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**REINFORCING, REVISING AND RECONCILING  
ATTRIBUTIONS IN THE EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW**

*By*

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**Working Paper # 432**

March, 1999

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## **Reinforcing, Revising and Reconciling Attributions in the Employment Interview**

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## **Abstract**

The literature on the role of causal and characteristic attributions in the employment interview is reviewed and a set of propositions developed. Those propositions are used, in association with PEAT (Probability, Expectancy Attribution Theory), to provide a comprehensive model of interview attributions that makes specific predictions for empirical test and opens new avenues for theoretical development.

The employment interview is used by almost all organizations and is the most popular technique for selecting employees (Dougherty, Turban & Callender, 1994; Howard & Ferris, 1996; Schmitt, 1976). However, studies have consistently shown the interview to be lacking in both reliability and validity (Harris, 1989; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt and Maurer, 1994; Schmitt, 1976; Springbett, 1958). Ironically, although practitioners doggedly persist in using interviews, empirical evidence shows that their own post-interview ratings of candidates are primarily determined by their pre-interview impressions (Dipboye, 1982; Dipboye, Stramler & Fontenelle, 1984; Huguenard, Sager & Ferguson, 1970; Macan & Dipboye, 1994; Phillips & Dipboye, 1989; Springbett, 1958; Tucker & Rowe, 1979). It is remarkable that practitioners continue to use interviews despite their demonstrated low effectiveness and considerable evidence that they do not pay attention to interview performance anyway. Given the mystery surrounding these issues, and the widespread use of interviews, it is very important that we develop a better understanding of the cognitive dynamics of the interview and the interpretation of its results.

A number of researchers have discussed and/or demonstrated the usefulness of attribution theory in understanding the cognitive dynamics of the interview (Arvey and Campion, 1982; Dipboye, 1982, 1992; Dipboye, Stramler & Fontenelle, 1984; Herriott, 1989; Macan & Dipboye, 1994; Phillips & Dipboye, 1989; Ramsay, Gallois and Callan, 1997; Silvester, 1997; Struthers, Colwill and Perry, 1992; Tucker & Rowe, 1979). These studies indicate that observers maintain their pre-interview impressions of candidates, despite contradictory information provided by the interview, through the use of causal attributions; and that causal attributions made during the interview are related to post-interview ratings of candidates. The establishment and empirical

verification of these basic principles is a considerable accomplishment, and it sets the stage for further theoretical and empirical work.

The current paper is intended to provide the basis for such an extension. It will use PEAT (Medcof, 1990, 1991), a theory of attribution processes, to interpret the literature on interview attribution, and then provide a comprehensive model of such attributions and the role they play in interpreting interview performance. This clarification of the role of attributions can provide the basis for further empirical research, and a theoretical understanding that can be fitted into more general models of cognitions about interviews, such as Dipboye's (1982). It is important to note that the decision making process with respect to the employment interview is a very complex one and that attribution theory accounts for only parts of it (Dipboye, 1982, 1992; Herriot, 1989). We will begin our literature review by considering two papers which propose fundamental bases for the biased attributions that appear to occur when interview behaviour is interpreted.

### **The Bases for Biassed Attributions about Interview Performance**

According to Herriot (1989), attributional biases in the interview are a result of the very purpose of the interview itself. That purpose is to assess the applicants, so there is pressure to make dispositional attributions about them. However, the interview situation consists of a number of powerful forces that constrain the interviewee to act in particular ways. In this kind of situation, situational attributions are much more appropriate than dispositional (Herriot, 1981; Herriot, 1989).

Herriott (1989) suggests that this problem is exacerbated by the fact that three other false assumptions are also generally made about the interview. First, it is assumed that the same expectations with regard to interview performance are held by both interviewer and interviewee.

In reality, expectations are often quite different. Second, it is assumed that behaviour in the context of the interview parallels performance in work life. In reality, behaviour in the interview is quite distinct from behaviour at work. Third, it is assumed that behaviour in one interview is essentially the same as behaviour in all interviews. In actuality, each interview provides a distinct setting within which a specific behaviour will result. These false assumptions made about the interview situation, combined with the pressure to look for dispositional attributions, lead interviewers to make inappropriate causal attributions about interviewees.

Dipboye (1982) provides another theoretical account which attempts to provide a general explanation for biased attributions in the interview. In his view, interviewers' pre-interview impressions are self-fulfilling prophecies which affect events during (and subsequently decisions after) the interview. One of the main tenets of this theory, and one which supports the biased attribution hypothesis, is that interviewers may interpret the events of the interview in a manner which is consistent with their pre-interview impressions. Dipboye made two important predictions based on this hypothesis. First, that the more favourable the paper credentials of the interviewee, the more favourable will be the evaluation by the interviewer after the interview. Second, pre-interview impressions will affect the causal attributions made about the interviewee's performance in the interview.

These general approaches to the role of attributions in the cognitive dynamics of the interview provide a good introduction to the more specific papers that will be reviewed below. However, before beginning that review, we will briefly describe PEAT (Probability, Expectancy, Attribution Theory), a theory of attributions proposed by Medcof (1990, 1991) which will be used to organize and interpret the literature.

## PEAT

PEAT is a general theory of attributions which covers a wide variety of situations and integrates a number of the attribution theories that preceded it, including Kelley (1973), Jones and Davis (1965) and Weiner (1986). As a consequence, it is stated in very abstract terms and most of its fundamental concepts are expressed as probability statements. For purposes of this paper, which focuses upon the employment interview, it will be useful to explain PEAT, not in its abstracted form, but in a way that lends itself to the discussion of the issues that are most important in the interview situation. For this reason PEAT will be explained using examples from the interview situation and using terminology that lends itself to that discussion. In addition, the PEAT model shown in Figure 1 is modified from its fundamental form.

