Who to Hire?

A Situated Study of Employee Selection as Routine, Practice, and Process

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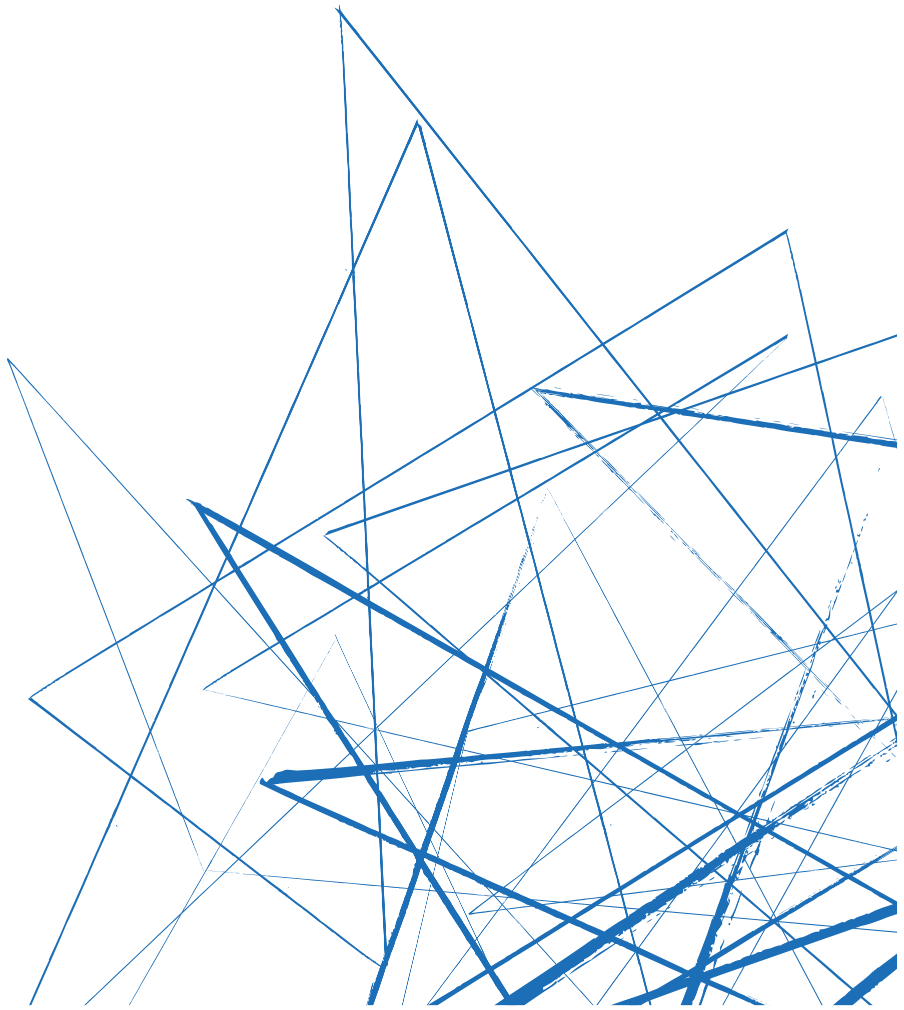

WHO TO HIRE? – A SITUATED STUDY OF EMPLOYEE SELECTION AS ROUTINE, PRACTICE, AND PROCESS

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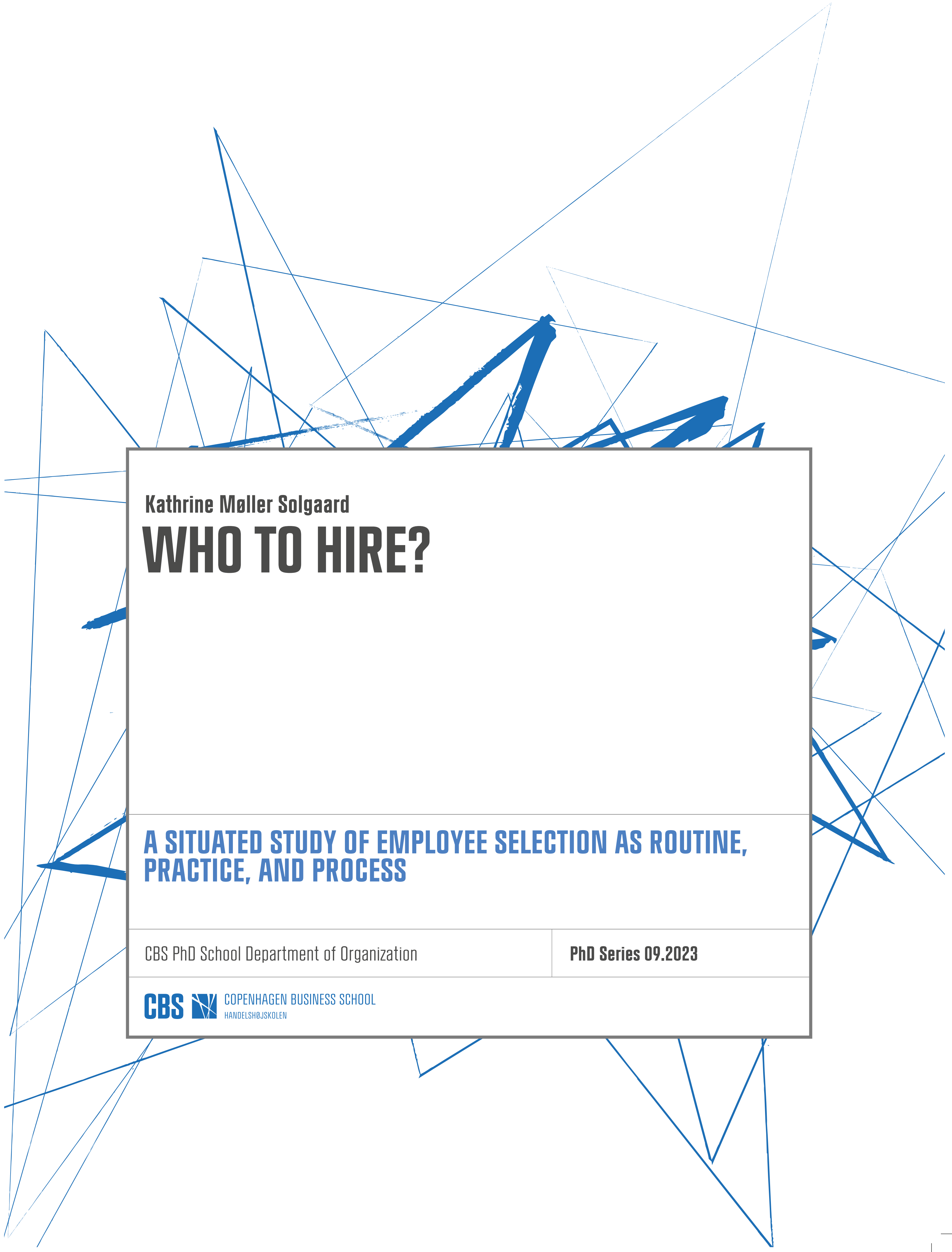

Kathrine Møller Solgaard

WHO TO HIRE?

A SITUATED STUDY OF EMPLOYEE SELECTION AS ROUTINE, PRACTICE, AND PROCESS

CBS PhD School Department of Organization

PhD Series 09.2023

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HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

Who to hire?

A situated study of employee selection as routine, practice, and process

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Kathrine Møller Solgaard,
København NV, December 2022

Abstract

This dissertation examines how employee selection practices are mediated by ideational and material tools based on an ethnographic study across multiple organizations. Prior research has demonstrated that employee selectors rarely adopt the "best practice" approach established by psychometric research. Yet little is known about why selectors refrain from following research-based recommendations, or how they conduct employee selection instead. With this analytical tension as a backdrop, the dissertation adopts a practice-based approach to pursue the following research question: *How do ideational and material tools mediate the performance of employee selection?* The dissertation comprises three papers conceptualizing employee selection as routine, practice, and process, respectively, to investigate how the actions of selectors are mediated by different cultural means.

The first paper advances an understanding of employee selection as a supra-organizational routine characterized by competing pressures for standardization and flexibility. The paper draws on the full data set and examines how selectors handle competing demands for standardized best practice and situational flexibility in performing hiring routines. The findings suggest that to enable flexibility, selectors nurture routine multiplicity by invoking and reframing the overarching ideal of merit-based selection. Based on these findings, the paper theorizes how competing demands can be handled by drawing on a repertoire of ostensive patterns that individually handle the demand for standardization but collectively provide flexibility. This study contributes to the overall dissertation by examining how employee selection practice is mediated by the meritocratic ideal.

The second paper provides new insight into how the situated performance of employee selection practices is mediated by the use of personality tests. The paper explores the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality tests by analyzing a test-based dialogue from a case study in a Danish trade union that declaredly uses personality tests for dialogue. Through an affirmative critique the paper examines the interplay between coexisting framings of ordering and disordering in personality testing. The findings suggest that the dialogical framing has a constitutive potential because it creates a productive tension from where new

practices emerge that may be cultivated as new local standards. These new practices may help overcome the prevailing meritocratic and disciplinary issues inherent in personality testing.

The third paper advances a temporal understanding of employee selection. The study is based on longitudinal process data from a hiring process in a Danish municipality and adopts a temporal sensemaking approach to study how selection criteria mediate employee selection processes. The study provides insight into how selectors' search for temporal sensemaking organizes the emergence of criteria, which in turn give shape to the unfolding selection process. Based on the findings, the paper theorizes selection criteria as temporal sensemaking devices that facilitate progress towards selection and deselection of candidates.

Together, the three studies show that the ideational and material tools carry with them a "scientific rationality" that may challenge the situated enactments of employee selection. The scientific rationality inherent in selection ideals, tools, and criteria tends to challenge the progression towards selection decisions. To keep the pace and ensure the progress that the practice of employee selection requires, selectors creatively use and harness the mediatory tools. Based on these findings, the dissertation argues that the constraints imposed by the mediatory tools also provide impetus for the emergence of new selection performances. Precisely because the scientific rationality inherent in the mediatory tools becomes an obstacle to the situated performance of employee selection, the same mediatory tools also induce creative movements to overcome the obstacles – creative movements with the potential to be cultivated over time as new selection practices.

Cumulatively, the dissertation contributes to employee selection literature in primarily two ways. First, by conducting an ethnographic study of how employee selection unfolds in situ, the dissertation responds to several calls for studies that consider the entire hiring process to examine the situated use of selection criteria and selection tools. Second, by conceptualizing employee selection as both routine, practice, and process, the dissertation extends the emerging social constructionist and processual views of employee selection.

The findings of the dissertation also have implications for practice. First, the findings highlight the importance of selectors acquiring a rich repertoire of ways to approach employee selection in order to cultivate flexibility. Second, the findings invite for discussions about whether and when it is meaningful to pursuit the scientific rationality in the performance of employee selection. Third, the dissertation argues that decisions about which employee selection methods and tools to use should be based on not only considerations of validity and utility, but also ethical considerations of marginalization and societal consequences.

Dansk resumé

På baggrund af et etnografisk studie på tværs af flere organisationer undersøger denne afhandling, hvordan medarbejderudvælgelsespraksis er formidlet af ideationelle og materielle værktøjer. Tidligere forskning har demonstreret, at personaleudvælgere sjældent anvender den "best practice" tilgang, der er etableret af psykometrisk forskning. På trods af dette ved man ikke meget om, hvorfor medarbejderudvælgere undlader at følge de forskningsbaserede anbefalinger, eller hvordan de i stedet udfører medarbejder-udvælgelse. Med denne analytiske spænding som baggrund anvender afhandlingen en praksisbaseret tilgang til at undersøge følgende forskningsspørgsmål: *Hvordan er medarbejderudvælgelse formidlet af ideationelle og materielle værktøjer?* Afhandlingen rummer tre artikler, der konceptualiserer medarbejderudvælgelse som henholdsvis rutine, praksis og proces for at undersøge, hvordan medarbejderudvælgeres handlinger er formidlet af forskellige kulturelle midler.

Den første artikel udvikler en forståelse af medarbejderudvælgelse som en supra-organisatorisk rutine præget af konkurrerende pres for standardisering og fleksibilitet. Artiklen trækker på det fulde datasæt og undersøger, hvordan medarbejderudvælgere håndterer konkurrerende krav om standardiseret best practice og situationsbestemt fleksibilitet i udførelsen af ansættelsesrutiner. Resultaterne indikerer, at for at muliggøre fleksibilitet, så dyrker medarbejderudvælgerne rutinemangfoldighed ved at påkalde og omformulere det overordnede ideal om meritbaseret udvælgelse. På baggrund af disse fund teoretiserer jeg, hvordan konkurrerende krav kan håndteres ved at trække på et repertoire af idealmønstre ("ostensive patterns"), der alle hver især håndterer kravet om standardisering, men tilsammen giver fleksibilitet. Dette studie bidrager til den samlede afhandling ved at undersøge, hvordan medarbejderudvælgelsespraksis formidles af det meritokratiske ideal.

Den anden artikel giver ny indsigt i, hvordan den situerede udførelse af medarbejder-udvælgelsespraksis formidles af anvendelsen af personlighedstests. I artiklen udforskes potentialerne ved en dialogisk genfremstilling af anvendelsen af personlighedstests ved at analysere en testbaseret dialog fra et casestudie i en dansk

fagforening, der erklæret bruger personlighedstest til dialog. Gennem en affirmativ kritik undersøger artiklen samspillet mellem sameksisterende rammesætninger af orden og uorden i personlighedstestning. Resultaterne indikerer, at den dialogiske ramme har et konstitutivt potentiale, fordi den skaber en produktiv spænding, hvorfra nye praksisser opstår, der kan dyrkes som nye lokale standarder. Disse nye praksisser kan hjælpe med at overvinde de fremherskende meritokratiske og disciplinære problemer, som er iboende i personlighedstestning.

Den tredje artikel udvikler en temporal forståelse af medarbejderudvælgelse. Undersøgelsen er baseret på longitudinelle procesdata fra en ansættelsesproces i en dansk kommune og anvender en temporal meningsskabelsestilgang til at undersøge, hvordan udvælgelseskriterier formidler medarbejderudvælgelsesprocesser. Undersøgelsen giver indsigt i, hvordan medarbejderudvælgeres søgen efter temporal meningsskabelse organiserer fremkomsten af kriterier, som igen giver form til hvordan udvælgelses-processen udfolder sig. Baseret på resultaterne teoretiserer artiklen udvælgelseskriterier som temporale meningsskabelsesredskaber, der faciliterer udvikling hen imod udvælgelse og fravalg af kandidater.

Tilsammen viser de tre undersøgelser, at de ideationelle og materielle værktøjer indebærer en "videnskabelig rationalitet", der kan udfordre de situerede udførelser af medarbejderudvælgelse. Den videnskabelige rationalitet, der er iboende i selektions-idealer, -værktøjer og -kriterier, har en tendens til at udfordre udviklingen hen imod udvælgelsesbeslutninger. For at holde tempoet og sikre de fremskridt, som medarbejderudvælgelsespraksisser kræver, bruger og udnytter medarbejderudvælgere de formidlende værktøjer kreativt. Baseret på disse resultater argumenteres der i afhandlingen for, at de begrænsninger, som de formidlende værktøjer pålægger praksis, også giver impulser til fremkomsten af nye udvælgelsesfremstillinger. Netop fordi den videnskabelige rationalitet, der ligger i de formidlende værktøjer, bliver en hindring for den situerede udførelse af medarbejderudvælgelse, inducerer de samme formidlende værktøjer også kreative bevægelser for at overvinde hindringerne – kreative bevægelser med potentiale for over tid at blive kultiveret som nye udvælgelsespraksisser.

Kumulativt bidrager afhandlingen til medarbejderudvælgelseslitteraturen på primært to måder. For det første, ved at udføre en etnografisk undersøgelse af, hvordan medarbejderudvælgelse udfolder sig in situ, responderer afhandlingen på adskillige opfordringer til undersøgelser, der forholder sig til hele ansættelsesprocessen for at undersøge den situerede brug af udvælgelseskriterier og udvælgelsesværktøjer. For det andet, ved at konceptualisere medarbejderudvælgelse både som rutine, praksis og proces, udvider afhandlingen de emergerende socialkonstruktionistiske og processuelle syn på medarbejderudvælgelse.

Afhandlingens resultater har også implikationer for praksis. For det første understreger resultaterne vigtigheden af, at medarbejderudvælgere tilegner sig et rigt repertoire af måder at gribe medarbejderudvælgelse an på for derved at kultivere fleksibilitet. For det andet inviterer resultaterne til diskussioner om, hvorvidt og hvornår det er meningsfuldt at forfølge en videnskabelige rationalitet i udførelsen af medarbejderudvælgelse. For det tredje argumenteres der i afhandlingen for, at beslutninger om, hvilke medarbejder-udvælgelsesmetoder og -værktøjer, der skal anvendes, ikke kun bør baseres på overvejelser om validitet og utilitet, men også etiske overvejelser om marginalisering og samfundsmæssige konsekvenser.

Preface

This dissertation is paper-based and comprises three empirical papers that have been either submitted to or published in peer-reviewed academic journals.

The first paper (chapter 5), **“From best practice to coexisting hiring routines: Harnessing the problematic meritocratic ideal”**, is single authored. The paper has been submitted to *Organization Science* and awaits critical review. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the SCANCOR seminar series, Stanford University (2021), and at my second work-in-progress seminar, Copenhagen Business School (2022). I have furthermore received three friendly reviews on earlier versions of the paper (2022).

The second paper (chapter 6), **“The potentials of a dialogical reframing of personality testing in hiring”**, is coauthored by Professor Morten Nissen, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. The paper has been published in *International Review of Theoretical Psychologies* (2021, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 104-122). Earlier versions of the paper have been presented at a paper development seminar organized by Culture and Organization in Copenhagen (2019); at the International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) conference (2019); and at Winter Games organized by Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School (2020).

The third paper (chapter 7), **“Moving targets: Criteria as temporal sensemaking devices in employee selection”**, is coauthored by Postdoctoral fellow Jonathan Feddersen, Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, and Associate Professor Iben Sandal Stjerne, Engineering Technology, Technical University of Denmark. The paper has been submitted to *Human Relations* and awaits critical review. Earlier versions of the paper have been presented at the Organization Theory (OT) Publishing seminars series, Copenhagen Business School (2019), and at Summer Games organized by Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School (2022). An earlier version of the paper was accepted for the 36th EGOS Colloquium in Hamburg (2020), but due to the COVID-19 pandemic I had to cancel my participation.

A few practical notes. The empirical papers (chapter 5-7) are rounded off with individual reference lists, whereas the references from the remaining chapters (the framework) are collected in a reference list at the end of the dissertation. Please note that when I refer to the single-authored first paper, I use singular personal pronouns, whereas I use the plural form when I refer to the second and third papers that are both coauthored. A final note is that the three papers have been edited to comply with the respective journal guidelines and therefore differ in their formatting and referencing style.

1. Introduction

Employee selection as mediated action

> I think she is very calm and very pleasant but, well, the test can confirm that. And our members will appreciate that too. I would just like if the test could indicate how she would feel about the career change. Whether it would be overwhelming in any way. I find it a little hard to imagine that she will be overwhelmed by it, but maybe. Because it is maybe more [demanding] to make that change than she, herself, thinks. I mean, even if you are busy in a ministry, I imagine that… Well, you don't have that pressure from members. I am aware that the Minister and all sorts of other people will say that now one thing must happen, and then the other, and the third, and fourth. I just imagine that it is something else when you stand with people who say: "My life is in your hands" almost, right? "Fix it now!" I don't know, but the test can maybe reveal it. I think, let's give her a test.
>
> (Hiring manager during evaluation meeting, Danish trade union, January 2019)

When employee selectors are trying to decide who to hire, they find themselves in a complex and challenging situation. Not only are they trying to figure out what the job is like and what the applicants are like, but they are also trying to imagine a shared future between the two to explore whether the person will fit the job position. Now add to this that the projected future fit is not limited to dealing with the person and the job, but also how the person will fit in with their new colleagues, team, managers, department, and organization. Both in relation to professional skills and on a more personal or value-based level. Now add that selectors often must select or deselect a job candidate based on a motivation letter, a résumé, maybe a personality test, and, say, two 30-minutes job interviews. And in addition, it is rarely just one selector who selects or deselects the candidates. Typically, it is a negotiation process between at least two people and often more. To reach a selection decision the selectors must be able to collectively envision an agreeable fit between a candidate and the organization, despite their perhaps divergent perceptions of the candidate and the organizational needs based on their own personal trajectories. Now add that the selectors want to hire someone who will not only fit in now, but also in the years to come. Starting to feel overwhelmed? Maybe? If not, then add that people change, organizations change, jobs change, people change their jobs, organizations change people, and so on and so forth.

When we start thinking about all the elements and processes involved in employee selection, we quickly find ourselves struggling to keep our head above water in an ocean of complexity. The introductory quote I have selected for my dissertation is by no means exceptional. On the contrary, I would say that it is exemplary of what usually happens during an evaluation meeting. The quote is extracted from a long conversation between two hiring managers who try to decide whether a specific candidate fits a specific job in their organization. We can see how the quoted manager makes preliminary conclusions that she hopes will be confirmed by a succeeding personality test. We hear her concerns about whether the candidate will manage to make the career change. We sense that the candidate's ability to handle stressful events is treated as an important selection criterion. We hear how she tries to imagine in what way the candidate's current job in the ministry may be stressful, and how she compares it to an imagined stressful event in the trade union. We can almost see the mental pictures in her head, when she tries to project her inconclusive version of the candidate into an anticipated future scenario in the organization to figure out, how the applicant will handle it. And we see how she again handles the ambiguity by relying on the personality test to come.

The reason why we learn about these exercises of imagination is because they are articulated in the dialogues between the selectors involved in the hiring process. To pursue their goal of merit-based selection, that is, of assessing and selecting the best candidate for the job based on merits, the selectors probe, discuss, and negotiate the emerging versions of candidates to figure out if they meet the criteria for entry. They refer to past experiences, maybe something which was mentioned in the job interview, and they reinterpret and recombine events to construct provisional versions of the candidates that they ongoingly project into an imagined future in the organization. Through these ongoing attempts of collective meaning making, the selectors construct and revise temporal connections between the candidates' pasts and the organizational future that motivate and justify a final hiring decision. The emerging temporal connections cannot be aptly described as an absolute result of objective assessment, but neither is it descriptive to say that it is purely idiosyncratic or fictive. Not just any connection will do. With the words of Mol (2002a), the emerging connection could have been "more than one and less than many" (p. 247).

There is indeed an element of creativity and idiosyncrasy in the performances of selectors. For instance, in the introductory quote, why is it the issue of career change that emerges as a central theme rather than some other issue of relevance? It seems likely that at another day with some other selectors, the negotiation would have revolved around something else. However, it is at the same time not totally random. The issue of career change emerges meaningfully from attempts to temporally connect the past and future of this specific candidate and this specific organization. And importantly, the issue of career change falls within the accepted norms of what can be discussed when evaluating a candidate. If the hiring manger wanted to discuss the candidate's height, name, or taste in music, it would probably be considered inappropriate or at least irrelevant.

To perform as a selector means to become enrolled in a social practice. It implies to accept certain norms of what is right and wrong and "involves learning how to act, how to speak (and what to say), but also how to feel, what to expect, and what things mean" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 5). According to Llewellyn and Spence (2009), who have studied the practice of conducting job interviews, practice is a members' phenomenon. As members, selectors orient to the "distinctive purposes, entitlements, presuppositions, identities and definitions of acceptable conduct" (Llewellyn & Spence, 2009, p. 1419) in real time interaction during employee selection. This also means that when the hiring manager in the quote assumes the candidate's past experiences to be important or expects that the test will provide some crucial answers, it is "neither mindless repetition nor complete invention" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 5). Selection is indeed an example of a routinized, social practice that each selector both "carries" and "carries out" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 4). That is, selectors both carry the heritage of the social practice of selecting new employees, all while they carry out the selection process with initiative and as a creative and individual performance.

About employee selection

A version of “our people are our most valuable asset” is a well-rehearsed corporate saying, often uttered along with a reference to the rise of knowledge-based work (Bryan et al., 2006; Guthridge et al., 2008). In scholarly writings, effective recruitment and selection processes are broadly recognized as essential in achieving an engaged workforce, competitive advantage, and organizational success (Carless, 2009; Ployhart, 2006; Risavy & Hausdorf, 2011; Sangeetha, 2010). There is no doubt that organizations struggle to attract and select the most talented and suitable candidates for given job positions.

More than twenty years ago McKinsey conducted a yearlong study with the now famous title, “The War for Talent”, based on which they emphasized the importance of recruitment, selection, and retention of top performers (Chambers et al., 1998). Ten years later, they published a follow-up report in which they added the importance of the so-called “B players” (Guthridge et al., 2008), however reiterating that “the war for talent never ended” and “if anything has become worse” (p. 49). The popularization and diffusion of the saying, “the war for talent”, not only reflects that companies now regard people as valuable assets or that falling birthrates and rising rates of retirement create a shortage of labor (Guthridge et al., 2008). It also reflects a discourse in the competition state (Cerny, 1997; Genschel & Seelkopf, 2015) in which companies abdicate much of the responsibility for educating and developing employees. Instead, they search for “plug-and-play”[1] candidates and expect the state to provide those talents, or they fight other companies in a zero-sum game as “the war for talent” inevitably implies. Whether one zooms in on the lives of the job seekers finding it difficult to gain a foothold in the labor market or on the organizations struggling to obtain the necessary specialized labor, the consequences are immense.

