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The Decision-Oriented Interview (DOI) as an in-depth selection interview

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Abstract

The Decision-Oriented Interview (DOI) as an in-depth selection interview technique is presented. The core idea of the Decision-Oriented Interview is described. Questions in a DOI are depicted in detail and then the interview guide for the DOI is characterized with its functions and features. A typical part of an interview guide for the description of behavior in a performance-differentiating situation illustrates the decision-oriented approach. In the outlook it is shown that the DOI rules can be very helpful in many fields of applied psychology as well as for collecting the very first information in a field of psychological research or test development.

Key words: in-depth interview, selection interview, Decision-Oriented Interview, interview guide, interview rules, checklists, Decision-Oriented Assessment,

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Introduction: The Decision-Oriented Interview (DOI) as a toolkit

A Decision-Oriented Interview is an interview that is planned, executed and evaluated according to scientific psychological criteria to enable decision-makers to reach satisfying decisions (Westhoff & Kluck, 2012, p. 103). We use the term "satisfying" to characterize decisions under uncertainty (i.e. decisions where we don't know the best alternative in advance) when, after implementation of the decision, the decision-maker has no regrets about the way the decision was reached. There are a number of different reasons why decision-makers may regret the way a decision was reached, for example because they failed to take all the possible alternatives into consideration, because they didn't inform themselves adequately about the alternatives, because they weren't clear about their goals or values, or because they didn't have any contingency plans drawn up in case the alternative they actually selected turned out to be a bad choice.

Proficiency assessment is a sequence of inevitable decisions. If decision-makers do not reach each of these decisions with appropriate deliberation, they run the risk of later regretting how they reached their final decision because they made a mistake that could have been avoided. Decision-Oriented Assessment (DOA) (Westhoff & Kluck, 2012, first published 1991) provides a collection of rules for the whole process of psychological assessment which can also be used in the human resources sector. Our aim in this article is to offer an introduction to the Decision-Oriented Interview (DOI) – one component of the DOA process – in a way that is easy to follow. The DOI consists of a set of rules for the 1. planning, 2. execution, and 3. evaluation of proficiency assessment interviews. This article explains with illustrative examples what these rules mean in practice and how they are applied for planning the DOI as an in-depth selection interview. – The personal pronoun "we" is used in the following text because not only the members of the writer's team but a growing number of psychologists in the German-speaking countries and in all fields of applied psychology have been working with good success according to DOA and hence the DOI rules for more than two decades.

So-called "in-depth interviews" are used to develop a qualitative description of a candidate's behavior, i.e. how the candidate behaves, or has behaved in the past, under specific conditions. The assumption is that candidates will behave in the future in a similar way as in the past. There are scattered references to this kind of interview in the literature. The DOI systematizes the in-depth interview in a collection of rules that are compiled into well-structured checklists (Westhoff, 2013a).

The core idea of the Decision-Oriented Interview (DOI)

In the DOI the interviewer always lets the interviewee describe their concrete behavior and experience in a specific situation, such that "I can imagine it as though I were watching a movie". The interviewer describes the critical incident to the interviewee and asks them to describe in detail what then happened in this performance-differentiating situation. The interviewee should not only describe their behavior but also what they thought at the time, how they felt and whether there were any physical consequences. All this information is helpful when one wants to predict how a candidate would behave in a comparable situation.

In learning psychology the pleasant consequences of a specific behavior are called reinforcement because the individual tends to want to experience the situation again. Possibly unpleasant consequences are called punishment because the individual then tries to avoid such a situation in the future. In an in-depth interview most interviewees will usually report this information spontaneously or after a slight nudge from the interviewer. This learning psychological information is also of crucial significance if one wants to understand, predict or influence behavior in performance-differentiating situations.

The saying "after the match is before the match" is valid not only in soccer. It is therefore to be recommended that the interviewee not only describes what happened in a specific situation but also how the situation arose and how it developed afterwards. This pre- and post-event history also contains information that is helpful for understanding, predicting or influencing behavior.

Table 1:
Four aspects of behavior in the course of an event and how to ask about them:

1. Feelings (How did you feel?)
2. Thoughts (What went through your head?)
3. Actions (What did you do?)
4. Bodily changes (Did it affect you physically? If so, how?)

