Employment Interview Simulation Project: Evaluation and Application to Social Work Field Education

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Abstract

The transition from student to professional is challenging and often filled with pressure to secure relevant employment in a competitive market. We provided MSW students with employment interview simulations during their final practicum to evaluate the application and utility of this training to social work field education. A participatory action research model was utilized. Primary themes were identified as fundamental to interviews, including: managing anxiety, self-reflection, and effective communication. Overall, students found the process and feedback to be invaluable to their learning. We suggest ways in which interview training can be integrated into field education to strengthen students' postgraduate employability.

Keywords: Simulation interviews, interview training, MSW students, field education, managing anxiety

Making the transition from student to health professional can be challenging and anxiety- provoking, particularly preparing for today's competitive job market and identifying one's unique contributions as a recent graduate. Employment interviews are most commonly used by organizations to select and recruit prospective employees (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002); however, many students have had minimal interview experience upon graduating (Reddan, 2008). Hiring decisions are primarily influenced by the interview performance, and this knowledge can invoke feelings of anxiety and apprehension in new graduates. Heightened anxiety often translates into issues such as ineffective verbal/non-verbal behaviors and decreased confidence level, which can negatively impact the perception of professionalism noted by prospective employers (Young, Behnke, & Mann, 2004). To date, much of the literature suggests that students in a variety of practice settings report that interview simulations are extremely beneficial as a tool in preparing them for "real life" interviews.

Reddan (2008) discusses the need for universities to invest in providing students with career development courses, not only to prepare graduates for navigating a diverse and competitive employment market, but to provide them with marketable and transferable skills to become successful at obtaining jobs. Recommendations for students to build self-awareness of their transferable skills are further encouraged in the literature (Nabi & Bagley, 1998; Stewart & Knowles, 1999). Despite these recommendations, the career success of graduating students is believed to be often overlooked within higher education (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000) and limited research exists on what contributes to career success (Sagen, Dallam, & Laverty, 2000). In particular, there lacks substantial research and literature on employment interview skills and preparation within the social work field. The following interview simulation project wishes to address this gap in the literature, specifically relating to Master of Social Work students.

As the landscape for graduating social work students continues to change and career trajectories become less traditional (Nabi & Bagley, 1998), preparation for interviews in a variety of organizational structures becomes increasingly important. In particular, social workers have the potential to make unique contributions to vast areas of employment, as they learn to develop core competencies, including: professionalism, ethical practice, critical thinking, diversity, human rights and justice, research, and policy reform (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2011). Social work training provides a foundation of theoretical knowledge and practical skills that are utilized in diverse areas, including: assessment; case management; psychotherapeutic and supportive counselling; social justice initiatives; and policy implementation, within micro and macro systems. Interpersonal skills grounded in empathic, nonjudgmental, holistic, and non-oppressive values make social workers valued contributors to interprofessional teams and well suited to jobs that deal with individuals, families, and communities at large. Overall, social work graduates should feel competent in communicating their diverse and extensive skillset to a wide range of employers to maximize their postgraduate career opportunities.

Recent studies have found that interview preparation and perceived self-efficacy (i.e., sense of confidence) of interview skills are helpful in real interview settings (Harchar, 2005). For example, interviewing skills more greatly influence recruiters' decisions about hiring and perceptions of student fit, compared to students' experience (Goldberg & Perry, 1998). Coll and Lay (2001) suggest that although students may prepare a very comprehensive resume, they will struggle during an interview, which results in job loss to another candidate. Interview preparation activities may include mock interviews, role plays, discussion, and feedback, and are believed to be critical in preparing students for job interviews (Hansen, Oliphant, Oliphant, & Hansen, 2009). Mock interviews have been found to improve self-efficacy, including interview confidence and performance (Coll & Lay, 2001; Reddan, 2008). Students have reported numerous advantages by participating in mock interviews before an interprofessional panel, including understanding their strengths and limitations, gaining knowledge of actual interview questions, and learning how to prepare for interviews and handle stress (Reddan, 2008).