Yet, for the company who are hiring, for instance, a new software developer, the broader issues related to the discourse of competition, such as the marginalization of long-term unemployed, is of course not a main concern. Instead, selectors are concerned with how they can attract a pool of well-qualified candidates, and how they can select the one who will most likely perform effectively in the job. What procedures should they implement in their hiring process to reach this goal? And should they select candidate A, who they believe to be an excellent software developer, but who will probably leave the company after a few years to seek new challenges? Or should they hire candidate B, who might need some more supervision, but who they believe will be easier to retain? Or should they go for candidate C, who inspires them and could turn out to be an important figure in their mission of becoming a more innovative company? Or candidate D, who appears to be a mediocre software developer, but who they believe to have some amazing relational qualities and therefore might be able to strengthen the cross-functional collaborations in the company? How to compare candidates that in many ways are incommensurable?

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[1] I have encountered the use of this term numerous times during my fieldwork.

If the company decides to look for answers in the research literature, they will find some relatively clear and well-established guidelines provided by the dominant employee selection research paradigm, the psychometric paradigm: Identify the KSAOs (i.e., knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics) critical for effective job performance; use the most valid selection tools to assess the candidates (i.e., combine a general mental ability test with an integrity test and a structured interview); and hire the applicant with the highest scores on the critical measures (Ployhart et al., 2017; Ployhart & Schneider, 2012; Ryan & Ployhart, 2014; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Inherent in this best practice approach is the promise of merit-based selection. Both ethical concerns about ensuring equal opportunities as well as capitalist concerns about the right of employers to hire the “best” candidate to “maximize utility” (Born & Scholarios, 2017, p. 282). However, following these best practice guidelines does not take all the considerations of the selectors into account. These measures might predict job performance, but they do not tell who will become a highly valued colleague supporting other team members in their daily performance on the job; who will become a long-term employee adapting to the job requirements as they change over time; or who will do something unexpected that pushes the company beyond the status quo.

Moreover, the standardized best practice approach inevitably fuels the discourse of competition by creating an “ideal worker” who possesses certain competences (Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Nadesan, 1997; O’neil, 2016; Scholz & Ingold, 2021; Tienari et al., 2013). Research indicates that the ideal of job candidates being selected solely on their merits has probably always been a utopian myth (see e.g., Salaman & Thompson, 1978; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005). However, as the nature of work is changing, the ideal of meritocratic employee selection risks getting even more detached from how selection processes unfold. Job requirements have become increasingly hard to define, as the complexity and changeability of jobs have escalated in response to increased globalization, digitalization, and competition. As far as meritocratic selection entails that selection criteria can be predefined, the merit-based ideal of employee selection becomes more and more unattainable. If selection criteria become increasingly nebulous, for instance when they are expressed as “fit into the organization” (Bergström & Knights, 2006; Bozionelos, 2005), there is a risk that the room for discrimination expands (Derous et al., 2017; Drydakis, 2015; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013).

Given that the field of employee selection research has been exceptionally focused on providing clear recommendations for practice, it is surprising that employee selection is the subfield within HRM where there appears to be the most pronounced research-practice gap (Rynes et al., 2002). Studies have shown repeatedly that there is a dissonance between the methods that selectors prefer to use, and the most valid selection methods recommended by psychometric scholars. In fact, Smith and Abrahamsen (1992) have demonstrated that the use of selection instruments is negatively correlated with their validity. In the same vein, Rynes et al. (2002) have shown that when it comes to staffing, the beliefs of HR practitioners are “notably inconsistent with research findings” (p. 159), which also has been confirmed in a more recent study (Fisher et al., 2021). These studies refer to the well-established research findings of the psychometric paradigm, such as the usefulness of intelligence as a predictor of job performance. Thus, despite the clear best practice guidelines provided by the psychometric paradigm, there seems to be a disconnect between what selectors do and what the dominant paradigm has established as ideal practice.

The reason *why* selectors rarely use the methods that psychometric research, and the HRM literature more broadly, recommend is less clear. Most scholars point a finger at practitioners when accounting for the divide, explaining it as a knowledge gap (Fisher et al., 2021; Rynes et al., 2002) or a knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer & Sutton 2000). Highhouse (2008) accuses practitioners of being *stubborn* and relying too much on their intuition, whereas others suggest that practitioners are satisfied with the status quo (Gill, 2018), or that practitioners distrust scientific research and perceive some of the research findings as self-threatening (Rynes et al., 2018).

However, there may be good reasons to also consider the research side of the equation. Social process scholars who take a social psychological view of employee selection have argued that the problem may as well have its origins in the psychometric research paradigm itself (de Wolff, 1993; Herriot & Anderson, 1997; Herriot, 1993; McCourt, 1999). These scholars problematize that psychometric research has refrained from addressing the issue of employee selection more holistically than as the prediction of individual job performance. The psychometric paradigm neglects that employee selection is always embedded in, and enacted through, a context. There are often stakeholders with diverging interests involved in employee selection and a number of demands, in addition to the prediction of job performance, must be met during selection (Roe, 2017). Rather than attributing the origin of the research-practice gap to the "unknowing" or "stubborn" practitioners, another way to approach the issue of dissonance between favored and valid selection methods is to consider that practitioners indeed may have some *good reasons* to perform selection in other ways than what research has established as best practice. The universalist "one-size-fits-all" model may not fit all, after all, and maybe the evolving employment relation is better facilitated by means other than what psychometric research suggests.

Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) argue that the reason why many theories are not relevant to practice is that they fail to grasp the logic of practice:

> [S]cientific rationality leads researchers to impose a representational logic on practice that conceals the logic underlying practice: the meaningful relational totality in which practitioners are involved is neglected in favor of focusing on discrete entities with pregiven properties, the situational nature of the dilemmas practitioners face is underestimated in

> preference of generic propositional statements, and time as experienced by practitioners is excluded from contingency models. (p. 342)

Following Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), the scientific rationality of the psychometric paradigm assumes that selectors face a world consisting of discrete entities whose pregiven features can be assessed and represented by using scientifically validated methods. However, if we impose this representational logic on practice, we neglect "the meaningful relational totality in which practitioners are involved" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p. 342). What constitutes the logic of practice is the fundamental "entwinement of ourselves, others, and things in a relational whole" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p. 345). Selectors are not "acting like an input–output machine" (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014, p. 384), but they are entwined with other stakeholders, the history of the HRM profession, the meritocratic ideal of employee selection, the available selection tools, the current situation of the specific hiring organization, and so on. Thus, to approach bridging the research-practice gap in employee selection, we need to develop theory that attempts to capture the logic of practice.

Indeed, employee selection research is a field in which the dominance of the scientific rationality framework has led to a neglect of the meaningful relational totality in which practitioners are involved. Therefore, it is not only the question of why selectors deviate from best practice that remains unclear, but also the question of how selectors practice employee selection instead. Only a handful of studies have used in-depth qualitative methods to investigate how employee selection is practiced. I will elaborate on these "in-practice" studies in the literature review in the next chapter, but for now I will limit myself to highlighting that these studies tell a very interesting and different story than what psychometric research recommends. For example, that intuition (Miles & Sadler-Smith, 2014) and aesthetic experience (Stjerne, 2018) are essential in decision-making, and that psychometric "objective facts" are often mobilized to meet standards of accountability and justify intuitive selection decisions (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Silverman & Jones, 1973, 1976).

The few in-practice studies have provided crucial empirical insight into how selection decisions are accomplished in employee selection and, importantly, they have further developed a social constructionist and processual view of employee selection (see Dachler, 1989; Ramsay & Scholarios, 1999). Yet, many important questions remain unanswered. Overall, we have limited insight into the epistemology of selection practice. That is, how knowledge is established, negotiated, contested, and mobilized during employee selection practices. With the introductory quote in mind, it seems likely that assessment tools and selection criteria play a key role in how selectors negotiate and establish knowledge to advance towards hiring decisions. Bolander and Sandberg (2013) have suggested that selectors use tools and criteria as sensemaking devices but, as they conclude, more research is needed to fully understand the role of different tools. In addition, if selection tools and criteria are used as sensemaking devices, what role does the ideal of objective, merit-based selection then play in hiring processes?

Research questions

This dissertation builds on the emerging social constructionist and processual view of employee selection and aims at addressing the analytical tension of the research-practice gap by inquiring into the epistemology of selection practice (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Schön, 1983). To do so, I adopt a practice theoretical approach. According to Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015), "practice theory has the potential to bring OS [organization studies] scholars closer to understanding how organizational practices are constituted and, thus, being able to developing theories more relevant to organizational practitioners" (p. 194). Thus, a practice lens allows me to inquire into the epistemology of practice to build more practice-relevant theory.

Adopting a practice-based approach implies viewing phenomena as existing in a mutually constitutive relationship to each other (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Furthermore, the interaction between an actor and the world is always assumed to be mediated by some cultural means (Miettinen et al., 2009; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005). Practices are always carried out through, and made possible by, a wide range of cultural tools, artifacts, symbols, and signs (Nicolini, 2013). Norms, culture, and institutions influence the situated actions of actors through mediation, all while the situated actions (re)produce and potentially transform these social regularities (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Against this background, this dissertation assumes that mediators play a key role in understanding how employee selection is practiced and why practice apparently deviates from what the research prescribes. To pursue my research interest, I ask the following overarching research question: *How do ideational and material tools mediate the performance of employee selection?*

Some clarification of the terms used in the research question is warranted. Let me start from the back. This dissertation seeks to examine the performance of *employee selection*, that is, the situated activities that organizational actors perform to assess and select new employees. In Denmark, organizational actors typically refer to the entire process of attracting, assessing, and selecting new employees as "recruitment". In the research literature, however, "recruitment" usually refers more narrowly to an "organization's collective efforts to identify, attract, and influence the job choices of competent applicants" (Ployhart, 2006, p. 869). In this dissertation I am not concerned with the organizational efforts to attract a pool of applicants, but with how knowledge is established and mobilized to select and deselect applicants. Thus, when I later in this dissertation include classical recruitment activities in my analyses, such as job advertisements, I do it to examine the articulated shared understandings of the job and organization, and not to explore the advertisement's ability to recruit candidates. Although I describe my research object as "employee selection", I sometimes use the more general term, "hiring". When I use "hiring", it is typically to highlight something more general about the subject or the processes I have observed, while downplaying the focus I otherwise have on selection, specifically.

I would like to make a brief note about the people who perform employee selection before I continue with the first part of the research question. Many organizational actors with different titles are involved in employee selection processes, for example, recruiters, talent acquisition partners, hiring managers, employees forming a hiring committee, HR consultants, and so on and so forth. In this dissertation, it has not been my agenda to study a specific group of selectors. Instead, I assume that anyone who performs employee selection is enrolled in the social practice of employee selection and is therefore of interest to this study. I typically refer to them as "selectors", but in some contexts I prefer to use "practitioners", "organizational actors", or "hiring managers", to name just a few. In short, my use of different terms, all referring to the actors who carry out employee selection, is pragmatic, with the aim of facilitating the reader's understanding.

Now, let me turn to the first part of the research question, that is, *the ideational and material tools that mediate* selection practice. As already mentioned, the concept of "mediated action" asserts that interactions between actors and their environment are always mediated by cultural means, such as tools and signs (Miettinen et al., 2009). That action is mediated means that all practices are performed through, made possible by, as well as constrained by some "ideational" or "material" tools that are part of our cultural heritage (Nicolini, 2013, p. 106). The three papers of this dissertation study different mediatory tools through different theoretical lenses. The three papers therefore provide complementary insights into the same overarching problem of mediated action in employee selection practices. Table 1 provides an overview of the three papers and comprises the research questions, the primary mediatory tools that the papers examine, and the overall theoretical lenses. I will elaborate on these aspects in the next few chapters.

Table 1. Overview of research questions and operationalizations of the overarching research question

	Research questions	Mediatory tools and theoretical lenses
Paper 1	How do selectors use coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns to handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility in performing hiring routines?	**Ideal:** The meritocratic ideal as mediating action Employee selection as a **routine**
Paper 2	What are the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection practices?	**Tool:** The personality test as mediating action Employee selection as a **practice**
Paper 3	How do selection criteria support temporal sensemaking processes and, thereby, selection and deselection of candidates?	**Criteria:** The selection criteria as mediating action Employee selection as a **process**

Research context and empirical materials

The three empirical papers that comprise the dissertation draw on ethnographic data from multiple organizations. The data have allowed me to make an in-depth study of the performance of employee selection as it naturally unfolds in situ across different organizations. Overall, the fieldwork has been three-sided.

First, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork for 18 months in an HR consultancy firm, in which I was employed from 2018-2022 as an industrial PhD fellow. I was affiliated with the recruitment team and had my desk in a shared office space with them. As an employee, I have had easy access to observe, listen to, and talk to the recruiters about their day-to-day work, and it has allowed me to present and discuss my ideas and preliminary findings with practitioners throughout the research process. These numerous interactions and the resulting empirical materials have been a key source to gaining insight into the practices of employee selection. The fieldwork has allowed me to explore selection practices from the selectors' point of view; the ideals selectors try to live up to; the tools and methods they employ to assess and select candidates; the compromises they pragmatically make and their reasons for making them; and the assumptions and logics embedded in selection practices.

Second, I have generated process data by studying hiring processes in situ in three different Danish organizations: A municipality, a trade union, and a private company. In each of the three organizations, I have studied an entire hiring process as it unfolded from beginning to end. I have observed screening meetings, preparation meetings, job interviews, personality test feedback sessions, evaluation meetings, final decision meetings, and I have made follow-up interviews with the involved actors. These longitudinal data have allowed me to examine how selection criteria are temporally organized and support the unfolding selection decisions over time throughout employee selection processes.

Third, I have generated data by conducting in-depth expert interviews with recruiters from different organizations. The interviews contain both detailed descriptions of specific employee selection performances and more general reflections on employee selection practices and the rationales inherent in these practices.

I will elaborate on the research design, methods, and cases when I present my methodology in chapter 4.

Structure of the dissertation

After this introduction, I will present a review of the employee selection literature in **chapter 2**, “Literature review: From prescribing best practice to studying employee selection in practice”. To establish the foundation of my dissertation, the literature review maps out the different research traditions in the employee selection field. I will particularly elaborate on what I refer to as the “in-practice” literature. The majority of this strand of literature understands the objects of employee assessments (e.g., knowledge, values, and personality traits) as socially constructed and examines how employee selection is carried out in practice. This is the sub-field to which my dissertation seeks to contribute. I conclude the chapter by highlighting three gaps in the literature that this dissertation seeks to address: (1) How selectors handle the inherent tension in employee selection between the ideal of standardized, objective methods and the pragmatic need for flexibility, (2) how personality tests are used in employee selection practices, and (3) what role both formal and informal criteria play in the performance of employee selection processes.

In **chapter 3**, “Theoretical framework: Selection as routine, practice, and process”, I present the theoretical perspectives that inform my research. I clarify how a practice theoretical orientation runs through all three papers and how the three theoretical lenses that I adopt in the three papers – routine dynamics, practice theory, and process studies – can be understood as related to an overall practice theoretical orientation. The aim of the chapter is to explicate how different theoretical lenses have contributed to operationalizing the question of how the performance of employee selection is enabled by, constrained by, and enacted through both material and ideational tools.

Next, I continue by presenting my methodological approach in **chapter 4**, “Methodology: Studying employee selection in practice”. In this chapter, I present my onto-epistemological position to clarify the assumptions about the relation between knowledge and reality that underpin the entire dissertation. I explain my research aim of nurturing alternative stories and show how it has shaped my methodology. The chapter furthermore provides details on the research process, methods used, data generated, ethical considerations, and analytical strategy.

Chapter 5 is the first of the three papers of the dissertation: "From best practice to coexisting hiring routines: Harnessing the problematic meritocratic ideal". The paper draws on the full data set and examines how selectors handle competing demands for standardized best practice and situational flexibility in performing hiring routines. The findings suggest that to enable flexibility, selectors nurture routine multiplicity by invoking and reframing the overarching ideal of meritocratic selection. Based on these findings, I theorize how competing demands might be handled by drawing on a repertoire of ostensive patterns that individually handle the demand for standardization but collectively provide flexibility.

Chapter 6, the second paper, has the title: "The potentials of a dialogical reframing of personality testing in hiring". The paper draws on data from a hiring process in a Danish trade union and investigates the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in employee selection practices. The study finds that the dialogical reframing nurtures the emergence of what we conceptualize as the "con-test" framing: Either as exploring the meta-competences of candidates or as co-creating embryos through joint reflections on organizational issues. Based on the findings, the paper argues that a dialogical framing provides impetus for new framings that may help overcome the prevailing meritocratic and disciplinary issues inherent in personality testing.

Chapter 7, the third paper, "Moving targets: Criteria as temporal sensemaking devices in employee selection", uses longitudinal data from a hiring process in a Danish municipality to examine the temporal role of selection criteria in employee selection processes. The study theorizes employee selection as a temporal sensemaking process in which selectors ongoingly (re)configure the relationship of past, present, and future to construct fit trajectories. We identify four sensemaking processes linking past, present, and future that result in the emergence of selection criteria. The study advances a temporal understanding of employee selection processes by demonstrating how selection criteria are crucial to temporal sensemaking.

Based on the findings, we theorize selection criteria as temporal sensemaking devices that facilitate progress towards selection and deselection of candidates.

In **chapter 8**, “Conclusions: Scientific rationality as a generous constraint”, I will summarize the findings of each of the three papers and draw the findings together to answer my overarching research question. In addition, I will outline the research contributions and suggest directions for future research, followed by some implications for practice.

2. Literature review

From prescribing best practice to studying employee selection in practice

The research field of employee selection goes back to the beginning of the 20th century (Buckley et al., 2000; Ployhart et al., 2017) and is traditionally positioned in the intersection between industrial and organizational psychology and human resource management. With its long history, employee selection is one of the most intensively studied organizational phenomena, and the number of journal articles and handbooks on the subject are indeed overwhelming. In light of this it is somewhat surprising that the topic has been studied in an unusual one-sided manner. To this day, research on employee selection continues to be a very productive research area "which, perhaps uniquely in organization studies, is dominated by a single paradigm of very long standing" (McCourt, 1999, p. 1012). Due to the dominance of what is usually referred to as the psychometric paradigm, the vast majority of literature on the topic is prescriptive and only very few explorative, interpretative, or descriptive studies of employee selection exist.

In this chapter, rather than aiming for an exhaustive review, I will map out the different research traditions in the employee selection field. This may sound counterintuitive to my description in the paragraph above, but despite the paradigm consensus in the field other research traditions do in fact exist often establishing themselves as a counter to the dominant psychometric paradigm. Some of these are recognized in the employee selection field as a relatively coherent stream of research (e.g., the "social process" approach), whereas others represent more fragmented research efforts that I have identified and grouped together in this review (e.g., the "in-practice" approach).

I have identified five streams of employee selection literature that I refer to as the *psychometric*, *strategic*, *social process*, *critical*, and *in-practice* approaches. I will give a relatively brief presentation of the first four research approaches, including their basic assumptions and main contributions to the field, to establish the foundation of my dissertation. I then continue by elaborating on the fifth stream of research; the few organizational studies that explore employee selection as it occurs and unfolds in practice, what I refer to as the "in-practice" literature. This is the subfield to which my dissertation seeks to contribute. I conclude the chapter by highlighting three gaps in the literature that this dissertation seeks to address.

The psychometric approach

Psychometric research is concerned with the objective assessment and measurement of non-observable human characteristics. The psychometric paradigm in the field of employee selection has prediction of individual job performance at its core. Historically, employee selection has been operationalized as a predictive hypothesis that links individual differences in knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) to individual outcomes such as job performance (Ployhart et al., 2017). The predictive hypothesis simply implies that you should "[h]ire those with the highest scores on measures of the KSAOs critical for effective performance on the job" (Ployhart et al., 2017, p. 291). Hence, the ultimate goal of the psychometric paradigm is to determine the predictive validity of assessment methods to identify the optimal hiring procedures (Sackett & Lievens, 2008).

The psychometric paradigm dominates the employee selection research field. In McCourt's (1999) study of paradigm diversity and consensus, he interestingly uses the psychometric paradigm of employee selection as a case of "unique consistency and duration" (p. 1023) to discuss the (dis)advantages of paradigm consensus. He describes the psychometric prescriptive model as follows:

> Selection is conceived as an exercise in prediction. On the one hand there is a job consisting of discrete tasks, such that the jobholder needs certain personal attributes to do it successfully. Both tasks and attributes are identified through job analysis. On the other hand, there are individuals who are available to do the job. Selection, then, is the application of assessment instruments – tests, interviews and so on – which will predict performance by determining which individual(s) possess the necessary attributes (the 'selection criteria') in fullest measure. (McCourt, 1999, p. 1013)

As the extract suggests, seen through the lens of the psychometric paradigm selection is first and foremost a practice of comparison and prediction through standardization. This implies some fundamental assumptions about individuals, jobs, and organizations that are questionable, and have been increasingly questioned over the years: For instance, that applicants, jobs, and organizations are relatively discrete entities that can be defined independent of each other; that organizational actors are rational decision-makers acting in a vacuum, free of power relations, politics, and self-interests; and that human behavior is predictable over time and across contexts. I will return to how some of these issues have been discussed and questioned when presenting the other streams of research. For now, the essential message is that the dominant employee selection paradigm is based on a positivist, functionalist, and rationalist tradition that, following Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), is developed within the framework of scientific rationality (for a summary, see Table 2).

One of the main advantages of the paradigm uniformity in the selection field is the incredible cumulation of studies that have made the application of meta-analysis possible (McCourt, 1999). Over the years, an ongoing cumulation of studies combined with the development of improved statistical methods have allowed scholars to establish and refine the predictive validity of the most common selection methods and tools, which has led to standardized best practice guidelines (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2016) that have spread to more practitioner-oriented handbooks as well. For instance, based on these studies it is well-established that structured job interviews should be used rather than unstructured job interviews, since the structured ones are more valid predictors of job performance. Another example is the recommendation to use General Mental Ability tests, since “g” or intelligence, is the best predictor of job performance across job types and levels (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2016).

The psychometric paradigm has historically been one-sided in the sense that it has been preoccupied with the interests of employers, positioning the job seeker as merely a passive object in the selection process. For instance, besides being concerned with the validity of selection tools in predicting individual job performance, psychometric scholars have paid a lot of attention to the practical utility for employers, that is, the monetary gain if using more valid selection methods (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2016). Over the years, however, some branches of research have emerged from the psychometric paradigm, focusing more on selection from the point of view of applicants. For instance, subfields have emerged concerned with faking and impression management (Arthur et al., 2001; Morgeson et al., 2007; Roulin et al., 2015) and applicant reactions to selection methods (Hausknecht et al., 2004; Imus & Ryan, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2017). Yet, how the applicants perceive and react to the selection process, and whether they engage in impression management, has been questions of concern primarily with the purpose of optimizing the validity and utility of selection methods, still from the perspective of employers and organizations.

Table 2. The psychometric approach

	Assumptions about applicants	Assumptions about jobs/ organizations	Key focus	Key references
Psychometric	Discrete entity with stable measurable attributes. Select the applicant with highest scores on valid measures relevant for job performance.	Discrete job tasks and organizational requirements that can be predefined through job analysis.	- Rationality - Objectivity - Reliability - Predictive validity - Utility	(Hough & Oswald, 2000; Ployhart et al., 2017; Sackett & Lievens, 2008; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2016; see also McCourt, 1999)

The strategic approach

The strategic approach to employee selection is best described as a further development or offspring of the psychometric paradigm. The approach stays within the scientific rationality framework and builds on the same assumptions about objective assessment, prediction, and standardization as the psychometric paradigm advocates. However, the strategic scholars try to adapt the prescriptive model to better fit the current state of affairs in the organizational and corporate world by integrating staffing and strategy (see Table 3).

One of the main ways these scholars problematize and develop the psychometric paradigm is by arguing that the narrow focus on individual job performance is outdated. By drawing linkages between insights from strategic human resource management and the psychometric literature on selection, scholars claim that hiring should be more concerned with firm level performance (Hausknecht & Wright, 2012). Hiring should be linked to the strategic goals of the organization, and aligned with organizational objectives, strategies, and characteristics (Phillips & Gully, 2015). Thus, the strategic scholars seek to establish a direct connection between the strategy of the company and the recruitment and selection activities and systems of the company to use hiring as a means to achieve strategic goals and create a competitive advantage (Ployhart, 2006). Staffing is reframed as connected to broader strategic HRM frameworks, and scholars aim at developing hiring systems that support growth on multiple organizational levels (Phillips & Gully, 2015; Ployhart, 2006).

The strategic scholars assert that the nature of work is changing as the organizational world undergoes increasingly rapid disruptions. Recent technological advances, increasing use of data science tools, globalization, increasingly competitive environments, rapidly changing jobs, and so on have created new challenges and changed the purpose of hiring practices (Chanda et al., 2010; Elfenbein & Sterling, 2018). Against this background, scholars argue that *strategic job analysis* that incorporates future goals of the organization in the hiring process is highly needed (Schneider & Konz, 1989; Snow & Snell, 1993; Sparrow, 1997; Williams & Dobson, 1997). Instead of hiring for replacement with a “best athlete” approach in which hiring is viewed as a line of single choices about who to hire for an individual job, the strategic approach argues for a more long-term and comprehensive view on hiring as an ongoing process in which people strategy and business strategy are aligned with the goal of growth (Elfenbein & Sterling, 2018).