Table 2:
Reinforcement and punishment:

We ask about reinforcement (= pleasant result) with: *What did you find good about X?*
We ask about punishment (= unpleasant result) with: *What did you find not so good about X?*

Table 3:
Possible questions concerning pre- and post-event history are:

What was the situation before X?
What was the situation after X?

Table 4 shows the systematic combination of event features which can be used for the prediction of individual behavior in similar future situations.

Table 4:
Systematic combination of event features

Course of the event	before	during	after
Feelings (F)	F	F	F
Thoughts (T)	T	T	T
Actions (A)	A	A	A
Bodily changes (B)	B	B	B
Reinforcements (R)	R	R	R
Punishments (P)	P	P	P

Questions in a Decision-Oriented Interview (DOI)

The DOI method is consistently oriented to behavior that can be observed externally or by the candidates themselves. Such observations of behavior offer a more verifiable basis for proficiency assessment than abstract descriptions of behavior and characterizations of persons using unclarified and unstandardized terms. Statements about the characteristics of people can be made at the end of the proficiency assessment. But in the interview itself, candidates must first describe how they or others behave in certain situations. Only then can we conclude to what extent the person described has certain traits or not. It is easier for candidates to describe behavior if the frame of reference of the interview questions is clear. For this reason, when a new topic is introduced in the DOI, the interviewer briefly explains its purpose in the interview.

Candidates can answer questions more easily if they are only asked about one topic at a time. If the interviewer violates this "single idea" rule (Cannell & Kahn, 1968) and addresses more than one issue in a question, candidates cannot be expected to know which part of the question they should answer, or they may forget to answer one part of the question. In both cases, the interviewer will then have to ask the question again in the correct way, or important information may be missed.

In a DOI, the candidate is supposed to portray observed behavior and experiences. The interviewer's questions and elicitations should serve to guide this portrayal and the interviewer should only interrupt as necessary to keep the candidate's response on course. In general, short and precise formulations serve this purpose best.

Many interviewers are inclined to encourage the candidate to get to the point quickly. This often leads to formulations of questions that are by their very nature suggestive, although most interviewers are completely unaware of this fact. In the DOI, leading questions are clearly defined as follows: Questions in an interview are leading if the formulation of the question indicates an answer that the interviewer "wants to hear", usually because at least one of the following conditions is fulfilled: 1. Information stated in the question makes it obvious what the desired answer is. 2. The question already contains an evaluation of the behavior being asked about. 3. Something is assumed as given that cannot be assumed as given because it could also be (or have been) different. 4. Possible answers are not listed completely. 5. If all possible answers are presented, or in the case of "yes/no"-questions, one of the possible answers is more obvious to the candidate. 6. The question contains filler words that hint at the desired answer, e.g. "surely", "perhaps", etc.

The danger of asking leading questions is often underestimated, since the suggestion may be so subtle that the interviewer does not even notice it. But the candidate will certainly react to it. If a whole series of leading questions is used, this can distort the whole interview. The only way to avoid such serious mistakes in interviewer behavior is to have appropriate training and to use meticulously formulated interview guides.

Efficient questions

Another characteristic of efficient questions in Decision-Oriented Interviews is that they help the candidate to recall details of past behavior in specific situations. One way to do this is to formulate the question in such a way that it reactivates the context of the specific behavior. This requires the interviewer either to know from experience how specific events are encoded, or to direct the questions in order to encourage the candidate to recall the context in which the specific event took place.

Emotionally loaded words and phrases in interview questions may be experienced by the candidate as highly appropriate, but also as highly inappropriate. Since this cannot be anticipated when designing the interview guide, we strive to avoid the use of such words or phrases in questions as far as possible when we plan a DOI. But this does not mean that feelings are not taken into account. On the contrary, by remaining open-minded during the interview to the feelings experienced by the candidate, the interviewer can record them more precisely and react to them more appropriately.

Interviewers may occasionally find certain questions required by the goals of the proficiency assessment to be personally embarrassing, and as a result may avoid such questions or formulate them inaccurately, even though they are aware of the internal "censor's scissors" that are at work here. But we simply have to overcome the fears which underlie this problem if we want to conduct effective proficiency assessments. Careful preparation of the interview (i.e. design of an interview guide) is absolutely essential for this, as is systematic training and regular supervision by colleagues to ensure interviewer competence.