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Please Insert Figure 1 Approximately Here

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A fundamental tenet of PEAT is that attributions are of two kinds, causal and characteristic. Causal attributions are statements about which agents have caused particular events. A statement that a candidate did poorly in the interview because his plane arrived late as a result of unanticipated bad weather, and that prevented him from preparing properly, identifies the weather as the causal agent. This is an external causal attribution. A statement that a candidate did poorly because he did not take the time to prepare properly, names the candidate as the causal agent, an internal causal attribution. In contrast, characteristic attributions name particular characteristics of causal agents that are implicated in the occurrence of the event. For example, the candidate who did not prepare properly might have the characteristic “poorly organized”

attributed to him as part of the explanation for the event. In the case of the unavoidably delayed candidate, the weather on that day might be attributed the characteristic “stormy” as part of the explanation. PEAT uses the general term “characteristic” to cover both the traits of people (which have traditionally been called dispositions in attribution theories) and the traits of non-human causal agents, which PEAT calls constraints. For example, “poorly organized” is a characteristic and a disposition, “stormy” is a characteristic and a constraint. Causal attributions have received the most attention in the literature on attributions in the employment interview. But PEAT proposes that causal and characteristic attributions are so inextricably interlinked that to understand the causal attributions we must also understand the characteristic attributions. In Figure 1, causal and characteristic attributions are represented in two separate columns of Boxes in the right-hand third of the figure.

The distinction between causal and characteristic attributions is clearly drawn in PEAT, for theoretical reasons, although in our everyday language and thinking we often blur that distinction. For example, an interviewer might say that an interview went well because of the candidate’s clear talent. This statement clearly attributes a characteristic to the candidate (talent) and includes an implied causal attribution, that the candidate was responsible for the excellent interview behaviour. For ease and clarity of explication here, we will restrict our use of terms for characteristic and causal attributions so as not to necessitate the repeated explanation of their status. As shown in Figure 1, we will use the candidate and external as our examples of causal agents, and ability as our sample characteristic.

PEAT assumes that attributions are made on the basis of the observation of events, and in Figure 1 such an event is shown in Box D. For example, the event might be the performance of

the candidate during the interview. Like many real-world events, this one can be decomposed into a number of sub-events which might themselves be the subject of attributional analysis. For purposes of this discussion, it will be most useful to work at the level of analysis which treats the interview as the event. PEAT proposes that observers of events often compare them (Box C) to their expectations (Box B). For example, the performance of the candidate during the interview might be compared to the expectations about that performance arising from the previous reading of the candidate's resume. PEAT proposes that when such comparisons are made, two basic outcomes can occur. The observed event may be compatible with expectations (Path 1 in Figure 1), or it may be incompatible (Path 2). A third kind of situation occurs when the observer had no expectations before the event. In this case, there is no comparison to be made and Path 3 is followed.

On Path 1, the observed event is compatible with expectations. This could occur if good performance on the interview (the event) was consistent with expectations based upon the previously read resume. In this case the interview reinforces the prior expectations of the observer and the high opinion of the candidate held before the interview will be even higher after. If asked for an explanation of the event, the observer might say that the candidate did well because of her high ability. This statement includes two types of attribution. It directly names a characteristic of the candidate (high ability) which can explain the event (characteristic attribution, Box 1.2) and implies that the candidate herself was the cause of her behaviour (causal attribution, Box 1.1).

On Path 2, the observed event is not compatible with expectations. This could occur if the resume indicated high ability but the subsequent interview indicated the opposite. In such cases

observers can opt for reconciliation (Path 2.1), revision (Path 2.2), or some combination of the two. In reconciliation, the observer maintains the beliefs held before the event and reconciles the conflicting information arising from the event through attribution processes. In the example just given, the observer may continue to believe that the candidate has high ability (based upon the resume) and reconcile the poor interview performance with this by attributing it to some other cause, such as bad luck. In this case the causal attribution (Box 2.1.1) names an external, unstable agent, luck, but there is no corresponding characteristic attributed for, Box 2.1.2. As an alternative to reconciliation, the observer might choose revision (Path 2.2) to explain the incompatibility. In this case the original belief is revised to take account of the new information provided by the event. For example, the observer might attribute the interview behaviour to the person (causal attribution, Box 2.2.1) but lower her estimate of the interviewee's ability (characteristic attribution, Box 2.2.2) to account for the poor interview behaviour. In this case the characteristic attribution has been changed.

Path 3 is taken when observers have no expectations about the event. In this case they use the event to establish their beliefs about causal and characteristic attributions. An example of registration could occur if an interviewer had no prior expectations about the candidate and used the interview to establish first impressions about causes (Box 3.1) and characteristics (Box 3.2). As a fine point, PEAT maintains that observers are seldom completely devoid of expectations about events, people and situations, but in many cases those expectations are so weakly held that they are effectively ignored in interpreting the event.

Continuing with PEAT in Figure 1, after causal and characteristic attributions are made, the observer proceeds along Path 4 to Boxes A, B and F. Box A represents the emotional reactions

of the observer, such as liking an impressive interview candidate. Box B represents the observer's expectations about future events. For example, if the first interview was good but the observer attributed it to luck, the observer expects that the candidate will do more poorly on the follow-up interview and will do a poor job if hired. As Figure 1 shows, those expectations can then feed into the comparator (Box C) when the interviewer considers the follow-up interview which is a new event (Box D). Box F represents the behaviour of the interviewer as a result of her interpretation of the interview. This can also feed into the next event (Box D). For example, if she believes that the impressive behaviour on the first interview was luck, she may take pains during the follow-up interview to ensure that the candidate's true talents are revealed. This would be an example of the self-fulfilling prophesy in the interview that Dipboye (1982) describes.

This explanation of PEAT has described several cognitive processes occurring in a particular order. This is a convenient way to explain the theory but it should not be taken to imply that PEAT states that those processes must always occur in that order. It seems likely that, in most cases, observers will arrive at a consistent set of attributions, expectations and emotional reactions, more or less simultaneously. PEAT emphasizes that observers will tend to gravitate towards consistency among all of these cognitions, but does not specify a necessary order for their formation. Now that we have described PEAT, we can proceed with the literature review. We will summarize the findings of each paper and interpret them in the framework of PEAT.

### **Empirical Evidence**

Springbett (1958) provided a clear demonstration that post-interview evaluations conform to pre-interview impressions. In the study, subjects were exposed to both the application form and

the interview of each candidate. Half saw the paper credentials first and the other half the interview first. They were asked to make three ratings of “accept or reject”; one based solely on the application form, one based solely on the interview, and a final one based on both the interview and the application form.