Table 3. The strategic approach

	Assumptions about applicants	Assumptions about jobs/organizations	Key focus	Key references
Strategic	Employees are key assets in realizing strategic objectives. Individual job performance is of interest as far as it contributes to the organizational strategy and has an impact on firm level performance.	Organizations can rationally formulate a strategy to reach advantageous goals and translate strategic objectives into selection criteria. The composition of employee capabilities is what creates strategic value on the firm level.	- Integrating staffing and strategy - Strategic job analysis - From individual performance to organizational performance	(Chanda et al., 2010; Elfenbein & Sterling, 2018; Hausknecht & Wright, 2012; Phillips & Gully, 2015; Ployhart, 2006; Schneider & Konz, 1989; Williams & Dobson, 1997)

The social process approach

Whereas the basic assumptions underpinning the psychometric paradigm were left unquestioned by the strategic approach, the social process approach establishes itself by explicitly problematizing the fundamental assumptions of the psychometric paradigm (de Wolff, 1993; Herriot & Anderson, 1997; Herriot, 1993; McCourt, 1999). For instance, Dachler (1989) opens his conclusion with the following sentence: "We have tried to show that by questioning the implicit assumptions underlying the traditional selection models, alternative perspectives of organizations and individual differences can emerge" (p. 67). Several of the key papers representing the social process approach provide long lists of the flawed assumptions of det psychometric paradigm and describe it for instance as a "psychic prison" (Herriot & Anderson, 1997) or as "a paradigm bursting at the seams" (Herriot, 1993). Thus, it is very clear that these scholars fight for their right to provide alternative perspectives on employee selection, which underscores the difficulties of being the theoretical minority in a field of strong paradigm consensus. Whereas the origin of the psychometric and strategic streams of research are North American with roots in differential psychology, the social process approach is a European tradition that draws on social psychological theory to understand the interpersonal processes of employee selection (see Table 4).

Similar to the strategic approach, social process scholars have questioned the immense focus on individual differences and prediction of individual job performance, arguing that the predictive model is outdated and inadequate in a climate where many jobs and organizations are increasingly complex, ever-changing, and less bureaucratic than they used to be (Dachler, 1989; Herriot & Anderson, 1997; Herriot, 1993). According to de Wolff (1993), whether the best practice model of the psychometric paradigm is suitable depends on various factors, for instance on the size, resources, and priorities of the company, the number of applicants, and whether the selection criterion is known and stable. In relation to the research-practice gap, these scholars argue that practitioners probably, and for good reasons, are more concerned with the social processes of selection in an organizational context rather than the narrow focus on prediction of individual job performance (Herriot, 1993). McCourt (1999) claims that it is "likely that the neglect of non-performance factors at the individual level and performance factors at the organizational level has been detrimental to selection research, since it has meant overlooking many factors which organizations value" (p. 1022). In many hiring situations the core task is above all to facilitate a negotiation process between two parties trying to reach an agreement, rather than to predict individual job performance (de Wolff, 1993).

According to the social process scholars, selection is not an assessment of passive job applicants but it is rather a social encounter between two negotiating parties trying to establish a psychological contract that aligns mutual expectations (Anderson, 1992). The organizational entry is a reciprocal process that happens through several pre-entry and post-entry phases (Wanous, 1992). What is put at the forefront in the social process tradition is not as much the prediction of behavior than it is the facilitation of individual and organizational development and the evolving employment relationship between the two (Anderson & Ostroff, 1997; Dachler, 1989; de Wolff, 1993). Thus, where interpersonal and subjective processes are interfering biases that challenge the predictive validity in the psychometric paradigm, they are understood as important dynamics that shape the initial relationship between applicants and organizations in the social process approach.

Table 4. The social process approach

	Assumptions about applicants	Assumptions about jobs/ organizations	Key focus	Key references
Social process	Changeable subject actively negotiating and making decisions. Focus on the development of congruence between applicant and organizational expectations.	People and intersubjective processes make organizations. Selection is itself part of the developing relationship between employees and organizations.	- Interpersonal negotiation - Congruent expectations - Mutual decision-making - The relation between selection and socialization	(Anderson & Ostroff, 1997; Dachler, 1989; Derous & De Witte, 2001; Herriot, 1989, 1993, 2002; Herriot & Anderson, 1997; Wanous, 1992; de Wolff, 1993)

The critical approach

From the perspective of what I, inspired by critical management studies, refer to as the critical approach, employee selection is an exercise of disciplinary power that constitutes the individual as potentially knowable and thus manageable (Rose, 1999; Townley, 1994). Drawing on poststructuralist and often Foucauldian theorizing this stream of literature aims at disclosing the dark side of best practice employee selection (see Table 5).

Critical scholars have problematized the prescriptive model of the psychometric paradigm and emphasized the asymmetrical power relations in the hiring situation. The critical scholars criticize the prescriptive model of promoting objectivity and scientific assessment leading to an idealized standard of meritocratic selection which, however, often carries with it a flipside of discriminatory practices (Nadesan, 1997) and subjective judgment (Newton, 1994) disguised by the seemingly neutrality of its methods. These scholars argue that the standardized methods recommended by the psychometric tradition contribute to and legitimize homogenized corporate cultures, in which particular behaviors and identities are systematically privileged over others, naturalizing and depoliticizing institutional power relations that systematically exclude certain groups of people (Nadesan, 1997; O’neil, 2016). The demarcation of organizational members and non-members based on increasingly standardized methods creates the conception of an “ideal worker” possessing certain “competences”, which demands of the applicant to identify with organizational culture and internalize organizational identity ideals (Bergström & Knights, 2006; Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Roberts & Campbell, 2007). The “aura of expertise” (Cromby & Willis, 2013, p. 251) stemming from the seemingly scientific character of the selection tools is exactly what makes the psychometric methods so powerful (Hollway, 1991). To receive organizational membership applicants must objectify themselves and, thus, “rehearse the very practice of remaking the self that neoliberal governmentality demands” (Cromby & Willis, 2013, p. 252). By “measuring” competences, personality traits, preferences, and so on, the subjectivity of the individual is constituted, which is exactly how the power of human resource management is exercised (Iles & Salaman, 1995).

Table 5. The critical approach

	Assumptions about applicants	Assumptions about jobs/organizations	Key focus	Key references
Critical	HRM discourse and procedures constitute the individual as knowable and, thus, manageable. HRM methods turn the subject into an object of knowledge, normatively demanding certain competences.	Organizations are powerful. The exercise of power in selection reproduces organizational regimes of truth and has a homogenizing effect. It creates a normative “ideal worker” that applicants must conform to.	- Asymmetrical power relations - Knowledge - Expertise - Discourses - Subjectification - Discrimination	(Bergström & Knights, 2006; Cromby & Willis, 2013; Hollway, 1991; Iles & Salaman, 1995; Nadesan, 1997; Newton, 1994; Rose, 1999; Townley, 1993, 1994)

Summing up: An emerging social constructionist perspective

This chapter has until now shown how employee selection research is a field dominated by the psychometric paradigm. Furthermore, the chapter has outlined three minor and less recognized streams of selection literature. Whereas the psychometric paradigm has contributed with guidelines for best practice selection, the three other approaches have contributed with important additions, problematizations, and changes of foci. The strategic approach has connected hiring procedures with firm strategy and moved the focus from individual performance towards multilevel performance, emphasizing the importance of firm level performance. The social process approach has introduced the applicant as an active agent in the hiring process and highlighted the interpersonal exchanges and negotiations, the mutual decision-making, and the links between selection and socialization. Finally, the critical approach has shed light on the dark side of the allegedly objective methods of best practice selection and argued that increased standardization disguises and legitimizes discriminatory practices.

The social process approach and, particularly, the critical approach reject the understanding of selection decisions as purely rational and objective. Instead, they represent a move towards theorizing selection decisions as socially constructed processes, reflecting power relations and intersubjective negotiations (Iles & Salaman, 1995; Ramsay & Scholarios, 1999). From a social constructionist perspective, what selectors look for during employee selection (e.g., personality traits, values, and competences) does not refer to "real" entities that can be objectively assessed, but rather such attributes reflect continuously changing, cultural-historically derived, locally negotiated, and context-dependent meanings of what is critical for job performance (Dachler, 1989; Ramsay & Scholarios, 1999).

The social process and critical approaches are more interpretative than the psychometric and strategic approaches, but their theorizations and critiques rarely stem from empirical work that studies how employee selection is carried out in practice. Overall, the most concerning gap in the employee selection literature, is the lack of studies that seek to describe and understand how employee selection unfolds in everyday organizational life. However, the emerging social constructionist perspective has given rise to new avenues for empirical research. Many of the theoretical arguments that the social process and critical scholars have presented call for in-depth, qualitative empirical inquiry that addresses questions such as, for instance, how selection practices construct "objective truths" and selection decisions in situ. This task has been taken up by the in-practice scholars.

The in-practice approach

Whereas the above review provides a broad introduction to the field of employee selection, the following sections go into more detail about how employee selection takes place in practice. Only a handful of studies have been conducted on this subject. Yet, during the last few decades we have witnessed an increasing interest among organizational scholars in employee selection as it unfolds in situ. These scholars have further developed a social constructionist and processual view of employee selection. Yet, organizational research on the topic remains fragmented, probably because scholars tend to view recruitment and selection as the domain of HRM. Whereas each of the four streams of literature presented above has a common theoretical foundation, the in-practice studies are far more theoretically heterogenous. Instead, what these studies have in common, in addition to their focus on employee selection as socially constructed, is that they try to understand how employee selection naturally occurs and is practiced in organizations. These scholars do not develop new ideal models for best practice, but instead they aim at describing and interpreting how organizations select their new employees.

In the following, I will review the contributions of this relatively scarce body of literature to which my dissertation seeks to contribute. Please recall that this dissertation aims at understanding how selection *ideals* (paper 1), *tools* (paper 2), and *criteria* (paper 3) mediate the performance of employee selection. In accordance, I will focus on outlining the contributions of the in-practice approach in relation to these three aspects. Occasionally, I will also draw on studies that fall outside the in-practice approach if this nuances the presentation. For a comprehensive overview of the five identified research approaches, see Table 6.

The ideal of meritocratic objectivity in practice

A central theme in the in-practice studies is the ideal inherent in employee selection of unbiased, objective selection based on merits. Some studies emphasize how the meritocratic ideal turns into a question of accountability and legitimization in selection practice. For instance, early studies have shown that selectors, in accordance with the norm of scientific selection, operate with neutral procedures on the surface,

Table 6. A comprehensive overview of the employee selection research field

	Assumptions about applicants	Assumptions about jobs/organizations	Key focus	Key references
Psychometric	Discrete entity with stable measurable attributes. Select the applicant with highest scores on valid measures relevant for job performance.	Discrete job tasks and organizational requirements that can be predefined through job analysis.	- rationality - objectivity - reliability - predictive validity - utility	(Hough & Oswald, 2000; Ployhart et al., 2017; Sackett & Lievens, 2008; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2016; see also McCourt, 1999)
Strategic	Employees are key assets in realizing strategic objectives. Individual job performance is of interest as far as it contributes to the organizational strategy and has an impact on firm level performance.	Organizations can rationally formulate a strategy to reach advantageous goals and translate strategic objectives into selection criteria. The composition of employee capabilities is what creates strategic value on the firm level.	- integrating staffing and strategy - strategic job analysis - from individual performance to organizational performance	(Chanda et al., 2010; Elfenbein & Sterling, 2018; Hausknecht & Wright, 2012; Phillips & Gully, 2015; Ployhart, 2006; Schneider & Konz, 1989; Williams & Dobson, 1997)
Social process	Changeable subject actively negotiating and making decisions. Focus on the development of congruence between applicant and organizational expectations.	People and intersubjective processes make organizations. Selection is itself part of the developing relationship between employees and organizations.	- interpersonal negotiation - congruent expectations - mutual decision-making - the relation between selection and socialization	(Anderson & Ostroff, 1997; Dachler, 1989; Derous & De Witte, 2001; Herriot, 1989, 1993, 2002; Herriot & Anderson, 1997; Wanous, 1992; de Wolff, 1993)
Critical	HRM discourse and procedures constitute the individual as knowable and, thus, manageable. HRM methods turn the subject into an object of knowledge, normatively demanding certain competences.	Organizations are powerful. The exercise of power in selection reproduces organizational regimes of truth and has a homogenizing effect. It creates a normative "ideal worker", that applicants must conform to.	- asymmetrical power relations - knowledge - expertise - discourses - subjectification - discrimination	(Bergström & Knights, 2006; Cromby & Willis, 2013; Hollway, 1991; Iles & Salaman, 1995; Nadesan, 1997; Newton, 1994; Rose, 1999; Townley, 1993, 1994)
In-practice	To understand the role of the applicant, it is necessary to explore how the applicant interact with the hiring organization, selection methods, tools etc. during the selection process.	To understand the role of jobs and organizations in selection, researchers should explore how they are articulated in practice and what role they play in the selection process.	- the enactment of selection in practice - decision-making processes as they occur in practice - the specific organizational context	(Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Roberts & Campbell, 2007; Klingenberg & Pelletier, 2019; Salaman & Thompson, 1978; Silverman & Jones, 1976; Stjerne, 2018)

while actually resorting to interpretations based on cultural norms of the ruling class in their evaluations (Salaman & Thompson, 1978). In the same vein, Silverman & Jones (1973, 1976) and, more recently, Roberts & Campbell (2007) have shown that selectors make snap decisions, but then subsequently work to provide rational reasons to produce convincing accounts that justify their decisions. These results have been nuanced by Bolander & Sandberg (2013) who find no general rule about whether a constructed version of a candidate or the decision about a candidate is produced first. Instead, they argue that selectors consider versions of candidates and decisions simultaneously and try to make them meaningfully consistent with each other in the light of available standards of accountability. The view that objectivity (e.g., expressed as a certain version of a candidate) is entangled with, and enacted through, practice is furthered in a recent study by Klingenberg and Pelletier (2019). They study the practice of selecting for values in nursing and find that personal values are assigned to applicants as a result of negotiation, but that this translation work is omitted from final records. By such, objectivity is established in practice as values are made to appear a property of applicants rather than emerging from negotiations. Taken together, these studies suggest that "objective facts" are constructed by using standardized "neutral" methods, and that such facts are mobilized to meet standards of accountability and justify more intuitive selection decisions.

Beyond findings related to justification and accountability, scholars have also paid attention to how employee selection may be an arena for other things than meritocratic selection. As an example, Campbell and Roberts (2007) argue that the interview is a ritual which is as much about (re)producing the institution as it is about the fair and effective selection of candidates. Bozionelos (2005), as another example, presents a case in which employee selection becomes a political arena for organizational power networks in which decisions are based on political motives rather than on merit. He suggests that selection decision can be viewed as forming a continuum where purely rational and merit-based processes fall on the one end of the continuum and purely political processes fall on the other.

A last handful of studies are questioning whether the scientific ideals of standardized, objective methods and best practice selection is in fact the best in practice and worth striving for in all contexts. For instance, studies have shown that intuition

(Miles & Sadler-Smith, 2014) and aesthetic experience (Stjerne, 2018) are crucial in making selection decisions. These scholars argue that researchers should contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of intuition and aesthetics in decision-making, rather than just discounting these aspects based on the assumption that they threaten merit-based selection. Furthermore, studies have shown that the standardized best practice model as defined by the psychometric literature, may be inadequate in a variety of contexts, for instance in the hotel sector (Lockyer & Scholarios, 2004), construction sector (Lockyer & Scholarios, 2007), and body art sector (Timming, 2011). Taken together, these studies indicate that there is an inherent tension in employee selection between the ideals of formalization and objectivity on the one hand, and the need for flexible adaptation to the specific context on the other hand.

Selection methods and tools in practice

Not surprising given that the job interview is a widely used selection method, a lot of the in-practice studies have focused on the dynamics of the job interview, often in relation to identity, discourse, and power. For instance, Van De Mieroop and Schnurr (2018) have explored the role of humor as a discursive strategy in job interviews. Their findings suggest that candidates use humor to claim co-membership and construct shared identities with interviewers. As another example, Campbell and Roberts (2007) and Roberts and Campbell (2007) examined the institutionalized rules of job interview interaction. They found that the unwritten rules of job interviews tend to disadvantage applicants born abroad, who often suffer a *linguistic penalty* for not knowing the narrative requirements of the interview. Successful candidates, on the other hand, effectively synthesize personal and institutional discourses and build a coherent narrative which is easy for assessors to process. Scheuer (2001) similarly found that successful candidates synthesized what he refers to as professional and lifeworld discourses, and that the communicative style and social background of candidates play a crucial role. Taken together, this branch of studies (see also Bergström & Knights, 2006; Bozionelos, 2005; Button, 1987; Llewellyn, 2010; Van De Mieroop, 2019) have provided insights into the institutionalized rules of the job interview, how the outcome of job interviews is a discursive interactional achievement, and how the interview may serve as a political arena of power games or exclude applicants with foreign or unprivileged backgrounds.

Only a few in-practice studies have investigated other employee selection methods and tools than the job interview, and most often this has not been the primary agenda of these studies. For instance, several scholars have explored the role of written records on assessment sheets as part of their studies. Early studies by Salaman and Thompson (1978) and Silverman and Jones (1976) found that instead of providing a basis for selection decisions, assessment sheets create a surface of scientifically neutral criteria that rationalize and legitimize selection decisions based on other grounds. In a similar vein, Roberts and Campbell (2007) have shown how the intend of the assessment sheets is to create objective and valid interviews, while in practice they encourage snap judgment and are used to gather evidence justifying those snap judgments. Klingenberg and Pelletier (2019) have shown how a multitude of information is translated into one statement or numerical score on a sheet and how this makes values appear as a property of applicants rather than a set of negotiations between actors, since the traces of the translation process are omitted.

Despite personality tests being an increasingly popular selection tool (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006; Youngman, 2017), extant research remains surprisingly silent about how the use of personality tests in employee selection unfolds in practice. Those who go closest are Bolander and Sandberg (2013) who study how employee selection decisions are made in situ. Their findings suggest that selectors use selection tools, among others personality tests, as sensemaking devices to make sense and produce factual versions of candidates. More specifically they find that selectors continually refer to selection tools during decision meetings, not as an objective reference but to reduce ambiguity and establish more specific versions of the candidates to either reach a decision or explain the reasons for a decision. The authors argue that regardless of the results that the tools deliver, selection tools such as personality tests represent rules that selectors can choose to either comply with, adjust, or disregard. Thus, the rules of tools are used as interpretive schemes establishing a range of possible actions without dictating any specific actions. These findings are intriguing, yet they only explain how personality tests are used to reach decisions during evaluation meetings. Our knowledge of how personality tests are used in situ during employee selection processes is limited, if not non-existent.

Selection criteria in practice

Selection criteria play a key role in employee selection. In the best practice literature, selection criteria are typically operationalized as the KSAO's (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics) critical to job performance (Ployhart et al., 2017). According to the prescriptive literature, selection criteria should be defined in the initial job analysis to establish the standard against which applicants are benchmarked during the selection process (McCourt, 1999). Although selection criteria are assumed to be core to employee selection, little is known about what role selection criteria play when employee selection is enacted in practice. Only a few studies have investigated the role of selection criteria in practice, and even fewer of these studies have made it into a primary focus. Yet, based on these few studies I will distinguish between two types of criteria that I refer to as *formal* and *informal* criteria. Formal criteria are similar to those described in the best practice model. Such criteria are established prior to the selection process, made explicit, and written down, for example in assessment forms or job adds. In contrast, informal criteria emerge during the selection process when evaluating candidates. They can act as decisive criteria, yet without necessarily being recognized in the moment as criteria.

One of the main contributions of the in-practice studies of selection criteria is that they have shown how criteria create room for discrimination and hidden political agendas. For instance, Salaman and Thompson (1978) have shown how formal criteria, due to their abstract and decontextualized character described in scientific psychological terms, can hide highly class determined selection outcomes. In a similar vein, Bozionelos (2005) has more recently suggested that the degree of vagueness of official criteria influence how much room the selection process provides for political games at the expense of merit-based selection. Based on an experimental design, Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) showed that criteria based on merit were redefined to justify discrimination in the assessment of applicants. Together, these studies indicate that the abstract, ambiguous, and malleable character of selection criteria allow for non-meritocratic selection.

Moreover, studies have demonstrated that formal selection criteria provide a means to *legitimize* selection decisions, yet without providing a basis or any clear guidance for how to *make* selection decisions (Salaman & Thompson, 1978; Silverman & Jones, 1976). According to these scholars, the inevitable gap between the abstract term (the criterion) and actual behavior (the assessable example of the criterion) renders criteria useful for retrospective explanations of decisions already made, while rendering them difficult to use to prospectively produce decisions – even though this is what they appear to do on the surface. Studies show that the exact same behavior or attribute may be viewed as a manifestation of a *selection* criterion in relation to one candidate, while being viewed as a manifestation of a *deselection* criterion in relation to another candidate, depending on the specific context (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Silverman & Jones, 1973, 1976). Taken together, these studies show that the inherently indexical character of behaviors and attributes, combined with the inevitable gap between abstract criteria and actual behavior, create space for a relatively wide range of possible interpretations and courses of action.

In addition, studies have shown how informal criteria, such as the ability to synthesize personal and organizational discourses or produce certain narrative structures during job interviews, might become decisive in selection processes, even when they have no relevancy for the jobs considered (Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Roberts & Campbell, 2007). The role of informal criteria has also been taken up by Van Den Brink and Benschop (2011).Their study shows how individual qualities of candidates, such as perceived personality or leadership potential, enter the assessment process and attain the role of informal "common-sense criteria" (Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011, p. 515). They also find that these informal criteria may overrule the more formal criteria and become decisive.

In a recent study, Klingenberg and Pelletier (2019) have examined how value-based selection is conducted in practice, based on an empirical case in which the official criteria are a handful of specified personal values. They find that selectors engage in various practices to translate the abstract criteria, the invisible values, into something which is measurable and recordable. Due to the translation work and specific inscription devices, values take a particular shape in which they become a property of applicants. The study shows the process of translation and negotiation that makes the criteria manifest as essentialized attributes of applicants and, thus, how criteria construct the same attributes that they were supposed to be a benchmark for. Bolander and Sandberg's (2013) study indicates that formal selection criteria are used to mold a plethora of impressions of candidates into more specific version and, hence, to reduce ambiguity and lay the foundation for the next action. Their study thereby insinuates a link between selection criteria, the process of establishing factual versions of candidates, and selection decisions, yet it remains unclear how formal and informal criteria are used during the negotiation process to select and deselect candidates.

Three avenues for further research

By glancing one’s eye over the references in the above review of the literature on ideals, tools, and criteria, the scarcity of in-practice studies becomes very evident. Since the current knowledge about how employee selection unfolds in practice is based on a limited number of studies, there are many possible directions for further research. By breaking the review above into three separate sections, I have foreshadowed the avenues that the three papers of this dissertation will follow.

First, as described above, the in-practice studies have demonstrated that the ideal of merit-based selection permeates practice, but that selectors simultaneously need to adapt their methods flexibly to the specific context they are embedded in to accomplish selection successfully. These findings indicate that there is an inherent tension in employee selection between the ideal of standardized, objective methods and the pragmatic need for flexible customization. Studies have shown how these competing demands manifest as selectors only align with the demand for standardized objective methods on the surface. However, little is known about how selectors at the same time flexibly customize the standardized methods to each specific hiring situation. Since the standardization/flexibility tension is so pervasive and fundamental to selection practice, all three papers of this dissertation touch upon it to some extent. However, paper 1 specifically addresses the issue by investigating how selectors legitimize a multiplicity of hiring routines to nurture flexibility.

Second, despite the paramount importance of selection tools and methods, we still have limited insight into how selection tools are used in practice. The only exception is perhaps the method of conducting a job interview that has been the focus of several in-practice studies. Other common selection tools, such as personality tests, have been largely overlooked. Despite the growing popularity of personality tests, researchers have shown scarce interest in investigating *how* personality tests are used. Instead, scholars tend to take for granted that personality tests are used for top-down selection (see e.g., Youngman, 2017). Paper 2 addresses this gap by delving into one of the prevalent ways that personality tests are used in employee selection practices, that is, as a tool that facilitates dialogue between applicants and selectors.

Third, employee selection is assumed to be organized around selection criteria that applicants are evaluated against. From extant in-practice studies, we know that the gap between abstract criteria and concrete behavior can be immense, creating room for a broad spectrum of interpretations and thus, potentially, discriminatory selection practices. Furthermore, from my reading of the extant research on selection criteria, I identify not only descriptions of formal selection criteria, but also what I refer to as informal criteria. This finding raises the question of what role formal and informal criteria play in the performance of employee selection. To expand and nuance current understandings of selection criteria, paper 3 explores the temporal organizing of selection criteria and how they support the selection and deselection of candidates.

3. Theoretical framework

Selection as routine, practice, and process

As explained in the previous chapter, this dissertation aims at contributing to the in-practice studies of employee selection. In these studies, organizational scholars have attempted to develop a social constructionist view of employee selection. What unite the in-practice studies, besides their focus on employee selection as socially constructed, is their ambition to investigate employee selection as it naturally occurs. Thus, there is not one single theoretical framework that these scholars adhere to. Instead, they employ the theories and theoretical concepts that serve the purpose of their specific study, within the broad overall umbrella of social constructionism.

