Intuitive Personality Testing:
Goals and Types
of Questions
Make the Difference
in Interviews*

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Abstract: Intuitive Personality Testing: Goals and types of questions make the difference in interviews.

The present paper addresses three questions raised by Snyder and Swann's (1978) research. Do subjects test a hypothesis or do they comply to a task? What kind of questions will they spontaneously formulate? Will they formulate questions that are functional to advancing their goals in a first experiment, we show that subjects select questions based towards their hypothesis although there is no prescribed task. The strength of the hypothesis does not affect the bias in the selection of the questions. In a second study, it is shown that the formulation of the questions depends mainly on the goal of the interview and only slightly on the hypothesis and expectation entertained by the interviewees. It is concluded that strategies followed by interviewees should be considered as functional rather than biased.

Key words: Hypothesis-testing, Information-search, Confirmatory bias, Interview, Social Cognition.

Résumé: Jaugez intuitivement la personnalité: importance des objectifs de l'interview et du type de questions disponibles.

Cet article envisage trois questions soulevées par les recherches de Snyder et Swann (1978). Les sujets testent-ils une hypothèse ou se conforment-ils à une tâche? Quelles questions formulent-ils spontanément? Celles-ci sont-elles fonctionnelles pour les buts de l'intervieweur? Dans une première recherche, nous montrons que les sujets sélectionnent des questions basées en faveur de leur hypothèse et celui, et d'autre part, la force de l'hypothèse y influence pas ce processus. Dans une deuxième expérience, on montre que les questions formulées spontanément dépendent essentiellement des objectifs de l'interview et très peu de l'hypothèse et des attentes des intervieweurs. En conclusion, on suggère que les stratégies suivies par les intervieweurs sont considérées comme fonctionnelles plutôt que biasées.

Mots-clés: Test d'hypothèse, Recherche d'information, Biais de confirmation, Interview, Cognition sociale.

It seems that, in general, people are much more willing to search for confirmatory than disconfirmatory evidence. Snyder and his colleagues (e.g., Snyder and Swann, 1978, Snyder and Gangestad, 1982) have presented abundant empirical evidence toward the existence of a confirmatory bias in the interview situation. Their general paradigm has been to ask subjects to select interview questions to see if their client corresponded to the profile of a typical extravert or introvert. Subjects were therefore provided with the definition of a given profile and they were instructed: "You are to find out how well this profile describes the person you interview." To do this, subjects were given a list of 26 questions, some of them (11) categorized as extraverted, some (10) as introverted and the rest (5) as neutral. The task of the subjects was to choose 12 questions among the list of 26, supposedly for an interview which would take place immediately afterwards. Snyder's series of results are clearly unambiguous when asked to test a given profile, subjects favor questions that confirm the profile. No variable (e.g., incentive, certainty, phrasing, etc.) thought of by Snyder was capable of obliterating what he calls a hypothesis-confirming bias.

Three problems have been raised with this methodology and its interpretation. First, Semin and Strack (1980) disagree with the conclusion that this research shows a bias toward hypothesis confirmation. They claim that Snyder's subjects try to comply to a task rather than confirm a hypothesis. To test their alternative interpretation, Semin and Strack (1980) ran two studies where subjects were simultaneously confronted to a given task (i.e. to see if the client's personality corresponds to an introverted or extraverted profile) and to a given hypothesis (i.e. the client is or should be introverted or extraverted). In both studies, the results show a task-confirming bias rather than an hypothesis-testing one. In our view, this does not mean that Snyder's conclusions are wrong. It may well be that the task overrides the hypothesis but, given the designs used by Semin and Strack (1980), one cannot preclude the possibility that there will be an hypothesis-confirming bias when subjects do not have a specified task but entertain a specific hypothesis. In other words, two control conditions were missing in their studies and it is the purpose of the first experiment to rest their
Experiment I

As noted above, we were not convinced that Semin and Strack’s (1980) research had demonstrated that only task-testing and not hypothesis-testing per se led to a confirming bias. Confident in the work of several researchers in different areas of social sciences (e.g., Merton, 1948; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968), we did not see why a hypothesis alone would not be sufficient to elicit a confirming strategy. We therefore conducted an experiment where subjects expected to meet either an introverted person or an extraverted one. Our first hypothesis was that participants would select more extraverted questions than introverted ones when expecting to meet an extravert and the reverse when waiting to interview an introvert.

