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## OBJECTIVE METHODS IN THE PERSONAL INTERVIEW IN VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE<sup>1</sup>

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Objective methods in the personal interview may seem at first to be a contradiction in concepts. It has been assumed that to the personal interview, as a makeshift, should be relegated only those problems or questions not susceptible to treatment by more objective methods. This assumption implies only one purpose for the interview, namely fact-finding, whereas instruction and motivation are very important functions. Co-operative fact-finding must necessarily constitute an important part of many guidance interviews. However, the three functions, *fact-finding*, *giving instruction*, and *motivating* cannot be separated, for instruction and motivation grow out of recognition of facts.

The primary function of the interview is to provide a favorable opportunity for the joint analysis and discussion of the aptitudes, interests, opportunities, and plans of the individual by himself and the adviser. This exploration is used to motivate self-guidance. Since fact-finding is essential, and since the interview has been criticized chiefly as used for this purpose, objective methods in fact-finding will receive particular emphasis in this report.

### THE FUNCTION OF OBJECTIVE METHODS IN INTERVIEWS

What are the functions and criteria of objective methods? Briefly, objective methods are those methods which yield results which can be verified by any person using the same method, regardless of personal judgment or prejudice. There is, however, the question of the applicability of such methods to interviewing. (1)

<sup>1</sup> Read at the annual meeting of the National Vocational Guidance Association, Atlantic City, Feb. 21, 1930.

Some investigators believe objective methods are limited to physical facts. (2) Others would include, in addition, those subjective facts for which we have definite physical evidence, but no other subjective facts. (3) A third group of persons believe that objective methods can be used directly in dealing with abstract or subjective facts and the reports and inferences from these. Unless we admit all these to be valid applications of objective methods, we seriously limit our belief in the possibilities of coping scientifically with many social, educational, and industrial problems as well as those of guidance.

It has been thought that the fact-finding interview could be reliable for obtaining reports of objective facts only. As a matter of fact, just the opposite is true. In the author's study of the use and reliability of the interview for fact-finding in industrial relations, the results repeatedly pointed to the conclusion that the interview is a feasible means for revealing attitudes of workers in industrial situations. The procedure is not only practicable but is also reliable for this purpose. The results of interviews agreed almost perfectly with the attitudes of workers as revealed by secret ballots in two entirely different situations. Statements of attitude agreed with a secret ballot on an unemployment compensation plan. In another situation, the results of interview agreed with a labor union secret vote on a proposal for arbitrating a strike. The author believes that we are reasonably justified in transferring this generalization to the use of interviews for revealing attitudes of students and of others.

On the other hand, the interview is not reliable for obtaining objective facts such as quantities, numbers, or dates, particularly if the interviewee has no special interest or motive for remembering them. Only 55 per cent of strikers could state the date when notice of reduction of wages was posted, even though they were still on strike and this notice precipitated the strike. The date was relatively easy to remember as the Monday following Easter. Very few of the workers interviewed had any definite idea of the number of workers in the mill where they worked. In another situation only 67 per cent of the employees could state the year when they signed a contract over which they had a strike. Forty-three per cent erred in the date as much as a year, with an average error of two and a half years, although the date was less than seven years earlier.

In another experiment the author asked three different groups of students to answer a series of questions. Some of these questions were asked twice at the same time, but in different form, so that answers in both gross numbers and percentages were called for. For example, such a question was, "What per cent of all the men in Pennsylvania State College are members of a fraternity?" Later the question was asked, "How many men are in fraternities?" Not only did the answers of different students show extreme variation, but the answers in terms of percentages varied extensively from those in terms of gross numbers given by the same students. In answering the two forms of questions in regard to membership in a fraternity, 39 per cent of the students gave answers in percentages which varied as much as 10 per cent from their own answers in gross numbers. The average of estimates of the number of women in college placed the number at 577, which was essentially correct, but 33 per cent of the students who estimated the number of women in both percentages and gross numbers had a difference of 50 or more between their two answers. It is quite obvious that such figures, obtained in interviews, would need to be checked for reliability, and that other procedures are much more expedient and valid than the interview for obtaining such data.

The author's premise is that the interview is most reliable for finding those facts for which records and similar objective sources are least available. That does not mean, however, that we can make the naïve assumptions and use the subjective methods that have too often been exploited in the name of character-analysis or even vocational guidance interviews. We must use objective methods which will help keep out errors. Although the interview can be used to deal with subjective facts, the errors are most subtle and it is in their elimination that we need the most refined objective methods.