Similarly, in this dissertation I use theories pragmatically as lenses that help me grasp and articulate the small slices of the world I am looking at in my empirical materials. Since the three papers are concerned with different aspects of employee selection, that is, how selection is mediated by ideals, tools, and criteria, different theoretical tools and analytical concepts have emerged as most helpful. Although the dissertation is based on a coherent onto-epistemological framework (which I will present in the following methodology chapter), each of the papers conceptualizes employee selection in slightly different, yet theoretically compatible, ways. The three theoretical perspectives that I draw on in the papers are routine dynamics, practice theory, and process studies. All though I frame selection as a routine in chapter 5, as a practice in chapter 6, and as a process in chapter 7, it would however be misleading to say that each chapter only draws on one theoretical perspective. A practice theoretical perspective runs as a common thread through all three papers and has inspired me throughout the dissertation. Since a practice perspective is inherently processual and routine dynamics draw on both process and practice perspectives, the lines between the three perspectives are, inevitably, blurred.

I will, however, seek to clarify the blurred lines in this chapter. I will begin with a presentation of the overarching practice theoretical perspective that this dissertation draws on followed by an introduction to how I study employee selection as a routine, practice, and process respectively in the three papers. I will keep the presentations brief here, since it will be unfolded in more detail later in the three empirical papers (chapter 5-7). Instead, in this chapter I aim to provide an overview of the theories that underlie my dissertation, especially to highlight the common thread of practice theory that runs across all chapters.

The common practice theoretical thread

The field of practice studies has a long history with roots going all the way back to Hegelian and Marxist dialectics as well as early philosophers of pragmatism (Miettinen et al., 2009). According to Corradi et al. (2010), we have witnessed a return to the concept of practice in organization studies in the last decades. A practice lens has been adopted in relation to the study of a broad variety of organizational phenomena, such as organizational learning (e.g., Wenger, 2010), the use of technology (e.g., Orlikowski, 2000), and strategy (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). However, practice theories in organization studies do not constitute a uniform body of theory and there is no unified approach representing a single school of thought (Nicolini, 2013). Rather than conforming to one specific version of practice theory, this dissertation is inspired by some of the core elements, principals, and ways of thinking that can be found in most versions of practice theory. In the following, I will highlight four salient features of the practice approach that particularly inform this dissertation.

First, a practice lens supports a detailed focus on the *situated mundane activities* of everyday work life. Practice-based studies aim at determining “how practitioners do what they do and what doing does” (Gherardi, 2009, p. 124). It forces us to pay attention to organizational activities as they unfold as well as to the situated and embodied character of social phenomena (Miettinen et al., 2009; Schoeneborn et al., 2016). Social order is an ongoing production and temporary accomplishment, emerging through the recurrent actions of people (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Thus, situated actions recursively produce and reproduce social orders that, in turn, constrain and enable those same actions.

This foreshadows a second critical feature of practice theory which informs this study as well; that *relations are mutually constitutive*. The idea is that a phenomenon always exists in relation to other phenomena and that they are mutually constitutive of each other (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). The relationality of mutual constitution also means that "social orders (structures, institutions, routines, etc.) cannot be conceived without understanding the role of agency in producing them, and similarly, agency cannot be understood 'simply' as human action, but rather must be understood as always already configured by structural conditions" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242). Actors and tools are entwined in a relational whole and, therefore, actors are always already related to their practices (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, 2015). This mutually constitutive relationship between agency and structure, human action and social orders, or subject and object is ongoing and recursive which implies that what we experience as stability or social regularities are always in a process of becoming: "[T]hey are ongoing accomplishments (re)produced and possibly transformed in every instance of action" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242).

Third, practices are seen as always *mediated by artifacts and tools*. Whereas the two aspects described above are core to all practice theorizing, the degree to which artifacts and the assumption of mediation materializes in practice studies varies. It is most prominent in activity theories, such as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (e.g., Engeström, 1999; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005), and in science and technology studies, such as actor-network theory (Latour, 2005). The concept of "mediated action" was developed by Vygotsky and asserts that interactions between actors and their environment are always mediated by cultural means, such as tools and signs (Miettinen et al., 2009). That action is mediated implies that all practices are performed through, made possible by, as well as constrained by some ideational or material tools that are part of our cultural heritage and, therefore, "there is no way *not* to be socio-culturally situated when carrying out an action" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 107). The basic assumption of mediation is central to this dissertation and has informed the formulation of the overarching research question that aims at understanding how employee selection practices are mediated by ideational and material tools.

Finally, at its core practice theory is a *practice of critique*. Practice theory has emerged from the long-standing philosophical critique of the logic of scientific rationality (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, 2015), and it is a powerful alternative to positivism, rationalism, cognitivism, representationalism, and functionalism because it articulates knowledge as a situated activity and a practical accomplishment (Corradi et al., 2010; Gherardi, 2009). Part of the critique is performed through a persistent "*rejection of dualisms* and recognition of the inherent relationship between elements that have often been treated dichotomously" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242), such as subject and object or agency and structure. Instead, and as already explained, practice theory aims at theorizing the dynamic and mutual constitution of such elements.

Three theoretical perspectives

After having highlighted some of the common theoretical assumptions across the three papers, I will now turn to the theoretical perspectives that have inspired the analytical process in each of the three papers of the dissertation (for an overview, see Table 7). In chapter 2, I reviewed extant literature on employee selection to establish that ideals, tools, and criteria matter in employee selection, yet detailed investigation of how they constrain and enable selection is missing. The mutually constitutive relations between performances and practices and how they are made possible by, constrained by, and enacted through both material and ideational tools can be studied by applying a range of different theoretical lenses. In what follows, I will present the theoretical lenses I have used to understand the relationality of employee selection and ideals, tools, and criteria respectively, and explicate what each lens has sensitized me to see. All the ideas and principles presented above inform the entire dissertation, yet it differs for each of the three empirical papers (chapter 5-7) which perspectives are foregrounded and backgrounded. Where the emphasis is placed depends on the empirical materials and what emerged during the analytical process as most helpful. To avoid too much repetition, I will focus on explaining the underlying theoretical perspectives which are not necessarily made explicit in the papers but have nevertheless informed them and show how these perspectives relate to the overarching practice theoretical perspective.

Table 7. Theoretical sources and analytical concepts

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Selection as	Routine	Practice	Process
Mediated by	Ideals	Tools	Criteria
Informed by	Routine dynamics	Practice theory	Process theory
Analytical concepts	Coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns	Dialectical interplay of ordering and disordering	Temporal sensemaking: Connecting past, present, and future into fit trajectories
Primary theoretical sources	D'Adderio (2014) Feldman et al. (2021) Spee et al. (2016) Turner and Rindova (2012)	Cooper (1986) Nissen (2020) Putnam et al. (2016) Staunæs (2016)	Emirbayer and Mische (1998) Hernes and Obstfeld (2022) Jansen and Shipp (2019) Wiebe (2010)

Selection as routine: Mediated by ideals

Chapter 5 (paper 1) explores how selection practices are mediated by the meritocratic ideal of standardized best practice selection. In this paper, I mobilize a routine dynamics lens to conceptualize employee selection as a supra-organizational routine (Jarzabkowski et al., 2016; Kho & Spee, 2021). The routine dynamics perspective on organizational routines (also referred to as the practice perspective on organizational routines) is grounded in practice theory (Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011). Routine dynamics theory builds on the same assumptions as practice theory about the mutual constitutive and recurrent relationship of dualities and emphasizes the everyday actions and doings of actors as well as the role of artifacts. The foundation of the routine dynamics theory is based on elements from Gidden's structuration theory, Bourdieu's relational framework, and Latour's distinction between the ostensive and performative (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). All three scholars have been central figures in the development of practice theory. As such, the study of routine dynamics is at its core practice-based and might be characterized as a domain-specific theory of practice (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

The hiring routine is perhaps the most common example of an organizational routine (see e.g., Feldman, 2016; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Feldman et al., 2021; Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Hiring, and employee selection more specifically, live up to the well-established definition of organizational routines as being "repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95). Thus, adopting a routine dynamics lens in this dissertation has been an obvious choice. Interestingly, despite the fact that hiring is positioned as a prototypical organizational routine, only very few studies have studied the routine dynamics of hiring empirically (Feldman, 2000; Rerup & Feldman, 2011). Therefore, using a routine dynamics lens to study employee selection in practice has enabled me not only to understand the dynamics of employee selection and how it is mediated by ideals, but also to make both an empirical and theoretical contribution to the routine dynamics literature.

As a basic analytical tool in paper 1, I have adopted the distinction between the performative and ostensive aspects of routines (first introduced by Feldman, 2000; theoretically developed in the seminal work of Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The distinction is a useful analytical tool for studying the mutually constitutive relation between the specific, observable enactments of employee selection (the performative) and the abstract pattern or generalized idea of employee selection (the ostensive). The routine dynamics perspective has allowed me to study the abstract patterns of hiring routines across organizations as produced by situated actions. The perspective has furthermore been useful in theorizing how practitioners balance and navigate in such coexisting patterns. Several routine dynamics scholars have studied how organizational actors balance competing demands of standardization and flexibility by nurturing coexisting ostensive patterns (D'Adderio, 2014; Spee et al., 2016; Turner & Rindova, 2012), yet without examining the role of overarching ideals such as the meritocratic ideal in employee selection. Thus, the routine dynamics perspective provided me with a conceptual platform and vocabulary to explain the tension in my data between the ideal of standardization and need for pragmatic flexibility.

Selection as practice: Mediated by tools

Chapter 6 (paper 2) explores how selection practices are mediated by one very common selection tool, a personality test, and how different framings of personality testing coexist in productive tension. Here, we conceptualize personality testing in employee selection as a practice that dialectically moves between moments of ordering and disordering. Based on an epistemology of practice in which knowledge is performative and we, thus, create the world around us by the ways in which we describe, categorize, and articulate the objects we interact with, we make an *affirmative critique* (Braidotti, 2018; Christensen, 2020; Juelskjær & Staunæs, 2016; Raffnsøe, 2017; Staunæs, 2016, 2018; Staunaes & Raffnsøe, 2019). Because the methodological approach of the entire dissertation is inspired by affirmative critique, I will elaborate on the approach when I present the methodology in chapter 4. Here, I will instead emphasize the practice theoretical roots of affirmative critique and explain what this lens has sensitized me to see.

The affirmative critique, which we in paper 2 operationalize as the dialectical interplay of contradicting tendencies of ordering and disordering, has long practice theoretical roots, especially in material dialectics and activity theory, such as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). What we learn from material dialectics and activity theory is that *all* activity is mediated by tools, and "[m]ediated means here that all practices are carried out through, and are made possible by, a range of ideational and material apparatuses, devices, and 'utensils' that we draw from our cultural heritage or social milieux" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 106). Therefore, practices comprise not only the multiple perspectives and interests of participants, but also the "multiple layers and strands of history embodied in rules, conventions, and artefacts" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 114) brought in by the mediating tools. CHAT implies a sensitivity for contradictions, conflicts, and tensions, and consider these to be productive rather than problematic; tensions fuel the ongoing and inevitable development of practice (Nicolini, 2013). Engeström has coined the term *expansion* to capture this process of constant development, which "refers to processes in which an activity system, for example a work organization, resolves its pressing internal contradictions by constructing and implementing a qualitatively new way of functioning for itself" (Engeström, 2007, p. 24). CHAT is interventionist by nature, and expansion is therefore not only an analytical tool, but also a possible starting point for intervention (Nicolini, 2013).

The practice theoretical tenets of CHAT presented briefly above – that is, mediation by sociocultural artifacts, contradictions fueling ongoing change, and CHAT's engaged nature – all shine through in our affirmative critique of personality testing in paper 2. The affirmative critique has attuned our analysis to the different framings of ordering and disordering in personality testing, and how they coexist in a productive tension that fuels a continuous process of development. This attunement opens to *rearticulations* (Nissen, 2020) of the situated practice of using personality tests as selection tools. Rearticulations, that may nurture what Engeström (2007, p. 24) in the quote above describes as "a qualitatively new way of functioning" or what Nicolini refers to as "culturally new patterns of activity" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 115). Thus, our affirmative critique has allowed us to capture progressive tendencies emerging from the inherent contradictory tensions in the practice of using personality tests as selection tools. In line with the engaged nature of CHAT, we aim to feed into these tendencies and make them visible in new ways as they potentially change the practices of which they are part (Nissen, 2020).

Selection as process: Mediated by criteria

A processual understanding of social and organizational phenomena is an inherent part of all practice theoretical approaches (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013). In line with process organization studies (for an overview, see Langley et al., 2013), practice theories emphasize processes over entities and focus on the situated, emergent, ever-changing, and unfolding character of social phenomena (Schoeneborn et al., 2016). Since process and practice perspectives share many of the same fundamental assumptions, they are indeed compatible, but they have different strengths and weaknesses. Whereas a practice perspective is particularly strong in foregrounding the situated, mundane activities in day-to-day organizational life, it lacks the more developed temporal view of process studies (Hernes & Schultz, 2020).

In chapter 7 (paper 3), we draw on a processual understanding of employee selection as we investigate how selection processes are mediated by selection criteria. Given the crucial role of selection criteria as "sensemaking devices" in socially constructing fit in the moment (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013), and recent findings on the inherently temporal character of "fitting" (Jansen & Shipp, 2019), the third paper probes into how selection criteria are temporally organized. To advance a temporal understanding of criteria in employee selection, we draw on processual, social constructionist conceptualizations of selection processes (e.g., Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Klingenberg & Pelletier, 2019; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2011), methodological insights from process studies (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013) and literature emphasizing the temporal dimension of sensemaking processes (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Gephart et al., 2010; Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Wiebe, 2010). By doing so, we conceptualize employee selection as an unfolding temporal sensemaking process and investigate the role selection criteria play in how selectors draw connections between past, present, and future to make decisions.

The more developed temporal view that can be found in process organization studies has been helpful to study the mediating role of selection criteria. By adopting a temporal sensemaking view, that is, "the act of (re)configuring the relationship of past, present, and future" (Wiebe, 2010, p. 231), our study has been able to provide new insights into the role of selection criteria. The view has allowed us to show that selection criteria both emerge from and are used for attempts to meaningfully connect the past and future of the candidates and the organization in an ongoing present. Moreover, the temporal sensemaking approach has allowed us to go beyond current distinctions between formal and informal criteria (Bozionelos, 2005; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2011) to show how different types of temporally organized criteria are useful for different types of selection and deselection decisions at different stages in the hiring process.

Weaving three theoretical threads

> *Practice* approaches are fundamentally *processual* and tend to see the world as an ongoing *routinized* and recurrent accomplishment. (Nicolini, 2013, p. 3, emphasis added)

In this chapter, I have outlined four practice theoretical tenets that run as a common thread across the three papers of the dissertation: A focus on situated mundane activities, understanding relations as mutually constitutive, assuming that all actions are mediated by ideational and material tools, and maintaining the critical roots of practice theory. The chapter has furthermore sketched the three different theoretical perspectives that have allowed me to study how employee selection is mediated by ideals, tools, and criteria. The routine dynamics perspective has allowed me to examine how the supra-organizational ostensive patterns of employee selection are used to handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility. The practice theoretical perspective has allowed me to examine how the situated dialectical interplay between ordering and disordering in personality testing potentially create new practices. The process theoretical perspective has allowed me to examine how selection criteria emerge from and support processes of connecting pasts and futures. For each of the three, I have shown how they are compatible with the practice theoretical common thread of the dissertation. As Nicolini (2013) highlights in the quote above, practice, process, and routine theorizing go hand in hand.

4. Methodology

Studying employee selection in practice

In this dissertation, I investigate how ideational and material tools mediate the performance of employee selection. To study the situated and mediated activities of employee selection, I have adopted an ethnographic, process-oriented methodology. In this chapter I will describe my methodological approach, the methods I have applied to generate data, and my analytical strategy. I will furthermore provide an overview of my empirical materials and discuss some of the ethical issues related to studying hiring processes. I will begin the chapter on the upper steps of the ladder of abstraction with a presentation of my onto-epistemological position to clarify the assumptions about the relation between knowledge and reality that underpin the dissertation.

Multiple ontologies and the epistemology of practice

> We are in need of inquiry into the epistemology of practice. What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowledge presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers, and learned journals? In what sense, if any, is there intellectual rigor in professional practice? (Schön, 1983, p. VIII)

Concurring with Schön's statement in the quote above, a fundamental assumption of this dissertation is that we need to inquire into the epistemology of practice, instead of assuming a positivist epistemology of practice, to understand professional knowing and doing. Following scholars such as Schön (1983) and Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), I presume that practice has its own logic which deviates from the scientific rationality of most management theories, often rendering management theories irrelevant to practice. When the research-practice gap is particularly prominent in the employee selection field (Rynes et al., 2002), I assume that it is related to the unique consensus in the field in which scholars stick to one theoretical paradigm which provides a strikingly prototypical example of a theory developed within the framework of scientific rationality. A main objective of this dissertation is to inquire into the epistemology of practice to develop employee selection theory that resonates with the practice world of selectors. Following Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), this could be described as developing "practical rationality theory". Thus, to capture the logic of practice this study builds on onto-epistemological assumptions that put the situated performances of employee selection at the forefront together with the knowledgeable practitioners, with an eye for the fundamental "entwinement of ourselves, others, and things in a relational whole" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p. 345).

The dissertation furthermore builds on an anti-dualist approach to knowledge and reality in which the boundaries between epistemology and ontology are not clear-cut. Here, I am inspired by Mol (2002b, 2008)[2] and her way of studying the performativity of practices. In this perspective, knowledge is not an objective *representation* of reality (as in the positivist paradigm or the scientific rationality framework), but knowledge is rather a *manipulation* of reality (Mol, 2002b). The fundamental idea is that knowledge is performative (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2007; Gherardi, 2009; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005; Wenger, 2010); knowledge interacts with reality, and we create the world around us by the ways in which we describe, categorize, and articulate the objects we interact with. In line with this, and in contrast to the dominant employee selection research paradigm, I am not pursuing the epistemological question about how to find the truth, but instead I am interested in how objects are handled, enacted, and performed in practices (Mol, 2002b). I want to explore and understand the situated activities of selection practitioners, how they conduct applicant assessments to reach hiring decisions, and how their performances are constrained and enabled by the ideals, tools, and criteria that both are established in and regulate selection practices.

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[2] From several prior experiences, I know that it is important that I clarify the following: Even though I mention Annemarie Mol and declare that I am, indeed, inspired by her, it does not mean that I am doing a full-blown ANT study. The onto-epistemological assumptions underpinning her approach to studying objects in practice are compatible with other theoretical frameworks than actor-network theory, among others the three theoretical perspectives that inform this dissertation.

Mol (2002b) refers to such a stance as studying ontology-in-practice and she explains that “reality is multiple” (p. 6) and “that *ontology* is not given in the order of things, but that, instead, *ontologies* are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices” (p. 6). This basic assumption about ontology as the plural *ontologies* is essential for my way of inquiring into the epistemology of practice. I assume that multiple realities coexist when I study employee selection practices. For instance, for each of the actors involved in a hiring process the situation is a different one and the problems and objectives are not the same from these different positions; problems and objectives become multiple. In accordance, I do not aim at assessing whether the selection methods lead to objective knowledge about who applicants *really* are – I presume that there is no such one truth – but rather I aim at showing the ways in which knowledge is established and performed, mediated by ideational and material tools, and how different ontologies coexist, often in tension (Mol, 2010).

In the three studies of this dissertation the assumption of multiple ontologies shines through in different ways. In the first paper (chapter 5), I dive into the ontologies by exploring the coexisting ostensive patterns of employee selection and how they are used to handle the competing demands for standardization and flexibility. In the second paper (chapter 6), we shed light on the ontologies through an affirmative critique by which we explore the coexisting framings of ordering and disordering in the practice of personality testing in employee selection. In the third paper (chapter 7), we show how selection criteria emerge to connect past, present, and future into alternative coexisting temporal trajectories that only come together as *one* temporary stabilized fit trajectory with great effort. Thus, despite different theoretical lenses and methodological approaches in the three papers, the fundamental assumption that different ontologies are brought into being in day-to-day practices forms a common basis.

Another commonality is the basic assumption that practitioners are knowledgeable and reflective actors. In line with Gioia et al. (2012), I presume “that people in organizations know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions" (p. 17). I therefore find it meaningful and important to try to understand the world from the perspective of those who are being studied. Particularly, in a field like employee selection where studies of how selection is practiced are rare and the voice of practitioners is surprisingly absent. I am curious to know how selectors understand their daily work practices, their ways of knowing and doing, the logics and ideas they draw on to make sense of their assignments, and how they enact their role as selectors.

However, and on a more critical note, this does not imply that I assume organizational actors to be apolitical truthtellers, standing "outside" of ideology reporting their beliefs, meanings, and authentic experiences from a position of neutrality (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Nor does it mean that I assume my main role as a researcher to be that of a "glorified reporter", as Gioia et al. (2012, p. 17) suggest. I do believe that I, from my position as a researcher, have something else to offer. Selectors usually do not audio record conversations or job interviews, nor do they go into the "research laboratory" and code transcripts to build theoretical models. I trust that such research practices have the potential to expand on the kind of knowing that is inherent in practice. Thus, as a researcher, I aim at providing theoretical models *of* and *for* selection practice (Pentland & Feldman, 2007). Models that recognize "indigenous" ideas and at the same time build on these ideas by putting them in dialogue with relevant theoretical perspectives to articulate alternative stories.

Nurturing alternative stories

> I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better. All the better. (Foucault, 1997, p. 323)

One difficulty I have faced in this research project is to find a balanced way of criticizing the dominant paradigm in selection research without neglecting its relevance. When you want to argue for the relevance of your own approach and convince your readers of its necessity, you easily fall into the trap of highlighting what is wrong with the existing paradigm and you end up making a purely *negative* *critique* (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). A negative critique is one, where you only mirror what is already there by showing a reversed version (Staunæs, 2016). Such a critique may be tenable and important, sometimes even necessary, but the negation in itself does not move us forward - beyond the point where we perhaps admit that something is wrong and could be different. Such a critique easily loses its transformative potential and therefore my research aim has been a different one.

Instead of rejecting the psychometric paradigm (and hiring practices that are inspired by the psychometric paradigm) as wrong, my aim has been to make an *affirmative critique*[3] (see e.g., Braidotti, 2018; Christensen, 2020; Juelskjær and Staunæs, 2016; Raffnsøe, 2017; Staunæs, 2016, 2018; Staunaes and Raffnsøe, 2019). In line with the assumptions outlined in the previous section, an affirmative critique assumes knowledge to be performative. By the ways in which we describe, categorize, and articulate our objects of study we shape reality and make certain thoughts available while excluding others (Staunæs, 2016). An affirmative critique aims at articulating some of these excluded thoughts, and it does not rest with a simple negation. It affirms the importance of ideas, rearticulate them and "bring them to life", as the introductory quote by Foucault suggests. Thus, an affirmative critique is adventurous and does not arrive at nor presuppose a final synthesis or endpoint (Raffnsøe, 2017; Staunæs, 2016). It creates a form of knowledge beyond the separation of the given from the possible, since it articulates actuality (*what is*) as well as potentiality (*what could have been or could become*). In other words, rearticulations are always anticipatory and always incomplete. They go beyond the actuality of what is and draws the contours of different realities that may or may not unfold (Nissen, 2020).

Inspired by affirmative critique, I aim at mirroring employee selection in ways where the emerging reflections are new images on the threshold between what is and what could be. The reflections are deeply rooted in the empirical materials, and yet they are feeding into new possible realities by telling some of the untold stories. In paper 2, we explicitly use affirmative critique as our methodology. In paper 1 and 3, it has inspired to engagement in the dominant paradigm of selection, to articulate not only shortcomings but also progressive tendencies within mainstream (research) practice to nurture alternative stories. By inviting such tendencies of difference into networks of discussion, they are made visible in new ways with potentials to reconfigure what we think we know. My research aim of nurturing alternative stories of employee selection has shaped my methodology in several ways.

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[3] Affirmative critique is similar to critical performativity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009, 2016), which perhaps is more well-known in organization studies. However, since critical performativity emerged from discussions about the status of performativity specifically in Critical Management Studies, I prefer to describe my approach as affirmative critique, which has more transdisciplinary roots and connotations.

First, to nurture alternative stories I found it useful to develop my broad initial research questions through problematization, that is, by "identifying and challenging assumptions that underlie existing theories" (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 248). As indicated in the first few chapters, the assumption of stable and predictable entities in the scientific rationality framework (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) of the psychometric paradigm, prompted me to enter the empirical field with a broad curiosity to explore the thoughts, logics, dreams, and ideas that cannot be seen through the lens of this paradigm. Particularly, it prompted me to explore the logic of practice (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011); that is, the kinds of knowing that organizational actors engage in during employee selection and the fundamental entwinement of selectors with others and ideational and material tools.

Second, to be able to articulate alternative stories, I have aimed at generating data that capture the complexity, richness, and diversity of hiring practices. Therefore, I have adopted an ethnographic methodology and pursued to make an in-depth study of employee selection as it naturally occurs and unfolds in situ. Furthermore, I decided to study employee selection practices across different organizations, which could be described as a multiple case study (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). However, my aim was never to do a comparative study of the cases to build "more robust, generalizable, and testable theory" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). Instead, my aim was to search for variety in the way employee selection was performed to increase my chances of encountering interesting or surprising enactments of selection practice. For my research design across organizations, I found inspiration in writings on multi-sited ethnography (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995), and more specifically in Nicolini's (2009) suggestion to "focus on practice as the object to be followed" (p. 121) across multiple sites.

Third, in my quest to generate interesting empirical materials and develop new theoretical understandings of employee selection through affirmative critique, I have been inspired by the research methodology outlined by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) as the construction of mysteries. This methodology entails encountering the field in an open way with a broad focus and see what turns up in terms of a breakdown, that is, "an empirical 'finding' [that] can't easily be accounted for by available theory" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1270). The approach implies that you actively search for empirical materials that are interesting in the sense that they prompt the construction of alternative stories. With this methodology, the empirical materials are "mobilized as a critical dialogue partner – not a judge or a mirror - that problematizes a significant form of understanding, thus encouraging problematization and theoretical insights" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1266). In line with this, my research process has been abductive (Locke et al., 2008; Tavory & Timmermans, 2019), seeking to create a productive dialogue between empirical materials and theoretical concepts. Through these abductive iterations alternative stories have emerged.

