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When the inferior candidate is offered the job: The selection interview as a political and power game

Nikos Bozionelos

ABSTRACT

The article seeks to advance the view that the selection interview frequently serves as a political arena for various power networks in the organization whose interests may be conflicting. Members of the interview panel try to advance the interests of the power networks to which they belong by lobbying for the candidates whose background and values concur most with those interests. The notion of the interview as a political and power game is illustrated with a case from the academic environment. It is concluded that there is a need for systematic investigation to establish the prevalence of the phenomenon, develop taxonomies, and examine its relationship with variables and outcomes of importance to organizations.

KEYWORDS

decision-making ■ intra-organizational power networks ■ organizational performance ■ organizational politics ■ personnel selection

The interview is the most widely utilized method for the selection of human resources (e.g. Shackleton & Newell, 1997; and see also Moscoso, 2000). Despite expressed concerns over its validity, meta-analytic research (e.g. Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; McDaniel et al., 1994; Schmidt & Rader, 1999; and see also Cortina et al., 2000) suggests that the interview can be a selection tool with substantial predictive validity. This is the case, however, when it is properly conducted, that is, structured, behavioural or situational, and

with properly trained interviewers (e.g. see Jelf, 1999; Moscoso, 2000) and utilized. Considering the widespread deployment of the interview by organizations it is necessary to identify and understand the processes that determine its outcomes and the sources that can negatively affect its validity as a human resource selection tool.

The intention of this article is to advance the view that the selection interview can, in certain cases, be understood as a process that involves political and power games; that is, as a political and power exercise. Not an exercise that involves an interaction between the interviewee and the interview panel, but an exercise that involves a power contest between members of the interview panel itself; who represent various intra-organizational power networks with different and often conflicting interests. The term 'political interview' will be employed to signify the case of selection interviews that are utilized as arenas for political and power games between intra-organizational groups. Although this term may not be the optimal it is considered adequate for the communication of the above notion.¹

The present article implies that the actual validity of the selection interview may be higher than that concluded in the review literature; and that the potential validity of the method can be further approached when its *intentional* abuse, which is advocated in the present work, is taken into account. Indeed, authors have noted that involvement of organizational politics in decision-making on human resource issues can have adverse effects on the quality of pertinent decisions (Kacmar et al., 1999).

The selection interview and the political perspective to organizational life

The views advanced in this article abide to the political perspective to human resource management, and to organizational life in general. This perspective argues that on many occasions important decisions in organizations are influenced by political motives rather than by rationale or merit (Ferris & King, 1991, and see also Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 1992). In these occasions the interests of the organization may be compromised by the interests of particular groups or individuals in the organization.

Consideration of organizational politics is of prime importance, because an understanding of political processes within organizations will assist in accounting for decisions, attitudes, behaviours and outcomes that cannot be fully accounted for by the rational approach to the management of human resources (e.g. Christiansen et al., 1997; Kacmar et al., 1999; Ammeter et al., 2002; Blazejewski & Dorow, 2003). However, research from

the political perspective to organizational life is scarce, partly because such research is difficult to conduct (Kacmar et al., 1999). Furthermore, the limited extant research focuses mostly on perceptions of organizational politics, that is, organizational members' views of others' political actions in the organization, rather than on individuals' or groups' own political activities and their consequences for them and the organization (see, for example, Ferris et al., 1989, 1996; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Kacmar et al., 1999).

The present article adopts the political perspective to organizational life and focuses on political and power contests between various intra-organizational power networks that tend to take place in the events and the decision-making process that surround the selection interview. In particular, it is argued that in a respectable number of cases certain candidates are preferred and are offered the job at the expense of other clearly superior candidates. In these cases 'performance in the interview' is presented as the justification for the decisions. However, these decisions are in fact the outcome of a political exercise, involving influence and power, between various power networks within the organization that represent different vested interests.

Organizations are composed of power networks that are manifested as coalitions or cliques, which have the purpose to advance the interests of their members (e.g. see Allison, 1971; Tichy & Fombrun, 1979; Tichy, 1981; Farrell & Petersen, 1982; Ibarra, 1993). These networks represent different views of organizational life, survival and success. And these views are, in turn, translated into different approaches to organizational tactics and strategy. Normally, there is a fine balance in the power these networks possess, which is reflected in their degree of influence on organizational policies.

Individuals who enter the organization also possess values and attitudes that reflect certain perspectives on organizational life, strategy and tactic. These can be in line or in contrast with those espoused by members of the power networks that exist in the organization. Therefore, entrance of new members into the organization through the formal selection route can potentially shift the existing balance of power between the various power networks. Hence, exertion of influence on selection decisions can be an issue of paramount importance for those who are involved in these networks. In fact, Ferris and Judge (1991; see also Ferris & King, 1991) suggested that a reason managers prefer colleagues who display similarities with themselves (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989) is that this similarity facilitates the process of network building and strengthens their own power base.

Therefore, some or all members of selection interview panels often have to engage in political and power games in order to manipulate the

outcomes of selection decisions; so these decisions will favour the candidates who are most compatible with the advancement of the interests of the power networks to which they belong.

In these cases the merit of candidates becomes an irrelevant parameter; and interview performance is either ignored, or socially constructed, or literally constructed by means of intentional actions of members of the interview panel. The above can be achieved in a number of ways, some of which are illustrated below.

Research findings imply that performance of candidates in the interview is to a large extent subjective. In particular, empirical evidence shows that interviewers evaluate the same behaviours and responses of interviewees in diametrically opposite ways (i.e. as indicating high competence or low competence) depending on the beliefs they hold about the candidates prior to the interview (Dipboye et al., 1992); and that the same responses of interviewees can be interpreted by interviewers as revealing different characteristics, also depending on their pre-interview beliefs about the applicants (Macan & Dipboye, 1994). Therefore, members of power networks who are represented in the interview panel can potentially utilize and present virtually any response of interviewees in ways that best fit their interests. If, for example, they consider that hiring a particular candidate is in line with their objectives they can construct an argument to suggest that particular responses indicate competence and desirable characteristics, and vice versa. Although carefully designed and implemented structured interviews may be able to reduce subjectivity in the assessment of candidates, utilization of this type of interview is the rare exception rather than the norm (van der Zee et al., 2002).