PEAT’s interpretation of the study is as follows. Subjects either read the application form or watched the interview first. Whichever it was, this would be a first event (Box D) and it would be one for which the subjects had no prior expectations (Box B). Consequently, they would follow Path 3, registration, and form first impressions of the characteristics of the applicant and form any causal attributions they felt were appropriate. They would then proceed along Path 4 to form emotional reactions (Box A) and expectations (Box B). Finally they would go along Path 5 to Box F, behaviour. In this study, none of these cognitions were measured. An indirect measure of behaviour was taken by asking subjects whether they would accept or reject the candidate for hiring.

Subjects were then exposed to the second kind of information, resume or interview, and this constituted a second event (Box D). For this event they did have expectations (Box B), based upon their prior exposure to either the application form or the interview. If they found that the two sources of information were compatible, they would proceed along Path 1, reinforcement. Although Springbett did not measure any attributions to enable us to check directly if reinforcement occurred at that point, he did measure the final hiring decision and that measure indicates that reinforcement did occur. The overall rate of agreement between the decision based upon the application form only, and the final decision, was 88%, when the application form came first. This jumped to 91% when the interview agreed with the application form, thus

indicating reinforcement. When the interview came first, the overall rate of agreement between it and the final decision was 67%. This leapt to 79% when the application form agreed with the interview, again indicating reinforcement.

In the cases in which subjects found the two sources of information to be incompatible, PEAT predicts they would follow Path 2 and process the information through either reconciliation (Path 2.1) or revision (Path 2.2). There is no basis at this point to predict which of these two paths subjects would follow, but Springbett's (1958) data indicate that most subjects chose reconciliation when exposed to the application form first, and revision when exposed to the interview first. In the cases in which subjects saw the application form first, the data show that the final decision agreed with the application form decision 88% of the time. This dropped to 81% when the interview decision disagreed with the application for decision. This shows that the majority of subjects remained with the application form decision despite the incompatible interview information. PEAT suggests that they would reconcile the incompatibility between their decision and the interview information through appropriate causal attributions, but no measurements were made to allow us to verify this. In the cases in which the interview was first, the overall rate of agreement between the interview and final decisions was 67%. This dropped to 42% when the following application form was incompatible with it. Here the majority of subjects chose to revise (Path 2.2) their views in light of the application form information.

Although Springbett(1958) did not set out to test PEAT, or any attribution theory, for that matter, we do see that the general framework of his experiment fits into PEAT's framework. We also see that, although he did not collect information about most of the variables in PEAT, the data he did collect was interpretable using PEAT. There is clear evidence that reinforcement,

reconciliation and revision do occur, but under different circumstances, and PEAT can specify those circumstances. Springbett (1958) also showed that pre-interview impressions can strongly affect post-interview ratings and that this is probably because observers rely more heavily on the application form than on the interview when making their decisions.

Huguenard, Sager and Ferguson (1970) had subjects read what they were told was a personality profile of the applicant they were about to interview. There were two versions of this profile, which were identical, except that one described the applicant as 'cold' while the other used the term 'warm'. Subjects then interviewed the applicant, following which they rated the applicants on an 80-item pair-comparison questionnaire which contrasted warm and neutral adjectives. The results indicate that the adjectives chosen to describe the interviewee were consistent with the version of the profile read before the interview. Subjects who read the 'warm' profile chose warm-related adjectives while those who read the 'cold' profile chose neutral adjectives.

In terms of PEAT, the reading of the personality profile was an event (Box D) about which the subjects had few, if any, expectations. They would choose Path 3, registration, and take the personality profile as the basis for attributing characteristics and causes, for forming emotional reactions and expectations, and as a basis for at least some behaviours in the interview. The subsequent interview was a second event and subjects had an opportunity to engage in reinforcement, reconciliation or revision, depending upon how they interpreted the interview relative to the personality profile. The data indicate that most of them did not engage in any revision since post-interview characteristic attributions were highly consistent with the pre-interview personality profiles.

In short, Huguenard *et al* (1970) showed then that pre-interview characteristic attributions have a strong determining effect on post-interview characteristic attributions. Although this phenomenon was clearly demonstrated, data were not collected that would allow us to evaluate the intervening cognitive dynamics proposed by PEAT.

The first study to apply attribution theory to the employment interview was a laboratory experiment by Tucker and Rowe (1979). In this study, subjects read one of three letters of reference, either favourable, neutral or unfavourable. They all then read the same interview transcript, which consisted of ten work-related outcomes from the applicant's past, five of which were positive and five of which were negative. The dependent measure consisted of a list of six possible causal attributions, three internal (ability, effort, applicant's personality) and three external (task difficulty, luck, influence of other people); which subjects were asked to attribute to each of the ten outcomes. Note that this experimental design, by providing ten interview components, violates our above stated intention to treat the whole interview as one event. As will be seen momentarily, this particular violation does not do any harm to our ability to interpret the data.

PEAT's interpretation of the experiment is as follows. The reading of the paper credentials is a registration event which sets up an initial set of cognitions, including expectations (Box B). Subjects were then presented with ten outcomes from the interviewees' past, each of which constitutes a separate event (Box D) within the interview. Each outcome is compared (Box C) to expectations. PEAT predicts that when the event is compatible with expectations, reinforcement will occur and the event will be attributed to a stable characteristic of the interviewee. The data support this, showing that subjects who read a favourable letter of recommendation made the

most internal attributions for successful events, and those who read the unfavourable letter made the most internal attributions for unsuccessful events. PEAT predicts that when the letter and events are incompatible, reconciliation or revision will be chosen. The data indicate that the majority of subjects chose reconciliation. Those who read the favourable letter made the fewest internal attributions for past failures. This indicates that they maintained the favourable view of the candidate provided by the letter and did not attribute the negative event to him or her. Rather, they reconciled the conflicting information by attributing the negative event to some other agent. Those who read the unfavourable letter made the fewest internal attributions for successful events. This indicates they maintained their negative views of the candidate set by the letter and did not attribute successful events to them. Those events were attributed to some other agent. Following these attributions, subjects would proceed along Path 4 to emotional reactions (Box A) and expectations (Box B). No data were collected on these. Subjects then follow Path 5 to where the behaviour takes place (Box F). Subjects showed their probable behaviour by indicating whether their decision was to hire or reject the applicant. The results indicate that more internal attributions for past successes lead to a greater probability of acceptance, while more internal attributions for failures led to a greater probability of rejection. Thus, behaviour intentions were consistent with attributions.