Methods and data

The empirical foundation of this dissertation is composed of data from several different organizations and consists of documents, interviews, and observations. My unit of analysis is *the practice of employee selection*. What unites the diverse empirical work of this dissertation is therefore that it all tries to shed light on the practice of employee selection, just in different ways. As mentioned in chapter 1, my empirical work has been three-sided. Table 8 summarizes the entire data set. In what follows, I will describe the data generation process. I will first describe my fieldwork in the HR consultancy firm, then the expert interviews I have conducted, and lastly the process data I have generated from three case studies.

Table 8. Overview of the complete data set

Data source	Data details
Interviews (Audio recordings)	11 semi-structured expert interviews with recruiters
	18 semi-structured interviews with job candidates, recruiters, HR consultants, hiring managers, and hiring teams, conducted in relation to observed hiring processes
Observations (Field notes and audio recordings)	41 job interviews (ca 41 hours) 16 evaluation meetings (ca 9 hours) 12 preparation meetings (search, screening, job analysis etc.) (ca 12 hours)
	1 personality test certification course (ca 15 hours) 7 presentations/workshops about recruitment and selection (ca 6 hours)
	Ca 140 days at a shared office space with the recruitment team of an HR consultancy firm
Documents	E.g., emails about specific hiring processes, job postings, job applications, résumés, written references, case materials, general mental ability and personality test results, notes about test results, notes about each candidate's onboarding needs, reports about job search and hiring trends, status reports about the Danish labor market, and organizational descriptions of hiring processes

Ethnographic fieldwork in an HR consultancy firm

From 2018-2022 I have been employed as an industrial PhD in a Danish HR consultancy firm. The consultancy is a small to medium-sized enterprise with 70-90 employees, and it has offices spread across Denmark. The consultancy has three main areas of expertise: Career counseling, outplacement, and headhunting. I was employed to do research on recruitment and selection practices and therefore I was affiliated with the headhunting team, what the company refers to as the recruitment team. The size of the recruitment team varied during my employment, but they were typically between 8-12 recruiters, who were spread geographically across three offices. During my employment, I had a desk in a shared office space with the recruiters in the Copenhagen-based office. However, I attended several meetings where all members of the team were gathered, and I did occasionally visit the other offices.

During the first year and a half, from mid 2018 until early 2020, I was at the office approximately two days a week doing ethnographic fieldwork. The intensity with which I engaged in the fieldwork varied from one day to the next. On a low-intensity day, I would be at the office with maybe four of my recruiter colleagues, and all of us would be working on our laptops. I would listen to their conversations about current assignments, potential candidates, difficulties with clients, and so on. As their colleague, I would participate in those conversations and sometimes also share my thoughts and reflections on the topic being discussed. Whenever something in our conversations struck me as interesting, surprising, or as a story worth remembering, I would document it in my fieldnotes.

On a high-intensity day, I would perhaps shadow (Czarniawska, 2018) one of my colleagues on his or her assignments. We would typically meet at the office in the morning and have a cup of coffee and do some preparations before leaving. On our way to the client organization, we would discuss the specific assignment. For instance, the type of organization we were visiting, what the hiring manager was like, what the candidates were like, and maybe the specific concerns regarding today's job interviews. During the job interviews, I would always do non-participant observations. Typically, I would sit at the table with the rest of the participants and take field notes on my laptop. During the following evaluations, I would still take a non-participant stance. However, often my colleague or the hiring manager would involve me in the discussion and then I would naturally participate.

My role in these conversations, and in general at the office, was a delicate mix of many different things. In many ways, I was just a regular employee. I was a member of the recruitment team, and I was someone who was hanging out by the coffee machine like everyone else, and with whom my colleagues could share what they had been up to during the weekend. At the same time, I was a colleague with a special task and who was employed under special conditions. I often got friendly jokes commenting on my flexible hours or received questions like, "what is it more precisely that you are doing?" or "are you starting to see some results?". Furthermore, I was often assigned the role as an expert who got questions like, "which companies have actually implemented AI in their hiring processes yet?” or “which type of personality test has the highest predictive validity?”. When shadowing my colleagues on their assignments, I most often managed to assume a role similar to that of a trainee, who curiously observed every single move of my “trainer”, asked a lot of questions, and strived for rich and detailed answers. However, sometimes – typically by the end of the day – I rather assumed the role of a consultant who provided the feedback and reflections that my colleague sought. Since the recruiters were used to conducting job interviews alone, they clearly enjoyed having someone to share their experiences with.

As an industrial PhD, I did a wide range of dissemination activities for the consultancy. Among others, I gave presentations both inhouse and externally and I wrote blog posts about employee selection. I audio recorded some of the more workshop-like presentations, which gave a nuanced insight into the challenges and concerns of recruiters and hiring managers. During my time at the consultancy, I have furthermore assembled various organizational documents related to employee selection, for instance, recruitment and selection flowcharts, emails, blog posts, sales material, and labor market reports. In addition, I have had access to many other relevant events and activities. For instance, I have taken four personality tests and a general mental ability test just to try for myself what it feels like; I have been on a two-day personality test certification course; and I have attended several employee selection courses and workshop. I have documented these events in field notes and/or audio recordings. All these materials have supported my general understanding of employee selection practices and the kind of knowing that is inherent in practice.

Overall, the industrial PhD setup has given me a unique opportunity to take part in and witness the everyday work life of agency recruiters. The data generated from this fieldwork has played an important role in shaping my understanding of employee selection practices. My employment has established a playground for me to explore the mediating role of ideational and material tools and to discuss the issues of interest to recruiters with recruiters themselves. These data have primarily served as background information and has inspired my development of ideas and problematizations in the three empirical papers.

Expert interviews

Early in the research process in the summer 2018, I decided to conduct expert interviews with recruiters from different organizations to get insights into the employee selection field from a practitioner viewpoint. Before my employment as an industrial PhD, I had never worked with recruitment and selection, and the expert interviews were therefore a way for me to enter the field. I used the interviews to get an introduction to how practitioners understand the practice of selecting employees, but also to gain insight into the fundamental tensions, discussions, and controversies inherent in the field. I conducted a total of 11 expert interviews. Their length varied from 35 minutes to two hours and 40 minutes.

To find interviewees, I used a purposive sampling approach. I was purposively trying to recruit curious and reflective practitioners, assuming that it would give rise to reflections that went beyond the institutionalized narratives of employee selection. Because my research aim was to nurture alternative stories rather than arrive at generalizable results, I was not trying to generate representative data but to generate breakdowns and mysteries (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). I found the first few interviewees through my professional network and then I used a snowball sampling approach to reach out to other recruiters that the interviewees referred me to. Among the interviewees were both agency recruiters, in-house recruiters, and HR consultants representing both SMEs and large enterprises (for an overview of the interviewees, see Table 9). The interviews were semi-structured, always covering all themes from my interview guide but differing in which themes were explored most in detail. The interviews contain both detailed descriptions of employee selection experiences and reflections on the rationales behind the ways that employee selection is enacted.

Table 9. Overview of expert interviewees

Interviewee	Organization	Job role/experience
#1	Global executive search and recruitment firm (large enterprise)	Agency recruiter, but also responsible for in-house recruitment and selection

#2	Danish HR consultancy firm (SME)	Agency recruiter with previous experience as in-house recruiter
#3	Global company with headquarters in Denmark (large enterprise)	Talent Acquisition Partner / In-house recruiter
#4	Digital HR media agency (start-up)	Agency recruiter with focus on digital innovation in recruitment and selection
#5	Danish management consultancy firm (SME)	CEO and HR consultant, responsible for assessment and test tools. Also, board member of an industry association for executive search and selection. Previous experience as in-house recruiter
#6	Global HR consultancy firm with headquarters in Denmark (SME)	Co-founder, CEO, and agency recruiter. The company works with a data driven and test-based approach to recruitment and selection
#7	Danish company (large enterprise)	In-house recruiter with previous experience as agency recruiter
#8	Danish HR consultancy firm (SME)	Agency recruiter with previous experience as in-house recruiter
#9	Unemployment insurance fund (municipal organization)	HR consultant and career counselor, previous experience with in-house recruitment
#10	Freelancer	Several board positions and freelance HR consultant working with recruitment and assessment events. Previous experience with in-house recruitment
#11	Freelancer	External university lecturer and freelance HR consultant working with recruitment and assessment events. Previous experience as in-house recruiter

Three case studies

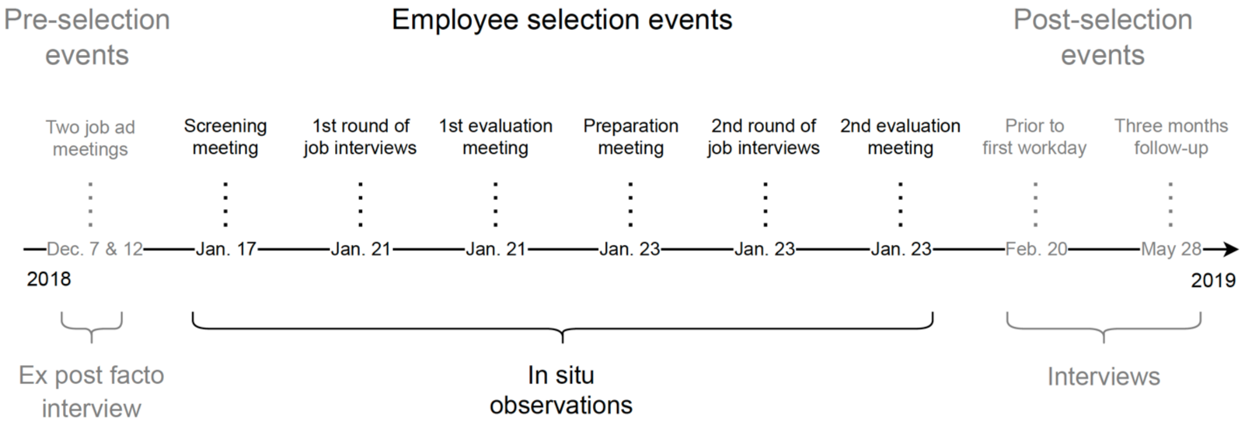
In addition to expert interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in the HR consultancy firm, I have conducted three in-depth case studies of hiring processes in three different Danish organizations in the period from December 2018 to August 2019: A municipality, a trade union, and a private company. To recruit these organizations, my supervisor from the HR consultancy firm and I reached out directly to potential case organizations through our professional networks. We additionally posted a request through the LinkedIn profile of the HR consultancy firm. Based on our request, several organizational actors contacted me, and I ended up making fieldwork agreements with two of these: A hiring manager from a Danish municipality who was hiring a Team Manager, and an HR consultant from a Danish trade union who was hiring four to five Legal Consultants. Some months later, I furthermore got the opportunity to follow a hiring process in a private company through the HR consultancy firm in which I was employed.

In addition to practical consideration such as timing and location, the three case organizations were selected based on their variety. The organizations represent three different sectors of society, the job positions have no similarities, the selection methods and tools are different from each other, and the involved organizational actors vary too. My reason for engaging with three very diverse case organizations was to create ample opportunity for encountering surprising or progressive approaches to employee selection. I wanted to increase the chance of finding and nurturing singular activities that could be proclaimed as prototypical of progressive tendencies and modelled for their general relevance (Nissen, 2009).

In each of the case organizations, I observed a hiring process in situ, from beginning to end, and combined the observations with repeated interviewing and with collecting written materials. Thus, I have made three longitudinal studies of three entire hiring processes to generate process data. Figure 1 is a reproduction from the third paper (chapter 7) displaying the hiring events and data collection process in the municipality. It is reproduced here as an illustrative example of the kind of data collection process I have conducted in each of the three organizations and as a visualization of what “longitudinal” means in this specific research context. A short introduction to each of the three cases follows.

In the municipality, I followed a hiring manager and a hiring committee of three employees in their process of filling a Team Manager position. On the surface, their selection process was a textbook example. To put it briefly, the hiring process consisted of the following steps: Creating a job profile, writing a job advertisement, screening the incoming applications, running a first round of job interviews, evaluating candidates, running a second round of job interviews, evaluating candidates, and selecting the new Team Manager. The process was very structured. For instance, it was predetermined how many candidates would be invited for each round of job interviews; the organizational actors used structured interview guides; and all candidates were interviewed on the same days and evaluated during the same meetings. In the third paper (chapter 7), we analyze the process data from this case organization to explore the temporal role of selection criteria.

Figure 1. Overview of data generation process in the municipality (reprint from paper 3)


Pre-selection events
Employee selection events
Post-selection events
Two job ad meetings
Screening meeting
1st round of job interviews
1st evaluation meeting
Preparation meeting
2nd round of job interviews
2nd evaluation meeting
Prior to first workday
Three months follow-up
Dec. 7 & 12
Jan. 17
Jan. 21
Jan. 21
Jan. 23
Jan. 23
Jan. 23
Feb. 20
May 28
2018
2019
Ex post facto interview
In situ observations
Interviews

In the trade union, I followed an in-house HR consultant and shifting hiring managers, who were in the process of filling four to five Legal Consultant positions. Whereas the process in the municipality had predetermined dates for first and second round of job interviews on which all interviews were conducted, this process was more fluid. Yet, although a few of the candidates were included in the selection process through informal channels, most applicants would meet the same formal steps in the selection process: After advertising the job, the incoming applications were screened on an ongoing basis and applicants were invited for a job interview one by one. After a first job interview conducted by two hiring managers, the candidate was either rejected or invited for a second job interview. Before the second job interview, the candidate completed a personality test and a general mental ability test. The second job interview was then structured as a test-based dialogue conducted by the HR consultant. After the dialogue, the HR consultant and the hiring manager decided if they would give the candidate a job offer. In the second paper (chapter 6), we make an in-depth analysis of one of these test-based dialogues.

The hiring manager in the private company had hired the HR consultancy firm in which I was employed to support their process of filling a Business Developer position. Thus, in this hiring process I followed the hiring manager from the company as well as two of my colleagues who were assigned the task. This hiring process was even more fluid and ad hoc than the one in the trade union. One of my colleagues was responsible for writing the job advertisement, searching on LinkedIn, screening incoming applications, and phone screening interesting applicants. My other colleague was responsible for the ongoing dialogue with the hiring manager and for conducting a first and second job interview with interesting candidates. The second job interview included a case assignment and was conducted by both the hiring manager and my colleague. The final candidates furthermore received a personality test and the hiring manager and one of his colleagues then conducted a third and last job interview with the finalists.

When I initiated the three case studies, my plan was to conduct interviews with both the applicants and the recruiters throughout the hiring process. I wanted to combine my observations with repeated interviewing of both parties to explore the emergence of a person-organization match from both sides of the table. However, as soon as the fieldwork started, I abandoned that idea. Although the applicants knew that I was an external researcher and not a selector, I could immediately sense that it would be ethically questionable to interview both parties during the process. From the applicants' viewpoint I would to some degree represent the hiring organization, even if I officially did not; when the applicants entered the job interview room, I was already sitting there around the table together with the selectors, and I would furthermore stay in the room to observe the following evaluation when the applicants left again. It would be unfair to ask the applicants, who of course had a lot at stake, to tell me about how they perceived the job interview as long as they were still in process for the job. I therefore decided only to study the hiring processes as they unfolded from the perspective of the organizational actors. However, when a candidate had signed a contract, I would conduct an interview with the "winning" candidate to gain retrospective insight into how he or she had experienced taking part in the selection process. In addition, I have conducted follow-up interviews with both the organizational actors and the new employee in the subsequent employment to catch a glimpse of how the anticipated fit was unfolding and materializing.

In the ideal world I would have attended all parts of the hiring processes from beginning to end. However, in the real world, things are way more complicated. For instance, a lot of interaction was happening in-between the formal selection events that I inevitably missed out on, such as informal dialogues between selectors or phone calls from applicants. Furthermore, the preselection meetings had already taken place in advance of my collaboration with both the municipality and the trade union, and at the private company the hiring manager forgot to invite me for the third and final job interview. However, in each of these instances, I did my best to patch the holes by interviewing the organizational actors about the events I missed out on. Apart from these few exceptions I have participated in situ during all hiring events, such as preparation meetings, screenings, job interviews, test-feedback sessions, and candidate evaluation meetings. I audio recorded these events while I also made observations that I recorded in field notes. Furthermore, I collected all relevant documents, such as CVs, job advertisements, job applications, and test results. I mostly made non-participant observations but when prompted by selectors I would participate in the dialogue. However, this only happened in situations where the applicants were absent. Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with selectors in the beginning of the hiring process and three months into the subsequent employment and with the new employee after signing the contract and again after three months in the job. Lastly, in addition to the semi-structured interviews I made a lot of smaller, informal interviews with the organizational actors during the selection process. Table 10 provides a quantitative summary of the data generated from the three studies.

To pursue my research interest these three longitudinal process studies have been pivotal. Because practice approaches are fundamentally processual (Nicolini, 2013), the approach of this dissertation calls for process data that allows for studying phenomena as evolving and brought into being in every moment (Abdallah et al., 2019; Langley et al., 2013). To advance an understanding of the socially constructed character of employee selection that prior studies have pointed to (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Klingenberg & Pelletier, 2019; Stjerne, 2018), it has been essential not to settle for an empirical snapshot. Deciding whom to offer a job is the outcome of an unfolding selection process through which versions of the candidates and decisions are successively constructed (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). Thus, to better understand and explain how employee selection is enacted and mediated by material and ideational tools, it was important to generate data that allowed me explore "how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time" (Langley et al., 2013, p. 1). These in-depth process data has allowed me to pursue the negotiated and socially constructed processes through which selectors over time arrive at selection decisions (paper 3).

Table 10. Summary of process data from the three case organizations

	Trade union	Municipality	Private company
Job interviews	12	9	8
Meetings	6	4	5
Semi-structured interviews	10	5	Informal interviews only
Documents	130+ pages	90+ pages	220+ pages

Some ethical considerations

Researching employee selection means inquiring into a sensitive topic with ethical implications (Taylor, 2006). Employee selection practices are inevitably associated with asymmetrical power relations. Because I have studied selection processes from the viewpoint of the organizational actors, I was positioned both symbolically and literally on the employer's side of the table. This position only emphasized the importance of continually reflecting on the ethical implications of my research project. In the following, I will shed light on the most important ethical considerations that have arisen during the research process.

It has been important for me to try to make sure that my participation was not experienced as stressful or uncomfortable for neither the selectors nor the candidates. Since the selectors themselves reached out to me and invited me to study their hiring processes, my concerns have mostly been directed towards the applicants. It is a stressful situation for most applicants to participate in a job interview or any other assessment activity, and therefore it was essential that the applicants felt assured that refusing to participate in the research project was legitimate and without consequences. As an attempt to handle this ethical dilemma, I decided to obtain consent several times from each applicant. My hope was that it would strengthen the applicants' ability to decline if they did not want to participate in the research project either from the outset or later in the hiring process. Typically, first consent was obtained electronically when applicants were applying for the job. Next consent was usually obtained by phone when applicants were invited to a job interview. Third consent was written, and I obtained it myself when I met the candidates for the first time, usually at their first job interview. Each time it was emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary; that they could withdraw their consent at any time; that it would not have any consequences for their chances in the selection process; and that all identifying details would be removed to maintain confidentiality to the extent it was possible.

Despite these attempts to strengthen applicants' ability to decline, it is of course impossible to know whether some of the applicants felt a pressure to participate anyway. Indeed, some might have felt so. However, probably because the assessment situation is so unnatural per se, my general experience was that that my presence did not make much of a difference to the candidates. When applicants go to a job interview, they have already accepted that a handful of people will observe, assess, and make written records of everything they say or do. Applicants also know that their performance will be discussed and evaluated afterwards. Whether one of the observers is a researcher and whether the conversation is audio recorded in addition, did not seem to make much of a difference. None of us (the selectors and I) received negative utterances or vibes from any of the applicants – not even in retrospect from candidates who got rejected. We interpreted this as indicating that participation in the research project was perceived as neither disturbing nor uncomfortable. In fact, every single applicant chose to give consent again and again, and none of them withdrew their consent at a later stage.

Analytical strategy

In this chapter I have explained that my research process has been abductive (Locke et al., 2008; Tavory & Timmermans, 2019), and that I have approached the empirical and analytical work with a strategy of nurturing alternative stories. Inspired by the tradition of affirmative critique (Staunæs, 2016), I have aimed at articulating tendencies of difference, searching for diversity and breakdowns, and constructing mysteries (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This has served as my general analytical strategy and has inspired me across the papers of the dissertation.

Overall, I have furthermore been inspired by the multimodal constitution analysis as presented by Højgaard and Søndergaard (2015). This analytical approach includes several constitution modalities, both of social, discursive, material, and subjective kinds. It is the empirical materials that decide the balancing of the modalities in the analysis. The multimodal constitution analysis privileges a curiosity on processes of becoming and invites analyses that encompass different modalities. Most of my empirical materials have invited me to focus on the social/discursive modalities, for instance, the negotiations between organizational actors. However, it has also directed my attention towards the relations and interactions between the organizational actors and the methods they use, such as selection criteria (paper 3) and personality tests (paper 2), and how these methods contribute to the performance of employee selection.

On a more practical level, I have used NVivo to structure my data and create a data overview. Different research aims and analytical approaches call for different data needs in terms of “depth (process detail) and breadth (number of cases)” (Langley, 1999, p. 695). Whereas paper 2 and paper 3 are characterized by the need for depth, paper 1 is better characterized by the need for breadth (for an overview of which materials I draw on in each of the three papers, see Table 11). Accordingly, all audio recorded data that are used for detailed in-depth analysis have been transcribed. For instance, all audio recordings from the hiring process in the municipality (job interviews, meetings, and the interviews I have conducted) have been transcribed, because the process details are essential for the analytical approach in paper 3. In contrast, when I am aiming at breadth, as is the case in paper

1 in which I draw on the full data set, I have contented myself with using the field notes[4] as a starting point. Sometimes, if I came across a particularly interesting passage in my field notes during the analytical work for paper 1, I would then listen to the audio recording and transcribe that specific passage. However, I decided to transcribe the expert interviews in full length because these data form the starting point for my analysis in the first paper.

Table 11. Summary of data used in each paper

	Data
Paper 1	**The full data set** Observations, interviews, and documents Analytical starting point: Expert interviews (audio recorded and transcribed)
Paper 2	**Danish trade union** Observations, interviews, and documents Primary focus: Observations (audio recorded and transcribed) from one test-based dialogue during a job interview
Paper 3	**Danish municipality** Observations, interviews, and documents Primary focus: Observations (audio recorded and transcribed) from a complete hiring process

Although the three papers on an abstract level draw on some of the same fundamental analytical ideas, I have mobilized different analytical approaches and concepts in each paper as the tools that have supported my analytical work (see Table 12). In the first paper (chapter 5), I use the "Gioia methodology" (Gioia et al., 2012) to identify the coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns (Jarzabkowski et al., 2016; Spee et al., 2016) that selectors orient towards to handle the competing demands for standardization and flexibility. In the second paper (chapter 6), we make an affirmative critique (Staunæs, 2016) to articulate the dialectical relation between ordering and disordering (Cooper, 1986; Putnam et al., 2016) in personality testing to explore the performative potential of their interplay. In the third paper (chapter 7), we use the temporal dimension of selection criteria as an anchoring point (Langley, 1999) to examine selectors repeated attempts to reconfigure the relationship of past, present, and future to form fit trajectories (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Wiebe, 2010). I will confine myself to this brief presentation of my analytical strategy here, since each paper will elaborate on its own specific analytical approach and concepts. The following three chapters present the empirical papers that form the basis of my dissertation.

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[4] Please recall that all audio recorded events were also observed and recorded in field notes – and often very detailed field notes. For instance, during job interviews I were usually writing field notes non-stop throughout the interviews.

Table 12. Analytical approaches and concepts in the three papers

	Analytical approaches	Analytical concepts
Paper 1	“Gioia methodology”	Coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns
Paper 2	Affirmative critique	Dialectical interplay of ordering and disordering
Paper 3	Anchoring point: Temporality of criteria	Temporal sensemaking: Connecting past, present, and future into a fit trajectory

5. From Best Practice to Co-existing Hiring Routines

Harnessing the Problematic Meritocratic Ideal

Kathrine Møller Solgaard

Abstract

This paper examines how selectors handle competing demands for standardized best practice and situational flexibility in performing hiring routines. To address this issue, I draw on an 18-month ethnographic study conducted across multiple organizations to extract the coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns that selectors orient towards to handle the tension. I find that selectors handle the demand for standardized best practice by invoking and reframing the overarching ideal of meritocratic selection. By doing so, selectors legitimize four contradictory coexisting ostensive patterns that either align with, improve, deconstruct, or circumvent the standardized best practice model. Multiple ostensive patterns that they can orient towards as needed allow them to flexibly meet the demands of the specific hiring situations they face. The findings contribute to routine dynamics and employee selection literature in two main ways: First, the study captures the role of overarching ideals in routine dynamics characterized by competing demands for standardization and flexibility and shows how ideals can be harnessed to legitimize the flexibility that they simultaneously constrain. Second, it theorizes how competing demands might be managed by developing a repertoire of ostensive patterns that relate to the demand for standardization and provide flexibility simultaneously.

