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The Employment Interview as a Sociometric Selection Technique

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ABSTRACT. Much of the research conducted on the employment interview suggests that it is time-consuming, expensive, and only modestly predictive of job performance. In spite of this, however, it remains one of the most widely used selection techniques. In this article, we argue that the employment interview continues to be used because it serves organizational functions other than the prediction of job performance. From this perspective, we review studies that suggest that the interview is used by organizations as a form of sociometric selection. We then describe how sociometric selection is functional to organizations, and we review studies that illustrate the positive effects organizations experience when using standard sociometric techniques. We suggest that many of these same benefits are realized when organizations use the employment interview as a method of sociometric selection. We also identify the potential disadvantages of sociometric selection and present suggestions for future research.

IN FEW AREAS OF INDUSTRIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL (I/O) psychology is the research more at odds with the practice than it is in the area of the employment interview. For nearly 80 years, researchers have studied the employment interview, and reviewers of this research conclude that the interview is, at best, a modest predictor of job performance (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Harris, 1989; Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965). Still, the interview is the most widely used selection method (Bureau of National Affairs, 1988), and it is the method that has the strongest impact on hiring decisions (Friedman & Williams, 1982). Arvey and Campion call this discrepancy between research findings and organizational practice the "black hole" in personnel-selection research. Our purpose in this article is to reconcile this discrepancy by showing that the traditional interview is in fact a method of sociometric selection, and as such, it serves functions other than the prediction of job performance. We present our case in four sections. First, we define sociometric selection. Second, we review research on the interview that illustrates that the traditional interview is essentially a method of sociometric selection and that the interview serves a variety of functions. Third, we review studies on standard socio-

metric procedures that provide indirect evidence of the effects of sociometric selection. We conclude with a summary of the strengths and limitations of sociometric selection in organizations and suggest areas for future research.

Sociometric Selection

Sociometric selection is the selection of individuals into a group based on group members' affective responses toward the applicants. In sociometric selection, each group member is a test or assessment device, that is, group members make a personal assessment of an applicant based on attributes they consider important. They use their own personal calculus to determine an applicant's standing on attributes and to combine multiple attributes to form an overall judgment. The attributes and the importance assigned to them are likely a mixture of personal values and concerns and the values and concerns held in common by all or most members of the group. The definition of group most relevant to this article is Alderfer's (1977) because it provides a broad definition of groups in an organizational setting. He defines a human group as "a collection of individuals (1) who have significantly interdependent relations with each other, (2) who perceive themselves as a group by reliably distinguishing members from non-members, (3) whose group identity is recognized by non-members, (4) who, as group members acting alone or in concert, have significantly interdependent relations with other groups, and (5) whose roles in the group are therefore a function of expectations from themselves, other group members, and from non-group members" (p. 230).

Typically, group members will pool their judgments of applicants and make a group decision about which applicant or applicants to admit into the group. Thus, sociometric selection involves a complex process in which many individuals assess an individual for possible inclusion in a group. Assessments are likely to involve personal as well as group criteria, and then individual assessments are combined by group members in an attempt to satisfy both the self-interest of individual members and the needs of the group.

Conversely, psychometric selection typically involves selection of an individual for a position or job (Guion, 1976). An applicant's standing is measured on one or more attributes related to one or more objective tasks of the job. Ideally, these attributes are measured with a reliable and valid instrument, following a standardized procedure (Anastasi, 1988; Guion). Psychometric selection results in a number that reflects an applicant's standing on an attribute. Group or organization members then use this information—often combined with other information—to make a decision on each applicant. Decisions can be made on a clinical basis or with the aid of "mechanical" statistical techniques. Advocates of psychometric selection suggest that selection

decisions be made, as much as possible, on the basis of statistical information that is based on empirical relationships between predictors and criteria (see, e.g., Ree & Earles, 1992; Sawyer, 1966).

Sociometric Selection and the Traditional Employment Interview

Three features of the traditional interview give it a sociometric quality. First, the traditional interview is unstructured and open ended. As such, it evokes a wide range of behaviors from which interviewers make inferences about the applicant's values, personality, interests, and goals. Second, the traditional interview is a group phenomenon in which work group members assess an applicant's "fit" with themselves and the group. And third, judgments made in the traditional interview are largely based on implicit criteria. Implicit criteria are the qualities that each interviewer personally values in a new-hire and that are generally not discussed or acknowledged by the group.