The results of this study are consistent with PEAT's interpretation which says that initial impressions are maintained, despite contradictory interview information, through the use of attributions. They also demonstrate self-consistent interpretations by subjects, covering attributions and behavioural intentions. These general conclusions are consistent with other attribution theories such as Kelley's (1973) and Weiner's (1986), as well as with PEAT. The

advantage of PEAT, as will be demonstrated below, is that it provides a structure to include the other theories and some additional refinements of its own.

Phillips and Dipboye (1989) tested whether the attribution phenomena demonstrated by Tucker and Rowe (1979) in the laboratory also occurred in the real world. Practising managers were surveyed before and after they interviewed applicants for jobs in their firms. Before each interview, managers evaluated their pre-interview impressions of the applicant's qualifications and how well they were expected to perform, based on their applications and their scores on a standardized test. After the interview, they rated the applicant's qualifications, the quality of the applicant's performance, and indicated the factors to which they attributed that performance. It was found that post-interview evaluations of performance were positively related to pre-interview impressions. More importantly, there was a correlation between pre-interview impressions and attributions for performance. Favourable pre-interview evaluations were associated with internal attributions for favourable interview performance. Favourable pre-interview evaluations were also associated with external attributions for unfavourable interview performance. Conversely, unfavourable pre-interview impressions were associated with external attributions for favourable interview performance and with internal attributions for unfavourable performances. These data fit the PEAT model in much the same way as those of Tucker and Rowe (1979), so there is no need to trace them out in detail. It is clear that the cognitions of the managers were consistent with Tucker and Rowe's (1979) findings and with PEAT.

Dipboye, Stramler and Fontenelle (1984) conducted a study in order to test the hypothesis proposed by Dipboye (1982) that perceptions of the interview are assimilated into impressions based on the application form. In this study, subjects were presented with an application form

and a videotaped interview of the applicant, half getting the interview first and half getting the application form first. There were two versions of the application form, one depicting poor qualifications, the other depicting good qualifications. The interview was held constant. The dependent variables consisted of several Likert scale questions measuring characteristic attributions (ability), emotional reactions, expectations and likelihood of hiring. The data show that subjects did rely heavily on the application form, whether it came first or second in sequence. Those who read good application forms gave higher ratings of ability and better ratings of job qualifications, reported more liking of the interviewee, and were more likely to recommend hiring the interviewee, than subjects who read the poor application forms.

We see in Dipboye *et al* (1984) another study whose general framework can be included in the PEAT structure, and whose results are potentially explainable by PEAT. But we also see another case in which the data collected, although provocative, do not permit a clear test of most of the principal ideas embodied in PEAT. However, this study did measure cognitive variables all along the Path described by PEAT, and found that they were consistent with information provided by the application form, regardless of whether it preceded or followed the interview. This is useful to know but the knowledge yielded by the experiment would have been greatly increased if the favorability of the interview had been manipulated. If this manipulation had been done, the effects of compatible and incompatible applications and interviews could have been explicitly explored. Such an exploration would have provided a good way to test PEAT, which makes explicit predictions about conditions of compatibility and incompatibility.

Macan and Dipboye (1994) collected direct evidence on the mechanisms which mediate bias in the evaluations of interview performance. In their study, subjects were presented with

application forms followed by audio recordings of interviews with applicants, whom subjects were told were applying for a sales position. Subjects began by reviewing the paper credentials of 4 applicants, 1 with high qualifications, 2 with moderate qualifications and 1 with low qualifications. They then rated their initial impressions of each applicant. They then listened to an audio tape of interviews with the 4 candidates, which were equivalent in quality of performance. They were then asked to rate how well each applicant performed in the interview. Finally, subjects performed a recognition test of the applicants' statements during the interview.

The data showed that better paper credentials were associated with more positive characteristic attributions and better evaluations of interview performance, despite the fact that the quality of interview performance did not vary. However, pre-interview impressions had no effect on the accuracy of recall of applicants' statements during the interview. Macan and Dipboye (1994) concluded that a biased interpretation of interview events was an important mediating factor in determining the perceived quality of the interviewee's performance.

PEAT interprets these data as follows. Reading the application forms was a registration event. The data indicate that in this registration process subjects attributed the greatest number of sales-consistent traits (characteristics) in the 'high qualifications' condition, a moderate number in the 'moderate' condition and the least in the 'poor' condition (Box 3.2). Subjects then followed Path 4 to expectations for future performance. The data show that subjects' expectancies for quality of answers, number of sales-consistent statements, and favorability of statements, were consistent with the qualifications in the applications they read.

The next event (Box D) was the audio recording of the interview, which was compared (Box C) to expectations (Box B). As was the case in Dipboye *et al.* (1984), the interview

performance was ambiguous and could therefore have been interpreted as either compatible or incompatible with expectations. According to the data, subjects who read the 'high' application form gave more sales-consistent characteristic attributions than those who read the 'moderate' application form, and the lowest number were given by subjects in the 'low' condition. This demonstrates the biasing effect of the previously read application form.

PEAT would suggest that this result probably came about as a result of subjects taking Paths 1 and/or 2.1. If the interview was perceived to be compatible with expectations, the interview would serve to reinforce those expectations (Path 1). Subjects would name the applicant as the cause of the behaviour (Box 1.1) and would attribute characteristics consistent with the application form for that interviewee (Box 1.2). If the interview were seen as incompatible with expectations, subjects would have reconciled the disparity by naming an unstable agent or characteristic (Boxes 2.1.1 & 2.1.2) as the cause of the interview performance. Subjects would then follow Path 4 where they would form emotional reactions (Box A) and expectations (Box B), which were also consistent with the version of the application form they read. Subjects indicated their emotional reaction by rating the favorability of the applicant's responses. The results indicate that subjects in the 'high' condition rated the applicant's statements as the most favourable, those in the 'poor' condition rated the statements as the least favourable, while those in the 'moderate' condition rated the responses intermediate between the two. Subjects then followed Path 5 to where they take action (Box F). Subjects indicated their likely behaviour by recording their willingness to hire the candidate. As expected, subjects in the 'high' condition were the most willing to hire while subjects in the 'low' condition were the least willing.