Furthermore, empirical research indicates that behaviours of interviewers (e.g. agreement, verbal encouragement, warmth, indication of understanding) evoke from interviewees behaviours of similar nature (e.g. good self-presentation, establishment of good rapport); which, in turn, influence impressions of interviewees' competence, as rated by independent observers (Dougherty et al., 1994). It also appears that even the non-verbal, and apparently more subtle than the verbal, behaviour of interviewers can be effective in influencing the performance of candidates in the selection interview. Liden et al. (1993) specifically investigated the influence of non-verbal interviewer behaviours on the interview performance of interviewees. They found that interviewees performed better when the interviewer displayed positive non-verbal behaviours towards them (e.g. maintenance of eye contact, smiling, leaning forward in the chair) than when the interviewer displayed distant non-verbal behaviours towards them, for example, no eye contact, not smiling, sitting sideways in relation to the interviewee (Liden et al., 1993).

Therefore, members of the interview panel may behave towards interviewees in ways that enable them to evoke responses and behaviours that are in line with the selection decision they pursue. For example, if they consider that hiring a particular candidate is in line with their interests they may display encouraging and approving behaviours, so they boost the morale of the candidate and increase the likelihood that the candidate also displays positive behaviours towards the panel; or if certain interviewers consider that entry of a candidate into the organization is against their interests they may engage in, subtle or less subtle, discouraging, disapproving, or even provocative behaviours in order to lower the moral of the candidate or prompt the candidate to act in ways that reduce one's probabilities of success (e.g. respond to aggressive or offensive comments accordingly). Later, in the decision-making session, they will be able to utilize these instances of appropriate or inappropriate behaviours from the part of the candidate in order to build their case in favour of or against the particular candidate, respectively.

In addition, panel members may try to communicate negative or positive signs to interviewees in order to influence candidates' own attitudes towards the organization and the job accordingly. Empirical research indicates that interviewees' perceptions of interviewers' behaviour towards them (e.g. personableness, appropriateness of questions, provision of information on the job and the organization) affects their attitudes towards the job and the organization and, in turn, their attraction to the organization and their willingness to accept job offers (Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995; Turban et al., 1998). Therefore, members of the interview panel who consider that entry of a particular candidate into the organization is against their interests may try to behave in ways that will repel the candidate from the organization, and vice versa.

Finally, in the decision-making session that follows the interview, interviewers may try to socially construct impressions regarding the interview performance of particular candidates, according to the interests of the power networks they represent. Although this may seem rather extreme, it is highly feasible. Empirical evidence suggests that in the evaluation of interviewees' performance interviewers are prone to accept and adopt erroneous information on responses of candidates that other members of the panel provide (Highhouse & Bottrill, 1995). Therefore, members of a particular power network who are included in the interview panel may try, and achieve, to persuade other panel members that a particular candidate provided certain responses, which are in line with the selection decision they pursue, even though the responses of the candidate were in fact very different.

Why the interview is a most appropriate selection stage for political games

All stages in the selection process can serve as arenas for political games. For example, the screening stage, where decisions on the applicants who will proceed to the next stages of the selection process are made, is also prone to manipulative actions (e.g. in order to filter-out or favour certain candidates). Therefore, the entire selection process in organizations can be viewed under the political perspective (for a, non-exhaustive, illustration see Figure 1).

However, it appears that the interview is the stage of the selection process that enables a most powerful, and maybe most unproblematic, intervention in order to influence the outcome of the process (i.e. who will be hired). As already noted, the interview is utilized as a selection tool by virtually all organizations. Furthermore, the selection interview normally represents the final stage in the selection process, which accumulates the outcomes and information collected in the previous stages. Therefore, ability to input in the process of the interview itself and in the decision-making session that follows the interview offers a major advantage in terms of determining the

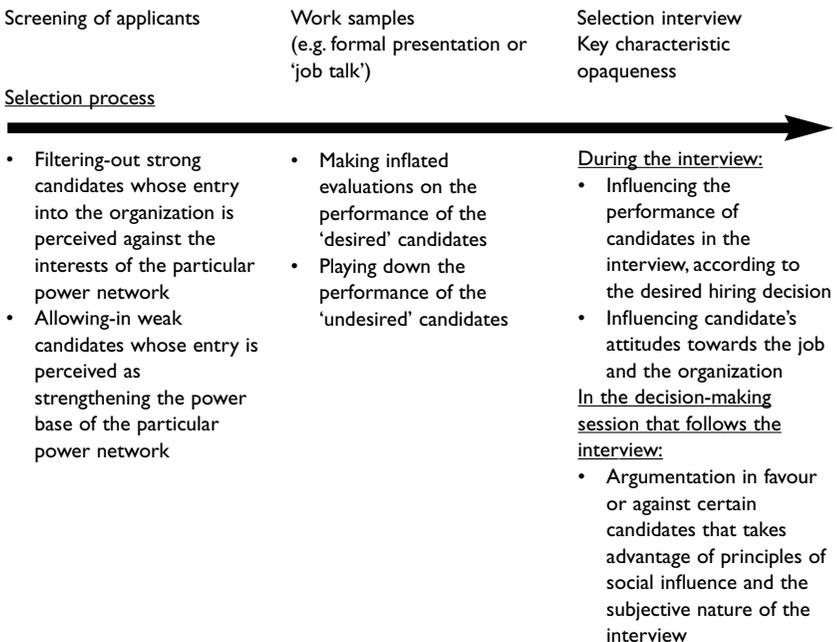


Figure 1 An illustration of the points in the selection process that can serve as arenas for political and power games between intra-organizational power networks; and of tactics that can be utilized in each stage

selection outcome. For our argument, determination of this outcome is equivalent to ensuring that the 'successful' candidate (i.e. the person who will be offered the job) will be the one who mostly serves the interests of a particular power network.

