. Fifty-nine percent were male and 41% were female. They were predominantly White (62%), African American (19%), Asian (11%), and Hispanic (5%). The average age of recruiters

was 37.5 years. Sixty-six percent were male, and they had an average 6.7 years of experience. All were either White (82%) or African American (18%).

MEASURES

Dependent variable. The criterion was a composite score of three assessments made immediately after interviewing each applicant. The items were “The applicant will probably be invited for an on-site interview,” “The applicant will probably be offered the job,” and “My company will definitely consider this candidate for a position.” Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The alpha reliability for this scale was .92.

Control variables. As there were several recruiters involved, we were concerned about the nonindependence of our observations. To address this, we created 40 (k-1) dummy variables to represent recruiters. These were entered in the first step of the regression analysis, to partial out their effects.

Because we were interested in examining the unique impact of verbal and nonverbal interviewing skills beyond objective qualifications, we included a single-item measure of objective qualifications as a control variable. To minimize the impact of common method variance, we asked recruiters to evaluate the applicant’s résumé prior to the interview. On a 5-point scale (1 = *very unqualified*; 5 = *very qualified*), they indicated how qualified they felt the applicant was compared with other applicants they would be interviewing for the position.

Additionally, we included applicant age and a dummy variable (1 = White; 0 = Other) for applicant ethnicity as controls. Finally, because we had formulated hypotheses regarding the moderating impact of gender, we entered gender as a control variable in the third step of our regression analysis. Gender was coded such that 1 = male and 2 = female.

Predictors. We examined two types of interviewing skills: a five-item measure of rational verbal influence (alpha = .86) and a three-item measure of nonverbal behaviors (alpha = .75). Sample items for the verbal influence scale included “The applicant demonstrated knowledge of the field, company, and position” and “The applicant demonstrated how his/her education, experience, and skills relate to the position.” Sample items for the nonverbal behavior scale included “The applicant was appropriately dressed for the interview” and “The applicant had a pleasant appearance.” The complete set of items is included in Table 1. Responses for both scales were made on a 5-

TABLE 1
Factor Loadings and Reliabilities of Interview Skills Items

<i>Item</i>	<i>Rational Verbal Influence Loading</i>	<i>Nonverbal Behavior Loading</i>
The applicant demonstrated knowledge of the field, company, and position	.79	.16
The applicant asked relevant questions	.79	.09
The applicant demonstrated how his/her education, experience, and skills relate to the position	.78	.12
The applicant conveyed his/her goals clearly	.80	.24
The applicant presented his/her ideas in an organized manner	.73	.34
Scale alpha for verbal behavior = .86		
The applicant was appropriately dressed for the interview	.17	.84
The applicant appeared confident and professional	.31	.56
The applicant had a pleasant appearance	.11	.90
Scale alpha for nonverbal behavior = .75		

point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). To test the moderator hypotheses, we centered the component terms and created interaction terms comprising gender and verbal skills and gender and nonverbal skills.

RESULTS

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we performed a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation on the verbal and nonverbal influence items to ascertain that the items measured the constructs they were intended to measure. As we expected, Table 1 shows that the items had very high loadings on the factor they purported to measure and considerably lower loadings on the other factor.

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between the items. The data here suggest that both verbal and nonverbal skills had significant bivariate relationships with the overall interview assessment criterion. Although verbal and nonverbal skills were highly correlated with each other, subsequent analyses indicated that the variance inflation factor for each variable was below 3.00; therefore, multicollinearity did not appear to be a problem (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1992).

TABLE 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Overall interview assessment	3.07	.88	1.00						
Gender	1.41	.49	.03	1.00					
Objective skills	3.49	.88	.47***	-.02	1.00				
Verbal skills	3.58	.75	.66***	.01	.45***	1.00			
Nonverbal skills	3.90	.67	.43***	.09	.27***	.53***	1.00		
Verbal Skills × Gender	—	—	.01	.00	-.04	.01	-.03	1.00	
Nonverbal Skills × Gender	—	—	-.08	.03	-.06	-.03	-.11	.53***	1.00

NOTE: Gender was coded 1 for males, 2 for females. Component terms were centered prior to creating interactions.

** $p \geq .05$. *** $p \geq .01$.

Our first hypothesis predicted that verbal and nonverbal skills would predict recruiter assessments of applicants. As can be seen from Table 3, this set of variables explained 16% of the variance in overall interview assessments, with both factors having at least a marginal relationship with the criterion. Thus, this hypothesis received strong support.