Unstructured and open-ended. The traditional employment interview is an unstructured and open-ended question and answer session between a member of an organization and an applicant for a job in that organization. The unstructured and open-ended format of the traditional interview makes it a diffuse and, to some extent, a particularistic selection device; it also gives the applicant a good deal of control over his or her responses. By unstructured, we mean that the nature and number of the questions, the interpretation of the applicant's answers, and the means for forming a judgment about the applicant are at the discretion of the individual interviewer. By open-ended, we mean that applicants can answer questions in any way they choose; that is, they are not normally given alternatives from which to choose their answer.

Because of the interview's unstructured and open-ended format, the interviewer can solicit information that helps in estimating, with varying degrees of accuracy, a variety of applicant characteristics and skills, such as social skills, interpersonal communication skills, socioeconomic status, personal goals, values, marital and family status, intelligence, motivation to work, deference to authority, and ability to conform to expectations for the position.

A group phenomenon. Although most researchers on the employment interview have viewed it on the level of the individual or dyad, the traditional employment interview typically operates as a group-level phenomenon, that is, a phenomenon that involves two or more people with some sense of common purpose and awareness of belonging to a common social unit. In most organizations, job applicants are interviewed by two or more employees (Colarelli, 1992; Friedman & Williams, 1982).

The interviewing process for faculty jobs is a good example of the group nature of the employment interview (York & Cranny, 1989). A search committee composed of several faculty members with a major stake in the position

will first evaluate the applicants' vitae and cover letters to determine which applicants' skills, experience, and interests are compatible with the requirements of the position. They then develop a "short list," and the top candidates on the short list are invited for an interview. The primary purpose of the interview process is not to assess skills and abilities—most of this has been done by reviewing vitae—but to find out whether the candidates' values and personalities fit with the culture of the work group and department.

The usual faculty interview process begins with a series of one-on-one interviews with the faculty members in the work unit with whom the applicant would be working. In a psychology department, for example, work units might be groups of social, experimental, industrial/organizational, biological, or clinical faculty. An applicant for a clinical position would, for example, be interviewed first by faculty members in the clinical group. The applicant might then be interviewed by those at the top of the department hierarchy, such as unit heads, senior professors, and the chairperson. He or she might also meet with a university official, such as a dean. Often several faculty members also take the applicant to breakfast and dinner, during which they observe and evaluate the applicant in a more casual setting. In addition, a faculty candidate would meet with small groups of graduate or undergraduate students. At some point, the candidate will give a presentation of a current research project to members of the department and to students. Although this procedure provides an opportunity to assess the candidate's presentation skills, it also provides another forum to assess the compatibility of the candidate's personality and values with the department's culture. Finally, the department holds an evening cocktail party or afternoon sherry hour when all members of the department informally interact with (and evaluate) the candidate. After a candidate departs, faculty members and students share opinions about him or her. When all the finalists have been interviewed, the faculty members are likely to hold several formal meetings to discuss and evaluate the candidate. The search committee or others in the department rank the candidates, and then the top candidate receives a job offer.

Implicit criteria. Some criteria or standards of acceptability by which interviewers judge job candidates are shared implicit criteria or private implicit criteria. Shared implicit criteria are criteria that most group members know and accept but are not publicly acknowledged or discussed. Private implicit criteria are criteria that are personal and often unique to individual group members; they are also not publicly acknowledged or discussed. One reason why criteria remain implicit is because it helps the group manage in-group conflict and protects the group from potentially hostile forces in its environment. The literature on organizational culture also points out that cultural ideologies tend to become implicit over time (Trice & Beyer, 1993). As ideologies and values

continue to help organizations adapt to internal problems of integration and external problems of adaptation, they become taken for granted. Trice and Beyer suggest that "with continuing expression and use, ideologies come to be viewed as nondebatable ways of understanding ... events and as natural, undeniable guides for behavior" (p. 38). Perhaps, this is what happens as certain shared interview criteria become implicit.