A second question of this experiment deals with the strength of the hypothesis. Will a clear and unambiguous hypothesis lead to more confirmation than a weaker one? Finally, and contrary to most previous studies, this one used a very realistic context. We tried to implement it so that subjects were led to believe that they certainly would interview someone.

Method

Subjects

One hundred and four subjects took part in the study on a voluntary basis. They were male and female Psychology students. Sixty of them helped in the construction of the material and 44, half female, half male, participated in the experiment itself. Since the sex variable did not show any effect, it will be dropped from the reported analysis.

Experimental procedure

When recruited, subjects received an individual appointment to meet the responsibilities of the study in offices known to belong to the Department of Clinical Psychology. Upon their arrival, they learnt they would have to conduct a psychological interview, if they were in real practice, before seeing the interviewee, they would first receive some information about their client’s personality, make an approximate diagnosis, and then conduct the interview. This procedure was presented to them as the way psychologists usually work: they do not know the person they will interview except by means of responses to psychological tests.

After this introduction, each subject was led to believe that the interviewee was already in the adjacent office, busy to answer an “Ego Strength Scale.” Sex of the interviewee was always matched with the sex of the interviewee. A few minutes later, the female experimenter went to the adjacent room to pick up the client’s personality questionnaire and voices could be heard. Depending on the experimental condition, she came back with one of four forms.
Answers to the questionnaire had been prepared to induce an extraverted or introverted impression of the client. The strength of this induction had also been manipulated. In the strong induction conditions, 6 items pertained to introversion and 6 to extraversion but all 12 answers made clear that the respondent was either introvert or extravert. Only half of these items (3 for introversion and 3 for extraversion) appeared in the weak induction conditions, the 6 remaining items being neutral. Subjects were free to read the items and the answers at their own pace. They then had to give their diagnostic. For each of 11 adjectives related to either extraversion or introversion, they had to write to what extent they applied to the client.

After completion of these diagnostic scales, the experimenter gave a list of 26 questions to the subjects. Supposedly because the study had to be standardized for comparative reasons, she warned them that they would not be free to ask whatever questions they would like; instead, they would have to select 12 questions amongst the 26 presented on the list and constitute those which are generally asked in an interview. With one exception (see below), the list was the one used by Snyder and Swan (1976).

Construction of the "Ego Strength Scale"

A list of 46 items borrowed from various traditional questionnaires (e.g. M.M.R., Edwards Personal Preference, Ego State Inventory, etc.) was presented to 30 pilot subjects. Their task was to say if each of them applied to extraversion, to introversion or to neither of them. Only those items with more than 60% of the responses in one category were retained for further consideration, i.e. 12 extraversion items, 12 introversion items and 10 neutral ones.

Ten other subjects tree-associated about the 34 items and in the final form of the "Ego Strength Scale" given to the experimental subjects, only the 6 most representative items were retained in each category (at least $z = 2.31$ and $p = .005$).

Construction of the diagnostic scales

Five introverted (reserved, shy, inhibited, rigid and introverted) and 6 extraverted (open, dynamic, sociable, spontaneous, leader and extraverted) adjectives were used to constitute the diagnostic scales. They had been selected (at least $z = 2.31$, $p = .005$) from a longer list by 30 subjects (the same who received the items mentioned above) who had to decide, for each of them, if they corresponded to a) extraversion, b) introversion, c) both or d) neither.

Interview questions

Twenty graduate students in Psychology categorized the 26 questions used by Snyder and Swan (1976) into three categories: extraversion, introversion and neutral. Only one disagreement occurred with the original categorization; the question "What do you think the good and the bad points

of acting friendly and open are?" was perceived as not sufficiently neutral and was replaced by the following one: "How do you see your future?"