In addition, apart from being the most widely utilized selection method and normally the final stage in the selection process, the interview has another important property: it normally produces no concrete evidence of what exactly occurred during the interview and in the decision-making session that follows it. Unlike other selection methods, including application blanks, curriculum vitae, biodata, psychometric tests and work samples, access to information evoked during the interview is very difficult in the vast majority of cases. The interview is an opaque process to outsiders, and extremely limited information is formally transmitted to those who have not been present. Any transmission of information on the events that have taken place during the interview is usually only informal; and, in fact, empirical research has found that the accuracy of interviewers' own recall of factual information on the interview they participated in is low (Carlson et al., 1971). Therefore, members of the interview panel are able to present the facts (i.e. what questions were posed, the manner in which these questions were posed, and how each candidate responded to these questions) to interested outsiders in ways that are compatible with their own interests.

The types of interviews that can serve as arenas for political games

Not all selection interviews are prone to be utilized as arenas for political and power games. For instance, mass interviews that purport to fill large numbers of positions on the shop floor should not normally serve as fields for political manipulations and power contests. This is because there is no pertinent reason, as the views and beliefs of employees on the shop floor are normally not critical for the balance in the power distribution in the upper organizational echelons.

The interviews that lend themselves to manipulative power games are those that are purported to fill critical posts in the middle and upper organizational echelons. This is for two reasons: 1) such posts, apart from functional importance, have also political importance; considering that their holders influence resources, processes and outcomes that can shift the balance of power in an organization, an organizational function, or a work unit; and 2) as one moves upwards in the organizational hierarchy the nature of work becomes more complex, hence, the criteria for merit and

performance become more blurred and ambiguous. And the greater the ambiguity inherent in a human resource system is the greater the potential for involvement of politics in relevant decisions becomes (Ferris & King, 1991). Therefore, there is both motive and opportunity for the utilization of political influence tactics in selection interviews that aim at filling critical posts in organizations.

Before we proceed with an illustrative case, it is appropriate to reiterate the central argument of the present work and the reason it is believed to be making a contribution. The notion that the present work aims to advance is fundamentally different from existing views and models on fallacies and limitations of the employment interview. Extant views and models (e.g. Dipboye, 1982, 1992; Howard & Ferris, 1996) presume that erroneous decisions on candidate selection (i.e. when inferior candidates are preferred over superior ones) in the context of the interview are the result of limitations of the method itself (e.g. the structure), or of limitations in the abilities of interviewers (e.g. limits posed by human information processing capacities), or of other characteristics of interviewers (e.g. amount of training and experience); who (i.e. the interviewers) are otherwise well-intentioned and whose aim is to select the most competent candidate (for a review of research on sources of bias and errors in decision-making in the employment interview, see Jelf, 1999). Indeed, genuine errors must provide a valid account for a large, or the largest, proportion of inappropriate selection decisions based on interviews. However, the present work adopts the view that genuine errors are not the reason behind all such inappropriate selection decisions. And it argues that interview-based decisions that favour less competent candidates are in some cases the outcome of political and power games, in which interviewers prioritize what they believe to be the interests of the power networks to which they belong over the interests of the whole organization or unit. Hence, in these cases the decisions to hire less competent, or incompetent, candidates are not the product of error, but instead are the product of intention.

An illustrative case

The suggestion advanced in this article is illustrated with a case study. The case refers to a set of interviews to fill faculty positions in an academic department, and can be understood under the prism of the political interview. This case is appropriate not only because it illustrates how the selection interview can be utilized in order to advance political interests at the expense of candidates' merit; but also because it contains information on the negative consequences that utilization of political criteria in selection

decisions can incur for the organization or the organizational unit. This is an additional contribution, because despite suggestions that involvement of politics in human resource decisions has negative effects on organizational performance (Kacmar et al., 1999), empirical evidence is still lacking.

Interviews that are employed to appoint candidates for academic positions are ideal to serve as platforms for political games because they are utilized in order to fill very limited numbers of posts. Furthermore, academic units employ limited numbers of highly specialized individuals. Hence, even a small number of new entrants can potentially disturb the existing balance of power between power networks within a particular academic unit.

Comments on the method

The way in which the data of the case were collected is best described as 'retrospective participant observation' (Bryman & Bell, 2003: 321). The author was a member of that academic department at the time the events took place, and, hence, a complete participant (Gold, 1958) in the setting who fully observed the events. However, at the time there was no consideration regarding publication of the case or any of the events in the case; though it was soon decided to produce a written record of these events, and especially of the author's conversations with the other individuals involved in the case (mainly the members of the interview panel), which were recorded in a verbatim way to the best of the author's memory. For this reason, the term 'retrospective' is appropriate, as at the time he was observing the events the author had not yet formed the intention to publicize them in any way (Bryman & Bell, 2003). It should be noted that empirical evidence suggests no difference in the degree of accuracy between retrospective and simultaneous recall of events in which the individual participates (e.g. Brockner et al., 1994).

The fact that the observer (i.e. the author) was a complete participant eliminates the possibility that others in the setting (i.e. in this particular department) behaved in atypical ways because of his presence. Hence, a major criticism of participant observation (Waddington, 2004) is not of concern in the present work. In addition, the retrospective nature of the observation, that is, that the observer had not formed any intention to publicize or utilize the events in any way at the time they were occurring (Bryman & Bell, 2003), ensures that the events were experienced, and a short time later recorded (see above), by the observer without having any particular perspectives or theoretical frameworks in mind, which is an element that enhances the validity of the method (Waddington, 2004). It was much later that the author, prompted by this and other similar though less conspicuous cases, conceived the notion of the political interview. Furthermore, the fact

that participant observation, and especially complete participant observation, was utilized dramatically reduced the possibility that the researcher was deceived by the other actors in the setting, for example, the members of the interview panel or other members of the academic department (Burns, 2000). This is because the observer, and author, had extensive inside knowledge of the social setting. This is a major advantage of participant observation over other methods of data collection (Burns, 2000), and it appears that in the present case the possibility of deception was non-existent.