#### THE OBJECTIVE OR IMPERSONAL ATTITUDE

The first step toward objective methods, and the essential of all objective methods is the objective or impersonal attitude. The guidance counselor must avoid a personal attitude or interest. This seems obvious and simple to carry out, but to have an interest in the student necessary to understanding and still prevent subtle errors from insidiously destroying the reliability of the interview

is not easy. Like or dislike of a student is a fact which interviewers should analyze in as objective a manner as possible. Just as it is recommended that the psychoanalyst be psychoanalyzed, so the guidance counselor should be psychoanalyzed, or interviewed and guided searchingly at least by himself.

One of the errors of a non-objective method into which the interviewer most easily falls is that of dominating not only the interview but also the interviewee. It is so natural to let our good intentions run to the fatherly attitude. As Thorndike has stated, "Every human being thus tends by original nature to arrive at a status of mastery or submission toward every other human being, and even under the more intelligent customs of civilized life somewhat of the tendency persists in many men."<sup>2</sup> The vocation of counseling may interest and select those persons who tend more often to take the mastery attitude, or select those who in less advantageous situations normally take a submissive attitude but find in counseling a compensation and an outlet for the desire to dominate.

The counselor should search himself particularly for compensations which appear in so many different forms. Hearty dislike of a trait in another person and an uncharitable estimate of that person may result from the fact that the first individual must battle the trait within himself. Admiration for an occupation and even an interest in it may result from a sense of inferiority in coping with it. There are places where angels do not have the courage to tread, but counselors will often quite readily advise a course of training which they would not undergo themselves. It is interesting to read what some counselors say should be the training for their own work, and to note how ambitious but general these recommendations are.

#### EVIDENCES OF THE OBJECTIVE ATTITUDE

What are the principles, methods, and criteria for ensuring the objective or scientific attitude in interviewing? Not only for maintaining the objective approach but also for avoiding the most insidious errors, it is wholesome for the interviewer to realize that *he* is the greatest source of errors and misunderstandings. Not the external conditions, not the denseness or the perversity of the interviewee, but the interviewer is responsible for lack of reliability

<sup>2</sup> Thorndike, E. L. *Educational Psychology*, Vol. I, p. 93.

in fact-finding or in giving information. The reliability of interviews for getting at the facts is ordinarily more likely to be jeopardized by the failure of the interviewee and interviewer to understand each other than by any attempt of the interviewee to falsify. Exceedingly great care must be exercised to make sure that the interviewee answers the question which the interviewer is asking, and which the latter may think the interviewee is answering. Many misunderstandings may result from differences in vocabularies or interpretative background of different persons. The responsibility for errors from this source falls upon the interviewer. Where there are objective or other reliable methods for checking the results of interviews the misunderstandings revealed are sometimes amazing.

The objective attitude is evidenced further by careful discrimination between fact and inference. Not only must the counselor always know which is fact and which is inference, but it is also his important task in helping a student reach a sound conclusion for self-guidance to lead him to see what is fact and what is inference.

To illustrate both these points an example from interviewing in industry is again drawn. During an interview with a girl in a cracker factory a careful investigator was informed that another girl, who was very unpopular, insisted on "hogging" the job. I shall quote from the investigator's written record of the interview: "It seemed strange that she would continue to sacrifice her popularity in the group for the additional weekly earnings. I undertook to find out about this and learned from her that she had an invalid mother and that she had made a conscious choice between being hardboiled and earning all she could on the one hand, and playing the game like a sport on the other." Later when he interviewed the girl in question, he found that she had no mother. Then he returned to the first worker and learned that she not only had not made the statement attributed to her but also had said that the other girl had no mother. For some cause, however, which he did not discover, he had accepted the erroneous idea as a fact, and had recorded it as such.

A third exacting test of the objective attitude is found in the method of giving information and advice for guidance. We all insist that guidance is not driving but is leading to self-guidance. But how can a vigorous wide-awake personality, such as a

student will respect and admire, keep his hands, to speak figuratively, off the planchette of the ouija board when a student is conscientiously attempting to have delicately balanced forces of various interests write his future? Possibly another analogy will aid in analyzing the problem, and thus help in dealing with it. The guidance interviewer may compare his function to that of a newspaper editor. The newspaper staff attempts to collect facts for dissemination to the readers. On some of these facts the editor attempts to draw conclusions and give advice in his editorials. These are recognized as such and the danger of being misled by them is relatively small. We are essentially helpless, however, in regard to most of the facts, for we must base our own conclusions on them, and we have no means of checking or correcting many of them. The emphasis given to various aspects of the news has its effect on us. Likewise the student is influenced by our treatment of the facts, and we must maintain an impersonal or objective attitude in preparing our articles and writing our headlines in the guidance interview. There is a time and place for the editorial or advice, but it should be labelled as such.