Personal criteria of individual groups members—private implicit criteria—tend to remain undiscussed because they would reveal self-interests and differences among group members and because such revelations might escalate into disruptive group conflict. Although private criteria tend to enhance personal interests, they may be detrimental to the group's interests and perhaps the personal interests of other group members. Thus, group members are likely to avoid discussion of private implicit criteria and discuss openly only those criteria that reflect group values.

Groups tend to avoid open discussion of shared implicit criteria because such discussions could increase the group's vulnerability to potentially hostile forces from its environment. Because a group must maintain working relationships with other groups within the same organization, it is unlikely that members would openly discuss criteria that are related to the group's subculture and are also at odds with the subcultures of other groups. A group is likely to discuss criteria that are generally valued by other groups and to avoid discussion of criteria that reflect the unique values or interests of one particular subgroup. Similarly, groups are unlikely to discuss openly criteria that are unique to the organization's culture, particularly criteria that reflect values that may be at odds with societal values. Therefore, the group will only make criteria explicit that are in harmony with larger social values, while those that conflict with larger social values will remain implicit. For example, an organization may value particular religious affiliations and principles and may therefore use religious affiliation as a criterion in hiring managers. However, because American culture and law generally oppose discrimination in employment based on religion, religious affiliation will remain an implicit, although very real, criterion in that organization. Making such a criterion explicit could create hostility toward the organization. Thus, only a criterion that is compatible with American social values is likely to be explicit.

The Employment Interview

Although the traditional interview typically functions as a method of sociometric selection, most of the research on the interview is based on the assumptions that the relevant units of analysis are individuals and jobs and that the purpose of the interview is to improve the fit between persons and jobs by assessing task-related knowledge, skills, and abilities. Because of these

assumptions, researchers have tended to interpret the findings of studies on the interview from individually focused and mechanistic perspectives. We will argue, however, that results of many studies on the interview support the notions that the interview is in fact a form of sociometric selection and that sociometric selection is functional to organizational effectiveness.

Interview Mechanics and Psychometric "Improvements"

Most research on the employment interview falls into four categories: (a) the validity of the interview, (b) ways to improve the interview, (c) the content of the interview, and (d) the interview process and decision making. Research examining the validity of the interview has focused almost exclusively on its ability to predict job performance. Because much of this research has shown the interview to be only modestly predictive of job performance, work on improving the interview has focused on increasing its power to predict performance. Researchers have suggested that the mechanics of the interview become more structured and standardized so that the interview resembles a standardized psychometric test (Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988; Janz, Hellervick, & Gilmore, 1986; Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980). Generally, practitioners ignore these suggestions and use the unstructured format.

Interview Content and Process

Research examining the interview content, decision making, and process, however, provides insight into what interviewers actually base their hiring recommendations on. This research suggests that often interviewers do not base their hiring recommendations on the objective knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform a specific job; rather, they base them on other applicant characteristics (Orphen, 1984; Raza & Carpenter, 1987). Studies examining the content of employment interviews have found that interviewers tend to ask more questions about nonacademic and extracurricular activities than about specific job skills (Keenan & Wedderburn, 1980; Taylor & Sniezek, 1984). They also tend to focus on attitudes, communication abilities, and interpersonal skills (Graves & Karren, 1992; Kinicki, Lockwood, Hom, & Griffeth, 1990).

The interview is a "dynamic process of social interaction and interpersonal judgment" (Binning, Goldstein, Garcia, & Scattaragia, 1988, p. 30). This process includes pre-interview impressions, the actual face-to-face interview, and post-interview evaluations. Much of the information that interviewers use in judging applicants comes from cues related to demographic information (Avolio & Barrett, 1987; Graves & Powell, 1988; McDonald & Hakel, 1985), personality (Jackson, Peacock, & Smith, 1980; Paunonen, Jackson, & Oberman, 1987), and attitude similarity (Keenan, 1977; Orphen, 1984). Our

reading of this research on interview content and interviewer decision making suggests that the way the interview is actually used is akin to sociometric selection. It tends to be a group phenomenon in which judgments are made about an applicant's personality, values, and likelihood of fitting in with the group and organizational culture.