This study by Macan and Dipboye (1994) demonstrates clearly the effect of pre-interview impressions on “interview-based” ratings. Although this experiment was not intended to test PEAT, its general structure fit into PEAT and it did gather data relevant to a number of points in the series of cognitive processes proposed by PEAT. In doing this it found that a fundamental proposition of PEAT was supported; that although observers may be interpreting events in a biased way, the elements of their interpretations are internally consistent. It also becomes apparent from this and earlier studies that, to truly test the prepositions of PEAT, the quality of the qualifications presented in both the interview and the paper credentials should be manipulated by the experimenter, so that ambiguity of interpretation is not created by allowing subjects considerable freedom in interpreting one or the other.

Struthers, Colwill and Perry (1992) took a new tack on attributions in the interview when they manipulated the causal attributions made by applicants in the interview. They presented subjects with a job description, the educational and work experience requirements of the job, a hypothetical applicant’s resume and “employment interview transcripts” that contained the applicants responses to three questions. Eight versions of these materials manipulated the independent variables in the study in the form of candidates’ responses to a question about why they left their last job . The eight versions manipulated whether the reasons (causes) were internal or external, stable or unstable and positive or negative. After reading these materials, subjects indicated their expectations for the candidate’s future performance on the job, their emotional reactions, and their decision to hire or reject, on a series of Likert scale rating questions. There were two important findings. Firstly, positive reasons for job leaving in the transcripts led to higher ratings on expectancy, emotional reaction and decision to hire.

Secondly, the attributions made for job leaving also affected ratings. Specifically, applicants who offered *external* attributions for *negative* outcomes received more favourable ratings than those who cited *internal* attributions. These findings are consistent with PEAT and with Weiner's (1986) theory. It was the latter which Struthers *et al* used to guide their experimental design and make their predictions.

This experimental format fits into the PEAT model in much the same way as the earlier ones, with the resume setting up expectations (through registration) and the subsequent interview transcripts being compared to those expectations in some way. However, the main finding of the Struthers *et al* study is that, during the interview, interpretations of events can be offered that “help” interviewers interpret the information they have before them. It seems, for example, that the candidate can provide casual attributions that facilitate the attribution of positive characteristics to the candidate. This testifies to the important role that causal attributions play in interpreting interview events, and confirms that characteristic attributions are intimately interlinked with the causal. Struthers *et al* did not set out to test PEAT, but they did collect data from points all along the cognitive sequence proposed by PEAT, and those data are consistent with PEAT.

Silvester (1997) also examined causal attributions made by candidates in interviews but chose to do so in a natural setting. Transcripts from real job interviews in two companies were collected and content analysed for attributional patterns. The interviewers had rated the candidates after each interview using a 7-point scale, from very poor to very good, and these ratings were compared to the attribution patterns. As in previous studies (Phillips & Dipboye, 1989; Struthers, *et al*, 1992; Tucker & Rowe, 1979), candidates who were rated higher had

systematically different causal attributions associated with past events than candidates rated lower. Silvester found that candidates who made more *internal* attributions about past *failures* were rated more highly than those who made more *external* attributions. This is the opposite of the Struthers *et al* (1992) result. In addition, no difference was found for attributions for past successes, suggesting that negative information carries more weight than positive in affecting evaluations of performance.

Although Silvester (1997) has clearly demonstrated again the importance of attributions in the interpretation of the employment interview, her data demand that we consider attribution issues in the light of other cognitive processing that goes on in the interview. Struthers *et al* (1992), Tucker and Rowe (1979) and Phillips and Dipboye (1989) have shown in controlled experiments and in the field that attributions in the interview work the way theories predict. That seems to be a well-established finding. Silvester (1997) showed, in a naturalistic setting, that it is not quite that simple. In the less-controlled environment of the real interview, other processes are clearly in play which may not have been measured or noticed by researchers. Silvester does an excellent job of using a self-presentational model to interpret her results, and the relationship of attribution theory to self-presentational theory now becomes a subject of some interest.

It might also be fruitful to pursue other facets of attribution theory in this context. For example, the concept of ability held by interviewers might include the ability to recognize past mistakes and to find ways to correct them. Part of this concept of ability might be the capacity to attribute past failures to oneself and then to change one's behaviour to correct those failings. In management, a chronic inability to take ownership of problems is certainly a liability. How might this more complex concept of ability be fit into the framework of attribution theory which

has traditionally treated ability in a rather simple-minded way. Some of the work of Weiner (1986) and his associates on attribution theory and the need for achievement suggests that there are clear possibilities in such a line of enquiry.

Ramsay, Gallois and Callan (1997) have also expanded the scope for the application of attribution theory to the employment interview. Most of the literature reviewed above treats the interview as primarily a source of indirect information about how candidates perform on the job. Questions are asked and candidates describe their past job activities and future job intentions. In contrast, Ramsay *et al* treat the interview itself as an activity that requires certain rule-following competences, and the failure of the candidate to demonstrate those competences can lower their likelihood of being hired. For example, Ramsay *et al* found that “interview presentation skills” and “general interpersonal competence” were closely related to hireability. They also demonstrated that attributions made about such competences follow identifiable patterns.

Rule-following competencies, such as Ramsay *et al* (1997) explored, are a type of ability, and it is reassuring that they were able to demonstrate some of the same kinds of attributional processing as are found for other kinds of job-related abilities. There is no reason to expect that the attribution processing built around such abilities will not follow the general rules described in PEAT and other attribution theories. The Ramsay *et al* study is an important embarkation that should open new doors for an attributional understanding of the employment interview.

This review of the empirical studies concerning the role of attributions in the interpretation of interview performance suggests a number of generalizations. One is that almost all of the findings can be contained within the PEAT framework. Given this, it seems likely that PEAT could provide some theoretical guidance for future empirical research as well as a tighter and

more comprehensive theoretical interpretation than has so far been provided. We will now attempt to make advances on both of these fronts, beginning with a set of propositions that seem justified on the basis of the above literature review, and by suggesting an experimental paradigm that can be used to clarify the implications of those propositions.