Inefficient questions

Questions that start with "why" or "what are the reasons" are attempting to elicit someone's "motivation" for behaving in a certain way. Such questions don't address behavior and experience; they ask candidates to express causal attributions. But causal attributions are not reports of observed behavior. They provide no information whatsoever on the conditions which govern behavior in particular situations, only on the explanations thought up at a later point in time for the behavior in question. And yet causal attributions of this kind are frequently misinterpreted, even by interviewers themselves, as the motivational conditions for particular behavior. If causal attributions do happen to be relevant to the assessment process, the DOI interviewer will of course ask how the candidate would explain certain behavior. Such subjective explanations may indeed be relevant for prediction of behavior, as people generally consider their causal attributions to be correct and behave accordingly. But the real conditions for particular behavior may be completely different to those expressed in causal attributions.

In addition, questions like "why" or "what are the reasons" also suggest that the interviewer only wants to hear "rational" reasons as answers. This is evident in many observed interviews. But such questions usually inhibit candidates when they are describing a sequence of events in which feelings play an important or predominant role. They then feel obliged to give a kind of "rational" account. It is much easier for candidates if the interviewer asks them to describe a particular sequence of events, i.e. to describe what they did, thought and felt. Then they can feel free to describe everything that comes to mind, even things which were "irrational". Such portrayals will also contain a fair share of thoughts that may well be "rational" in the everyday sense of the word. Descriptions of internal and external processes thus yield more useful information about motivation than do answers to questions about reasons.

In addition, one knows from everyday experience that asking for rational reasons for behavior is often used as a strategy to reproach someone, or in an argument. For example, people tend to ask questions about reasons for behavior when they want to criticize someone's behavior. If one knows that the other person acted emotionally or from habit, such questions can be used to corner that person into giving "rational" reasons for their behavior. When they do, one can then respond critically by explaining that, actually, all the rational explanations they have given are false.

Many psychologists describe a specific situation in their questions and then want to hear how candidates would react in that situation. But such questions require candidates to know and accurately assess all the important conditions of the situation described. Candidates must also know themselves well enough to be able to tell how they would react to these conditions. This is only likely to be the case when someone has already experienced the situation described, or a very similar situation. So it always makes more sense to elicit a direct description from the candidates of the situation actually experienced. If candidates are asked about presumed behavior in a situation unknown to them, i.e. about hypothetical behavior, they will always be overchallenged, both intellectually and emotionally. How can we expect someone, working under time pressure, to adequately imagine all the important situational conditions and to decide within seconds how they would behave, when in reality the situation would have lasted for hours, days or even longer?

Openness of a question

Open questions do not prescribe the way the candidate is supposed to answer them. Closed questions indicate exactly how they are to be answered. The prescribed answers are always short, in extreme cases consisting of a single word like "yes" or "no". With rare exceptions, closed questions are the favored type of formulation in personality questionnaires and most other questionnaires used in job-related proficiency assessment.

Open questions are not imprecise or vague. On the contrary, they can be formulated so that candidates know exactly what they are supposed to talk about. Only the way they give their descriptions is not prescribed by the question. Candidates prefer open questions because they can talk the way they want to. This is why open questions are particularly helpful at the beginning of a new interview section, because the interviewer does not yet know very much about the behavior of the candidate in that particular area. Each section of a Decision-Oriented Interview is usually about the candidate's behavior in a specific situation. DOI interviewers always get candidates to report or describe this behavior by using open questions or elicitations. If a particular aspect of the past event being described is of further interest, interviewers will use a further open question which refers exclusively to that aspect. Even if they still require a more detailed description after this, i.e. details about an aspect of a particular aspect, they will continue to use only open questions.

In principle, all the questions in a DOI are open questions, with some justified exceptions such as filter questions. Filter questions are used to find out whether a candidate has been able to gather any experience in a certain area. If this is not the case, then a part of the interview guide is skipped, namely the part that was prepared in case the subject had indeed had that specific experience, for example a particular internship. The aims of the interview being planned ultimately determine how open the questions and elicitations are.