Keywords: *Routine dynamics, supra-organizational routines, multiplicity, coexisting ostensive patterns, meritocratic ideal, standardization, flexibility, employee selection, hiring, ethnography*

Introduction

> Perhaps the greatest technological achievement in industrial and organizational (I–O) psychology over the past 100 years is the development of decision aids (e.g., paper-and-pencil tests, structured interviews, mechanical combination of predictors) that substantially reduce error in the prediction of employee performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Arguably, the greatest failure of I–O psychology has been the inability to convince employers to use them. (Highhouse 2008, p. 333)

Best practice in employee selection is well-established and implies standardization. Standardized best practice selection is assumed to have substantial economic value for companies (Schmidt and Hunter 1998, Schmidt et al. 2016) and to prevent discriminatory selection decisions, which unfortunately remains a huge societal problem (Ghumman and Ryan 2013, Drydakis 2015, Derous et al. 2017). The standardized best practice model celebrates objective assessment and rational, unbiased decision-making and is closely related to ideals of fairness and meritocracy (Born and Scholarios 2017). Accordingly, most scholars in the field have focused on developing valid methods for judging job seekers solely on their merits, typically defined as the KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics) critical for job performance (Ployhart et al. 2017).

However, although best practice selection is well-established, studies repeatedly show that selectors do not favor using the most valid assessment methods (Rowe et al. 1994, Rynes et al. 2002, Fisher et al. 2021) and, as the introductory quote suggests, the deviation is considered highly problematic (Anderson et al. 2001, Ployhart 2006, Taylor 2006, Rynes et al. 2007, Anderson 2017, Stjerne 2018). Most scholars point a finger at practitioners when accounting for the divide, explaining it as a knowledge gap (Rynes et al. 2002, Fisher et al. 2021) or a knowing–doing gap (Pfeffer and Sutton 2000). Others accuse practitioners of relying too much on intuition (Highhouse 2008), of being satisfied with the status quo (Gill 2018), or of perceiving some of the research findings as self-threatening (Rynes et al. 2018). In contrast, another body of research argues that the persistent research–practice gap is due to the lack of pragmatic science (Anderson et al. 2001) and to the flawed fundamental assumptions of the dominant psychometric research paradigm (Herriot

1993, McCourt 1999). Yet, none of these explanations build on an inquiry into the challenges and concerns of selectors as they perform hiring routines as part of their everyday work. Therefore, little is known about employee selection from the viewpoint of selectors, and even less about their reasons for allegedly disregarding research recommendations. This lack of knowledge is problematic, because if we want to bridge the gap we need to develop theories that capture the logic of practice, that is, "the meaningful relational totality in which practitioners are involved" (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011, p. 342).

The few studies that have attempted to probe into the relational totality of practitioners highlight an inherent tension between, on the one hand, the meritocratic ideal of standardization and objectivity and, on the other hand, the need for pragmatic flexibility and adaptation to the specific context. For instance, studies indicate that "objective facts" are constructed by using standardized "neutral" methods and mobilized to meet standards of accountability and justify intuitive selection decisions (Silverman and Jones 1973, 1976; Salaman and Thompson 1978; Roberts and Campbell 2007; Bolander and Sandberg 2013; Klingenberg and Pelletier 2019). Such studies indicate that selectors accomplish the hiring of new employees by aligning with best practice superficially for purposes of legitimization, whereas performing selection in a much more intuitive and flexible manner. Yet, it remains unknown if this is the only way that selectors handle the conflict between the meritocratic pressure for standardized best practice and the contextual pressure for pragmatic flexibility. Even if selectors primarily handle the pressure for standardization through a process of superficial alignment, we still know little about how they simultaneously manage to adapt flexibly to the demands of the specific hiring situation. All in all, the processes through which the competing demands for standardization and flexibility in employee selection are handled remain largely unknown.

To theorize the tension between standardization and flexibility in hiring routines, I draw on insights from literature on routine dynamics (for a recent introduction, see Feldman et al. 2021). Because employee selection is rooted in the research, expertise, legislation, knowledge, ideals, and artifacts of the profession, I conceptualize employee selection as a professional routine that stretches across organizational boundaries (Jarzabkowski et al. 2016). Routine dynamics scholars have developed a distinction between two mutually constitutive aspects of routines, the *performative* (specific actions) and *ostensive* (abstract pattern) (Feldman 2000, Feldman and Pentland 2003). The performative aspects are inherently improvisatory and always, to some extent, novel, but even the ostensive aspects are multiple and may not be the same from person to person, from event to event, or over time (Pentland and Feldman 2005). The multiplicity of ostensive patterns raises important questions about how actors balance, negotiate, and coordinate competing patterns while being entangled with contexts (Feldman 2016, Howard-Grenville et al. 2016, Jarzabkowski et al. 2016, Spee et al. 2016). Building on studies on competing demands for standardization and flexibility in routine dynamics (Turner and Rindova 2012, D'Adderio 2014, Spee et al. 2016), I aim at defining the "supra-organizational" (Jarzabkowski et al. 2016) ostensive patterns of employee selection, as I pursue the following research question: *How do selectors use coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns to handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility in performing hiring routines?*

To answer this question, I draw on an 18-month ethnographic study conducted across multiple organizations. The ethnographic study revolves around hiring routines and includes among other things hundreds of days of observations in a recruitment agency, several shorter observation periods in other organizations, 29 formal interviews with actors involved in employee selection, and a wide range of organizational documents about hiring routines collected from several Danish companies.

I find four coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns that selectors orient towards and switch between to flexibly accomplish employee selection in the various hiring situations they face. They handle the meritocratic pressure for standardized best practice selection by either aligning with, improving, deconstructing, or circumventing the best practice model. The findings contribute to routine dynamics literature, in particular to work on multiple coexisting ostensive patterns and supra-organizational routines, by theorizing how overarching ideals can be harnessed to justify a multiplicity of ostensive patterns; patterns that are at odds with the demand for standardization, yet necessary to accomplish routines flexibly across various contexts. The findings furthermore contribute to literature on employee selection by advancing the current understanding of how selectors handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility when they are performing hiring routines.

Theoretical Framing

From Standardized Best Practice to Pragmatic Flexibility

The research field of employee selection is dominated by the psychometric paradigm, and the paradigm consensus in this field is a case of "unique consistency and duration" (McCourt 1999, p. 1023). The psychometric paradigm operationalizes selection as a predictive hypothesis that links individual differences to individual outcomes, in particular, job performance (Ployhart et al. 2017). Based on a century of research, scholars have established and refined the predictive validity of the most common selection methods and tools, which has led to standardized best practice guidelines (Schmidt and Hunter 1998, Schmidt et al. 2016). McCourt (1999) describes the standardized best practice model of the psychometric paradigm as follows:

> Selection is conceived as an exercise in prediction. On the one hand there is a job consisting of discrete tasks, such that the jobholder needs certain personal attributes to do it successfully. Both tasks and attributes are identified through job analysis. On the other hand, there are individuals who are available to do the job. Selection, then, is the application of assessment instruments – tests, interviews and so on – which will predict performance by determining which individual(s) possess the necessary attributes (the 'selection criteria') in fullest measure. (p. 1013)

However, over the years scholars have problematized the best practice model as defined by the psychometric paradigm in several ways. For instance, scholars have advanced a more strategic approach to hiring that problematizes the narrow focus on individual job performance in the best practice model. The strategic approach rests on the same fundamental assumptions as does the psychometric paradigm about "objective" assessment, prediction, rational decision-making, and standardization as fundamental to employee selection. Yet, these scholars emphasize that organizations need to adapt rapidly in the competitive global environment and argue that this necessity calls for strategic job analysis that incorporates future goals of the organization in the hiring process (Schneider and Konz 1989, Snow and Snell 1993, Sparrow 1997, Williams and Dobson 1997). Instead of hiring for replacement with a "best athlete" approach (Elfenbein and Sterling 2018), hiring should be linked to the strategic objectives of the organization and, importantly, to firm-level performance (Taylor and Collins 2000, Orlitzky 2007, Chanda et al. 2010, Hausknecht and Wright 2012, Phillips and Gully 2015).

Whereas the strategic approach aims at refining and developing the psychometric best practice model, other research currents challenge the basic assumptions underpinning the model and aim at a more radical critique of the paradigm. Social process scholars argue that employee selection is not an assessment of passive job applicants to predict job performance, but rather a facilitation of the social encounter between two negotiating parties (Dachler 1989, Wanous 1992, de Wolff 1993, Anderson and Ostroff 1997). The interpersonal and subjective processes – both of which are interfering biases in the psychometric and strategic approaches – are important dynamics that shape the initial relationship between applicants and organizations (Herriot 1993). Similarly, however with a greater focus on knowledge–power relations, poststructuralist scholars argue that the psychometric paradigm promotes an idealized standard of meritocratic selection, often carrying with it a flipside of discrimination (Nadesan 1997) and subjective judgment (Newton 1994), disguised by the seeming objectivity of its methods. The demarcation of organizational members and nonmembers based on increasingly standardized methods creates the conception of an ideal worker possessing certain competences, which contributes to and legitimizes homogenized corporate cultures (Nadesan 1997, Bergström and Knights 2006, Campbell and Roberts 2007, Roberts and Campbell 2007, O'neil 2016).

Despite these different advancements and problematizations, scholars tend to disregard the multiplicity of research perspectives on employee selection when they conclude that there is a problematic research–practice gap. When comparing research and practice to investigate the gap, they reduce the research field to psychometric research. For instance, when Rynes et al. (2002) conclude that the beliefs of HR practitioners are “notably inconsistent with research findings” (p. 159) (see also, Fisher et al. 2021), they refer only to the psychometric research findings. Highhouse (2008), as another example, argues that the reason practitioners are hesitant about using the most valid selection tools, as defined by psychometric research, is a “Stubborn Reliance on Intuition and Subjectivity in Employee Selection” (the title of his paper). Thus, what the research–practice gap refers to in extant literature is that practitioners do not comply with best practice as defined by psychometric research.

Concluding that a research–practice gap persists leaves open the question of why practitioners do not comply with the psychometric prescriptions, but also, whether they are more inspired by other lines of literature. Anderson et al. (2001) argue that the persistent gap is due to a lack of pragmatic science addressing the concerns of practitioners. Similarly, Herriot (1993) argues that even though practitioners benefit from the status provided by the scientific ideology of the best practice model, they also need to operate within an organizational environment in which the assumptions and values of the psychometric paradigm are increasingly inappropriate. The reductionist assumptions of the psychometric paradigm have led to a neglect of many of the factors that organizations value and to an increasing lack of congruence between the psychometric paradigm and organizational conditions (McCourt 1999). According to de Wolff (1993), the core task in many hiring situations is above all to facilitate a negotiation process between two parties trying to reach an agreement, rather than to predict job performance. Taken together, these studies suggest that the standardized best practice model often is incompatible with practice and that selectors therefore might orient towards the more practice-oriented streams of literature instead. To approach bridging the research–practice gap in employee selection, we need to develop theories that attempt to capture the entwined relationality of practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011).

The few studies that have attempted to probe into the relationality of selection practice highlight that selectors work more flexibly and intuitively than what psychometric research prescribes. These studies have shown that intuition (Miles and Sadler-Smith 2014), aesthetic experience (Stjerne 2018), and job evolution (Cohen and Mahabadi 2022) often are crucial to successfully accomplishing employee selection. When validated selection tools are implemented, they are often used in other ways than what the psychometric paradigm prescribes, for instance as dialogue tools (Solgaard and Nissen 2021) or as sensemaking devices to fit together versions of candidates and selection decisions (Bolander and Sandberg 2013). Studies furthermore suggest that the standardized best practice model may be inadequate in a variety of contexts, for instance in the hotel sector (Lockyer and Scholarios 2004), construction sector (Lockyer and Scholarios 2007), and body art sector (Timming 2011). Taken together, these findings indicate not only that actual practice deviates from best practice but also that the more intuitive, less formal approaches to employee selection might be necessary to accomplish selection in a variety of contexts. In essence, these studies demonstrate that "best practice" depends on the specific hiring situation.

Although research suggests that informal selection approaches are common and sometimes effective, studies also show that standardized methods often are mobilized for reasons of accountability and legitimacy. For instance, studies have shown that "objective facts" and formal procedures often are mobilized to produce convincing accounts that justify intuitive and snap selection decisions that are already made (Silverman and Jones 1973, 1976; Salaman and Thompson 1978; Roberts and Campbell 2007; Klingenberg and Pelletier 2019). Bolander and Sandberg (2013) nuance this finding by showing that selectors consider versions of candidates and decisions simultaneously and try to make them meaningfully consistent to meet standards of accountability.

To sum up, extant research indicates that selectors handle the competing demands for standardization and flexibility by aligning with best practice on the surface; "objective facts" are mobilized to gain legitimacy, rather than to gain predictive validity. Yet, we still know little about the various ways legitimacy might be gained and maintained as selectors perform hiring routines across a variety of contexts that demand flexibility and ingenuity. Even if selectors primarily handle the pressure for standardization through a process of superficial alignment, how do they simultaneously manage to adapt flexibly to the demands of the specific hiring situation? All in all, this knowledge gap calls for further investigation into the situated processes through which selectors handle the competing demands for standardization and flexibility.

Handling Competing Demands With Coexisting Ostensive Patterns

The routine dynamics literature provides a promising theoretical lens to address this issue. Organizational routines are defined by Feldman and Pentland (2003, p. 95) as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors.” Routine dynamics literature focuses on the endogenous process of routines, theorized as the mutual constitution of the performative and ostensive aspects (Feldman 2016). The performative aspect consists of specific actions or performances of the routine made by specific people in specific places and times (Feldman and Pentland 2003). The performative is filled with improvisations that make it possible to get things done in diverse situations and, therefore, the performative aspect is always novel to some extent (Pentland and Feldman 2005, 2007). The ostensive is the abstract pattern, the generalized idea of the routine, and it is both “models of” the routine, providing a description of the activity, and “models for” the routine, providing practitioners with a roadmap for carrying out the activity (Pentland and Feldman 2007, p. 787).

However, even the general idea of the routine, the ostensive pattern, is multiple and may not be the same from person to person, from event to event, or over time, and therefore “the ostensive aspect should not be conceptualized as a single, unified entity” (Pentland and Feldman 2005, p. 797). Over the years, scholars have increasingly paid attention to and advanced an understanding of routines as multiple, for instance by theorizing routines as “ontologically multiple” (D’Adderio and Pollock 2020), or as “process multiplicity”, that is, simultaneously *one* (a single sequence of actions) and *many* (a space of possible paths) (Pentland et al. 2020). Furthermore, scholars have explored the coexistence of competing demands, goals, and ostensive patterns in what is viewed as the “same” routine. Spee et al. (2016) have shown how the simultaneous enactment of coexisting ostensive patterns oriented towards standardization and flexibility is a skillful accomplishment coordinated by intersecting routines, each of which amplifies pressure towards one ostensive pattern or the other. Turner and Rindova (2012), as another example, have shown how the same mechanisms of artifacts and connections are used to support ostensive patterns of both consistency and flexibility and how sustaining dual patterns enables organizational members to simultaneously pursue consistency and enact change. Similarly, D'Adderio (2014) has shown how organizational members simultaneously create and maintain two ostensive patterns to reconcile contrasting pressures towards innovation and replication. These studies have provided important insights into the balancing and coordination of multiple demands and ostensive patterns of standardization and flexibility.

However, none of these studies have examined how overarching ideals, such as the meritocratic ideal of employee selection, influence and are used in the balancing of competing demands. Selectors might have little or no formal education that binds them together as professionals, but they are all influenced by the meritocratic ideal that spans beyond organizational boundaries, influencing the patterning of actions. The hiring routine is a common example of an organizational routine (Feldman 2000, 2016; Feldman and Pentland 2003; Pentland and Feldman 2005; Rerup and Feldman 2011; Feldman et al. 2021), but because employee selection is grounded not only in overarching ideals but also in the research, expertise, legislation, knowledge, and artifacts of the profession, I conceptualize employee selection as a supra-organizational routine (Jarzabkowski et al. 2016, Kho and Spee 2021). Accordingly, I aim at identifying ostensive patterns across organizations to study how selectors use these patterns to handle the meritocratic pressure for standardized best practice selection all while acting flexibly to accomplish selection in the various specific situations they face.

Methods

Data Collection

To study how selectors handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility, I have conducted an 18-month ethnographic study revolving around hiring routines. In accordance with my focus on supra-organizational ostensive patterns, my empirical materials were collected in multiple Danish companies from the summer of 2018 until early 2020. The materials consist of observations, interviews, and documents (see Table 13). The fieldwork is three-sided.

Table 13. Summary of Data

Data Source	Data Details	Data Content	Data Use
Observations Documented in field notes and/or audio recordings	- 41 job interviews (ca 41 hrs.) - 16 evaluation meetings (ca 9 hrs.) - 13 preparation meetings (e.g., search and screening) (ca 12 hrs.)	Specific performances of hiring routines observed across seven different organizations (1 large enterprise, 4 SMEs, 1 municipality, and 1 labor union)	- Identify/create supra-organizational ostensive patterns - Understand how selectors ongoingly switch their orientation towards different ostensive patterns - Understand how selectors handle competing demands of standardization and flexibility in situ
	- 1 personality test certification course (ca 15 hrs.) - 7 workshops about recruitment and selection (ca 6 hrs.)	Descriptions of best practice recruitment and selection	Gain insight into idealized descriptions of hiring routines and the use of artifacts
	Ca 140 working days at a shared office space with the recruitment team of an HR consultancy firm	Very diverse, for example: - Conversations about assignments and challenges - Specific performances of parts of hiring routines (e.g., search, job interviews, and phone screenings) - Reflections on their job role as agency recruiters	- Understand how selectors handle competing demands of standardization and flexibility - Understand the work life, challenges, reasoning, and reflections of agency recruiters
Interviews Documented in audio	11 semistructured expert interviews with recruiters from different organizations	Descriptions of both specific performances and general ideas of routines	- Identify supra-organizational ostensive patterns

recordings, transcribed			- Identify basic assumptions about jobs, persons, and organizations - Gain insight into how selectors experience the competing demands for standardization and flexibility
	18 semistructured interviews with applicants and selectors	Reflections on the specific hiring routine that they have just participated in (interviews were conducted in relation to observed hiring routines)	- Nuance my understanding of the observed performances of hiring routines - Understand how different actors understand and articulate the hiring routine
Documents	Various organizational documents from 12 different organizations	For example: Emails about specific hiring routines, job adds, applications, personality test results, reports about hiring trends, status reports about the Danish labor market, and organizational flowcharts of hiring processes	- Supplement observations and interviews by giving me the same written reference points as the involved actors have - Gain insight into idealized descriptions of hiring routines across organizations

First, I have conducted fieldwork in an HR consultancy firm approximately two days a week for 18 months. Here, I had a desk at a shared office space with a recruitment team that works with recruitment and selection fulltime. Sometimes I was at the office as a passive bystander, who observed the work, interactions, and conversations of the team. At other times, I participated as a colleague, and was actively engaged in discussions about their assignments, challenges, and concerns. Furthermore, I sometimes shadowed (Czarniawska 2007) the recruiters on their assignments and, thus, observed their performance of hiring routines in client companies.

Second, I have conducted fieldwork in three other organizations that manage their employee selection routines without external consultancy. In these organizations, I systematically followed three complete hiring processes from beginning to end: I followed the selectors (i.e., hiring managers, internal HR consultants, and hiring committee members) and participated during screening and preparation meetings, job interviews, personality test feedback sessions, and evaluation/decision meetings, and gathered data by combining participant observations and repeated interviewing.

Third, to further widen the scope of my investigation, I have generated data by engaging in a range of other events and activities. Of these, it is essential to mention that I have conducted semistructured in-depth expert interviews with recruiters and HR consultants from different organizations. The interviews contain both detailed descriptions of specific hiring routines (e.g., the sequence of actions and use of assessment tools) and reflections of a more general nature on the objectives, values, and ideals of employee selection. Furthermore, I have participated in a personality test certification course with a group of selectors and attended several workshops about recruitment and selection. In many of the empirical settings, I have collected relevant documents, such as formal flowcharts of hiring routines or emails concerning specific hiring processes.

Overall, my fieldwork has generated a rich and diverse data set, and it has provided me with an in-depth understanding of the performative and ostensive aspects of hiring routines as well as the concerns, objectives, values, considerations, and rationales of a wide range of selectors. Although the data set represents many different job types, selectors, organizations, and sectors in Denmark, it must be emphasized that I do not claim it to be a representative sample that allows me to identify the most common variants of hiring routines (although some of the ostensive patterns I identify might be so, indeed). Instead, and following Pentland et al. (2020, p. 14), my research interest is directed at “the whole space of possible paths, not just the dominant few.”

Data Analysis

The routine dynamics perspective makes it possible to study patterns across organizations while avoiding a focus on patterns as purely envisioned, intended, or mandated, because ostensive aspects are enacted patterns, produced through action (Feldman et al. 2021). “Ostensive aspects of routines are always made up of performances that we can point to” (Feldman et al. 2021, p. 8), and both practitioners and researchers can create the ostensive patterns from these performances (Pentland and Feldman 2005). Accordingly, I have observed specific performances of hiring routines and asked interviewees to talk about specific performances in order to extract patterns across organizational boundaries. In the analysis of my data, I furthermore draw on selectors' accounts of the general idea of hiring routines, given that such accounts reflect the ostensive patterns (Pentland and Feldman 2005, Turner and Rindova 2012). I suggest that combining accounts of the general idea with specific performances forms a strong foundation for identifying the coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns that selectors orient towards to handle the competing demands for standardization and flexibility.

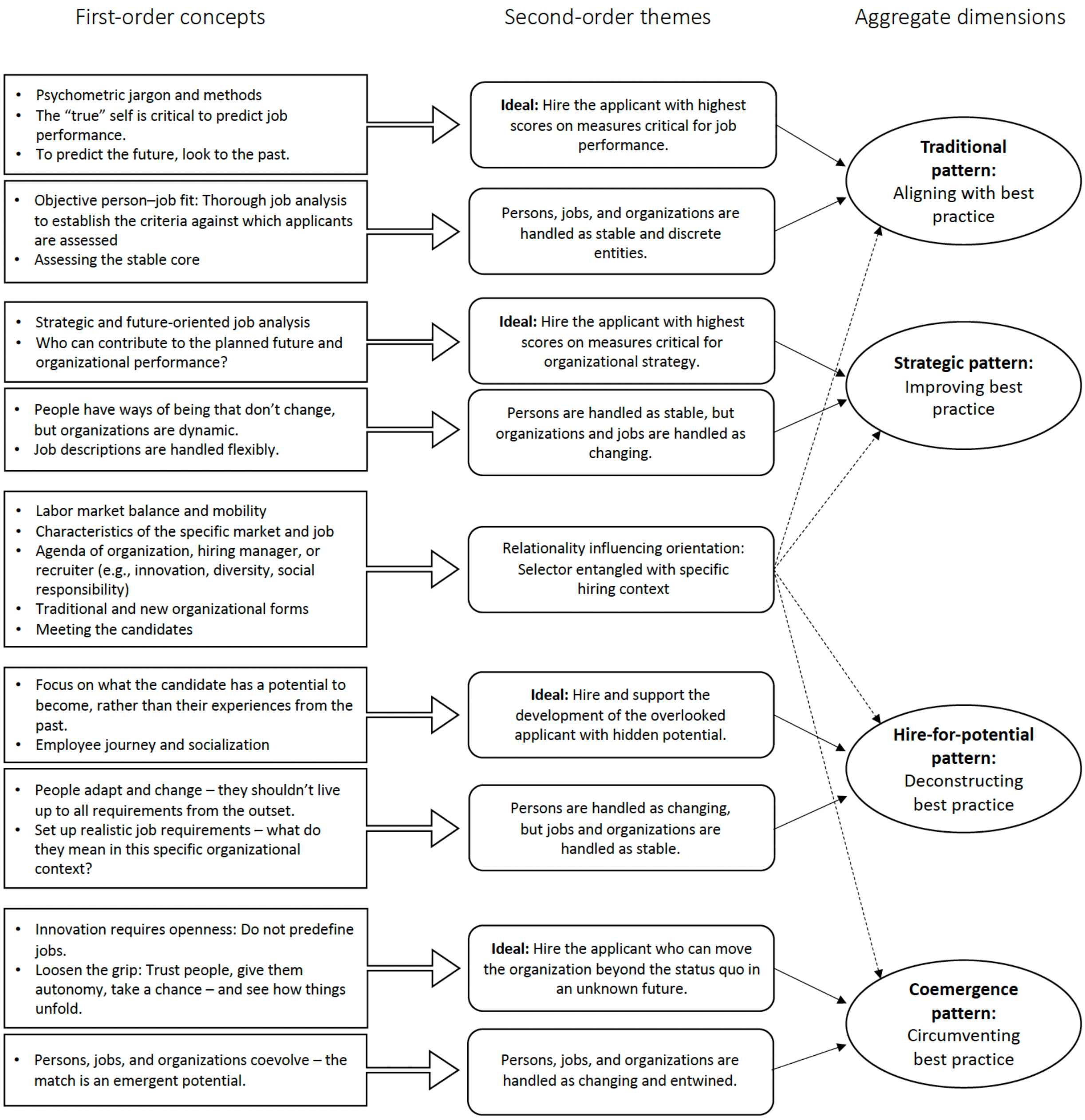
In the analysis of my data, I was inspired by an abductive approach (Locke et al. 2008, Tavory and Timmermans 2019) and, more specifically, the "Gioia methodology" (Gioia et al. 2012). Accordingly, I began by reading my interview transcripts, field notes, and organizational documents to familiarize myself with them. While reading, I was curious about a broad array of aspects in relation to hiring routines: How do selectors perform hiring routines in different organizational contexts? What are they trying to accomplish? Which actions, actors, and artifacts are involved and for what reasons? Is hiring best understood as one supra-organizational routine or as many different routines? How do selectors describe the routine(s) (actions, sequences, objectives, ideals, artifacts, etc.)? Do they strive to do the routine(s) in the same way(s) each time? What can make them change their approach? Already here I made a list with ideas and "breakdowns" that emerged from empirical impressions that were unanticipated and puzzling to me (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007).