On the other hand, however, the very fact that the author and observer was part of the focal department, and was naturally interested in the developments in it, may have biased his interpretation of events. This is a potential weakness of the method that cannot be refuted. Each individual has one's own views on matters that pertain to one's profession, but also on fundamental issues such as fairness and merit; and the author is no exception. For this reason, alternative interpretations of the events in the case have been considered and juxtaposed with the interpretation that utilizes the notion of the political interview. It is shown that the political perspective provides the most plausible account for the events in the case. In addition, the case includes a longitudinal follow-up, which utilized objectively verifiable information. This information concurs with the interpretation of the events in the case under the prism of the political perspective to organizational life.

The setting

The events took place within a particular department of a British business school.² At the time the events took place that department, and the school, was amongst the very best in the United Kingdom, having been awarded the highest possible rating '5' (in a scale of 1 to 5) in the, then, most recent Research Assessment Exercise (the ratings that academic departments of British universities achieve in the Research Assessment Exercise reflect their performance in research).³

The focal department, and the business school, had been dominated for a long time (i.e. about three decades) by a particular tradition to research and scholarship. This tradition espoused certain principles in the study of management, which abided to inductive reasoning and empirical work using exclusively qualitative methodologies. In this particular department, the advocates of this tradition despised and passionately combated other approaches to management research and scholarship, especially the positivist deductive approach that utilizes quantitative methodologies. The dominant tradition will be labelled here as 'Approach 1'. And let us label the alternative, and rival in our case, tradition to research and scholarship (i.e. the positivist deductive perspective) as 'Approach 2'.⁴

As it is usually the norm, a very limited number of academic staff who represented Approach 2 had been 'allowed' into the department for functional purposes (i.e. there were certain modules in the curriculum that could be taught only by academics with competencies that lent themselves to Approach 2). This staff included one relatively senior academic (i.e. at the level of associate professor, or senior lecturer in its British equivalent⁵). This member of staff was, however, marginalized and, naturally, dependent (i.e. for career development and resource access reasons) on the rest of the senior staff, all of whom espoused Approach 1.

The situation

Evidently, any substantial influx of academics representing Approach 2 could potentially shift the power balance in the department away from the established tradition (i.e. Approach 1). At that particular point in time, the opportunity for a considerable number (i.e. four) of new appointments arose. At that point in time our focal department had 16 academics in its ranks. Therefore, these four new appointments could potentially disturb the existing power balance that clearly favoured Approach 1. This could happen if all or the majority of the new appointees represented Approach 2. Indeed, once the application blanks and the curriculum vitae of applicants were evaluated it emerged that this was a real possibility. This was because the best candidates 'on paper' (i.e. number and quality of publications, academic credentials) were those who represented Approach 2. The direct implication of that fact was that the indisputable dominance of Approach 1 was potentially at stake.

The categorization of applicants into Approach 1 and Approach 2, which was utilized in the present work, was made at the time the events were occurring. It was based, primarily, on the content (e.g. research methodologies adopted) of applicants' published work and on the outlets (e.g. journals, edited volumes) in which their published work had appeared, and, secondarily, on applicants' background. The process of categorization was rather simple and its outcome was unambiguous; as there was complete agreement between the observer, and author, and the other members of the academic staff in the department who had also engaged themselves in the process of categorizing the applicants in terms of the two approaches. Of the 19 applicants, 11 represented Approach 1 and eight represented Approach 2.

Ten of the 19 applicants were invited for interview, of whom six represented Approach 1 and four represented Approach 2. As already noted, the outcomes of other stages of the human resource selection process are also prone to political manipulation. This includes the screening stage that involves decisions on who will be invited for the interview. Indeed, 'contamination' of the selection process at this stage was also performed in our

focal department by those advocates of Approach 1 who had input in the decision-making at that stage. They tried and achieved to include in the shortlist (i.e. the list of those who were invited to attend the interview) applicants who represented Approach 1, but who did not meet the required standards. As a result, at least two applicants representing Approach 1 who were invited for interview, one for the position of full professor and the other for the position of assistant professor, did not meet even minimal pertinent criteria (i.e. the publications of the former in peer-reviewed journals were insufficient in both number and quality, and the latter held no graduate degrees and had no publications in peer-reviewed journals despite having worked for nearly 10 years in academia). In fact, both of them were eventually offered jobs.

Following the typical procedure, the shortlisted applicants were invited to perform a presentation, summarizing their research, and then to attend the selection interview.

The presentations of all candidates were generally competent. This was both in terms of form and in terms of content, though the inability of some of the candidates that represented Approach 1 to deal with complex concepts and with matters and questions of technical nature (e.g. data-analytic) became evident. It also became evident, as was also clear in the curriculum vitae of the candidates, that it was the candidates who represented Approach 2 that had potential to publish in so-called 'premier' journals. One of them, candidate for the position of lecturer, had already achieved such publications and another, candidate for the position of assistant professor, had manuscripts under review and revision in such journals. Proven ability or clear potential to publish in premier journals was, or should have been, a factor with substantial weight in the selection decisions; because, as noted, at that time our focal department was placed amongst the best in the country with respect to the quality of research output, and the stated objective was to maintain that position.

Following the presentations of the candidates, the interview represented the final criterion. In our case, the interview can also be seen as representing the last front for the dominant coalition (i.e. Approach 1) to maintain its undisputable power base in the department. Being the dominant coalition, they had the advantage of occupying most of the posts in the interview panel. Three out of the four academic members of the interview panel represented Approach 1. This included the dean of the school and two full professors. A representative of the less powerful Approach 2 was also present in the panel. However, this individual was of lower status (i.e. a recently promoted associate professor) and dependent, as already noted, on the members of the dominant tradition. As it is conventionally the case, third

parties were also present in the interview panel. This included a specialist from the human resource function and a member of another academic department. However, the representative of the human resource function is usually allocated the sole duty to maintain the soundness of the procedure (e.g. the consistency of questions across candidates), and any representatives of outside academic departments tend to engage in a nominal control role. This is in line with the allocated and implicitly assumed respective roles in our case. Therefore, it is clear that the dominant Approach 1 had both the ability (i.e. numerical and power advantage) and the opportunity to manipulate the interview session itself and the decision-making session that followed. It also had the motive to do so in order to influence the selection decisions according to the perceived interests of its members.