Directness of a question

The easier it is for candidates to recognize the details a question is asking about, the more direct the question is. The more indirect the question, the less explicitly it states which aspects in a particular area of behavior are of interest. Candidates are then required to report everything they feel is worth reporting. How direct a question is depends on how present the particular behavior is in the candidate's mind. Confronted with direct questions, candidates may not be able to remember many details, or may only remember them poorly. Conversely, if candidates are asked to describe a certain event or development via indirect questions, they may be able to report details which might not occur to them if a direct question is posed. Candidates have difficulty in talking freely about certain things when the topics relate to behavior which is disapproved of socially, or to emotionally stressful events, or to situations which are problematic from a motivational point of view. In such cases, indirect questions are often the only way to get into the topic. Last but not least, how direct a question is depends on the aims of the interview being planned. Informative answers to certain indirect questions, e.g. about "embarrassing" topics, can only be expected once candidates have discovered, in the course of a longer interview, that they can indeed speak openly and confidentially.

Formulating highly efficient questions

The questions formulated in a DOI interview guide are optimally efficient if they make it as easy as possible for candidates to report details of behavior and experiences. If this is the case, candidates rightly feel that they can say whatever comes into their heads. Candidates have to be able to talk without having to think about whether they are formulating their answers appropriately. They have to be able to talk as freely as if they were trying to describe something in vivid detail to an interested friend.

In the literature on interviews it is often proposed that the level of language in the interview should be adapted to the respective interviewee. But this is not compatible with efficient design of an interview guide, which must "fit" equally well to all the candidates. We propose that observation of the following rules for formulating questions will ensure that the interview guide contains optimally efficient questions with respect to level of language.

A question should be formulated as concisely and to the point as possible. This may present a problem to people who intuitively prefer to use long and complex sentences as a sign of their educational background or professionalism. However, in the context of the DOI, true professionalism will always place the highest priority on effective communication rather than on public image.

The passive voice puts the emphasis on "what was done" (and optionally also "by whom"). This reduces the significance of the agent of the action. But in questions (and answers) relating to behavior, we are naturally more interested in "who did what", and should therefore formulate our questions in the active voice.

Substantives, like adjectives, are also abstract concepts. We need to think about what is meant by them. Questions are easier to understand if we describe the behavior we are interested in using verbs, and ultimately just provide starting points for the candidate to continue talking. If a question contains more than two substantives, we should ask ourselves whether we really need the third or the fourth one.

The danger of misunderstandings is particularly present when uncommon words are used in questions. The use of technical terms in questions, regardless of which specialized field they come from, may pose a problem for many candidates. Well-educated candidates in particular may be reluctant to ask for clarification if they don't understand a technical term, as they want to avoid betraying "ignorance" in the proficiency assessment context.

In certain stages of an interview, the interviewer must first find out whether discussion of a specific topic makes any sense with this particular candidate. We use filter questions at the start of such stages. If the candidate has some experience of the topic (if yes), the interviewer proceeds with the interview stage as planned. If the candidate has no experience of the topic (if no), the interviewer skips forward to a predefined point in the interview guide and continues with the next stage.

Questions should not contain any evaluation of the behavior being dealt with, as such evaluations may have a wide range of effects, all of them unproductive. Besides, these evaluations are superfluous and only make the questions unnecessarily long.

Sticking to the facts in the formulation of interview questions also means that, when the questions are asked, the interviewer is not talking up or down to the candidate. If questions contain nuances of ingratiation or arrogance on the part of the interviewer, or refer to other persons, including the candidate, pejoratively or complimentarily, this may distract the candidate. Such questions also carry information that is not essential for comprehension, and lengthen the questions unnecessarily.