A Sociometric Function of the Interview

People and organizations possess the capacity to engage in a wide variety of behaviors. In response to demands from their physical and social environments, they consciously and unconsciously select those behaviors that are advantageous in a particular situation. If the behavior is functional, in the sense that it allows the demand in the environment to be met, it is retained for use as the need arises. This process of socio-cultural evolution provides the basis for an evolutionary perspective in industrial and organizational psychology (Weick, 1979). If we examine how personnel technologies come to be used by organizations, we can see that the process resembles the variation, selection, and retention process characteristic of the socio-cultural evolutionary process. A variety of personnel technologies exist, and the organization becomes exposed to these technologies through a variety of means (academic and practitioner journals, fads, new employees, professional conferences). The organization may then use some of these technologies. Over time and with information from a variety of feedback mechanisms (trial and error, social research), the effects of the technology are then either formally or informally assessed and the technologies that were useful to the organization are retained. In short, organizations use the technologies they do because these serve some function that is important to them. From this perspective, specific technologies can be examined in terms of the function they perform.

We believe that the widespread use of the interview evolved over time because it was, and is, functional for assessing an applicant's "fit" with a work group and organization. Because our focus is on the interview as a sociometric selection device, we are emphasizing its function in assessing an applicant's fit with a work group and organization. We recognize that the interview serves other functions.

Although individual performance of specific job-related tasks is important for organizational survival, a variety of other organizational behaviors related to an individual's ability to work well with and fit into a larger group are also important (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Currently, a variety of personnel technologies can be used to assess an applicant's ability to perform a specific job, such as intelligence and work-sample tests (Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Reilly & Chao, 1982). However, the employment interview is one of the few selection techniques available that provides a means of assessing an appli-

cant's fit. It does this by allowing group members to collect and evaluate information regarding the applicant's values, goals, attitudes, personality, and communication styles.

In order for organizations and work groups within organizations to remain viable over time, it is necessary for members to have values and goals that are congruent with those of the organization and work group. When members share a common set of values and work toward common goals, performance and productivity are likely to be enhanced. Additionally, when group members have similar attitudes, personalities, and communication styles, the potential for interpersonal conflict is reduced. Individuals in groups also need to have common expectations about their roles and behaviors, and the roles and behaviors of other group members. Shared expectations are necessary for coordination among group members and for group survival (Sampson, 1963).

Given these considerations, a key issue in selection is whether the applicant is compatible with the members in the group and the organization (Colarelli, 1992; Colarelli & Boos, 1992). Researchers have recommended that job applicants be assessed in terms of their fit with the organization's strategies, culture, norms, and values (Fombrun, Tichy, & Devanna, 1984; Olian & Rynes, 1984). Rynes and Gerhart (1990) suggest that interpersonal skills, goal orientation, and physical attractiveness are a few criteria used in assessing fit. It is not surprising that these are some of the same criteria on which interviewers base their hiring recommendations.

Interviewers making sociometric decisions use a variety of cues to assess the similarity between themselves and the interviewee. Griffitt and Jackson (1970) reported that when interviewers perceived the interviewee to have similar attitudes, they made significantly more decisions to hire. An applicant's nonverbal behaviors can provide the interviewer with useful information about the applicant's social skills (Edinger & Patterson, 1983; Gifford, Ng, & Wilkinson, 1985; Schlenker, 1980). The level of assertiveness, dependability, confidence, and responsibility can also be assessed in an employment interview (Amalfitano & Kalt, 1977). Each of these provides information that helps the interviewer arrive at an assessment regarding an applicant's fit.

Sociometry and the Use of Sociometric Techniques to Improve Group Functioning

Sociometry is the measurable study of structured human dynamics, including the social, cultural, and psychological characteristics, of human groups (Moreno, 1956). Sociometry seeks to understand the interactions and dynamics of group processes and apply that knowledge to the betterment of the work group, the organization, and society. In the following section, we review

empirical studies on the effects of standard sociometric techniques. Our purpose in doing this is to provide indirect evidence about the possible effects of sociometric selection with the employment interview. Research in the field of sociometry has described two ways in which sociometric techniques have been used to improve group functioning: (a) to study the social, psychological, and cultural dynamics of existing groups in order to improve their functioning, and (b) to form *de novo* or new groups.