Prior research highlights the importance of exposure, preparedness, and self-efficacy for improving employment interview performance. We sought to evaluate the effectiveness of simulation interviews with social work students near the end of their final field placement and prior to navigating the job market. As this is a relatively new area of study, particularly in the field of social work, a participatory "action research" design was utilized, which has been successfully used and documented in previous research (Harchar, 2005). "Action Research is a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at one time. It is usually described as cyclic, with action and critical reflection taking place in turn" (Dick, 1997). Further, Baskerville (1999) illustrates four steps included in each cycle: plan, act, observe, and reflect. To encourage these steps, different modes of learning were utilized, including: videotaped simulation interviews, written and verbal feedback, and debrief sessions. In this study, students were encouraged to: plan and practice their potential responses to interview questions in two simulation interviews; act in front of an interprofessional interview panel; observe their interview performance on video; and reflect on areas of strength and improvement individually and during debrief sessions with members of the project team. Two separate simulation interviews were held to allow students time to observe and reflect upon their performance, integrate the feedback received, and rehearse their future responses. In the time between interviews, we anticipated that participants would engage in self-reflection and more readily identify their own goals and areas for improvement so that behavior change could be promoted and perceptions of interviewing self-efficacy could be improved (Bandura, 1977; 1986; 1991). By understanding the process and perceived gains from the participants themselves, our goals were twofold: firstly, to determine whether simulated employment interviews are a useful addition to social work field education; and secondly, to use students' experiences to inform future development of interview training tools.

Method

The participants were 10 second-year Master of Social Work students, who were completing their final practicum at a large teaching hospital in Toronto. All participants engaged in two separate individual simulation interviews for various social work positions within the hospital. The interviews were held approximately two weeks apart and were designed to simulate those likely to be encountered in the workforce. This was achieved by organizing interview panels and utilizing interview questions which were currently being used at the hospital for social work positions. Questions assessed the students' interest in applying for the position, relevant skills, knowledge and experience including interprofessional teamwork, conflict management, case examples, and expected challenges in transitioning from the student role. A panel of social workers, including a representative from the administrative group and staff from the target services, conducted the first interview. An interprofessional panel of senior level health professionals, in addition to social workers, conducted the second interview. This was intended to simulate actual social work interviews, which may be directed by staff from other disciplines, as social workers may find themselves in roles where they work and report to allied health leaders. The interviews were videotaped to provide students with the opportunity to observe and reflect upon their non-verbal and verbal behaviors. Following each interview, students were provided with a DVD of their interview, as well as written and verbal feedback from the panel on their performance. Verbal feedback included comments on the clarity and relevance of their answers, use of case examples to elucidate their skills, understanding of their social work role and values, demonstration of self-reflection and insight (e.g., expected challenges and additional training needed), and knowledge of the position and organization. Feedback on non-verbal performance included comments on body language, eye contact, rate of speech, tone of voice, confidence, and level of engagement and genuineness. After all second interviews, debrief sessions were conducted with students and members of the research team. Students were asked about their overall experience, including: their perceived utility of the interview simulations, the value of the feedback on their learning, differences encountered between the two interviews, factors that influenced their responses, and whether improvements could be made in the future.

Results

The debrief sessions enabled participatory action research to take place whereby critical reflection, exchange of information, and co-learning could take place among the research team and participants. Students reflected on their personal experiences with the overall process and provided their insight and feedback to further develop the training initiative.

Reported Experiences

All participants found the simulation interviews to be a valuable learning opportunity (e.g., "Interviewing is a skill beyond the skills you already have."). Notably, it afforded students the opportunity to gain perspective of their responses and behaviors; learning they would not otherwise receive in

actual interviews. One participant remarked, "[There is] no way to grow from being rejected from a job – this was different." Overall, participants gained insight into the interview process and learned how to deal with challenging situations. The following quotes were taken directly from participants' about their overall experience:

> "I feel that the simulated interview has been helpful in making me feel more prepared and more confident for real interviews and […] aware of what I need to work on."
> "The mock interview process presented me with the opportunity to practice my interview skills in a safe and familiar environment."
> "The interviews are of value both for students who have already gone through job interviews and for those who are new to it."

The interview process and questions. The interview process overall was found to be highly effective. Participants described that the first interview helped them anticipate possible questions in the second interview, for which they had time to better prepare and rehearse their responses. Participants were aware of the fact that "more self-reflection [was] involved after feedback from the first interview." Comments included, "it made me realize the different areas I wasn't prepared for" and "practice answers to questions I've never been asked before or thought about." One participant reported, "I felt more confident in the second interview and felt that I could have gone through with an actual interview after that." Additionally, participants agreed that the questions were adequately complex and reflective of those asked in real interview settings. Participants felt nervous about being videotaped; however, they were later appreciative that it afforded them the opportunity to analyze their behaviors and reflect on the interview in greater detail, compared to if they just relied on their memory.