Debriefing

After the selection of the interview questions, subjects were thoroughly debriefed. The aims and procedure were explained; reactions were encouraged and followed by a discussion. One subject was dismissed because he had been told everything about the experiment by his roommate. None of the other subjects showed any sign of suspicion. On the contrary, many of them relieved when they heard that the interview would not take place.

Results and discussion

All the measures were analyzed by 2 (extraversion vs. introversion) x (strong vs. weak induction) between subjects multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs). They were followed by ANOVAs to trace the sources of significant effects.

Diagnostic measures of the "Ego Strength Scale" tests

All 11 adjectives tapping the diagnosis of the subjects were rated on 9-point scales. We expected a main effect for the introversion-extraversion of the client and an interaction between that variable and the strength of its induction.

Using a MANOVA, the main effect for extraversion vs. introversion is highly significant, $F(1,19) = 89.28$, $p < .001$. Univariate tests show that the differences are significant (at least $< .001$) for all the adjectives except one (rigid, $F(1,19) = 1.50$, $p = .22$).

The MANOVA did not show a significant interaction, $F(11,39) = 1.20$, $p > .05$. However, univariate tests reveal a significant interaction at the .05 level for 4 adjectives (dynamic, sociable, open, extraverted and reserved) and a tendency ($p = .054$ and .079) for 2 others (inhibited and introverted). Moreover, in all the 11 cases, the results go in the predicted direction: a strongly induced extravert is judged more extraverted than a less strongly induced one, and the reverse is true for the induction of introversion.

It can be concluded that subjects clearly differentiated between the extraverted and introverted protocols. The manipulation of strength was well perceived but, still, it was efficient for 7 out of 11 adjectives.

Interview questions

Based on the judgments of the pilot subjects, the list of interview questions contained 11, 10 and 5 extraverted, introverted and neutral questions respectively. The MANOVA did show a significant effect only for the hypothesis variable, $F(3,38) = 9.13$, $p < .01$. The subsequent ANOVAs reveal that more extraverted questions are asked to the extravert than to the introvert, $F(1,40) = 12.20$, $p < .001$. It is the contrary for the introverted
questions, $F(1,40) = 12.41, p < .00$. There are no differences at all for the neutral questions. The means are displayed on Table 1.

Table 1. Number and types of questions as a function of the hypothesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extraversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraverted</td>
<td>6.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introverted</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that the strength of induction did not show any main or interactive effect either in the MANOVA or in the ANOVAs. These results apparently contradict data obtained by Swann and Ely (1984) and Swann and Giuliano (1987) whose subjects asked more diagnostic matching and nondiagnostic matching (biased) questions when they strongly believed they would meet a person with a given personality profile than when they were uncertain. A possible explanation is that our light induction was still too strong; indeed the means for the perception of the slight introvert and extravert are still very polarized. Another explanation is that subjects in the Swann and Ely (1984) and Swann and Giuliano (1987) studies had the choice between matching and non-matching questions while in this study as well as in one reported by Snyder and Swann (1978) who also did not find an effect for the strength of the hypothesis, all the questions were biased except the neutral ones.

As in the study by Meertens, Koemen, Delpeut, and Hager (1986), the main finding of this first experiment is thus clear. A mere hypothesis, rather than a specific task, is sufficient to instigate a confirmatory strategy, at least when one uses the list of questions created by Snyder and Swann (1978). What would happen if subjects were free to formulate themselves the questions to the interviewee?

### Experiment 2

According to the literature, there are several possibilities to answer this latter question. In two studies where subjects had to write down questions for an interview aimed at verifying the extraversion or introversion of the respondent, Trope, Bassok, and Alon (1984) found that the majority of the questions were diagnostic, i.e., diagnostic of extraversion or of introversion depending on the task or bidirectional. In two other studies, where subjects did not have a task but only the hypothesis that the interviewee was extraverted, Leyens (1989) showed that the most frequent questions were irrelevant to the hypothesis and that they were followed in popularity by matching diagnostic questions. Differences in the paradigms may explain differences in the results but what is clear in the two sets of investigation is that when people prepare questions themselves for an interview, they don't spontaneously formulate biased questions.