Hypothesis 2 posited that verbal skills would be more strongly related to recruiters' assessments of applicants than would nonverbal skills. Contrary to this prediction, Table 3 shows that the regression weight for nonverbal skills was considerably higher than was the regression weight for verbal skills. Thus, this hypothesis was unsupported.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 proposed that applicant gender and verbal and nonverbal interview skills would interact to predict overall interview assessments. Table 3 provides no support for the third hypothesis, but the regression weight of the Nonverbal Skills × Gender term suggests some initial marginal support for Hypothesis 4. To determine the nature of the interaction, using tercile splits, we trichotomized nonverbal skills and performed an analysis of variance. The plot of this interaction is displayed in Figure 1. This plot shows very little difference in the slopes for men and women with low and medium nonverbal skills. However, men with high nonverbal skills (positive deviants) were rated markedly higher than any other group. Thus, Hypothesis 4, which predicted that the slope would be steeper for males than for females, was marginally supported.

TABLE 3
Regression Results of Interviewer Assessments

	R ² Change	df	β
Step 1			
Recruiter effect dummies ^a	.29***	40	—
Step 2			
Age	.06***	2	-.08**
Ethnicity (1 = White; 0 = Other)			.14***
Step 2			
Objective qualifications	.17***	1	.26***
Step 3			
Gender	.01	1	.06
Step 4			
Verbal skills	.16***	2	.09*
Nonverbal skills			.49***
Step 5			
Verbal Skills × Gender	.01	2	.04
Nonverbal Skills × Gender			-.09*

a. To address concerns about the nonindependence of observations, we added a recruiter effect step, comprised of (k-1) dummy variables.

NOTE: Regression weights represent final equation betas.

* $p \geq .10$. ** $p \geq .05$. *** $p \geq .01$.

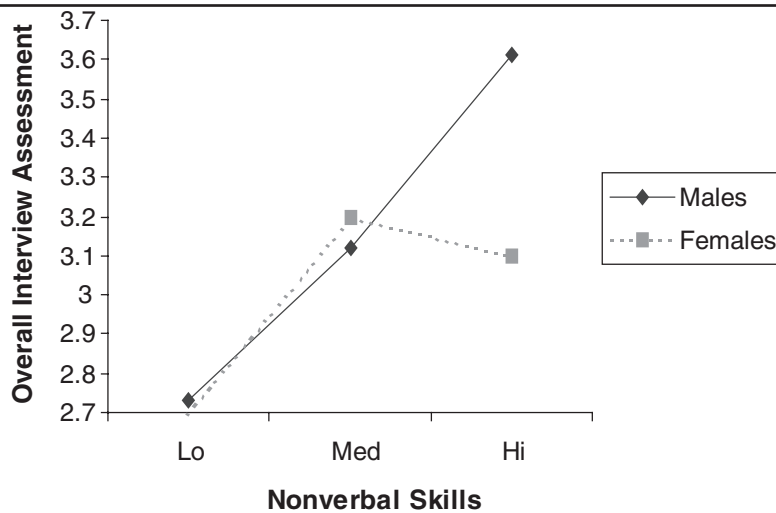


Figure 1: Nonverbal Skills × Gender Interaction

DISCUSSION

Past research has clearly shown that nonverbal skills and behavior have a positive impact on interview outcomes (Gifford et al., 1985; Imada & Hakel, 1977; McGovern et al., 1979; McGovern & Tinsley, 1978; Rasmussen, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988). This supports the notion that applicants who look and act the "part" will be more successful in their employment pursuit. The current research extends this by finding that talking the part will also aid applicants in their job search activities. The data support the hypothesis that both verbal and nonverbal interviewing skills predict recruiters' assessments of applicants. However, our results suggest that the latter are more important than the former.

Although nonverbal skills have been shown in the past to have an effect on recruiters' evaluations, (Gifford et al., 1985; Imada & Hakel, 1977; McGovern et al., 1979; McGovern & Tinsley, 1978; Rasmussen, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988) we tested whether verbal skills would be more strongly related to recruiters' assessments than would nonverbal skills. Contrary to researchers who have proposed that the interview allows for the assessment of applicants' interpersonal (verbal) skills (Dipboye, 1992; Landy et al., 1994), we found nonverbal skills to be a stronger predictor than verbal skills of overall interview assessments. Thus, our findings were more consistent with the findings of communication studies, which report that the great majority of communication is interpreted nonverbally, with only 7% interpreted by verbal impact (Mehrabian, 1971).