Feedback from the interview panel. The students had an unparalleled opportunity to receive feedback from seasoned professionals in Allied Health, Human Resources, Management, and Education. Participants reported that they gained insight into the composition of an interview panel as well as the type of information interviewers are seeking. Participants appreciated the mix of constructive and positive feedback, since it allowed them to reflect on areas for improvement and gave them reassurance about their strengths and potential. The feedback prompted students to engage in more critical reflection of their past experiences and how to effectively communicate their skills and experiences to an interview panel. After receiving feedback from the first interview, students reported being more inclined to anticipate questions, rehearse their responses, and modify their non-verbal behaviors for the second interview. Feedback which the students found most helpful included: to not assume what information the interview panel knows, to clearly articulate the transferability of one's skills and experiences, and to provide a clear definition of the social work role (especially to non-social workers). For instance, students verbalized, "You have to articulate skills/ experiences in your resume and not assume that it has been read in detail" and "You can't expect that you'll only be interviewed by social workers but an interprofessional team – and they may not understand what social workers do." Participants did not identify any unhelpful aspects of the feedback.

Comparing simulation to real interviews. Participants with previous interview experience agreed that the simulation interviews reflected real interviews in the complexity of questions asked, the interview panel, and overall professionalism in how they were conducted. Noted differences in the simulation interview included the virtue of having familiar staff members on the interview panel and knowing that it could not result in actual negative consequences, such as rejection (e.g. "It didn't feel like an evaluation, it was a discussion; [in a real interview] you don't see that."). Participants agreed that it is more difficult to learn from one's mistakes and recognize areas for improvement during real interview settings because feedback is rarely given. These themes are identified in the following comment: "Both the video and verbal feedback were helpful. In interviews [it is just] rejection or acceptance." Participants acknowledged that observing themselves on video in addition to receiving feedback, allowed them to better analyze their non-verbal behaviors, including voice; gestures; and nervous tendencies, which they could modify in the second interview. One participant reported, "Observing myself really got me thinking about how I responded, what is relevant/not relevant."

Primary challenges. When reflecting back on the process, all participants reported that a primary challenge was managing their anxiety before and during the interview. Participants cited that feeling inadequately prepared and having difficulty articulating one's thoughts contributed to their anxiety (e.g. "A lot of my anxiety came from the fact that I felt I was not prepared" and "Sometimes I forget what I'm saying or go off on tangents, have difficulty articulating my thoughts. Calming my nerves is a big challenge."). Participants acknowledged that their anxiety made it difficult for them to remember questions asked and their responses. Interview recordings made it possible for them to re-live the experience and reflect on how they would modify their future responses and behaviors. After completing the first interview, participants realized the importance of being prepared to articulate their own skills and experiences, to familiarize themselves with organization they were applying to, and to be able to anticipate the interview process. Getting feedback from the panel on how their anxiety was perceived was helpful in preparing for the second interview. For instance, one participant described, "I had an overwhelming sense of anxiety that I couldn't see anything clearly. Feedback brought this to my attention. For example, volume and rate of speech were noticeable." Finally, explaining their role to non-social workers was noted as challenging and an area to consider when practicing.

Suggestions for future interview training. Participants suggested that future interview questions inquire about diversity and anti-oppression, since their prior experiences with social work interviews included these themes. Additional suggestions for future training programs included learning skills to manage and reduce anxiety, and having group debriefing sessions so that ideas and experiences can be collectively shared.

Discussion

Central themes which arose from the current project highlight important topics previously cited in the literature. Specifically, employment interview anxiety (McCarthy & Goffin, 2004; Young et al., 2004) and the importance of effectively communicating and marketing one's transferable skills (Stewart & Knowles, 2000).