#### CLASSIFYING AND INTERPRETING FACTS

We must next consider objective methods in classifying and interpreting facts. Quite commonly there is a strong tendency to oversimplification and generalization, and to a neglect of the specific facts concerning the individual. The only excuse for vocational guidance is the fact that individuals differ, and we must never forget to attend to the variables in the situation. Lippman<sup>3</sup> has called attention to the fact that there are commonly certain "pictures in our heads" concerning the supposed appearance of individuals of a certain race, class, occupation, or social group; and these he has called stereotypes. Rice<sup>4</sup> designed an experiment to test the existence of these stereotypes and found them common concerning the appearance of various classes of persons. These lead to numerous errors of judgment. Estimates of intelligence and craftiness, presumably based on the features, are in reality influenced by the supposed identity of the portrait, that is, by

<sup>3</sup>Lippman, Walter: *Public Opinion*. New York. Harcourt Brace & Co., 1922, Parts I and II, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup>Rice, Stuart A.: "Stereotypes": A Source of Error in Judging Human Character. *Personnel Journal*, 1927, Vol. 5, pp. 267-276.

the stereotype of the supposed occupational or social status held in the mind of the judge. Goring<sup>5</sup> has shown that a composite of sketches of criminals gives the appearance of abnormality, whereas a composite of photographs shows no appearance of abnormality. He states that "an examination of these contrasted outlines shows most strikingly the difference between 'criminal types' as registered by the mechanical precision of a camera, and as viewed by the imagination of the enthusiastic, but uncritical, observer." The guidance counselor must not let his stereotypes lead him to oversimplify the facts and lead his client into a preconceived pigeon-hole. If such stereotypes affect our conclusions, then subjective methods rather than objective methods are being followed. It is one form of our tendency to organize our experience which leads to oversimplification of facts and forced classifications.

The leading question and the question which suggests a categorical answer are symptoms of oversimplification and a lack of imagination of other possible answers. When such questions are used, the interviewee should be given an opportunity, and even encouraged to qualify his answers. Also the meaning of the answer, especially the interviewer's interpretation of it, should be checked with the interviewee. We found that often when the interviewer restated the meaning in his own words, the interviewee could not accept it. Throughout the interview, particularly in checking the meaning intended by the interviewee, it is wise, as Goodwin Watson<sup>6</sup> has stated, "to make much use of illustrations and concrete examples, in brief Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, rather than let generalizations cloak confusion in apparent agreement."

#### AIDS IN ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Rating scales can be used as aids in classifying and interpreting personal data. They may cover up uncritical judgments, but rightly used they help in the analysis of complex personalities and minimize the danger of that oversimplification known as the "halo effect," even though it is present in the use of rating scales. Rating scales are not tools of measurement, nor are they substitutes

<sup>5</sup> Goring, Charles: *The English Convict: A Statistical Study*, London. His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1913. p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Watson, Goodwin: *The Interview from a Psychological Point of View*. Mimeograph outline of an address at annual meeting of National Vocational Guidance Association, Boston, 1928.

for judgments, but when judgments must be made, they are not less reliable because there is an attempt to analyze and record in an organized manner some of the elements which enter into them.

When all the data are in and the counselor tries to reach a conclusion in regard to the fitness of an individual for a particular kind of work, he finds it difficult to consider and give weight to all the factors which should enter into a decision. Not to do so would, again, often be an unwarranted simplification of a complex problem. To aid not only in this task, but also in the interviewing process, blanks or record sheets for guiding the interview and recording the various data in related units, have been devised for particular situations. About ten years ago the author found such a form useful in bringing together pertinent facts relating to the interests of graduate engineers. By means of this record, the placement of an engineer was assisted by six independent judgments on previous vocational interests, choice of other occupations, avocational interests, social interests, interests of relatives, and the technical interests in the work of the particular organization. The most recent and highly developed form of this nature for vocational guidance, of which I know, is that devised by Miss Agnes Leahy with the co-operation of W. V. Bingham and P. S. Achilles.