The selection outcome

The outcome was that all posts were filled with individuals representing Approach 1; despite that there were better qualified candidates who represented Approach 2. At least three of the four candidates (one full professor and two assistant professors) who were offered, and accepted, the jobs were under-qualified for these particular posts.

Naturally, there were inquiries by certain members of the department on why and how these decisions, which apparently contradicted logic and merit, were made. As already noted, however, the interview is an opaque process. Hence, no readily verifiable information on what exactly happened in the interviews or in the decision-making session that followed could be extracted. Nevertheless, the general theme that emerged from the, very reserved, responses of the members of the interview panel was that the interview performance of the 'successful' candidates was far superior to those who were not successful. The meaning that members of the interview panel attached to 'performance' in the interview was, however, vague. It related more to the notion of the readiness with which questions were handled rather than to the intellect and persuasiveness of responses. Furthermore, the members of the panel were unable, or avoidant, to provide specific instances of questions the responses to which clearly differentiated the appointed from the unsuccessful candidates.

Juxtaposing two of the candidates

It is of particular benefit to our discussion to juxtapose two candidates for the position of assistant professor, labelled Candidate 1 and Candidate 2; who represented Approaches 1 and 2, respectively. Both candidates were

married males of similar ages, mid-to late-30s. However, the similarities ceased at this point. Candidate 1 had about 10 years' experience as an academic, but his qualifications were limited to a bachelor degree and he had never conducted any work towards a graduate degree. He had no publications, apart from a chapter in an edited book, and he was at that time employed in one of the lowest rated British universities, whose business school had received one of the lowest ratings '2' in the, then, most recent Research Assessment Exercise. Candidate 2 had experience as a practitioner, researcher and instructor in a government organization. He had decided to change his career towards academia and his qualifications included a doctorate degree, apart from a bachelor and a master's. He already had a substantial number of manuscripts in the review and revision process for major academic journals. Furthermore, Candidate 2 had performed well in the presentation stage, where he demonstrated ability to work with complex concepts and to utilize sophisticated data-analytic techniques.

Taking into account that our focal department was at that time amongst the very best in the country (i.e. as noted, it had been awarded the highest possible rating '5' in the, then, most recent Research Assessment Exercise), it is evident that Candidate 1 was unqualified for the job, and under normal circumstances he should not have been even shortlisted. Furthermore, under any circumstances, Candidate 2 was clearly superior and should certainly have been preferred to Candidate 1. Therefore, it was highly surprising that Candidate 1 was offered the job whilst Candidate 2 was unsuccessful.

Naturally, questions were directed by some members of the department to members of the interview panel on the reasons this decision was made. The justifications, as in the cases of the other decisions, employed the notion of performance in the interview. However, the notion of performance pertained mostly to readiness to respond to questions rather than to the content quality of responses. And there was a profound inability to provide specific instances of questions that differentiated the interview performance of Candidate 1 from Candidate 2. Furthermore, the accounts of the members of the interview panel were not entirely compatible. Below is a representative sample of the justifications that were provided for the decision to prefer Candidate 1 over Candidate 2.

When one of the panel members was reminded that Candidate 1 neither had nor was working towards a doctorate degree, the response was: 'he said he will do one, and he was very resolute'. Another member of the panel justified the decision to offer the job to this particular candidate as following: '[Candidate 1] responded with easiness to the questions'. However, when this panel member was prompted to explain further he was unable to, simply noting that 'he was well prepared'. To a question regarding

the apparently high academic potential of Candidate 2, the response was that: 'the students may not understand him'. Finally, when it was reminded to another member of the panel that this candidate (i.e. Candidate 2) already had manuscripts under revision in major academic journals the response was that 'they may not be accepted eventually'. It should also be noted that some of the responses suggested the utilization of criteria that were not entirely relevant to merit, or were speculative and unrelated to the job. For example, one of the members of the panel noted that '[Candidate 1] is a nice person', and another member of the panel noted for Candidate 2 that 'it may be his wife who wants to come here'. Finally, when asked to comment on the decisions, the representative of Approach 2 in the panel only responded that 'this was the best that could be achieved'.

These decisions certainly maintained the power balance in the department in favour of the dominant tradition. Evidence that can be characterized as 'circumstantial' (i.e. the credentials of candidates, their performance in the presentation, and the 'justifications' of the members of the interview panel) suggest that the interview did serve as the means by which the dominant power network influenced the hiring decisions in, what they saw as, their favour.

Alternative interpretations

It is likely, however, that the above presented interpretation of the events in the case (i.e. as a manifestation of political games orchestrated by the senior members of the dominant power network in the department) may be biased by the perspective of the researcher. As noted, this is a limitation that is inherent in the main methodological approach (i.e. participant observation) used in the case study, and cannot be disputed. Therefore, it was imperative to isolate and evaluate alternative interpretations.

An alternative interpretation is that the candidates who were offered the jobs did indeed perform substantially better in the interviews, so much better that their interview performance overcame their weaker curriculum vitae, primarily, and presentations, secondarily. This alternative account demands scrutiny because it is mutually exclusive with the interpretation the present work proposes (i.e. that the interview served as an arena for political games and the decisions were a reflection of this fact). However, there are many reasons to question the validity of this alternative account for the selection outcomes:

- a) As already illustrated above, the members of the panel were themselves unable to provide any concrete instances of responses to the interview questions in which the appointed candidates clearly outperformed the

non-appointed ones. Some of the panel members were simply resorting to the general 'feeling' about the quality of responses and, in some cases, to the 'good preparation' of the candidates who were offered the jobs; being unable to increase specificity or to elaborate further. In addition, in certain cases the responses of appointed candidates, as transferred by the panel members themselves, were apparently problematic and indicated rather weak performance in the interview. For example, as already noted above, one of the candidates who was offered the job had no graduate degrees nor was he working towards one. Furthermore, this candidate had achieved no publications in peer-reviewed journals. As this candidate had already about 10 years of experience in academia and was in his mid-30s, his assertion in the interview, as transmitted by the members of the panel, that he 'will do one [i.e. a PhD]' should have been seen in a negative light. This is because such a response implies very limited familiarity with the process and demands of a doctoral degree (we must always keep in mind that these jobs were academic ones); and taking into account that the candidate had no experience in publishing original material (i.e. material in peer-reviewed journals), achieving a doctoral degree while working full-time would have been extremely difficult if not unrealistic. However, the candidate was offered the job at the expense of, as already seen, a much more qualified candidate.