### **Some Propositions**

The purpose of the job interview, as assumed in the above literature, is to predict the future. Interviewers make predictions about how well each candidate would perform the job, if hired, and choose the one predicted to perform the best. They are looking for enduring characteristics in candidates that they believe will predict job behaviour. This particular model of the purpose of the job interview excludes certain other purposes that do occur. In some cases, the job interview is primarily a mechanism to help justify a hiring decision that has already been made. In others, the job interview is primarily a political arena in which conflicting parties do battle to gain the installment of their favoured candidates. Our first proposition, then, identifies one, overriding purpose of the job interview. To the degree that a job interview is not dominated by this purpose, the applicability of the model developed here will be threatened.

**Proposition 1:** In the process of selecting from among candidates for a job, the primary focus of selectors will be to establish the stable, dispositional characteristics of the candidates with the aim of choosing a candidate whose stable characteristics are most suitable to the position.

Although causal attributions have been given pride of place over characteristic attributions in most of the literature, this is an anomaly arising from the history of attribution theory and from an earlier lack of understanding of attribution processes. Consistent with Proposition 1, and the

basic tenets of PEAT, it is proposed here that interviewers are not primarily interested in making causal attributions. Causal attributions are important ancillary concepts used in arriving at an interpretation of the world that is self-consistent and appears to predict the future. That interpretation is built primarily upon the attribution of stable characteristics to agents both human and non-human. Thus, our second proposition.

**Proposition 2:** Selectors will use information from the events of the selection process (eg. reading the resume, conducting the interview) to attribute characteristics to candidates, and will use causal attributions to support those characteristic attributions, in the light of both consistent and inconsistent information.

A fundamental assumption of PEAT is that humans attempt to establish a stable interpretation of the world that predicts the future. Humans are reluctant to change already established interpretations because such change threatens predictability. Consequently, later events tend to be interpreted in a way that does not threaten established belief structures, and it takes stronger information to overcome a belief than it does to establish it in the first place. Generally, earlier events are given precedence over later events in interpreting the world.

**Proposition 3:** All else being equal, information and events from earlier in the selection process will have a more potent influence on the stable characteristics attributed to a candidate than will information and events from later in the process. This is called the temporal potency factor.

But there is ample evidence in the literature reviewed above that written information about a candidate (be it resume or completed application form) has a stronger influence upon candidate rating than does the interview. The medium by which information about the candidate is

delivered has an effect upon the potency of that information. Using the resume to stand for the standard written media used in employee selection we propose the following.

**Proposition 4:** All else being equal, the resume of a candidate will have a more potent influence on the stable characteristics attributed to a candidate than will performance on an interview. This is called the media potency factor.

There is considerable empirical evidence, cited in the literature review above, that regardless of temporal order, the written media have a stronger influence on attributions and the final hiring decisions than does the interview.

**Proposition 5:** The media potency factor is more potent than the temporal potency factor, so observers will take the resume to be a better indication of the stable characteristics of the candidate than the interview, regardless of presentation order. Consequently, they will have a strong tendency to attribute resume performance to stable characteristics of the candidate.

The following propositions summarize and systematize the various interpretations of the literature using PEAT that were provided in the literature review above. These propositions essentially work through the attributional consequences of the five propositions just presented, using PEAT as the theoretical framework. The concept of “belief shift”, which is used several times, refers to the change in beliefs about the characteristics of a job candidate which a selector undergoes as a result of being exposed to a second set of information about that candidate. For example, after reviewing the resume of a candidate, a selector might attribute certain characteristics to her. In a subsequent interview, the selector might change his beliefs. The change in beliefs resulting from the information in the interview is the “belief shift.”

**Proposition 6:** When the resume and interview of a candidate provide compatible information, observers will follow Path 1 in PEAT and reinforcement will occur, so that the strength of the stable characteristic attributed after the second event will be stronger than it was immediately before (belief shift). Performance on both the resume and the interview will be attributed to stable characteristics of the candidate. This is so regardless of the order of presentation of the resume and the interview.

**Proposition 7:** When the resume and interview provide incompatible information, observers will choose reconciliation (Path 2.1) and/or revision (Path 2.2) to deal with the incompatibility. The degree to which they will choose one path over the other will depend upon the order of presentation and relative potency of the two information sources.

**Proposition 8:** When the resume and interview provide incompatible information, and the resume precedes the interview, both potency factors (media and temporal) favour the resume, and observers will choose reconciliation over revision when dealing with the incompatibility. In this case they will maintain their ability attributions established by the doubly potent resume, and explain the interview behaviour with unstable and/or external attributions. In this case there is relatively little belief shift as a result of exposure to the second event.

**Proposition 9:** When the resume and interview provide incompatible information, and the interview precedes the resume, the temporal potency factor favours the

interview and the media potency factor favours the resume. Since the media potency factor is stronger, observers will choose revision to deal with the incompatibility. In this case there will be a significant belief shift. Performance on the resume will be attributed to stable characteristics of the candidate, and performance on the interview will be attributed to external and/or unstable agents.

We will now demonstrate the application of these propositions to the kind of empirical paradigm used in several of the studies of this issue. This will provide a more detailed understanding of their implications and be suggestive of some future directions that empirical work might take. Assume an experimental paradigm in which subjects are exposed to both the resumes and interviews of candidates. The independent variables manipulated are the content of the resume or interview (positive or negative), the order in which they are presented (resume comes first or interview comes first) and whether the interview and resume are compatible with each other or not. This yields eight conditions or cases which are described and numbered in the three columns on the left of Table 1. The fourth column provides the term from PEAT describing the relationship of Event 1 to Event 2. Column 5 lists the cognitive process which will be used to deal with the information in events 1 and 2. For example, in Case 1, the resume is presented to subjects first (event 1), the interview comes second (event 2), they are both positive and so they are compatible (Path 1 in PEAT), and the cognitive process used to deal with them is reinforcement. In column 6 we see that in Case 1 the characteristic attributed to the candidate is the highest level of ability of all eight Cases (for reasons that will be discussed below). In column 7 we see that subjects' causal attribution for the behaviour on the **interview** is

to the candidate, a stable agent. For purposes of this discussion we will use ability to represent a stable characteristic of the candidate, although, in an experiment and in real life situations, other more complex attributions might be appropriate.