Table 5:
Examples for the formulation of efficient(+) rather than inefficient(-) questions

Are questions necessary?	
i.e. do they help to gather information in order to answer a Psychological Question (= hypothesis) e.g. about coping with emotional strain	
–	What is your favorite hobby?
+	What did you do after your last strenuous working day?
Are questions easy to understand? i.e. Are questions...	
...free from less-common words and technical terms	
–	Are you an extravert or introvert?
+	On which occasions did you enjoy being with other people in the past week?
...shortly formulated	
–	Are you able to tell what kind of actions you took after that event?
+	What did you do then?
...in active voice and describing behavior	
–	How are examinations prepared for?
+	Did you prepare for this examination? If yes: How?
...asking for one thing only (single idea rule)	
–	How do you find it now not to live alone anymore but together with a partner and to quarrel sometimes with him/her?
+	What do you find good about your partner? What do you find perhaps not so good about your partner? Describe your last conflict.
...formulated concretely	
–	What is your situation in terms of private relationships?
+	Do you have a partner?
...starting with a filter question if necessary	
–	Describe your last dispute with your friend.
+	Do you live in a partnership? If yes: Describe your last dispute from the very beginning up to the end.

⇒

...ordered correctly

– How did you organize your last project? What were your goals in your last project?

+ Tell me all about your last project. / What did you want to achieve? Did you make any plans? If yes: Tell me, please.

Is it possible to answer questions clearly? i.e. Are questions...

...formulated in an adequately open fashion

– Do you have a lot of work to do in your studies?

+ What did you have to do for your studies yesterday / last week?

...not suggestive

– Do you think that you prepared in the wrong way for your examination?

+ Did you prepare for the examination? If yes: Describe how, please.

...oriented on past behavior and not on hypothetical situations?

– How would you deal with a customer's complaint? (with a different kind of customer to those he knows)

+ The last time you had to deal with a customer's complaint please describe.

...free of evaluations of candidates or their behavior

– How did you cope with this horrible event of firing employees?

+ How did you cope with having to fire employees?

...not talking up or down to a person

– How did you cope with your disastrous failure?

+ How did you cope with this situation?

...not asking for "reasons" but for the description of a development

– What were the reasons why you decided to study psychology?

+ Tell me how it came about that you studied psychology?

...not asking "why" but for the description of behavior

– Why do you like to be a manager?

+ What do you find good about being a manager? What do you find perhaps not so good about being a manager?

Interview guide for the DOI

Functions of interview guides

An interview guide for a Decision-Oriented Interview is a complete, specifically formulated plan for the execution of an interview. It is not a questionnaire. An interview guide is the most important aid for a professionally executed Decision-Oriented Interview. Below, we will illustrate how an interview guide serves its individual purposes. Carrying out a good Decision-Oriented Interview is such a complex task that it cannot be completely and satisfactorily accomplished, even by experts, unless an interview guide is used. Most novice interviewers consider formulation of an interview guide to be a redundant activity, at first. But once they have experienced how hopelessly lost they can soon find themselves in unplanned and unprepared interviews, they realize how essential it is to formulate the interview guide right down to the last detail.

In the interview guide, we write down precise formulations not only of all the questions, but also of everything else the interviewer will have to talk about in the interview. This includes, for example, lead-ins, lead-overs and summaries. Novices often think that writing out such precise formulations in the guide is rather redundant. But, in practice interviews, they quickly realize that on-the-fly formulations under interview conditions are far less efficient than the economic and accurate formulations they can develop during the planning stage, where they can take all the time they need. Interview guides for a DOI as an in-depth interview are very often mistaken for questionnaires, since it is assumed that they are used for rigid questioning. The exact opposite is the case! However, it does require considerable practice to be able to design an interview guide so that it serves exactly as the flexible tool it is supposed to be.

Features of an interview guide

The overruling aim of every Decision-Oriented Interview is to get an answer to the question agreed on in the assignment. We always formulate the interview guide for a DOI according to this overruling aim. This means that we will only collect information that serves to determine fulfillment of the specifically formulated requirements, and thus to answer the client's question. When we plan Decision-Oriented Interviews for various clients' questions, there are no questions that we will always ask as a matter of routine. A schematic interview guide that is not specifically tailored to the particular client's question is incompatible with the requirement-based principle of the Decision-Oriented Interview method. Each interview guide will only contain specifically formulated questions that are justified with respect to the particular requirements and the particular client's question. Questions in Decision-Oriented Interviews are only justified if they are based on well-founded requirements. Only if all of these requirements are clearly described can the interview be used to test the degree to which the interviewee fulfills them.