In line with Snyder's research, one should expect confirmatory (matching) questions, diagnostic or not. Indeed Swann and Giuliano (1987) assert that the confirmatory strategy is almost identical to the diagnostic one. Just as evidence that would tend to confirm their beliefs comes to be viewed as relatively diagnostic, evidence that would tend to disconfirm their beliefs comes to be viewed as relatively nondiagnostic" (p. 521).

Still a third possibility is provided by Kruglanski (1979, Kruglanski and Mayseless, 1988) who contends that strategies are situation specific. In other words, interviewers will ask quite different questions if they have, for example, to probe the personality of a mental patient or the appropriateness of a candidate for a given job. Questions may also vary as a function of competing hypotheses, need to reach an accurate diagnosis, etc.

In order to verify these possibilities, we manipulated the following variables in a non-complete factorial design:

- the focus of the interview, either on the personality or on the job of the interviewee;
- the hypothesis entertained by the interviewer who expected to meet either an extravert or an introvert;
- the a priori expectations (none, extraversion, introversion) of the interviewer about the ought-to be personality of the interviewee which may not correspond to the real personality (here called the hypothesis).

Not all the cells of this theoretically $2 \times 3 \times 3$ factorial design could be realistically fulfilled and not all of them were theoretically relevant. This led to the test of the 8 conditions appearing on Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Design of Experiment 2 (the X indicates the conditions which were actually run)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Personality</th>
<th>Focus Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H. Extra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expectations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introversive</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversive</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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When the focus was on personality, subjects expected to interview either a client for a Counseling Center or an applicant to a contemplative monastery. When the focus was on the job, the to-be-interviewed was presented as a candidate for used-car sales or employment in a library. Half the subjects were led to believe that the interviewee was introverted and the other half that he was extraverted. The client and the librarian were chosen so as to not induce a specific expectation about the personality which was not the case of the used-car salesman and the monk who were expected to be extraverted and introverted respectively. Actually, this design could be analyzed as a 2 (hypotheses) × 4 (occupations which combine expectations and focus).

Method

Subjects

Forty male and 40 female students in departments other than Psychology of the University of Louvain-la-Neuve participated voluntarily in the research. As of current practice on that campus, they were recruited in the streets to answer a questionnaire in a laboratory room of the Psychology building. Two male and 2 female undergraduate students in Psychology served as experimenters. Forty-five other students helped in the testing of the experimental conditions.

Procedure

When they arrived in the laboratory, the subjects received a booklet explaining the investigation. They would have to formulate 10 questions as if they had to conduct the interview of someone but not all the subjects succeeded to complete the 10 questions. The interviewee was presented as (1) a client in a Counseling Center, (2) a potential contemplative monk, (3) a candidate as a librarian or (4) a candidate as used-car dealer. Before phrasing the questions, the participants received some information about the personality of the fictitious interviewee, i.e. the strong introduction responses to the "Ego Strength Scale" already presented in experiment 1. For half of the subjects, the person was presented as introverted and for the other half as extraverted.

After having formulated their questions, participants answered several questions to check the manipulations. Using the 11 adjectives described in experiment 1 and on 10 point scales, they had to decide the degree of introversion-extraversion of the interviewee.

Finally, the aim of the research was explained to the participants and their questions were answered and discussed.

Selection of the interviewees

The selection of the interviewees was pretented on 45 subjects who had to rate the probability of their personality on a 10 point scale (1 = introversion, 10 = extraversion). Here are their scores: 8, 5, 6, 4, 5 and 3 for salesman, client of a Counseling Center librarian, and monk. These occupations thus clearly lead to specific or no expectations concerning the personality.