That nonverbal skills had a greater impact is an encouraging finding, given that prior research suggests that nonverbal behaviors may increase the validity of the interview, because they tap job-relevant skills (Gifford et al., 1985; Harris, 1989; Landy et al., 1994). Moreover, research suggests that verbal influence tactics may have undesirable effects on organizations. For example, Wayne and Kacmar (1991) found that subordinates' verbal impression management behavior negatively affected the accuracy of performance appraisal assessments. Likewise, while Ralston and Kirkwood (1999) contended that impression management may have a favorable impact on the validity of the interview for salespeople, they argued that for other jobs,

Most employers probably do not want employees to communicate on the job as they did in the interview. . . . Most of us do not want our coworkers to pretend to like us to advance their careers. . . . We would hope that they would be candid in expressing their enthusiasm or reservations about our proposals and not pretend enthusiasm to curry favor. . . . Most of us would hope that our colleagues and other employees with whom we work would not engage in the

unsubstantiated entitlements (in which one claims responsibility for desirable events) and enhancements (which stress the value of one's accomplishments). (p. 207)

Although their cynicism may be overstated, the idea that the impact of verbal impression management skills on the validity of the interview is job dependent is well conceived. Future researchers should consider investigating the moderating impact of job type on the relationship between verbal interview skill and overall interview assessments and subsequent job performance.

We also found some interesting results regarding the Gender \times Nonverbal Skills interaction. In particular, our study bridges the prototype matching and positive deviance literatures. Research on prototype matching posited a matching process, whereby individuals whose gender matches the gender type of the interviewing skill should be evaluated most favorably, and those whose gender does not match the gender type of the skill should be evaluated least favorably (Perry, 1994). This proposition has been supported in several impression management studies (Johnson & Scandura, 1994; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Rudman, 1988). However, consistent with Buttner and McEnally's (1996) findings, research on positive deviance suggests that some mismatches (men with high nonverbal skills and females with high verbal skills) should result in more favorable outcomes (Duval et al., 2000; Kunda & Oleson, 1997). Together, these ideas suggest that verbal skills would have a stronger impact on the overall interview assessments of females than of males, whereas nonverbal skills would have a stronger impact on the overall interview assessments of males than of females. The steeper slope for men's (versus women's) nonverbal skills found in the present study was consistent with the latter of these two hypotheses regarding positive deviants.

The marginal support for this gender interaction hypothesis is important from a conceptual standpoint. Specifically, recruiters may rely on their gender stereotypes regarding interview skills, as doing so serves to simplify their decision making, one objective of stereotyping (Anderson, 1991). However, those who violate stereotypes in a positive way (i.e., men who have high nonverbal skills), are rewarded with the most favorable assessments. Future research examining the impact of negative versus positive counterstereotypicality with respect to characteristics other than gender typing would be a useful addition to the literature.

It is also worth noting that although verbal skills did marginally impact recruiters' overall assessments, this effect was not moderated by gender. Given the applied research demonstrating gender differences in the impact of assertive tactics on salary negotiations (Johnson & Scandura, 1994) and the

laboratory research on selection indicating that assertive tactics are more effective for men than for women, we expected a similar pattern in the present study. However, our findings suggest that in the context of campus recruiting, strong verbal skills are an asset to applicants of both genders.

Although this study offers several contributions to the literature, it is not without weaknesses. The primary concern reflects the potential for common method bias. Although recruiters' assessments of applicants' objective qualifications were made on a separate survey, ratings of applicants' interviewing skills and overall interview assessments were made on the same survey. Thus, tests of the first two hypotheses may have been contaminated by mono-method bias. However, because the latter hypotheses incorporated gender, an objective factor, its moderating effect on the relationship between interviewing skills and overall assessments is not likely attributable to common method bias. Moreover, of the other two applied studies of applicant interview skills, the Wade and Kinicki (1997) study had a similar limitation, whereas the Stevens and Kristof (1995) study, which considered only verbal behaviors, used transcripts of taped interviews to assess interview skills. Given the nature of the selection interview, it seems that the only way to independently assess both verbal and nonverbal behavior in an applied setting would be by using a videotape recorder, a procedure which may be quite unsettling to most applicants.

The second limitation of this study is one of external validity. That is, although our results indicated that interviewing skills and the interaction of interviewing skills and gender are important in college campus recruiting, it is unclear whether these results generalize to other interviewing contexts. Further research is needed to examine whether similar results are obtained with nonstudent targets.

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