- b) Let us accept temporarily, though there is evidence rather towards the contrary, that some of the candidates who represented Approach 1 did indeed perform extremely well in the interview and some of the candidates who represented Approach 2 did perform extremely poorly; to such degree that this overturned the substantially poorer credentials, primarily, and lower performance in the presentation, secondarily, of the former ones. However, to account for the fact that only candidates who represented Approach 1 were offered jobs we must assume that all these candidates were outstanding in the interview and that all candidates who represented Approach 2 were extremely poor in the interview. Evidently, this is a far-fetched assumption, and certainly much less plausible than the view that political motives and processes determined the selection outcomes.
- c) There is some circumstantial evidence that the decisions regarding who of the candidates to support had been made by the dominant power network before the interviews; and that the political and power contest had started earlier in the selection process, reaching its climax at the stage of the interview. As already noted, there was a single representative of Approach 2, of lower hierarchical status than the representatives of Approach 1, who was included in the interview panel. After

the presentations, which ended the day before the interviews, it was privately noted to this member of the panel that it was clear that the candidates from Approach 2 were superior in every respect and that the general expectation was that they would be offered jobs. The response was that 'now there may be the possibility to bring one of them'. This is indication that this individual was aware of the political game, and he was probably already feeling the 'pressure' by the other members of the panel. Considering the comments of this individual and the accounts of the other members of the panel along with the credentials and presentation performance of the candidates, it appears that this was a case of conformity. Apparently, the member of the panel who represented Approach 2 conceded to the other members of the panel, who, by means of their numerical and position power superiority, exerted implicit pressure towards him to go along with their views and hiring suggestions. However, although he publicly endorsed the selection decisions he did not appear to do so privately (see, for example, Deaux & Wrightsman, 1988).

The above points indicate that the possibility that all appointed candidates displayed outstanding performance and all non-appointed candidates displayed very disappointing performance in the interview is remote. This renders this alternative interpretation of the selection outcomes much less plausible than the interpretation that utilizes the notion of the political interview.

A second alternative interpretation of the selection decisions should also be considered. It can be suggested that the selection panel consciously appointed less able candidates, but the motives behind this decision were pertinent to benevolent, from their point of view, planning. That is, the representatives of Approach 1 in the panel believed that they would be able to maintain the dominance of their approach and also maintain the leading position of the department in terms of quality of research output.

However, this interpretation is not incompatible with the view that the interview served as an arena for political games in which the dominant power network used their positional and numerical power in the interview panel to promote the candidates of their interest. The responses and comments of the sole representative of Approach 2, presented earlier, implied that there was a power contest, however uneven, that took place in the process; and that this individual did not agree with the decisions, but had no alternative but to concede. Furthermore, the 'justifications' for the decisions, as presented earlier, that the members of the panel provided, were not in line with this alternative explanation; as these justifications clearly drew on the interview performance of the candidates, however unable the members of the panel

were to define it clearly. Therefore, the intentions, benevolent or not, of the members of the dominant power network in the interview panel were independent of the fact that the decisions on who to employ were the result of a political game.

Nevertheless, it can be plausibly argued that the motives behind the political manipulation of the selection outcomes were not related to any planning or consideration regarding the future of the department. As shown above, it was evident that some of the appointed candidates were not only inferior to other candidates, but rather they were 'unemployable', that is, they would not be able to perform at the levels required by the position and reputation of that particular department. This casts serious doubts on the benevolence of the motives of the dominant power network and rather credits the view that the motive was simply the maintenance of their own power base.

The long-term follow-up

Evidence for the fact that at least some of the appointed candidates were unemployable (in addition to the evidence provided by the background and credentials of these candidates), as well as for the negative consequences of the selection decisions for the department, was provided by the long-term follow-up of the case, which offers further support to the interpretation of the events from the political perspective.

The performance of the 'successful' candidates

Two of the appointed candidates were offered jobs at the grade of assistant professor. The background and credentials of one of these candidates were presented in detail above. The other appointed candidate also had about 10 years of experience in academia, had no publications of any kind, and was also employed by a university of lower standing in terms of research output. At the time of the appointment the candidate was completing his PhD. Both of these individuals were offered jobs on a two-year probationary basis (i.e. their appointments would be confirmed and become 'permanent' if they performed at a satisfactory level for two years: see also note 5). Neither of these individuals was successful in their probationary period, and they were both given a final one-year extension to this period. Their appointments were confirmed at the end of the third year. However, an examination of their achievements in these years, and especially in the third year, implies that the eventual confirmation of their appointments was also a politically driven decision. The appointed candidate who had no graduate degrees and,

according to one of the members of the interview panel, appeared in the interview 'very resolute' that he would 'do one [a PhD]', has still to do it.

Consequences for the organization

The literature suggests that employees' perceptions that decisions in the organization are based on political motives rather than on merit are associated with undesirable attitudes and behaviours, including job dissatisfaction, lower organizational commitment and citizenship, and higher voluntary turnover (Ferris et al., 1989, 1996; Kacmar et al., 1999; Witt et al., 2002). In our case the evidence for reduced job satisfaction, commitment and citizenship can be based only on unsystematic behavioural observation and, therefore, cannot be considered sufficiently solid to report. However, there is some concrete evidence for the outcome of voluntary turnover. Three high performing academics left the department in subsequent years, and none of them was successfully replaced (i.e. with an academic of similar calibre or potential). A fourth academic intentionally moved to another department.