Content analysis of the questions

The questions were classified according to the importance given to the personality, to the job or to neither of them. Here are the different categories:

1. Personality extraversion (PE) = Diagnostic of extraversion.
2. Personality introversion (PI) = Diagnostic of introversion.
3. Personality extraversion and introversion (PEI) = Bidirectional.
4. Personality other (PO) = Diagnostic of a trait other than extraversion or introversion (e.g. obsession),
5. Job (J) without reference to personality.
6. Job extraversion (JE), (e.g. "Do you think you are sociable enough for that kind of job?").
7. Job introversion (JI), (e.g. "Do you think you won't miss the presence of other people in this job?").
8. Job introversion and extraversion (JEX), a combination of the 2 preceding categories.
9. Job other (JO), the equivalent of PO but with the emphasis on the occupation.
10. Other (O), any questions which did not fit in the previous categories (e.g. open-ended questions). The judges had been instructed to use that category as rarely as possible.

It should be noted that there were no biased or leading questions.

The agreement between 3 judges was calculated over a sample of 80 questions (the fifth question asked by every subject) by Cohen's coefficient for nominal scales. It was very satisfactory: 95.

Results and Discussion

Verification of the hypothesis

As in the previous experiment, subjects distinguished clearly between the 2 profiles of personality which were offered to them. Again, the extraversion-introversion hypothesis was significantly (p < .001) differentiated for 10 out of 11 adjectives. It was again the adjective rigid which did not reach significance, F(1,32) = 1.56, p > 10.

Types of questions asked

We conducted several analyses of variance taking into account the different types of questions or some combinations of them. Given the
incomplete format of the factorial design, we opted for a 2 (hypothesis: introversion vs. extraversion) × 4 (occupations: Counseling Center, librarian, salesman, monk) design of analyses, with further analyses to look at simpler effects.

Two findings are of immediate evidence in all the analyses. In none of them is there any significant main effect for hypotheses or an interaction between the hypotheses and the occupation. Seven significant main effects (at least = .05) appear however for the occupation variable. These results show the importance of Kruglanski’s position: interview questions are not asked in a vacuum but their content depends on the goals of the interviewer.

Almost all of the questions emphasizing personality (PE, PI, PE, PO (F. [O]) show a job effect. The seventh main effect is due to the category (I) which is more often asked for the librarian and the salesman than for the other two conditions. Here, we report only the results pertaining to the combination of the 4 categories of personality alone (PE = PI + PE + PO). As could be expected, significantly more personality questions are asked in the case of a client of a Counseling Center and of a monk (Ms = 9.40 and 7.10 respectively) than in the other two cases (Ms = 2.60 and 3.95 for the salesman and the librarian, respectively). F (3.72) = 24.96, p < .0001. Given that the total number of questions was fixed (except for those subjects who did not give ten responses), it derives that the opposite result occurred for the job oriented questions whether related or not to personality.

On the average, 5.84 questions are asked about personality alone, if one takes into account the questions which linked personality to work, the total amounts to 8.62. This is certainly due to our instructions and the setting of the experiment. Nonetheless, it remains that this number is relatively high and suggests that people, in a situation of interview, are particularly prone to ask such type of questions. Such a result is completely in agreement with the work of Beauvois (and Le Foullet, 1985; Beauvois and Dubois, 1985) who shown that people in a position of power, like interviewers, favor internal explanations, i.e. dispositional or personality factors. That same result and the fact that there is a difference between the occupations give even more weight to Kruglanski’s hypothesis that our search for information is teleological and context-bound.

For the client of a Counseling Center who was either extraverted or introverted, we examined and described them in the same way the results of the first experiment. There is indeed a slight tendency into that direction, F (1.18) = 8.64, p < .05. As can be seen on Figure 2, a subject confronted with an extraverted client asks more extraverted (M = 2.6) than introverted (M = 1.3) questions, and the reverse occurs for those who thought they would interview an introvert (Ms = 1.1 vs. 1.8).

Figure 2 also shows that this tendency is not reproduced for the librarian for whom our subjects did not have a special expectation either. Actually, for the questions related to extraversion there is an almost significant interaction between occupation (client or librarian) and hypothesis (extravert vs. introvert). F (1.68) = 3.25, p < .08: the 2 occupations show a reverse pattern. This non-replication of the first study does come as a surprise. Indeed, one should remember that in experiment 1, subjects were provided with a list of questions, most of them being based on training, while in this experiment, they had to provide their own questions.