Diagnosing and Restructuring Existing Groups

Speroff (1956) described one example of how the sociometric status of a group can be diagnosed. Each member in the group indicated in writing or orally the person he or she considered to be the best on a certain number of criteria (e.g., the most efficient worker, or the most enjoyable worker). The members who were chosen the greatest number of times were considered the stars of the group. The members who were never chosen were considered isolates. A graphic quantitative representation of group members' choices was summarized in a sociogram. This schema provided information about: (a) the number and size of subgroups existing within the group, (b) the level of group cohesiveness, (c) a comparison of one's personal observations with the empirical, objective indicators, (d) the potential leaders of the group, and (e) whether restructuring or regrouping is necessary (Speroff, 1956). We can conclude that a summary, called a sociogram, of the group's interactions helps one to examine how the group is operating and determine what steps need to be taken to improve the functioning of the group.

In an early sociometric study, Van Zelst (1951) assessed the relationship between sociometric ratings of interpersonal desirability and job satisfaction in two groups of carpenters and two groups of bricklayers. Individuals in these groups were familiar with each other's personalities and levels of skill. He found that the higher the level of interpersonal desirability among workers, the greater the job satisfaction. In addition, those individuals who received higher ratings of interpersonal desirability expressed a greater degree of job security, perceived the work environment to be good, and believed their co-workers to be friendly. These workers also believed the organization was interested in their welfare, that good communication with management existed, and that management had good intentions. Later, Van Zelst (1952) evaluated these groups and predicted that sociometric restructuring would produce an increase in job satisfaction and a decrease in turnover. The experimental group consisted of a group of 20 carpenters and 20 bricklayers. The control group was made up of 18 carpenters and 16 bricklayers. Both groups worked on building the same style of house. The experimental group, which was restructured through the use of sociometry, scored significantly higher on job satisfac-

tion and had significantly lower turnover. In addition, labor and material costs were also significantly lower for the group formed by using sociometry.

In organizations, there exists both a formal social structure with official roles for the members and a sociometric structure that includes how the members get along with one another. Mendelson (1989) believes that the more disagreement there is between the official social structure of an organization and the sociometric structure, the more social conflict and tension will arise. Knowledge of what each of these structures is, and recognition of the differences and similarities between them can lead one to take steps to avert conflict and help the organization function smoothly.

Forming De Novo Groups

Research supports the notion that when new groups are formed from existing groups through the use of sociometric techniques, the new groups show high levels of satisfaction, cohesion, communication, and coordination (Secord & Backman, 1964). The United States military conducted the early research examining the use of sociometry to form new groups. Following World War II and the Korean conflict, the army began searching for better ways to process soldiers through the army's replacement system. Chesler, Van Steenburg, and Brueckel (1953) compared two approaches to processing replacements on morale and combat efficiency. The old method of replacement treated the men as individuals. The men were randomly chosen and sent to overseas assignments. The new method replaced the men in sociometrically assembled four-man teams. The four members of each team had been trained together and knew each other well. The results of this study indicated that the teams assembled by using sociometric techniques had higher morale and probably higher combat efficiency than those who were assigned individually (Chesler, Van Steenburg, & Brueckel, 1953).

Sociometric techniques have also been used with flying cadets (Zeleny, 1960). In this study, Zeleny studied 48 cadet-observers in an advanced Army Air Force flying school. The flying cadets completed a sociometric test and rated each of the cadets first on whether or not they would consider flying with them or felt indifferent to the cadet in question, and then they rated their choices on the most and least preferred flying partner. This sociometric technique was used to identify leaders and isolates among flying cadets, to assess the status of cadets, and to identify those who would be most compatible with each other. Flying partners were then assigned on the basis of this information. Sociometric techniques proved to be a more useful selection device than the random selection method the flying cadets used previously (Zeleny, 1960).

In a more recent study, Colarelli and Boos (1992) compared sociometric and ability-based selection on multiple outcomes—communication, coordina-

tion, peer rating, group cohesion, and job satisfaction. Subjects in the sociometric condition chose those whom they wanted to have in their work group, whereas the subjects in the ability-based condition were assigned because of their capabilities to perform a task. The work groups assembled by using a sociometric selection process had higher levels of communication, coordination, peer ratings, group cohesion, and job satisfaction than those using an ability-based selection process (Colarelli & Boos, 1992).