By means of such methods or devices, the relevant data are collected in an organized manner, and the pertinent facts can be seen in *constellations* which show where the interests and abilities of an individual lie. From this method or technique there is just one step to the interest test or analysis blank. It is based on the same principle that an individual is not interested in one narrowly defined activity but that his interest is characterized by tendencies toward or a preference for a constellation of reactions. In writing on the analysis of interests in 1920 the author described the tendency thus: "Men in different lines of work have different interests. The interests of a person are not in just one specific occupation; but they are general to the extent that they pertain to very similar or closely allied occupations or activities. Interest in a certain class of activities is a criterion that a person will be interested in any other very similar activity."<sup>7</sup> The work of Freyd, Strong and others since has corroborated this principle. The "halo

<sup>7</sup> Moore, B. V.: Personnel Selection of Graduate Engineers. Psychological Review Monograph No. 138, p. 81. Psychological Review Company, Princeton, N.J.

effect" may be a source of constant error in our judging the traits of another person, but this other kind of halo effect, or spread of interests, may be used to advantage in discovering what these interests are. We have always done this more or less in interviewing, but interest analysis blanks or interview record forms help us to treat the interviewee's reactions in a more objective manner.

#### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE METHODS

In this paper have been emphasized more or less general principles for objective methods in interviewing for vocational guidance. The interviewer who must meet immediate problems may be more interested in specific objective methods and devices for obtaining facts and avoiding errors in the interview process. Detailed reports on available aids are included in other papers, but it is probably well to call attention to some of these.

Objective methods in the interview depend partly on objective facts which can be known before the interview is begun. Therefore, the first step is for the interviewer to make himself acquainted with the available objective facts on record.

Secondly, we need to recognize the limitations of the interview and know just what can be accomplished by it. We need not discuss the fallacies of character analysis. Nevertheless, before employers select an applicant they usually want to see the candidate; and we expect to see all persons before we choose them as our friends. Why do we want to interview an individual face to face, and what factors affect our judgment? Each spring representatives from a large number of companies attend an industrial conference at the Pennsylvania State College. Many of these representatives select graduating seniors for their organizations. Last year the author arranged to have twenty-five juniors come before these men for about fifteen minutes and be rated on the one quality of "personal appearance." There was little agreement among the representatives in their ratings of these college juniors. These ratings will be checked with the number of jobs which each junior (now seniors) are offered this spring. Such a check will show what part "personal appearance," as observed in an interview, plays in the selection of applicants. This illustrates the application of objective methods in determining what part a specific trait plays in the guidance interview.

During the past two years the author has interviewed a large

number of freshmen. While other data were being obtained each interviewee was rated on four relatively objective traits—*personal appearance, poise and lack of timidity in the interview, speed or rate of speech, and use of English*. We are also having these same students rated by five of their fellow students. There is a slight negative correlation between the author's rating of *speed of speech* and the student's rating of *intelligence*, and a small negative correlation between the author's rating of *speed of speech* and the general intelligence test score. Evidently there is a justified tendency to judge those who speak slowly as more intelligent. The data are not conclusive, but they do contradict the statement which has been made that persons who speak rapidly tend to be overestimated in intelligence. Such misinterpretations need to be guarded against if we hope to approach the ideal of objective methods in our interviews.

The vocabulary of an applicant is rich with symptoms of his character and personality. Language is closely related to ability to learn, the higher thought processes, and personality habits. Miss Gladys C. Schwesinger of the Brooklyn Conference on Adult Education has studied the relation of vocabulary to social, economic and cultural background. In the same connection, it is interesting to note that Dr. Donald Snedden, of Harvard University, reports on the technique and reliability of a method for measuring intelligence by interview.<sup>8</sup>

We are interested in improving our interviews. An objective attitude requires that we determine their value and our success in improving them. This problem appears in special form in our efforts to train assistant interviewers. They must be trained to take the objective attitude and see the difference between reliable and useless data. The work of Esther A. Gaw, Dean of Women at Ohio State University, is an example of what can be accomplished in this field.<sup>9</sup>

#### SUMMARY

Rather than attempt to explain the use of specific techniques and devices in this paper, the author has emphasized principles for the application of objective methods in interviewing. First, atten-

<sup>8</sup> See articles by Gladys C. Schwesinger and Donald Snedden in this number of the PSYCHOLOGICAL CLINIC.

<sup>9</sup> See article by Esther A. Gaw in this number of the PSYCHOLOGICAL CLINIC.

tion was called to the functions of objective methods in interviews. The premise adopted was that the interview is most reliable for finding those facts for which records and similar objective sources are least available. Second, it was stated that the essential of all objective methods is the objective or impersonal attitude. Evidence of the objective attitude on the part of the interviewer is to be found in his awareness of the subjective factors which affect the interview, a sense of his responsibility for reliability, discrimination between fact and inference, and a careful method of giving information and advice. Third, reference has been made to methods and devices for classifying and interpreting facts; to cautions against oversimplification. In addition, the discovery of constellations of reactions on the part of the interviewee as an indication of his fundamental interests and capacities has been emphasized. These represent objective methods for aiding the subjective processes which must necessarily be a part of the interview.