I then conducted an inductive, open coding of my interview data. The codes were descriptive, closely linked to data, and provided me with a content overview. I started to look for similarities and differences in my initial codes and was able to merge them into 21 first-order concepts. During this process, I was intrigued by realizing that selectors sometimes switched between what appeared to be contradictory assumptions about the stability/changeability of persons, jobs, and organizations. With this breakdown in mind, I went through my fieldnotes and transcripts from the observed hiring routines to see whether the same was the case here. I noticed an ongoing tension: On the one hand, many actions were in line with the psychometric best practice model and reflected ideals of "scientific objectivity" and rational decision-making; for instance, they used structured interview guides, IQ tests, personality tests, and competency tests and ongoingly referred to the methods' validity. On the other hand, their actions also reflected other rationales, often emerging from being entangled with a specific situation, such as "inexperienced candidates should be given a chance to get experience," "the dialogue about the test results is more important than the test results per se," and "you should never ignore your gut feeling." I realized that different rationales, values, and goals coexist in hiring routines, and that selectors seemingly switch between these to accomplish selection in the specific contexts.

To move from first-order concepts to second-order themes, I moved back and forth between interesting passages in my data, the first-order concepts, and the emerging themes and ideas I had noted down, particularly the theme of multiple rationales, values, and goals as explained above. According to Pentland and Feldman (2005), comparing the ostensive aspects of routines enables researchers to compare different world views. For that reason, I started to suspect that the multiple rationales reflected multiple ostensive patterns. I looked for overlaps among the first-order concepts and tried to discern the supra-organizational commonalities in the hiring routines to extract the ostensive patterns while I constantly compared the concepts to those in the employee selection literature. Through this meaning condensation, I approached a more theoretical explanation of my data as I structured them into nine second-order themes.

I then returned to my data to revisit the passages that had given rise to the codes and themes to make sure I did not lose sight of the somewhat coherent performances and narratives, which I had broken down into separate codes and, subsequently, structured into themes in the first analytical steps. Because I was curious about how selectors' orientation towards supra-organizational ostensive patterns is entwined with and related to the specific hiring context in which they are involved, I needed to be very sensitive to the situatedness of their performances and articulations. I went through several iterations, moving back and forth between data, second-order themes, and theory, and I discussed the emerging analysis with colleagues. Through this process, I rearranged and refined my concepts and themes several times. The themes were finally aggregated into four supra-organizational ostensive patterns (aggregate dimensions, see the data structure in Figure 2). During this process, it became clear that each ostensive pattern handles persons, jobs, and organizations as stable/dynamic in a different way; gains legitimacy by rearticulating the meritocratic ideal in a different way; and, by doing so, handles the demand for standardized best practice selection in a different way. Together, the four ostensive patterns make it possible for selectors to accomplish selection in the specific complexity they meet in each hiring situation.

Figure 2. Data Structure


First-order concepts
Second-order themes
Aggregate dimensions
• Psychometric jargon and methods • The "true" self is critical to predict job performance. • To predict the future, look to the past.
• Objective person–job fit: Thorough job analysis to establish the criteria against which applicants are assessed • Assessing the stable core
• Strategic and future-oriented job analysis • Who can contribute to the planned future and organizational performance?
• People have ways of being that don't change, but organizations are dynamic. • Job descriptions are handled flexibly.
• Labor market balance and mobility • Characteristics of the specific market and job • Agenda of organization, hiring manager, or recruiter (e.g., innovation, diversity, social responsibility) • Traditional and new organizational forms • Meeting the candidates
• Focus on what the candidate has a potential to become, rather than their experiences from the past. • Employee journey and socialization
• People adapt and change – they shouldn't live up to all requirements from the outset. • Set up realistic job requirements – what do they mean in this specific organizational context?
• Innovation requires openness: Do not predefine jobs. • Loosen the grip: Trust people, give them autonomy, take a chance – and see how things unfold.
• Persons, jobs, and organizations coevolve – the match is an emergent potential.
Ideal: Hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical for job performance.
Persons, jobs, and organizations are handled as stable and discrete entities.
Ideal: Hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical for organizational strategy.
Persons are handled as stable, but organizations and jobs are handled as changing.
Relationality influencing orientation: Selector entangled with specific hiring context
Ideal: Hire and support the development of the overlooked applicant with hidden potential.
Persons are handled as changing, but jobs and organizations are handled as stable.
Ideal: Hire the applicant who can move the organization beyond the status quo in an unknown future.
Persons, jobs, and organizations are handled as changing and entwined.
Traditional pattern: Aligning with best practice
Strategic pattern: Improving best practice
Hire-for-potential pattern: Deconstructing best practice
Coemergence pattern: Circumventing best practice

Findings

In the following, I present the four identified supra-organizational ostensive patterns of hiring routines that selectors orient towards to accomplish employee selection across the specific hiring situations they face. I refer to these as the traditional pattern, strategic pattern, hire-for-potential pattern, and coemergence pattern. Together, multiple coexisting patterns are what enable selectors to accomplish selection flexibly. In addition, as I will show in the following sections, each pattern handles the meritocratic pressure for standardization by harnessing the meritocratic ideal differently. In the presentation, I include a few specific performances or articulations for illustrative purposes (for more data examples, see Table 15 in Appendix).

Traditional Pattern

The traditional pattern resonates with the scientific rationality of the psychometric paradigm in which reality consists of discrete entities with pregiven properties, and accurate knowledge about these is sought to select the best candidate for the job. In line with the psychometric best practice model, the pattern aims ostensibly at an objective person–job fit. One selector captures the essentials of this pattern with a metaphor: "We have a machine. It must run. A cogwheel is bursting. We need a new cogwheel. And then you go out and look for a cogwheel" (HR consultant). The metaphor emphasizes the functionalist replacement logic inherent in the pattern: When we observe that something is missing, something that would make the organizational machine run more smoothly, we look for a new employee possessing the necessary characteristics to add what was missing. When orienting towards this pattern, selectors handle the demand for standardized best practice selection by aligning with the goals and rationality of best practice selection as defined by the psychometric paradigm, at least on the surface.

When orienting towards the traditional pattern, selectors handle the job as a stable entity that exists independently of the job holder. The routine begins with a job analysis that carves out the job as a unit of predefined tasks and responsibilities, establishing the base for selection: "If you haven't made a proper job analysis (…)

then the predictive validity quickly disappears (…) I mean, if I don't know what I am looking for, how can I then look [for it]?" (agency recruiter). This first step, and the related assumptions, is ubiquitous and part of most formal representations of selection, for example, in the standardized best practice model of the psychometric paradigm, in employee selection workshops, in practitioner-oriented guides, and in organizational flowcharts. Because the ideal is an objective person-job fit, the organization is typically handled as a unity of definable values that can be included in the job description. The job analysis provides selectors with the criteria against which applicants are subsequently assessed.

During the assessment, selectors handle applicants as if they have a stable "true" self, consisting of pregiven drivers and preferences. The "true" self is, however, not immediately available, and it can be difficult to accurately uncover the assumed stable core of applicants. Personality tests are often used, but selectors also tend to have their own more idiosyncratic and experience-based tactics, for instance: "I run my interviews in a way where candidates always get the chance to present themselves and talk about their thoughts first. Because if I start to tell too much about who we are (…), then they will just reflect it. Then you won't get the authentic version of who they really are" (in-house recruiter). The intuitive ability to ask the right questions and understand who people really are is often described as a core professional skill that selectors acquire over time. Other tactics that selectors use are to share a bit about themselves during job interviews to create trust or to observe applicants' behavior before the job interview, when they are not conscious about their performance. Although the applicant's skills and knowledge are important, these are assumed to be acquirable if one has the drive, and therefore the assessment of the "true" self is the main objective to infer person-job fit.

In line with the psychometric paradigm (e.g., Schmidt and Hunter 1998, Schmidt et al. 2016), the focus in the traditional selection pattern is narrowed to person-job fit. In general, selectors often orient towards this pattern, especially in the context of bureaucratic organizations looking for replacements, when jobs are easy to define, when there is an excess of applicants, and when they can afford to spend time on standardized procedures and be selective. Furthermore, when selectors act as consulting experts from a distance, either because HRM functions are centralized or because they support the process as external consultants, they tend to draw on this pattern as a starting point. By aligning with the psychometric jargon (e.g., “without a job analysis the predictive validity disappears”), with the goal of predicting job performance and with the recommendation to use the methods with high predictive validity, they meet the meritocratic ideal of best practice selection (i.e., *hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical for job performance*) – at least on the surface. As an agency recruiter admits, “it is a way of legitimizing that you actually deliver a professionalism.” Their tricks of the trade to reveal the “true” self are just one example of how the pattern, and indeed their performances, deviate from the standardized best practice model.

Strategic Pattern

In the strategic pattern, the hiring routine is framed as the acquirement and rearrangement of human resources to realize organizational strategy. In a world where jobs change quickly as organizations adjust to shifting circumstances, technological developments, and market disruptions, staffing aligned with strategy becomes a means to take control of the unknown and achieve organizational goals. Even though jobs and organizations are handled as dynamic in this pattern, applicants are still handled as if they have a stable core of preferences. However, the focus is not so much on the “true” self and person-job fit, but rather on predicting performance on an organizational level, as the strategic research tradition prescribes. The machine metaphor is used by the same selector again with a slight twist: “We have a machine. We need to move it over there. We need a gadget. And then you try to describe that gadget.” Thus, selectors focus on hiring people who can contribute to the planned future of the organization and move the organizational machine to an already specified place.

When selectors are situated in a context in which organizations and jobs undergo rapid changes, the best practice of conducting a traditional job analysis falls short. An HR consultant emphasizes this inadequacy by mimicking a traditional selection dialogue between a hiring manager and a recruiter: “Now Casper has resigned. We need a new Casper. Okay, what was Casper like? You know, he is good with customers and good at getting new orders (...) Okay, I'm going to find one like that.”

According to the HR consultant, a procedure like this mistakenly focuses on replacement instead of on defining the critical capabilities to realize organizational strategy. Instead, when selectors orient towards the strategic pattern, they aim at a more future-oriented and strategic job analysis, which can be performed in many ways. One very data-driven example is from an HR consultancy firm that customizes a competence framework to the strategy of each client company and maps the identified competencies onto different facets in a personality test. By measuring relevant performance indicators in the client organization on an ongoing basis, they keep adjusting the framework to market fluctuations. A more common variant is to incorporate the organizational strategy in the job analysis by considering the company's expected future needs.

In the strategic pattern, the resulting job descriptions are handled more flexibly than what the standardized best practice model prescribes. Selectors focus on the overall needs of the department and organization and to meet these needs, they sometimes change the job content to fit an attractive candidate or even reorganize tasks and responsibilities among existing employees: "A slight twist happens when you meet the candidate, where you say, hey, this is maybe where he is much stronger than I had thought. And maybe we actually need that. And then there's maybe someone else in the department who steps up and takes some other tasks" (in-house recruiter). Such adaptations are a means to work towards the strategic objectives but also to ensure that the job fits the preferences and personality of a given applicant. The need for job adaptations rests on the assumption that "[p]eople have some ways of being that do not change. That is, you have some preferences and ways of doing things, and you do not just adapt those to the role. In such cases, it is more a question of the role being adapted to them" (in-house recruiter).

When selectors find it meaningful to orient towards the strategic pattern, their choice of orientation is typically related to the organizational situation (e.g., lacking the necessary capabilities to realize organizational strategy), or to the market (e.g., ongoing disruptions). Even more than the traditional pattern, the strategic pattern draws on psychometric jargon, methods, and tools. However, it does not align with the goal of person-job fit or aim at predicting individual job performance. Instead, the pattern draws on insights provided by the strategic research tradition (e.g., Chanda et al. 2010, Hausknecht and Wright 2012) and, in line with this dependence, the demand for standardized best practice is handled by framing the strategic pattern as improving best practice, which falls short when one hires to realize organizational strategy. In other words, the strategic pattern gains legitimacy by harnessing and reframing the meritocratic ideal as *hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical for organizational strategy.*

Hire-for-Potential Pattern

In sharp contrast to the patterns above, selectors sometimes handle employees as shapeable, adaptable, and in constant development. When orienting towards the hire-for-potential pattern, selectors pay attention to the intersubjective processes and how the hiring routine shapes the emerging employment relationship. Their attention makes the pattern resonate with many of the key ideas in the social process research tradition. Selectors focus on identifying and nurturing the potential of applicants and foreground applicants' ability to "stretch the elastic band" (HR consultant) based on the assumption that new employees will lose their motivation quickly if they live up to all job requirements from the outset. What really matters is applicants' potential and motivation rather than their current experiences, preferences, and abilities, and the objective is therefore to "get a picture of what kind of hidden resources they possess" (HR consultant) – *hidden* in the sense that these resources tend to be overlooked when applying the best-practice methods.

When selectors orient towards this pattern, they are aiming not only at identifying the future-oriented potential but also at supporting its growth. They frame themselves as employee journey facilitators, rather than information gatherers who try to establish the best possible conditions for the applicant's self-presentation to "make the candidate shine" (agency recruiter). In this pattern, the hiring routine is part of the organizational socialization and shapes the initial interactions in a fragile relationship that must be supported to develop successfully. During the hiring routine, different versions of applicants are constructed, shaping which "developmental seeds are sown" (agency recruiter). What version of the candidate that becomes the accepted "truth" affects not only who ends up with a job offer, but also "the opportunity space which is established for the candidate afterwards" (agency recruiter), and thus, how the employment relationship will unfold. During the hiring routine, applicants get familiar with organizational values and start imagining themselves as part of the organization, and “the hiring process must support that dream” (HR consultant).

Interestingly, when selectors orient towards the hire-for-potential pattern, they pay very limited attention to the job or organization per se. The ability of applicants to adapt to job demands is what makes most selection processes successful: “We can substitute our weaknesses all the time, and we can also develop our strengths. And that means we can always make it work” (HR consultant). The great faith in applicants’ ability to adapt and develop often makes the job and organization secondary in the hiring routine. In the routine, jobs and organizations are handled as stable entities that candidates adapt to. For instance, graduates are often hired without a specific job in mind, based on the conviction that they can learn to fill many different existing positions. When selectors instead have a specific job in mind, they focus on defining only the critical job requirements. Selectors emphasize the importance of setting up only a few realistic and unambiguous job requirements, because too many requirements delude them to focus on what the applicant currently is or can do, instead of what the applicant has the potential to become. In my data set, the risk of setting up unrealistic requirements is captured with many colorful expressions, such as the tendency to look for a “superman,” “superwoman,” “five-legged horse,” “five-legged unicorn,” “five-legged cow,” or “five-titted cow.”

When selectors are situated in hiring contexts where there is a lack of qualified applicants (e.g., low unemployment rates), where the salary level attracts only new graduates, or where the hiring organization has a focus on socially responsible hiring to create a diverse and inclusive organization, they tend to orient towards the hire-for-potential pattern to be able to accomplish selection. The hire-for-potential pattern seeks to deconstruct the standardized best practice model by arguing that what makes most hiring routines successful is applicants’ ability to constantly develop and adapt, rather than accurate prediction of job performance. The scientific rationality of prediction is replaced by inspiration from social process research (Dachler 1989, Wanous 1992, de Wolff 1993, Anderson and Ostroff 1997), for example, when selectors frame themselves as employee journey facilitators. But other sources of inspiration also shine through, for instance, appreciative inquiry's search for the "best of what is" (Ludema et al. 2006, Cooperrider et al. 2008) when selectors try to "make the candidate shine." Furthermore, the pattern invokes the poststructuralist critique of standardized best practice selection (Nadesan 1997, Bergström and Knights 2006, Campbell and Roberts 2007, Roberts and Campbell 2007, O'neil 2016) to promote diversity and give applicants who fall outside the "ideal worker" standard a chance to prove their worth. By reframing the meritocratic ideal as the socially responsible choice to *hire and support the development of the overlooked applicant with hidden potential*, the demand for standardized best practice is deconstructed and the hire-for-potential pattern is legitimized, both of which support flexibility.

Coemergence Pattern

When orienting towards the ostensive pattern of coemergence, selectors handle persons, jobs, and organizations as inseparable and in flux. The fit between a given applicant and an organization is handled as a potential with the ability to develop in many different directions. Only by some sort of tryout, for example, role-playing during the hiring routine or ideally an internship, is it possible to get a preview of what might emerge from the relation between person, job, and organization: "It's about trying each other out in the job and thereby ensuring better potential for the best match" (HR consultant). Without a tryout, the match exists only as an abstraction during the hiring routine, and whether or how it will materialize in the subsequent employment is assumed to be unpredictable and dependent on future circumstances, among others "the whole onboarding part" (agency recruiter).

When orienting towards the coemergence pattern, selectors avoid assessing applicants against a predefined list of requirements because "an analysis of the job, it is as fuzzy as an analysis of a person" (HR consultant). Therefore, a more important question to pose is: "Well, can this person move with us? Because we don't know where we are going" (HR consultant). One way that selectors try to explore if the applicant can move with the organization is by presenting applicants with strategical problems rather than with predefined tasks: "Instead of recruiting specifically and going out and looking for a hammer because we need a hammer, try to go out and describe the problem that you think the company is facing" (HR consultant). Employee selection is, thus, used as an opportunity to invite applicants to cocreate new perspectives, methods, and solutions.

Compared to the aforementioned patterns, the coemergence pattern is about loosening the grip and trusting that the path forward will unfold and reveal itself along the way. Even the job is sometimes cocreated during the hiring routine: "Listen, what are you bringing with you and what do you want, if you are going to work with us? (…) What do I think that we, as a company, need in this job? And then the two of us will design the job together" (HR consultant). Based on this job design process with each candidate, the company decides on which of the imagined future work relations they prefer and whom they trust will be able to push the organization beyond the status quo. Only the few requirements and conditions that are known are outlined in the hiring process, and when it comes to all the rest, "we must define it along the way when we experience it" (HR consultant). Thus, the emerging relationship between person, job, and organization is handled not only in the gateway to the organization but ongoingly in the evolving work relationship. Thereby, the traditional boundaries between employee selection, onboarding, and the ongoing management of employees and dialogues about the job are dissolved.

In line with scholarly writings that portray modern life as increasingly complex and speeded-up (Bauman 2000, Rosa 2013), the coemergence pattern frames the world as undergoing constant change, a process that challenges the traditional relationship between employers and employees. When selectors are situated in a context of markets in flux, nonbureaucratic organizations, and complex jobs that are hard to define (e.g., when tasks are solved in shifting crossfunctional teams), and where constant innovation is needed to survive, they tend to orient towards the coemergence pattern. When selection is framed as an ongoing accomplishment that begins with the cocreation of the job, the standardized best practice model is circumvented. To accomplish selection in such contexts, selectors can no longer benefit from the status provided by the scientific ideology of the psychometric best practice model (Herriot 1993), and they reinvent their professionalism by cementing themselves as indispensable experts who know how to use the acquirement of human resources as a potential for radical organizational innovation. When hiring in such contexts, selectors need to act in “a much more impulsive, intuitive manner” (HR consultant) and the general idea resonates more with the experimentation and intuitive action often ascribed to adhocracies (Mintzberg 1980, Birkinshaw and Ridderstråle 2015) than with any perspectives provided by the employee selection literature. By reframing the meritocratic ideal as *hire the applicant who can move the organization beyond the status quo in an unknown future*, the standardized best practice model is circumvented, and the competing demands for standardization and flexibility are handled.

Table 14. Summary of Findings

	Traditional	Strategic	Hire for potential	Coemergence
Handled as stable/dynamic	Persons, jobs, and organizations are handled as stable and discrete entities.	Persons are handled as stable, but organizations and jobs are handled as dynamic.	Persons are handled as dynamic, but jobs and organizations are handled as stable.	Persons, jobs, and organizations are handled as dynamic and entwined.
Sources of inspiration	Psychometric paradigm and practitioner-oriented best practice guidelines	Psychometric paradigm and research on strategic staffing	Social process research tradition, appreciative inquiry, and poststructuralist critique	Critical theory on contemporary society and literature on adhocracies
Relationality influencing orientation (examples)	- Bureaucratic organization - Job is easy to define - Excess of applicants	- Lacking capabilities to realize strategy - Markets in flux	- Lack of applicants - Low salary level / graduates - Social responsibility agenda	- Innovation agenda - Complex jobs - New organizational forms - Markets in flux
Handle demand for standardization by:	Aligning with best practice	Improving best practice	Deconstructing best practice	Circumventing best practice
Harnessing the meritocratic ideal	Hire the applicant with highest scores on measures	Hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical	Hire and support the development of the overlooked	Hire the applicant who can move the organization beyond the status quo

	critical for job performance.	for organizational strategy.	applicant with hidden potential.	in an unknown future.
“Ideal type” presentation of the elements of the routine	Traditional job analysis	Strategic job analysis	Define only the few critical requirements.	Define the strategic problems.
	Job posting	Active recruiting (continually building up a candidate pipeline)	Recruitment events	Professional network (always looking for innovative people)
	Screening of applications – a handful are selected at one point in time	Screening of potential candidates and selection on an ongoing basis	Screening of applications – a large proportion is selected	Candidates are handpicked from networks – no screening necessary.
	Job interviews, sometimes accompanied by other traditional methods.	Job interviews and personality testing sometimes accompanied by other tests.	Assessment center / job interviews containing unanticipated challenges or tasks	Informal job dialogue, discussing strategic challenges and codeveloping possible solutions
	Final decision is based on the previous step – often one person is hired.	Possible adaptation / redistribution of job tasks as part of the final decision	Final decision is based on the previous step – often several persons are hired.	A mutual decision which is ongoingly renegotiated during the employment

A Framework: Harnessing the Overarching Ideal to Handle Competing Demands

As the findings above suggest (for a summary, see Table 14), the hiring routine is an effortful, emergent, and skillful accomplishment (Pentland and Rueter 1994, Feldman 2000, Kho and Spee 2021). The accomplishment requires that a selector be flexible to meet the demands of the specific hiring situation, while still being recognized as a professional who judges applicants solely on their merits. The demand for pragmatic flexibility combined with the historical connections between the development of standardized best practice selection and the meritocratic ideal (see Born and Scholarios 2017) establishes an inherent tension between standardization and flexibility in performing hiring routines.

This study set out to investigate this tension by asking: How do selectors use coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns to handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility in performing hiring routines? In the following, I will draw together my findings that are captured in the model in Figure 3. My findings suggest that four supra-organizational ostensive patterns coexist and that they, in conjunction, allow selectors to meet the demands of the specific complexity they face in each hiring situation. By shifting between the patterns that they orient towards, selectors can accomplish hiring routines flexibly across a variety of contexts and situations. Yet, the meritocratic pressure for standardized best-practice selection is an organizing principle for all four patterns. Each of the ostensive patterns gains and maintains legitimacy by harnessing the meritocratic ideal. By invoking that the nature of "merits" in selection is a construction – a convention nurtured by the dominant scientific rationality, rather than a given – selectors expand their space of possible paths (Pentland et al. 2020). Rather than just aligning with the standardized best practice model, it becomes legitimized to improve, deconstruct, or circumvent the model. In short, to handle the competing demands for standardization and flexibility, selectors must harness the meritocratic ideal to allow for multiple coexisting ostensive patterns that they can mix and move between.

The four supra-organizational ostensive patterns are analytical distinctions, yet they are entwined in empirical enactment of hiring routines. They do not exist in a pure form, they are more like Weberian ideal types (see Hernes and Schultz 2020). Selectors' orientation towards the four patterns might shift both from one performance of the routine to the next but also in the moment during the performance of a single hiring routine (for an empirical example, see Vignette 1). These shifts in orientation are entangled with, and enacted through, context, and my study indicates that a wide range of contextual aspects influence the orientation of selectors, including (but not limited to) the involved actors, job type, characteristics of the hiring organization, labor market balance, available time, resources, and so on.