The use of sociometric techniques to diagnose, restructure, and form new groups can benefit organizations, and it is likely that many of these same benefits are realized when sociometric techniques are used to select individuals into existing groups. The sociometric techniques used to diagnose, restructure, and form new groups, however, rely on information that is normally available from the members of the group. When organizations are selecting individuals for existing groups, however, this type of information is not usually available to the group and must be collected and evaluated in order to assess the applicant. The traditional employment interview is the primary means by which group members collect this type of information and engage in sociometric selection. The interview provides a variety of information about the applicant, ranging from demographic characteristics to communication styles and social skills. The unstructured nature of the employment interview allows the interviewer to probe for information on which to assess the applicant's personal values, attitudes, and goals. Interviewers use this information to determine if the applicant will fit with themselves and the group. Both the type of decision to be made, and the information on which it is based, are similar to those found in other sociometric techniques. Thus, many of the benefits that occur when using standard sociometric techniques are likely to be achieved when using the sociometric selection process.

Discussion

Most of the research on the employment interview suggests that it is a poor predictor of performance, is time consuming, and is expensive; however, it is widely used in organizations today to make hiring decisions. We have argued that the interview is used so widely because it serves other functions that have not been addressed in the current literature (Dreher & Muarer, 1989). Perhaps the most important function is the sociometric selection of applicants.

Organizations have available to them a number of human-resource technologies that allow them to identify individuals who possess knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform a given job. These technologies allow the organization to identify those individuals who are likely to be the best performers among the candidates in the applicant pool. However, individual job performance is just one dimension of human activity that is necessary for

organizational effectiveness. Other dimensions of human activity related to organizational effectiveness include being committed to the organization, functioning cooperatively in the work group, and fitting into the organization's culture. Central to these activities are the social, psychological, and cultural characteristics of the work group and organization. By definition (Moreno, 1956), these are related to the sociometric functioning of the work group and organization.

Research within the field of sociometry suggests advantages to using sociometric methods to assess existing groups and to form new groups. Some of these advantages include increased job satisfaction and communication as well as decreased turnover and labor costs. Given the importance of these issues in the competitive environment in which organizations find themselves today, it is likely that organizations would prefer to select those individuals who meet sociometric criteria as well as job-specific knowledge and skills.

Few technologies exist to assess applicants on these sociometric criteria. Research regarding interview content and interviewer decision making suggests that one such technology is the unstructured employment interview. Although it may have initially been used to assess job-specific knowledge, skills, and abilities, the interview appears to have evolved into a sociometric selection technique. That is, organizations have adapted it to meet this specific function. Evidence for this is found not only in the fact that the employment interview continues to be used but also in the research findings that indicate that interviewers focus their attention and base their decisions on information regarding values, attitudes, interpersonal skills, and "likability."

Although the employment interview can allow the organization to experience the benefits associated with sociometric selection, this type of selection can also be dysfunctional. For instance, when sociometric selection has the effect of denying members of protected groups organizational membership, the courts may sanction the organization. Sociometric selection can also become dysfunctional when it leads to a lack of diversity within the organization. A lack of diversity within the organization can be especially problematic when the environment the organization operates in changes rapidly. When diversity is limited, the organization may not have the necessary talents needed to address new demands in the environment. Sociometric selection can also be problematic when organizational decision making is influenced by pressures for social conformity leading to the phenomena known as "groupthink" (Janis, 1972). We suggest that practitioners be aware of the potential pitfalls associated with sociometric selection and take active steps to avoid them.

Before we propose suggestions for future research, we must first acknowledge that, unfortunately, little research has been conducted regarding the sociometric selection of applicants into existing groups. Therefore, basic research that examines the interview as a sociometric selection technique is

needed. This research would do well to focus on identifying how interviewers actually arrive at sociometric assessments of applicants, identifying appropriate organizational criteria on which to evaluate interviewer decisions, and establishing the theoretical and empirical linkages between the two. This research could follow the same logic as the validation of other selection techniques described by Binning and Barrett (1989). This would involve establishing the relationship between sociometric constructs identified in the interview and performance constructs identified in the work setting.

Researchers need to investigate what organizations and groups actually do when they interview job applicants. How widespread, for example, is sociometric selection and under what conditions is it most likely to occur? Finally, historical studies that examine the evolution and functions of selection methods over time will increase our understanding of the adaptive and ecological nature of human resource technologies.

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