Finally, as noted earlier, authors suggest that there can be serious negative consequences for organizational performance when critical human resource decisions are based on political criteria instead of merit, though empirical evidence on the matter is lacking (Kacmar et al., 1999). Our case provides evidence that is supportive to this suggestion. This department was one of the very few in the country who saw their performance rating lowered in the subsequent Research Assessment Exercise (see also note 3). That Research Assessment Exercise took place about 30 months after these appointees took over their new roles. Therefore, the new faculty members certainly contributed to the performance of our focal department.

These hiring decisions cannot be viewed as an exclusive explanation of the above negative outcomes and the decline of this particular department. Nevertheless, the case provides an indication that politically based decision-making in the selection process, and especially in the interview, did play an important role in the morale and performance of that academic unit.

Concluding comments and directions for research

The case demonstrated how the selection interview and its associated processes can be utilized for political purposes, and was illustrative of the power that the dominant power network in an organization can possess by means of the selection interview. The case was also indicative of the negative consequences that extensive involvement of political processes in the selection interview, but also in the entire selection process, can have for

organizations or organizational units. This case or variants of it (e.g. more than one dominant power networks) can be readily applied to virtually every organizational setting.

The utilization of the selection interview as a platform for power and influence games is further facilitated by the emergence and adoption of the notion of person–organization fit (Bowen et al., 1991). This refers to the extent to which the candidate fits into the culture of the organization and not only to the requirements of the particular job. ‘Fit into the organization’ constitutes an increasingly utilized criterion in personnel selection (e.g. Parsons et al., 1999). The concept of fit into the organization is ‘inherently vague’ and ‘nebulous by nature’ (Ferris & Judge, 1991: 460); and empirical research has found substantial disagreement between interviewers from the same organization in judgements on the fit between the interviewee and the organization (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). Therefore, the notion of person–organization fit provides additional ground for political games in the selection interview, but also in other stages of the selection process. Fit into the culture of the organization, which usually reflects the values and principles of the dominant power network, can be legitimately utilized as an argument for and against particular candidates. And selection decisions can be promoted and justified not only on the basis of candidates’ qualifications and ability to perform the job, which can be itself difficult to describe with satisfactory precision (e.g. Howard & Ferris, 1996), but also on the basis of candidates’ fit into the extant or intended organizational culture, which is even more difficult to define with reasonable accuracy.

As already noted earlier in the present work, the cases in which selection outcomes are purely the product of political and power processes should be seen as representing only a proportion of selection decisions. And selection decisions that are based purely on merit must also be a phenomenon with substantial occurrence. However, these two types of cases represent extremes, while most real situations must be intermediate between these two extremes. Politics play a role in the life of most organizations, but it is unlikely that they completely dominate all organizational processes and outcomes; and exactly the same must stand for rational thinking and merit. Therefore, there must be a substantial number of cases, most likely the majority, in which the selection outcomes are determined by a mixture of political and non-political (i.e. rational and merit-based) factors.

Hence, selection outcomes can be conceptualized as forming a continuum with respect to the extent to which they are influenced by political processes or by rational thinking and merit. Those selection decisions that are purely the product of merit-based processes fall on the one end of the continuum, while those selection decisions that are the pure product of

political processes fall on the other end of the continuum. The two ends accommodate the extreme cases, while those selection outcomes that are produced by various combinations of rational and political factors fall in between these two extremes. These cases should represent the majority. Evidently, the case analysed in the present work falls near the end of the continuum that accommodates those selection outcomes that have been determined by political processes.

The selection interview is, and will probably continue to be, the most heavily utilized selection method. Its utilization as a platform to display, maintain or shift power between informal intra-organizational networks or groups should be seen as a fact of organizational life, as it is the existence of these networks. Therefore, it will be difficult to intervene or induce changes in this respect; as it is not possible to eliminate informal organizational networks and the vested interests they represent (e.g. Luthans, 1998). The interview, by its nature, simply offers the means for various power networks to manipulate the selection outcome according to their interests. In such cases it is not the interview that is flawed as a selection tool, but it is the way it is utilized that makes it appear as such.

Acknowledgement and better understanding of the political interview will aid in accounting for cases of sub-optimal selection decisions, that is, cases where clearly inferior candidates have entered vital organizational positions via the formal selection route at the expense of considerably better candidates. Furthermore, acquisition of knowledge on the politics that surround the selection interview will supplement emerging knowledge on the role of politics in organizational life. Therefore, further systematic research in the issue is needed.

The empirical part of the present work (i.e. the case study), though appropriate for the illustration of the notion of the political interview, has the limitation that the conclusion that the selection outcome was determined by political processes was based on circumstantial evidence. This limitation further emphasizes the feature that renders the interview a very appropriate stage for political manipulation of the selection outcome. This feature is its opaqueness that makes direct observation of the interview itself and of the decision-making process that surrounds it very difficult to achieve. This is a serious impediment to systematic research on the issue, and this type of impediment (i.e. difficulty to directly observe the actual political process) is generally inherent to research on the role of politics in organizational life (see Kacmar et al., 1999).

However, although unobtrusive direct observation of political processes is very difficult to achieve, there are ways to partly circumvent this problem. One way is to conduct interviews and large scale surveys with human resource

practitioners and practising managers who have been involved in selection decisions. These individuals will provide information to determine the scale of the phenomenon of the political interview and to develop insights into the mechanisms that govern it. Another way is to utilize laboratory experiments. These, for example, will involve the assignment of participants into groups representing different intra-organizational networks with various vested interests that will be given the task to select new organizational members. The background characteristics of the candidates will be manipulated as to the degree to which they fit into each network and the degree to which they are qualified for the position. The distribution of power among the networks will also vary across experimental conditions. This may be an artificial situation, but it has the distinct advantage that it will enable the unobtrusive observation of the inter-group dynamics and the decision-making processes that will determine the selection outcomes. Therefore, it will make possible the generation of information that cannot be collected by any other means.