Employment Interview Anxiety

Anxiety related to employment interviews has been an increasingly studied area of interest, since high levels of anxiety can lead to negative behavioral outcomes (i.e., inappropriate responses) and be detrimental to the applicant's performance and overall success (Ayres, Keereetaweep, Chen, & Edwards, 1998; McCarthy & Goffin, 2004; Young et al., 2004). Researchers suggest that unique factors may contribute to interview anxiety, such as the interpersonal and interactive nature of the interview and lack of predictability over the process and outcome (Young et al., 2004). Relatedly, individuals may be less likely to practice their responses ahead of time, especially if they do not have knowledge of potential questions that may be asked. This highlights the importance of the current study, where students became familiar with possible interview questions during the first simulation interview and could then improve or modify their responses by engaging in self-reflection and practice.

Researchers (McCarthy & Goffin, 2004; Young et al., 2004) have identified the need to better understand mediating factors of employment interview anxiety and how it can be operationalized and distinguished from other types of anxiety. Subsequently, effective coping strategies and training programs can be formulated and offered to prospective applicants. Although anxiety was not directly measured in the current study, all participants verbalized that they experienced anxiety. In addition, participants confirmed that the initial simulation interview helped to reduce anxiety and promoted preparatory behaviors (e.g., planning and rehearsing) for the second simulation interview. Future studies should consider measuring levels of anxiety at different time points of the interview process and in relation to learning new coping strategies.

Effective Communication of One's Skills

The concept of storytelling has been discussed as central to interviews, particularly the ability for interviewees to explain their experiences in interesting and relevant ways and provide insight into their potential fit with the employer (Ralston, Kirkwood, & Burant, 2003). Stories that are well-constructed and delivered can also help the interviewee stand out and be remembered by the interviewers (Stevens & Kristof, 1995). In the current study, interview skills contributed to the assessment of the candidates, which has been cited as more important than the experiences of the students themselves (Goldberg & Perry, 1998). Overall, the way information is delivered plays an important role in the applicant's performance and overall impression made.

Application and Adaptation of the Model for use in Field Education

The current findings suggest that integrated training programs that combine instruction in interview skills and impression management with strategies to reduce anxiety and enhance self-efficacy, will provide students with the most value. Researchers have shown that integrated programs are promising, such that they can be short in duration and offered at a low cost. Brown, Hillier, and Warren (2010) delivered a program which combined techniques of self-management skills (e.g., goal-setting) and verbal self-guidance (e.g., using positive self-statements related to gaining employment), which not only improved self-efficacy and interview performance (as measured by behavioral outcomes), but reduced anxiety.

Although research has identified the value of integrated interviewing training approaches, to our knowledge, few social work programs in Canada offer such training opportunities. The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary have uniquely collaborated with career specialists to offer students training in interviewing skills. Services include one-on-one training with a career specialist and day-long workshops which include practicum and employment interview simulations (Fink, n.d.). Students also receive access to online videos (e.g., interview preparation), modules for resume writing, handouts, and articles on professionalism. Further, anxiety-related symptoms are addressed through an online resource for mindfulness meditation (K. Gallant & J. Sieppert, personal communication, June 17, 2015). The Calgary program successfully demonstrates ways in which interview training can be integrated into social work programs, such as partnering with career specialists and offering interview workshops. Our current project further demonstrates the value of using interdisciplinary panels to interview students since it reflects common interview practices, such as those found in hospital settings.

Providing opportunities for students to bridge theory with practice and assess their competence at doing so is fundamental. For social work students in particular, the final practicum may be enhanced with supplemental training in employment interviews. As learning theories suggest, long-term consolidation of information and new skills is improved when the learner can attach meaning and personal relevancy to them (Caine, Caine, McClintic, & Klimek, 2005; McGeehan, 2001) and when the learning environment requires interaction and participation (Gardner, 1999). Further, information processing and meaningful learning is enhanced when students are provided with real world experiences and given multiple opportunities (Caine et al., 2005). These theories suggest that students' learning may be consolidated by having the dual opportunity to learn practical social work skills in their field placement while learning techniques on how to communicate their role and transferability of skills to their future employers during interviews.

Field instructors. Field instructors may be ideal mentors in helping students develop self-reflection skills of their unique role and contribution to organizations, even as social work interns. They can help students identify ways in which their skills can be applied in a variety of social work roles. Further, field instructors

can encourage conversation and reflection on important topics in field settings and interviews alike, such as diversity and ethical considerations when working with clients. Overall, ongoing discussion and reflection may strengthen students' success at postgraduate interviews by enhancing their self-efficacy as they begin to see themselves as active contributors and prospective social work professionals. It is important for students to recognize that skills and experiences developed during their practicum are not to be discounted during employment interviews because they can provide tangible context and relevancy of their knowledge and training. Furthermore, integrating this type of training into field education would provide students with profession-specific interviewing skills and advice that may not be covered in general employment services offered by universities or external agencies (Reddan, 2008).