The entire planning and execution of any job-related proficiency assessment is oriented to the cost-benefit ratio. This also applies to the Decision-Oriented Interview. We only use questions that we expect to yield useful information for the decisions that need to be made. This excludes any sections of an interview that have little or nothing of value to offer in terms of answering the client's question. It is essential that the interviewer strictly upholds this policy while conducting the interview.

An interview guide is a tool, and must therefore be as easy to use as possible. To ensure this, it is advisable to formulate it in long form with all the necessary details. This includes deciding on the length of the individual interview sections. The interviewer, of course, should always know exactly which section of the plan they are in at any given moment during the interview. But it is also useful if the interviewee, too, can easily see how the interview is structured.

We write out the long form of the interview guide as clearly as possible and highlight all the important points. It is essential that we design this long form of the interview guide with organized visual highlighting so that the basic structure is easy for the eye to follow. In the interview, we use the visually optimized interview guide to maintain an overview. This ensures that we have no problems finding the right words in particularly difficult sections of the interview. However, this does not mean that we read the questions out word for word, but we must always communicate the essential core of each question correctly. The main symptoms of a poorly planned interview and a lack of discipline in its execution are a high proportion of interviewer talking time and inappropriately formulated questions.

General structure of an interview guide

The aim of the initial greetings and introductions part of the interview is always to allow the two parties to get to know each other a little and to adjust to each other. It is crucial for the rest of the interview that the interviewer refers to or asks about the current situation of the interviewee. Since the two parties must first break the ice through "everyday conversation", this may well involve discussing things which do not have anything to do with the client's question.

Starting with the client's question, we then describe the aims of the interview and the procedure. It is essential that the interviewee understands how important the interview is for answering the client's question. This will increase the interviewee's willingness to cooperate. It is also motivating if we provide an overview of the topics to be discussed, say how long the interview will last, and point out that it will be possible to take breaks.

Many interviewers, but usually not the interviewees, have great reservations about making audio or even video recording of their interviews. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, recordings of our own voices always sound different to how we experience them, and most people find this "other" voice unpleasant. Secondly, on playback interviewers hear and, in the case of video recordings, see all their errors in brutal clarity. In contrast, interviewees generally have no objections to audio or video recordings, especially if we back the suggestion up by explaining the advantages. However, if they do refuse their consent, we dictate as much of the information as possible onto a recording medium directly after the interview, using the interview guide as a structural and mnemonic aid. We also make use of our handwritten notes.

Video recordings of interviews can provide additional information about the non-verbal behavior accompanying the interview (gestures, facial expressions, motor activity), all of which may also be useful for proficiency assessment. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that interviewers with little grounding in psychology generally tend to completely overestimate the significance of non-verbal information. This may lead to them drawing untenable conclusions from the observed paralinguistic behavior. The decisive information for a Decision-Oriented Interview is always to be found in the verbal descriptions of behavior given by the interviewee. In any case, the type of recording we choose must also conform to cost-benefit considerations.

It goes without saying that we must always secure the consent of the interviewee prior to making an audio or video recording. Recording someone without their consent is not permissible. Clandestine recording would not only be against the law but would also violate the basic principle of "partnership" with the interviewee. However, in general we can expect interviewees to give their consent willingly since, from their point of view, a recording of the interview is the only real guarantee that all their answers will be objectively documented. Only in this way will interviewees be in a position to object to what they feel are distorted or even false evaluations by the interviewer.

At the beginning of each section, we give a brief and precise explanation to the interviewees of the aims of this section of the interview. This will increase their readiness to cooperate. With a summary of the main points at the end of each section, we give the interviewees feedback on how we have understood what they said. This also gives them an opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings or to provide additional information.

A standard feature of the Decision-Oriented Interview is that we first get the interviewees to describe what they feel the client's question is about, and then proceed with the sequence of topics, i.e. the selected performance-differentiating situations. In terms of the client's question, these performance-differentiating situations are those situations which allow clear distinctions to be made between people who deal with them well and people who do not deal with them so well.