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Please Insert Table 1 Approximately Here

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Our discussion here will be confined to the variables shown in table 1. It might be extended to include all of the variables covered by PEAT, but that would make this paper inordinately long. The focus here is upon the primary themes of the literature reviewed, that pre-interview impressions determine post-interview evaluations and that causal attributions about the interview are involved in the cognitive processes that lead to this. However, PEAT shows that there is a rich array of related cognitive activity which might be the subject of future research.

Since the main objectives of those reviewing resumes and holding interviews is to determine the stable characteristics of candidates, such as ability (our Proposition 1), we will focus our discussion here on column 6 of Table 1, which shows the relative rankings of ability of the candidates in the eight cases. This will be linked closely to our discussion of the causal attributions made for interview performance (column 7).

In Table 1, Cases 1 and 5 will have the highest rankings of ability of all because they both involve positive resumes and positive interviews reinforcing each other. The positive attributions of ability established by the first event (whether it be resume or interview) will undergo a belief shift to an even higher level after the reinforcing second event. And, since the resume is more potent than the interview, we would expect a larger belief shift when it is the

second event (Case 5) than when the interview is the second event (Case 1). In both these Cases interview performance is attributed to the candidate because that performance is consistent with the stable characteristic of the candidate (high ability).

Cases 4 and 8 will have the lowest rankings of ability of all because they both involve negative resumes and negative interviews reinforcing each other. The negative ratings of ability established by the first event (whether it be resume or interview) will undergo a belief shift to an even more negative level after the reinforcing second event. And, since the resume is more potent than the interview, we would expect a larger belief shift when it is the second event (Case 8) than when the interview is the second event (Case 4). In both of these cases the interview performance is attributed to the candidate because that performance is consistent with the stable characteristic of the candidate (low ability).

We now turn to the four cases in which the resumes and interviews are incompatible, numbers 2, 3, 5 and 6. None of these cases can reach the degree of positive attribution found in Cases 1 and 5, or the degree of negative attribution found in Cases 4 and 8, because of their conflicting information. But these four cases of incompatible information can be rank ordered amongst themselves between the extremes given by the cases with compatible information.

The logic for ranking the incompatible cases begins with Proposition 5 above, which states that media potency is stronger than temporal potency. Given this, the information in the resume will always prevail over the information in the interview, whether it be positive or negative or whether it comes first or second.

In Cases 2 and 3, in which the resume is event 1, it establishes a strong set of attributions and expectations which observers do not change when they are exposed to the weaker interview in

event 2. As a consequence, observers deal with incompatibility between resume and interview by using Path 2a, reconciliation. They maintain their beliefs about the ability of the candidate based upon the resume and reconcile the inconsistent interview by attributing the behaviour in the interview to an unstable and/or external agent. For example, in Case 2, when the first event is a positive resume, they might attribute the subsequent poor interview to an interviewing committee (external agent) that was excessively harsh. In Case 3, for example, when a negative resume precedes a positive interview, they will maintain their belief in low ability established by the resume and reconcile the positive interview with that belief by attributing it to luck (unstable agent). One consequence of this is that there will be relatively little belief shift resulting from the second event. In Cases 2 and 3 then, the beliefs in high ability or low ability established by the resume are maintained. But these beliefs are not reinforced by a subsequent compatible interview. Therefore the high ability attributed in Case 2 will not be as high as the ability attributed in Cells 1 and 5, which involve reinforcing compatible events. The low ability attributed in Case 3 will not be as low as that attributed in the negative reinforcing Cases 4 and 8.

In Cases 6 and 7, in which the interview comes first, it establishes a set of attributions and expectations which is subsequently revised (Path 2.2) as a result of the information in the more potent resume. The new information in event 2 is taken as a true indicator of the characteristics of the candidate. In Cases 6 and 7 you also get reconciliation. If asked after the second event, to explain why the candidate performed on the interview in a way incompatible with the resume, the answer will be in terms of unstable and/or external agents, as it was in Cases 2 and 3.

Because the information provided in Cases 6 and 7 is not reinforcing, the low ability attributed in Case 6 will not be as low as that attributed in Cases 4 and 8, and the high ability

attributed in Case 7 will not be as high as that attributed in Cases 1 and 5. But how will the attributions of ability in cases 6 and 7 compare to those in Cases 2 and 3? In Cases 2 and 3 the resume comes first so its effect will be driven by its media potency and temporal potency. In Cases 6 and 7 the resume comes second, so its media potency will be partly counteracted by the temporal potency of the preceding interview. As a consequence, the effect of the resume will be stronger in cases 2 and 3 than in Cases 6 and 7. Therefore, the positive effect of the resume in Case 2 will be greater than its positive effect in Case 7, and ratings of ability will be higher in Case 2 than in Case 7. Likewise, the negative effect of the interview will be stronger in Case 3 than in Case 6, so attributions of ability will be lower in Case 3 than in Case 6.

We can now summarize the basis for the ranking of the ability attributions in column 6. Since the resume is always more potent than the interview, the cases with positive resumes (1, 2, 5 and 7) will always have higher ability rankings than those with negative resumes (3, 4, 6 and 8). Of the cases with positive resumes, 1 and 5 will have the highest ability attributions because the positive resumes are reinforced by the positive interviews. The next highest will be Case 2, in which the negative interview is incompatible with the positive resume, but the resume has both media and temporal potencies on its side. This ability attribution will be higher than that in Case 7, where the positive resume has media potency but not temporal potency on its side. Among the cases with negative resumes, 4 and 8 will have the lowest ability attributions because negative resumes and interviews reinforce each other. The next lowest will be Case 3, in which the positive interview is incompatible with the negative resume, but the resume has both media potency and temporal potency on its side. This ability attribution will be lower than that in Case 6, where the negative resume has media potency but not temporal potency on its side.

## Conclusions

A few general conclusions can be drawn from the analysis above. The data indicate that written materials have a stronger effect upon interviewers' ratings of candidates than does the interview. Interviewers use written materials to attribute stable characteristics to job candidates and incompatible information arising from interviews is reconciled with these using causal attributions. These beliefs about the stable characteristics of candidates are self-consistent and extend to emotional reactions, expectations and to intended behaviours. This parsimonious and elegant explanation of the role of attributions in the employment interview was made possible by the application of PEAT in the analysis and explanation of the empirical evidence available.