To ensure that field instructors obtain knowledge of current interviewing practices, social work schools may consider hosting specialized training seminars or supplement existing field educator training modules. Training could encompass acquiring general interview skills from career specialists already employed by the university and becoming acquainted with profession-specific interview questions from hiring managers at various hospitals and community agencies. Additionally, field instructors may rely on their own workplace experiences to mentor students on how to effectively communicate and market their experiences and skills for a variety of workplaces.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations can be discussed. First, participants' satisfaction with the simulation interviews was only assessed through verbal feedback during the debrief sessions. Future research should consider asking participants to complete written evaluations or self-report questionnaires, as these methods may encourage participants to provide more candid feedback compared to direct dialogue with members of the project team.

Second, participant interview performance was not objectively examined by the interview panel. Although the panel provided constructive feedback for each participant after their interviews, a systematic method of evaluation was not used. A systematic scoring guide would assist with making quantitative comparisons of interview performance between successive simulation interviews. For instance, for developmental and feedback purposes, Brown et al. (2010) evaluated participants' interview behaviors using behavioral observational scores. They evaluated eye contact, voice clarity, body posture, response directedness, focus of responses, and ability to provide full justification for answers.

Third, subjective ratings of important interview variables, including participants' confidence levels; anxiety; preparedness; and self-efficacy, were not collected or objectively examined. Since performance anxiety is a predominant theme in the literature and was noted in the current study's debrief sessions, future research may consider having participants provide subjective ratings of their anxiety prior to and following the simulation interviews in order to better examine the effect of anxiety on

interview performance and whether anxiety levels change between the first and second simulation interviews. The Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI), as discussed by McCarthy and Goffin (2004), has been found to be a valid and reliable measure of job interview anxiety. It assesses five dimensions of anxiety: communication, appearance, social, performance, and behavioral. Using this tool, McCarthy and Goffin (2004) found a negative correlation between anxiety and interview performance on all five dimensions. As a result, they suggest that organizations consider supplementing interview skills training with training in anxiety-reduction and management in order to improve applicant performance and comfort during interviews. Further, they suggest that future research should consider identifying the links between applicant anxiety, hiring decisions, and job performance.

Finally, future studies may want to incorporate follow-up with participants after graduation, to ascertain whether the skills and feedback acquired during simulation interviews were implemented during real interviews. In the current study, follow-up after graduation was only done once. Measures of postgraduate employability may be useful indices of simulation interview applicability and utility within the competitive job market, including identifying number of interviews attended and job offers received for a duration of time after graduation.

Future research may wish to identify additional ways in which simulation interviews can be applied within schools of social work. There is growing interest in using simulations to better prepare students with foundation skills prior to beginning field experiences (CSWE, 2015). Thus, one area of application could involve preparation for practicum interviews. This could provide an introductory experience for students who are vying for placement opportunities at sites which may have many interested students. Although the current research project was focused on preparing graduate students for employment interviews, we believe that the interview questions and techniques described are transferable and can be easily adapted for use with undergraduates or for mock practicum interviews.

Conclusion

Analysis of prior research findings, as well as the current study's outcomes, suggest that employment interviews are a source of anxiety for graduating students and preparation (e.g., self-reflection and practice) can improve performance. This suggests utility for offering interview training at the graduate level, as students often have limited employment and interview experience and may find it difficult to effectively market themselves. With interview training, social work graduates can better learn how to deconstruct their prior experiences in ways that highlight their capabilities and core social work competencies and values, to ultimately position themselves as competitive candidates upon graduating. We propose that integrating this type of training into social work field education may provide students with profession-specific interviewing skills and advice that may not be covered in general employment services offered by universities or external agencies (Reddan, 2008). There is

further potential for this type of model to be applied for preparing students for practicum interviews. Integrated approaches that combine interview skills with strategies to reduce anxiety will likely provide the most benefit to recent graduates. Overall, we have demonstrated that there is potential for improving students' interview skills and perceptions and that interview training can be a viable adjunct to social work field education, where students and field instructors can promote learning together through observation, practice, reflection, and discussion.

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