There is nothing arbitrary about the sequence of interview topics. Certain topics can only be dealt with satisfactorily at a later stage in the interview, while there are other topics that the interviewees will be keen to talk about as soon as possible. Interviewees take it as a sign of genuine interest in them as a person if they are allowed to state how they see things. This also aids memory recall. We can always come back later to these initial statements, which reassures the interviewees that we really are listening to them and correctly remembering what they said. This promotes a positive attitude of interviewee to interviewer, and provides a strong motivation to continue giving descriptions of specific behavior. The final section of the Decision-Oriented Interview may involve the use of indirect questions designed to elicit useful information for a range of purposes, for example asking the interviewees to describe a typical or ideal day or weekend. At the beginning of the interview, such questions might easily meet with a lack of understanding or even mistrust.

The conclusion of the DOI is the logical place to give the interviewees one more opportunity to add anything they feel is missing, to get their feedback on the interview, and for the interviewer to explain the next stages of the proficiency assessment process. It may be helpful to tell the interviewees how they can contact the interviewer if they need to, for example if they later think of something important that has not yet been mentioned. Finally, the interviewer may want to initiate a conversation about an emotionally neutral topic, if this seems necessary in order to be able to wind down and leave the interviewee in a good state of mind.

When formulating the detailed structure of an interview guide, simple, clear and precise language must be used in all cases. Many interviewers and interviewees with an academic background have particular difficulties here, especially in the context of a proficiency assessment. A simple register of language without sophisticated grammar and vocabulary, and without technical terms, may be considered by interviewees as revealing their lack of proficiency, and by interviewers as a lack of professionalism. But in fact most misunderstandings in interviews arise from the use of inappropriately abstract terms instead of specific and clear descriptions. In interviews, it is essential that all necessary explanations are short, appropriate and easy for the interviewee to follow. This underlines once more how extremely useful it is if all explanations that may be required are considered before the interview, when there is no time pressure, and written down as part of the interview guide.

A number of explanations will be necessary at the beginning of a Decision-Oriented Interview. These explanations should not be prepared in the form of a short lecture, but should be planned so that we can communicate them in dialog with the interviewee, i.e. through questions and answers. Like other parts of the Decision-Oriented Interview, this procedure requires special practice.

The sequence of the questions in a particular interview section is not arbitrary. It will depend primarily on the aim of the interview. In addition, however, we must also take a number of psychological factors into account to ensure that interviewees are able to report the desired information in a usable form. It is only the description of specific individual behavior that provides the information we require for a useful proficiency assessment. For this reason, we always ask the interviewees to describe behavior so that we can visualize it in detail "like watching a movie". Most interviewees are able to do this easily after a few minutes.

Example: An excerpt from an interview guide

The following excerpt from an interview guide shows possible questions for a performance-differentiating situation. This is a recurrent part of information collection that has to be supplemented by questions specific to the situation. As well as the part concerned with information collection, the introduction and the conclusion all belong to a complete interview guide for a DOI.

The example section of a DOI starts with a filter question. This can be dropped if the interviewer is certain that the interviewee is familiar with the performance-differentiating situation. The actual question is the invitation to describe situation 1 and all that happened in such a way that the interviewer can imagine it as though he were watching a movie. The possible subsequent supplementary questions are only put if, in the interviewee's description, certain information is missing or incomplete. Questions that are absolutely specific to the concrete situation are to be added to the Decision-Oriented Interview Guide (DIG), as are the introduction and conclusion by the interviewer.

Table 6:
An excerpt from an interview guide

Have you already experienced the performance-differentiating situation 1 before? • If no: Proceed to performance-differentiating situation 2. • If yes: Please describe situation 1 and what happened in such a detailed and concrete form that I can imagine the whole thing as though I were watching a movie.
How did you feel? How did it affect you?
What were you thinking at the time?
What did you do?
Did it have any physical consequences for you? If so, which?
What did you find positive in situation 1?
What did you find not so positive in situation 1?
What was it like before situation 1 arose? / How did situation 1 come about?
What was it like after situation 1? / How did things develop after situation 1?