This paper has also provided a set of propositions that, when worked through using PEAT as a theoretical guide, provides quite specific predictions for the causal and characteristic attributions that should occur in each of the cases in Table 1. The conditions specified in Table 1 are eminently suitable for empirical test, and such a test would provide a considerable advance on the empirical findings already available. In addition, PEAT could be used to generate further predictions about expectations, emotional reactions and behaviour, which it was not possible to generate here due to space limitations. Such predictions could also be tested empirically.

In short, PEAT can provide a more systematic and comprehensive theoretical approach than has, heretofore, been available for the discussion of attributions in the employment interview. This advance should enable us to better understand attributions in the context of other cognitive processes that occur in the employment interview (Dipboye, 1982; Silvester, 1997) and to work in some of the new directions recently discovered for interview attributions, as in the work of Silvester (1997) and Ramsay *et al* (1997).

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**Table 1****Effects of Various Resume and Interview Combinations on attributions**


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<b>Resume Precedes Interview</b>						
Case	Event 1 <u>Resume</u>	Event 2 <u>Interview</u>	Event <u>Relationship</u>	Cognitive <u>Process</u>	Characteristic <u>Attribution</u>	Causal * <u>attribution</u>
1	Positive	Positive	Compatible	Reinforce	Highest Ability	Candidate Stable
2.	Positive	Negative	Incompatible	Reconcile	2 <sup>nd</sup> Highest Ability	External, unstable
3.	Negative	Positive	Incompatible	Reconcile	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lowest Ability	External Unstable
4.	Negative	Negative	Compatible	Reinforce	Lowest Ability	Candidate Stable

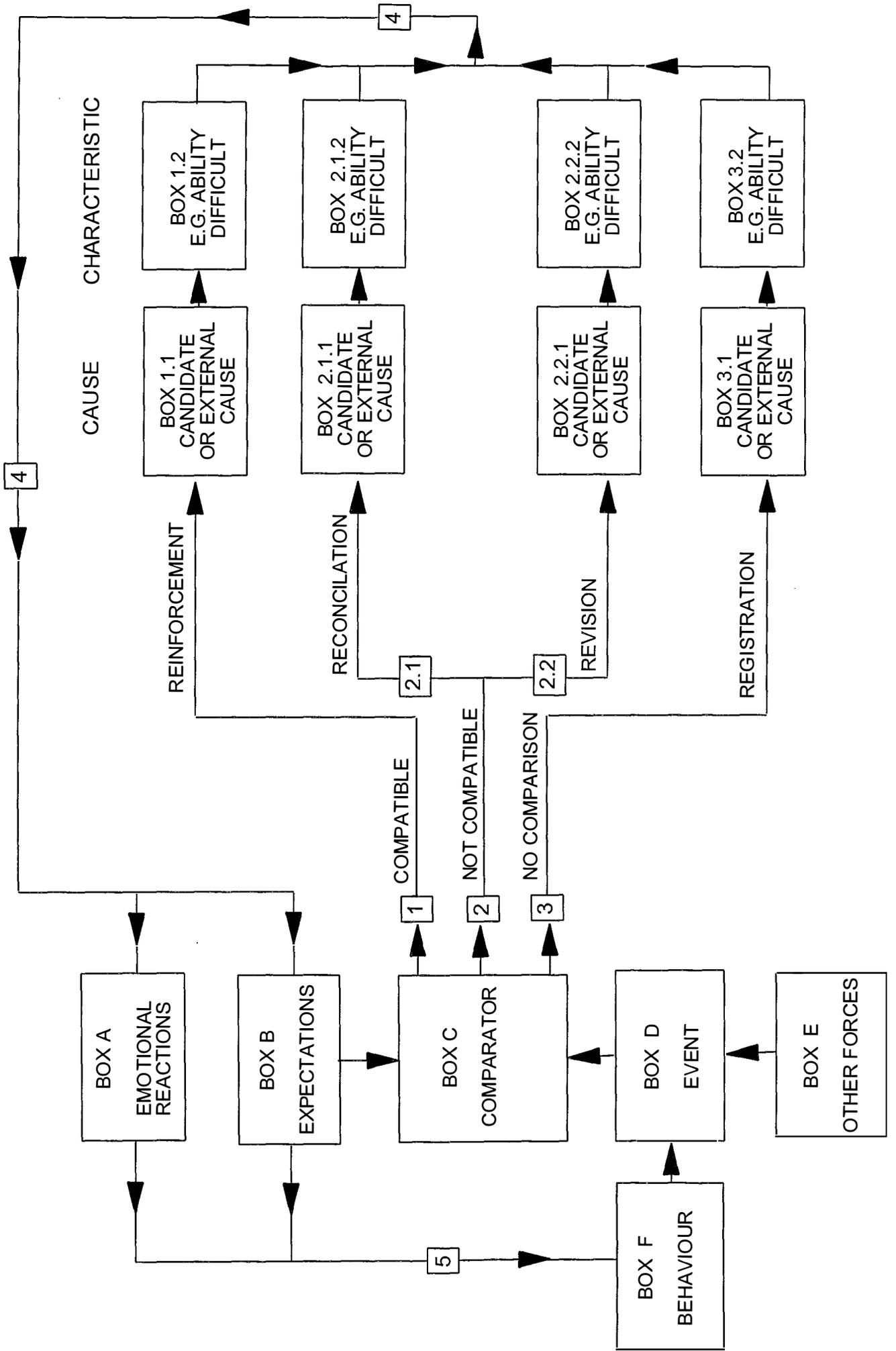
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<b>Interview Precedes Resume</b>						
Case	Event 1 <u>Interview</u>	Event 2 <u>Resume</u>	Event <u>Relationship</u>	Cognitive <u>Process</u>	Characteristic <u>Attribution</u>	Causal * <u>attribution</u>
5	Positive	Positive	Compatible	Reinforce	Highest Ability	Candidate Stable
6.	Positive	Negative	Incompatible	Revise	3 <sup>rd</sup> Highest Ability	External Unstable
7.	Negative	Positive	Incompatible	Revise	2 <sup>nd</sup> Lowest Ability	External Unstable
8.	Negative	Negative	Compatible	Reinforce	Lowest Ability	Candidate Stable

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Note. \* Causal attribution for the performance on the interview.

FIGURE 1. THE PROCESSES OF CAUSAL AND CHARACTERISTIC ATTRIBUTION IN PEAT



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