As in the study by Trope et al. (1984) the subjects choose diagnostic questions whether matching or not. There is however a difference with the results obtained by Trope et al. (1984) in the sense that our subjects did not privilege bidirectional questions to unidirectional ones for the client of the Counseling Center which is most similar to the condition used by Trope and collaborators, the means are respectively 4.79 and 4.95 for the un- and bidirectional questions.

What is particularly interesting is that people are less concerned with questions related to extraversion or introversion when the focus is on the job rather than on the personality. F (3.72) = 3.49, p < .05. As illustrated in Figure 3, the subjects who think they will interview a client or a monk ask more questions concerning extraversion or introversion (Ms = 3.60 and 3.25) than do those who believe they will question a salesman or a librarian (Ms = 2.25 and 1.90). This again probably indicates that our subjects were more preoccupied by the goal of their interview (for us, the goal is not synonymous to the task: it corresponds in some way to the reason for a particular task or activity) than by the personality of their interviewee; in other words, they complied with Kruglanski’s theory. In the same line, and rather surprisingly, when there was a mismatch between the real and the expected personality, as in the case of the introverted used car salesman and the extraverted contemplative monk, our subjects did not concentrate on particular types of questions.

As a conclusion of this study which departed completely from the traditional paradigm inaugurated by Snyder, it can be said that subjects did not try to emplot their interviewee in a presumed personality. They used diagnostic questions regardless of the fact that these were matching or mismatching the personality-hypothesis. They also clearly asked different questions according to the goal of the interview.

General Discussion

The results of the two studies we have presented provide support for the three theoretical models we have outlined in the introduction. They have clear implications for practical purposes but they also shed another light on the present fashion to see all human beings as cognitive mixers (Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Leyens, 1983; Leyens, Aspoet and Mermess, 1987; Leyens and Costo, 1989).

Contrary to Kern and Strack (1986), we believe and our data testify that people privilege their hypothesis by asking questions which will confirm it. We hope we have shown the matter is not only a question of task but of more hypothesis. This does not mean that people will always ask biased questions, and therefore persevere in a wrong direction if the departing hypothesis is inaccurate. All depends on the material they are provided with: this does not happen when subjects have the choice between diagnostic matching or mismatching questions (Leyens and Dormal, 1985) or, in the second experiment, when they have to formulate themselves the questions.

The second study showed that, given the task to prepare an interview, people are very well aware of the goals they have to pursue. They will formulate their questions accordingly. Although the whole setting of the
experiment emphasized a personality dimension because of the hypotheses and the expectations which were provided concerning the personality of the interviewees, our subjects concentrated their questions on job-related material when they had to interview a job applicant. More important is the fact that they did not privilege questions going in the sense of the personality hypothesis of the expectation even when they asked job-related questions and even when there was a mismatch between the hypothesis and the expectation. This also happened but to a lesser degree for the client of a Counseling Center. This non replication of the first study should not come as a surprise. We already referred to the fact that when people have to formulate themselves their questions before the interview takes place, they do not bias their questions (Trope et al., 1984; Leyens, 1989). Actually they tend to ask diagnostic questions and the "yes" or "no" answer of the interlocutor gives them the same information.

This does not mean, however, that in the course of a real interview, people do not ask biased, i.e. matching but non-diagnostic questions. In two studies, Leyens (1989) has shown that in such a situation these questions are amongst the most popular ones. Data pertaining to the latency times before asking the different questions suggest that this preference may be more a matter of smoothing the interview than of biasing it. We are presently conducting further research to test more precisely this hypothesis. Our research was not aimed at testing Beaucroix's hypothesis (1984) that the recourse to personality factors is linked to evaluative practices such as interviewing people. However, our results certainly do not contradict his theoretical position; most of the questions asked were related to personality even when the primary focus was on the task.

References


Expérience éducative et positionnement de soi chez des élèves de collège

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