The above research strategies, which are complementary, will lead to the creation of tentative models of the mechanisms that underline the phenomenon, as well as to the development of relevant taxonomies (e.g. according to the types of positions, organizational contexts, influence tactics). The knowledge to be generated by means of these research methods will also enable the construction of relevant measures (e.g. questionnaires). These measures will be utilized in subsequent research to systematically investigate in real settings, and by means of quantitative methodologies, the relationship between the political interview and variables that are of interest to organizations, including employees' perceptions of organizational justice, employees' commitment and motivation, withdrawal behaviours, and organizational or unit performance.

In addition, a pertinent area that should be of interest is the impression management tactics that the power networks may employ in order to justify or 'market' the selection decisions to outsiders. In the present case, it appeared that panel members who represented Approach 1 were not persuasive in their justifications of the selection decisions to other members of the department; probably because they did not expect these decisions to be challenged and, hence, they did not consider necessary to prepare a coherent plan for 'marketing' them. In other cases, however, where there are more stakeholders and greater accountability, the proper marketing of selection decisions may be a very important issue. For example, a similar case in a publicly owned company should necessitate successful marketing of the decision to the shareholders, and that would require effective impression management. The success with which the decisions are marketed should be related to important outcomes, such as satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment of employees. Perceptions of distributive and procedural

justice (e.g. Folger & Konovski, 1989) should be of importance. For example, in our case the selection decisions and the procedure with which these were reached could have appeared fair to outsiders to the department, because a sequence of widely utilized selection methods was employed and the interview panel included all appropriate parties. However, some members of the department initially formed perceptions of distributive injustice, as the decisions favoured clearly less competent candidates; and the highly suspect justification of these decisions suggested that the way in which they were made involved political manipulation; which led to perceptions of procedural injustice. These perceptions must have been connected with the subsequent manifestation of withdrawal behaviours by members of the department.

Finally, the present work focused on the selection interview. The reasons included its frequency of use, its opaqueness and its position in the sequence with which the various selection methods are typically utilized. However, as noted, it appears that the whole selection process can serve as a platform for political games for intra-organizational power networks (a preliminary model is presented in Figure 1). Therefore, future work also needs to consider other stages of the selection process, and maybe the entire hiring process (i.e. recruitment included).

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Notes

- 1 The author formed the ideas presented in this article via personal observations of actual cases, the most conspicuous of which is utilized in the article. The ideas were further consolidated when his own conclusions were corroborated by experiences and views of a small number of human resource managers with whom the author held a series of discussions. These human resource specialists confirmed the author's preliminary conclusion that intra-organizational power networks employ the selection interview as a means to bring into the organization individuals whom they consider will augment their power bases. This constituted unsystematic evidence. Nevertheless, the author considered this evidence adequate for the phenomenon to warrant mentioning in the literature, and to justify systematic empirical research.
- 2 In an effort to protect anonymity no information on the geographic location of the institution is provided. In addition, to further reduce the possibility of recognition of the individuals mentioned, all actors are referred to as masculine.
- 3 In 1989 the British government introduced the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which took place experimentally in that year and on an official basis in years 1992, 1996 and 2001. The next RAE is scheduled to take place in 2008. According to this exercise, the research output of academic departments or schools in British

universities has been systematically assessed on a 1 to 5 scale. The rating received in the RAE determines the amount of government funding that each department or school receives until the next RAE. Therefore, good performance in the RAE has been vital for the vast majority of universities and individual departments or schools. Although the criteria of assessment in the RAE have not been perfectly transparent, the quality of publications in peer-reviewed journals by the members of staff has been clearly given the greatest weight, as it should. Since the first time the RAE was implemented, there has been a steady 'inflation' in the ratings that departments or schools receive. This is natural, as academic units become better focused on their efforts to improve their RAE ratings, and academics place more emphasis on research and publishing in peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, the percentage of departments or schools awarded high grades (i.e. '4' or '5') has been increasing over the years. In the most recent RAE, which took place in 2001, more than 40 percent of business schools and business-related departments achieved ratings of '4' or '5'. The corresponding figures for the 1996 and 1992 RAEs were 26 percent and 15 percent, respectively. Over the years, it has been very unusual for a department to see its RAE rating lowering from its rating in the previous RAE.

- 4 It must be strongly stressed that the article has absolutely no intention in promoting or denouncing particular methodological approaches to the study of social phenomena. The case simply describes the facts as they occurred, to the best of the knowledge of the author. The fact that the two power networks in the case represented these particular approaches is purely coincidental. And the only reason the approaches are identified in the article is the enhancement of clarity in the illustration of the case.
- 5 For the readers who are not familiar with the hierarchical system in British academia, British universities utilize a hierarchy of four basic grades, whose correspondence with the system utilized in most other countries, including those in North America, most countries in the rest of Europe, and in the Far East, is: lecturer A – lecturer; lecturer B – assistant professor; senior lecturer – associate professor; professor – professor. Under normal circumstances individuals start their careers in the grade of lecturer A and progress through the hierarchy. When academics join a university in the grade of lecturer A or lecturer B, they are normally placed on 'probation', which lasts from two to four years, depending on previous experience and the policies of the particular university. At the end of the probationary period their performance is evaluated. Then the appointment is either 'confirmed' and becomes 'permanent', or the probationary period is extended (normally for one or two years), at the end of which performance is judged again. At this point the appointment will be either confirmed or the individual will be asked to leave. There is no probationary period when individuals join as senior lecturers or professors. This system appears similar to the 'tenure' system of North American and some Far Eastern universities. However, the probationary period is considerably shorter than the corresponding six-year period in North America or the Far East. Furthermore, it has been generally easier to have one's appointment confirmed in Britain than to achieve tenure in a North American or a Far Eastern university. Although, due to the performance requirements imposed by the Research Assessment Exercise, it is becoming gradually more difficult to have one's appointment confirmed, especially in the top research-led British universities, this is still the norm in the vast majority of cases. Finally, for a better understanding of some of the facts in the case, it should also be noted that there is no automatic promotion to senior lecturer (the associate professor equivalent for most other countries) once one's appointment is confirmed. Many academics with permanent posts in Britain retire from the grade of lecturer B (the equivalent of assistant professor). The present article will utilize the hierarchical titles with which most academics internationally are familiar with (i.e. lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, professor).

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