Social desirability

A crucial problem in conventional proficiency assessment is the socially desirable self-description of candidates. The DOA approach includes several measures in order to minimize this problem. First of all a behavior-describing requirements profile is needed in which the job holder's behavior in critical incidents – for the sake of clarity we prefer the expression "performance-differentiating situation" – is described in detail by job experts so that everybody knows what is the required behavior and what is a mediocre or even an unacceptable one (Koch & Westhoff, 2012, 2013). The second measure is that both sides are well prepared for the interview and that it is clear for both sides that they are in a similar situation as in the very beginning of a partnership. Both sides have to check whether they are sufficiently well suited to each other. And as in an engagement there will follow a time where it will be tested in reality whether the fit is sufficiently good.

According to the behavior-describing requirements profile the performance-differentiating situations are presented to the candidate in the DOI one after another. And in each situation the candidates are asked to describe their behavior in these situations in the past so that the interviewer can imagine it as if watching a movie. If there are blank parts in this movie the interviewer will ask for a more detailed description. Interviewees experience this appropriately as interest in their persons and therefore they like to talk about it. Of course they tend to describe their behavior in a favorable way but often they really do not know what is the most favorable way from the interviewer's viewpoint and even if they were to know the basic pattern of behavior is not changed in their description. To give a completely different description is very demanding and only brilliant writers can do that if they are not disturbed. But in a DOI the candidates are led from one performance-differentiating situation to the next and after the first one most of them like to tell what they really had experienced.

Giving socially desirable descriptions is fostered by the use of behavior "describing" adjectives and substantives which are used by interviewers who are not well prepared and who have no time to listen properly to the stories interviewees are willing and able to tell about what they had done in past performance-differentiating situations. On the contrary, in a DOI, stimulating descriptions of situations are given and interviewees are reinforced for telling what they experienced.

Advantages of the DOI compared with the conventional approach

In the conventional approach a project manager takes over the planning, preparation and evaluation of interviews that either they or co-opted interviewers are to carry out. In the most favourable case the manager presents the interviewers with a complete interview guide and has developed a category system for the evaluation. Through a training course for the interviewers the manager ensures that they all understand the interview guide and use it in the same way. In this the manager has to rely entirely on his own expertise and that of his team. A feedback from the literature on interviews is difficult and time-consuming because there one finds many sources that make recommendations of questionable validity. There is no provision for an evaluation of the procedure, in whatever form. There is no estimate of costs and benefits. The project manager and the interviewers make unsystematic conclusions in which they often cannot establish how this came about. So there is no systematic improvement in the procedures for the project in the organization involved.

An organization using the rules of DOI and the supplementary rules of Decision-Oriented Assessment (DOA) can re-examine the rules, one by one, that have been summarised in helpful checklists. This begins, for example, with a checklist to clarify the task; this alone embraces 23 points. Every step in the planning of the interview guide is supported by checklists. The project manager can thus be certain that nothing of importance has been forgotten and that the formulation of questions does not contravene basic principles of behavior. The latter, for example, is always then the case when the interviewee should not only report on their behavior and how they experienced the situation, but also give "reasons" for their behavior. All questions that require "reasoning" from the interviewee harbor a high risk of errors of reason that lead to invalid interview results. The DOI rules also guide the evaluation of the interview as well as its oral and written summary. A concluding evaluation of the project makes a cost/benefit analysis possible, and can also lead to a systematic improvement to the procedures used in the project that can then be implemented in the next project.

Outlook

The Decision-Oriented Interview was presented here as an in-depth selection interview. There are conditions for a successful DOI as a selection interview (see Westhoff, 2013b). And of course the rules for evaluation of a DOI as an in-depth interview should be followed in order to extract and document in-depth interview information optimally (Westhoff, 2013c). – The rules for the Decision-Oriented Interview as an oral examination have been tested successfully over more than two decades. The DOI showed up to be highly reliable (r = .90 and higher), valid (r = .48) and content valid (Westhoff & Hagemeister, 2013). – The DOI rules can also be used to improve the design of structured selection interviews of the following three types 1. the Situational Interview, 2. the Behavior Description Interview, and 3. the Multimodal Interview (Westhoff & Strobel, 2013). In this way the DOI rules offer a toolkit for a wide range of interviewing, (partly) structured or in-depth, in selection interviews as well as for all other fields of applied psychology or for collecting the very first information in a field of psychological research or test development.

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