Figure 3. Harnessing the Overarching Ideal to Handle Competing Demands for Standardization and Flexibility

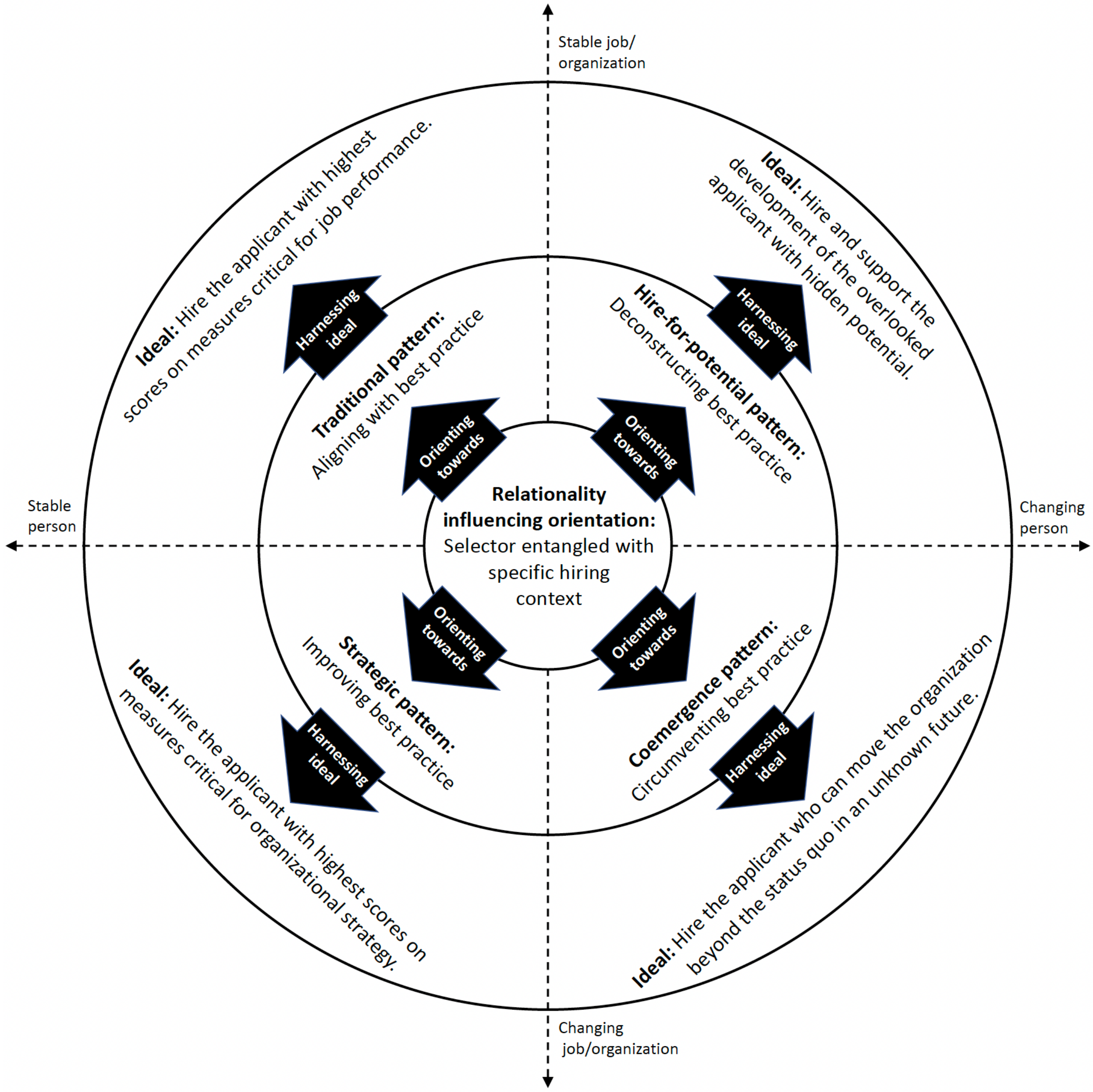

Stable job/ organization
Changing job/organization
Stable person
Changing person
Ideal: Hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical for job performance.
Ideal: Hire and support the development of the overlooked applicant with hidden potential.
Ideal: Hire the applicant with highest scores on measures critical for organizational strategy.
Ideal: Hire the applicant who can move the organization beyond the status quo in an unknown future.
Traditional pattern: Aligning with best practice
Hire-for-potential pattern: Deconstructing best practice
Strategic pattern: Improving best practice
Coemergence pattern: Circumventing best practice
Harnessing ideal
Harnessing ideal
Harnessing ideal
Harnessing ideal
Orienting towards
Orienting towards
Orienting towards
Orienting towards
Relationality influencing orientation: Selector entangled with specific hiring context

Figure 3: The model illustrates how hiring routines are entangled with, and enacted through, shifting contextual circumstances demanding flexibility. To flexibly meet the demands of each specific hiring situation, selectors orient towards, combine, and/or shift orientation between four supra-organizational ostensive patterns: The traditional, strategic, hire-for-potential, and coemergence patterns. Each pattern pragmatically handles the person, job, and organization as stable/changing and derives legitimacy by harnessing the meritocratic ideal, allowing selectors to handle the pressure for standardized best practice selection by either aligning with, improving, deconstructing, or circumventing the standardized best practice model.

Vignette 1. Meeting an Impressive Applicant

In 2019, a Danish trading company (SME) is looking for either a salesperson or someone who has the potential to become a salesperson. The company decides to use a recruitment agency to support their process of finding a new employee. Thus, the agency recruiter and hiring manager start out orienting towards both the traditional and hire-for-potential patterns. However, during one of the first job interviews, they meet an impressive applicant with skills in and experience with branding and marketing. Their encounter with this applicant initiates a shift. Instead of rejecting her as a misfit (traditional pattern), they shift orientation towards the coemergence pattern. They embrace the uncertainty and start codesigning a job in the organization with her. After a few dialogues with her, they decide to offer her a very undefined job with the title Marketing Manager because they trust that she will be able to push the organization in new, unknown but productive directions if they give her the opportunity and free rein.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to "zoom in" (Nicolini 2009, Howard-Grenville et al. 2016) and unfold selectors' contextually situated orientational shifts in all their fine-grained details. Instead, in this paper, I aim at "zooming out" (ibid.) to identify ostensive patterns across organizations as well as the entwinement of these patterns with overarching ideals. However, routines are enacted through performing and patterning, and creating ostensive patterns is an active and ongoing accomplishment (Feldman 2016, Feldman et al. 2021). Following this line of thought, the four supra-organizational patterns should not be mistaken for ready-made stable entities existing "out there." Rather, this study is an attempt to stabilize and conceptualize temporarily the ongoing patterning process that selectors engage in, and to provide models of and models for (Pentland and Feldman 2007) hiring routines.

Discussion

The Multiplicity of Routines

In this study, I have investigated hiring routines across organizations as a case of coexisting supra-organizational ostensive patterns and I have examined how these coexisting patterns of the hiring routine are used to handle competing demands. Thus, the main contribution of this study is that it adds to discussions revolving around the multiplicity of routines and coexisting ostensive patterns (Turner and Rindova 2012, D’Adderio 2014, Spee et al. 2016, D’Adderio and Pollock 2020, Pentland et al. 2020, Feldman et al. 2021). Whereas previous research has found that individuals (Feldman 2000, Howard-Grenville 2005), communities (D’Adderio 2014), connections (Turner and Rindova 2012), intersecting routines (Spee et al. 2016), and artifacts (Turner and Rindova 2012, D’Adderio 2014) are important resources for balancing multiple ostensive patterns, this study adds that overarching ideals might be harnessed to legitimize multiple patterns to handle the tension between contrasting demands.

Overarching ideals that permeate organizational routines are not limited to the field of employee selection. In fact, organizational routines characterized by standardization demands might always be permeated by overarching ideals (sometimes combined with legislation or rules), for instance ideals of consistency, preserving value, accountability, transparency, or efficiency (D’Adderio 2014, Spee et al. 2016, Turner and Rindova 2012). Feldman (2000) discussed the role of ideals held by actors she observed engaged in routines, and she showed how outcomes that fell short of those ideals instigated a *striving* response. In contrast, ideals I discuss are institutionalized and supra-organizational; they are imposed on actors performing routines. Thus, they do not necessarily correspond with practitioners’ own ideals or with practical world demands practitioners face. Such ideals are problematic, not per se, but because they restrict a routine that demands flexibility to be accomplished. The overarching ideal fuels the demand for standardization. Therefore, I suspect that the *harnessing* response the ideal instigates might apply to a wide range of organizational and supra-organizational routines.

A multiplicity of ostensive patterns has been used to refer to various actors’ different ostensive views of the “same” routine (Feldman and Pentland 2003, Pentland and Feldman 2005). Following this understanding, Howard-Grenville and Rerup (2017) suggest tracing participants with contradictory ostensive orientations over extended periods, and Pentland and Feldman (2005) suggest that comparing the ostensive aspects of routines enables researchers to compare different world views. In contrast, this study highlights that practitioners may hold several world views and contradictory ostensive orientations simultaneously. Practitioners are not limited to one version of what is ostensibly the "same" routine. The entanglement of routines in their contexts make practitioners flexibly switch between and sometimes mix contradictory orientations to accomplish the routine effectively.

These findings go beyond those of previous studies on the tension between conflicting demands and goals (Turner and Rindova 2012, D'Adderio 2014, Spee et al. 2016). In this study, the demand for flexibility is not solved by developing ostensive patterns that focus on flexibility, but rather by acquiring a repertoire of multiple coexisting ostensive patterns that selectors flexibly switch between. Similarly, the demand for standardization is not solved by developing ostensive patterns that focus on standardization, but rather the pressure is handled by reframing the overarching ideal as part of each of the ostensive patterns. This finding is contrary to those of previous studies suggesting that the tension is handled by developing two sets of coexisting ostensive patterns oriented towards standardization and flexibility, respectively. My study therefore advances current understandings of how competing demands are balanced by providing a case in which competing demands are managed by nurturing a repertoire of patterns that together provide flexibility, all while each pattern handles the demand for standardization by either aligning with, improving, deconstructing, or circumventing the standardized best practice model.

Lastly, a recent development in the theorization of routine multiplicity (Pentland et al. 2020) suggests that standardization aims at contracting the space of possible paths, whereas flexibility aims at expanding the space of possible paths. My findings support this proposal by showing that it is precisely the multiplicity of ostensive patterns which allows for flexibility by expanding the space of possible paths. By aligning with, improving, deconstructing, and circumventing the standardized best practice model to create room for flexibility, multiple ostensive patterns emerge, making the space of possible paths expand tremendously.

The Research–Practice Gap: Standardization and Flexibility in Employee Selection

How selectors handle the meritocratic pressure for standardized best practice selection, all while accomplishing selection in shifting contexts demanding flexibility, is an important, but to date unaddressed, question in the employee selection literature.

Whereas the tension between standardized best practice and the demand for situational flexibility has been recognized as fundamental to employee selection (Silverman and Jones 1973, 1976; Lockyer and Scholarios 2004, 2007; Timming 2011; Bolander and Sandberg 2013), it remains to be theorized how selectors manage this dual pressure. Thus, the second core contribution of this paper lies in theorizing how selectors handle conflicting demands of standardization and flexibility in employee selection by harnessing the meritocratic ideal (Figure 3).

Extant research has established that psychometric "objective facts" often are mobilized to meet standards of accountability and justify intuitive selection decisions (Silverman and Jones 1973, 1976; Bolander and Sandberg 2013) and that the standardized best practice model is adequate only in some contexts and situations (de Wolff 1993; Lockyer and Scholarios 2004, 2007; Timming 2011). By adopting a routine dynamics lens, this study advances the current understanding. I find that selectors switch between four supra-organizational ostensive patterns to enact selection routines flexibly. One of the four ostensive patterns, the traditional pattern, supports previous studies suggesting that selectors align with best practice superficially for purposes of legitimization while performing selection in a much more intuitive manner. However, the three other patterns elaborate on the current understanding by showing that the pressure for standardized best practice selection is handled not only by aligning with the standardized model but also by improving, deconstructing, or circumventing the model. Yet, the rationalized myth (Meyer and Rowan 1977) of meritocratic employee selection prevails. Selectors do not radically challenge or change the pressure for meritocratic selection, but instead they harness the meritocratic ideal to derive legitimacy from it and allow for routine multiplicity.

These findings also contribute to the current understandings of the research–practice gap in employee selection. In support of previous studies (Rynes et al. 2002, Highhouse 2008, Fisher et al. 2021), I find that selectors rarely adhere strictly to what psychometric research prescribes. My findings suggest that they are indeed inspired by the findings of psychometric research, but not exclusively. For instance, the hire-for-potential and coemergence patterns are more inspired by the social process and poststructuralist research traditions and replace the scientific rationality of prediction with pragmatic potentialization that aims at developing employees and organizations with a more open-ended approach. In line with previous research (D'Adderio 2014), the way selectors balance multiple ostensive patterns is better characterized as both/and rather than either/or (see also Vignette 1). Selectors ongoingly switch, in the moment, towards the ostensive patterns (and thus also towards the research resources) that allow them to accomplish selection in a satisfying manner in the specific situation.

Whereas the employee selection research field is characterized by paradigm consensus (Herriot 1993, McCourt 1999) my findings suggest that the employee selection practice field is better characterized by paradigm diversity, both in the performance and in the patterning of routines and in the theoretical perspectives that these patterns mobilize. Thus, in contrast to the psychometric paradigm that squeezes the complexity of practice into predictive validity by reducing, or even neglecting, the context in which personnel selection takes place, these findings suggest that selectors adjust their selection approach to the specific complexity they meet in each hiring situation. They skillfully orient towards the patterns that support their selection endeavors in specific circumstances. By highlighting the ongoing orientation and reorientation towards the different ostensive patterns stemming from the entwinement of hiring routines in shifting contexts, this study contributes with a more dynamic understanding to studies that argue that the standardized best practice model is adequate only in some sectors (Lockyer and Scholarios 2004, 2007; Timming 2011).

In contrast to previous studies that explain the research–practice gap as a knowledge gap (Rynes et al. 2002, Fisher et al. 2021), a knowing–doing gap (Pfeffer and Sutton 2000), or that accuse selectors of relying too much on their intuition (Highhouse 2008), of being satisfied with the status quo (Gill 2018), or of perceiving some of the research findings as self-threatening (Rynes et al. 2018), this study suggests that selectors are skillful and knowledgeable. In fact, their knowledge goes beyond the standardized best practice model, and they draw flexibly and pragmatically on different research traditions and theoretical resources to skillfully accomplish selection routines in the specific complexity they face and to compensate for the shortcomings of the best practice model. These other sources of inspiration help them to deviate from the best practice model to act flexibly when necessary while still being considered legitimate selectors who strive for meritocratic selection. My findings therefore suggest that whether there is a gap, and what the gap looks like, depends on whether other research traditions than the psychometric paradigm are acknowledged.

Boundary Conditions, Directions for Future Research, and Conclusions

Several calls have been made for studies that explore the entanglement of routines in their contexts (Howard-Grenville et al. 2016), situate routines within the broader settings that might influence how they unfold (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville 2011), and explore how routines are influenced by occurrences and structures that lie beyond organizational boundaries (Howard-Grenville and Lodge 2021). This study responds to such calls by exploring employee selection as a supra-organizational routine (Jarzabkowski et al. 2016, Kho and Spee 2021). Although this analytical choice of zooming out inevitably downplays the many more details and nuances that would materialize by the increased granularity of zooming in (Nicolini 2009, Howard-Grenville et al. 2016), it has allowed for identifying patterns across organizations and for exploring how patterning is influenced by professional standards, norms, and ideals that lie beyond organizational boundaries (Kho and Spee 2021). My study contributes to the understanding of how routines unfold across the boundaries of multiple organizations (Jarzabkowski et al. 2016) by providing insight into a routine which is highly influenced by a supra-organizational ideal that both constrains and enables the accomplishment of hiring routines.

These findings point to three primary avenues for further research. First, my findings support the claim that the prevailing tendency to zoom in on the fine-grained dynamics of situated performances of routines can be productively supplemented by studies that also zoom out on the relationality and dynamic embeddedness of routines in broader supra-organizational contexts (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville 2011, Feldman 2016, Howard-Grenville et al. 2016). One question that emerges as paramount when one zooms out is “when is [a routine] the same routine?” (D’Adderio and Pollock 2020, p. 14), because of course the “same” routine looks different across organizations. More studies are needed that aim at unfolding the relationality of routines beyond organizational boundaries to correct for the prevailing imbalance. Second, and more specifically, this case highlights how some routines are entangled with overarching ideals and standardized best practice models. As already discussed, I suspect that the response of harnessing the overarching ideal to handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility might apply to other (supra-)organizational routines. More studies that investigate the role of overarching ideals in routine dynamics are needed to decide the scope of the model presented in Figure 3. Furthermore, future studies might want to probe not only into the entanglement of other types of routines and ideals but also into how our own research endeavors and theoretical models are coconstitutive of the performing and patterning of routines. Third, and lastly, after zooming out, it is again time to zoom in. The framework provided by this study invites scholars interested in employee selection to zoom in and add insights that are more fine-grained in nature into how selectors enact and switch between coexisting ostensive patterns.

Because effective hiring routines are fundamental to organizational success and survival, we can no longer afford to ignore how the tension between standardization and flexibility affects the day-to-day performance of employee selection. As we have seen, by harnessing the meritocratic ideal, selectors often break free from the restrictions that the demand for standardized best practice has established, allowing for a multiplicity of ostensive patterns, while still retaining the legitimacy of the ideal in relationships with clients and peers.

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Appendix

Table 15. Coding Display: First-Order Concepts With Illustrative Data Examples

Psychometric jargon/methods "I think she's very calm and pleasant, but the test will show" (hiring manager, evaluation meeting) "We're moving on to the next [personality] trait. It's about self-confidence. It's about believing in yourself, your own value and abilities, even outside your comfort zone. On one hand, you can be self-critical, on the other hand, self-confident. Well, you're completely within the norm. You answered towards self-confident in most, if not all your responses. So, I've noted here that you probably have a basic trust in yourself and your abilities, and that you take on new challenges without being afraid to fail" (HR consultant, test feedback during job interview). "I just think there needs to be reasonable evidence before you start estimating people´s job performance, based on different methods. You might as well use astrology which has a validity score of 0.0" (hiring manager). **The "true" self is critical to predict job performance.** "That ability is not something you learn through many years of experience. It is a talent that you either possess or don't possess. It is much more closely linked to personality than anything else" (HR consultant). "I just can't read her and that makes me doubtful. Is she very dominating and 'this is how we did it at [name of former workplace], we will do the same here'? Or is she actually the involving [type]? I'm finding her really hard to read" (hiring committee member, evaluation meeting). "Of course, there are some professional skills (…) But what is much more interesting is: What type of person are we looking for? In my opinion, and I've also discussed this with management, then 20 percent is professional skills and 80 percent is personality" (in-house recruiter). **To predict the future, look to the past.** "[Our hiring routine is] extremely based on the past. I really just think it's proper scientific conduct. In order to predict the future, we look at the past. That's how all empirical practice works (…) If you over and over again have chosen jobs concerning recruitment, well then it's probably because you find recruitment exciting" (in-house recruiter). "His history doesn't really relate that much to sickness benefits, so he'll have to start from scratch. And then I fear we might risk, since we've seen it before, that he tends to his known fields of expertise. That he has his passion in the field he knows already and thus focuses on this" (hiring committee member, screening meeting).
Objective person–job fit: Thorough job analysis to establish the criteria against which applicants are assessed "It's mainly about drawing up a picture of the person against the criteria in the competence profile or job profile (…) To get valid argumentation as opposed to your own notes on what you intuitively think" (hiring manager).

“If you don’t have rigor in your job analysis, if you don’t have rigor in your method when you recruit, if you don’t conduct proper job interviews, if you don’t do proper mapping of qualities into some competences; then none of it matters. And that’s typically the problem. Typically, the problem is that people don’t spend time doing a job analysis” (HR consultant).

Assessing the stable core

“You should, of course, ask the right open questions and dig a bit deeper. You need to open up some more [if you don’t use a personality test]” (in-house recruiter).

“What I did while working in the ministry was that I used my office trainee. I was in HR and running these job interviews and I used our trainee to escort the candidates to and from the interview. But she was a part of the hiring committee, and she provided us with her observations prior [to our final decision]. And she managed to remove one of our top three candidates when she reported that he was arrogant towards her. Right until he stepped through the door and said hello. Then he [suddenly changed attitude and] spoke politely and acted attentively” (HR consultant).

Strategic and future-oriented job analysis

“If you could add some other topics [to the job advertisement]. Especially a topic concerning strategy. And how… Instead of that task list which is very restricted and the “Who are we?” Then maybe have something more substantially strategic. I would find that exciting. That is, where are we going (…) I wish we could be a bit better at sketching the current strategic situation of the company. Or be more specific about the problem you’re hired to handle” (HR consultant).

“What’s your strategy? Which must-wins are you working for? What are your key priorities? What’s your contribution to these key priorities, dear hiring manager? Okay, these contributions. Which capabilities are paramount for you to have in your team? Okay, these six capabilities” (HR consultant).

Who can contribute to the planned future and organizational performance?

“How do you cover the capabilities in your current team? We’re covered this way. We are vulnerable in this capability. Okay, so that capability is essential to be able to deliver on the strategy. So, starting from the strategy and boiling it down, to find the priorities of the hiring manager and the necessary capabilities” (HR consultant).

“At least say, ‘Okay, these capabilities are crucial for success in the years to come. We need to properly hire to cover them.’ That you focus more on strategically important capabilities (…) Is the person able to deliver the capabilities crucial to our strategy?” (HR consultant).

“How we normally run a process? (…) We say: ‘Well, what are the strategic challenges in this company? Or objectives? Their strategy. In this role, what results are you to deliver to help with realizing that strategy? To produce those results, what do you need to do? Which tasks do you have? What are your core tasks? And when you have those core tasks, then you start mapping: What skills do we need?’” (HR consultant).

People have ways of being that don’t change, but organizations are dynamic.

“Personality doesn’t change much. Your working conditions change quite a lot. So therefore, the most stable thing there is in all these very changeable companies is people's personalities. The most stable thing you find in companies is people's personalities” (agency recruiter).

"[Y]ou cannot overrule the way people are. And if you get to a point where the two things [job and person] collide too much, well, then either that person becomes a low performer, which is a shame for everyone, or they quit the job" (in-house recruiter).

Job descriptions are handled flexibly.

"[Y]ou can never talk about a perfect match. Because the job positions are never more than a maximum of 80 percent defined. It's a strange thing to put percentages on, but yes. But there is always that leeway – and it must be that way (…) It should not be more than that. Because it must be open for adaptation to the person" (in-house recruiter).

"Many of our [job] roles change slightly in features when we during a job interview find out, okay, we need someone who can solve A, B, and C, and then it might change to B, C, and D instead" (in-house recruiter).

Focus on what the candidate has a potential to become, rather than their experiences from the past.

"If we start by assuming that we can agree on believing in the changing human being. That we are not static, and that we change and life experiences change us (…) Then what I have on my résumé (…) It becomes enormously static (…) If we define our being as humans and our existence as unfixed, and assume that we evolve and develop our selves along the way (…) It just becomes a huge paradigm clash for me that what we look at [in hiring routines] is so statically focused on the past, if we agree that human beings are changeable" (HR consultant).

"The whole way we recruit. It's stagnated in looking at past experience and not future potential for development (…) So how can you try to make these things visible, with the client, or with those they want to recruit? It's typically about challenging the companies to rethink what they usually do" (HR consultant).

"Then we present two or three [candidates], who are exactly within the profile. The difference is gender and maybe how they act in the room and stuff like that, but besides that they have the same background, same education, have worked in similar types of job, they have had the same management and so on and so forth. And then there is a dark horse. An outlier (…) And it's often the dark horse who gets hired. That's my impression. So, there is this openness. But it demands legitimacy regarding your relationship with the client, to challenge the client. My impression is, when I look back and consider [which candidates] have been successful. Well, a lot of those [organizations] from where I receive the most praise or the largest Christmas card, it's often those places where the odd profile was hired and did something unexpected in the organization" (agency recruiter).

Employee journey and socialization

"In the hiring process, you are coconstructing the candidate (…) It's about making that space of opportunity for the candidate both as a limiting factor but also as expanding that same space. Because you're directing the managers, or the organization, to where the candidate might need some support. Where is the candidate stronger than you actually thought, so that you can capitalize even more on those skills? And where is there an actual need for development, that you must be aware of, either concerning skills or personally or something else? So that the hiring company thinks: 'I know the direction I have to follow with this person in the near future.' And that's what you coconstruct" (agency recruiter).

“Impressions of the company, impressions of the culture, impressions of the people, impressions of ‘what do I need to do to succeed.’ It starts there [when reading the job advertisement]” (HR consultant).

“What do I look like when I go to work on October 4th? What kind of clothes am I wearing? And that exact dream, it is enormously powerful. And it should be enormously powerful (…) The good hiring process – the job interview itself and the recruitment process – it is something that constantly reinforces my mental picture of what I look like in the job” (HR consultant).

“After all, there are many ways to work with recruitment and selection, and all of these would in one way, or another be... have an influence on the opportunity space which is established for the candidate [in the employment]. Depending on how things are articulated during the process (…) In fact, there... already there you create an embryo for what is going to be the start of that journey” (agency recruiter).

People adapt and change – they shouldn’t live up to all requirements from the outset.

“I think [employee selection] goes well because the way we build the person up together with the job is a development process in itself (…) No matter how you test people, you can always find someone who can prove their worth afterwards by developing. So, I never hire someone who knows a job to begin with. I hire someone in the expectation that in four years they will be excellent. So, that’s my approach to recruitment” (HR consultant).

“If you have a person who is really good at the job, but where you can just hear that they have done it before. They are probably very good; the professionalism is there. But is this what they are passionate about? Not so much. Then my input to the manager would be: Can you motivate this person and offer development opportunities? Because if you can’t, you’ll probably get a demotivated employee pretty quickly. Maybe we have to take this other person who is not quite at the same level in terms of skills, but who is going to be very, very, very motivated for the next few years and who will not leave the company” (in-house recruiter).

Set up realistic job requirements – what do they mean in this specific organizational context?

“What do you really really want? (…) What is it that you actually want?” (HR consultant).

“The company needs to know what they are looking for, because it is never the exact same thing. And there is something I call the lemming effect and it is when company managers have been to a management conference and then they all want to do the same thing. So, I challenge the conformity. As soon as I start, the first thing we do is to spend a lot of time with the company before the entire design process and I challenge them by saying: What is ‘potential’ for you? (…) So, for me it’s a matter of finding out: What is it for the company? The ‘potential’ and the ‘talent’” (HR consultant).

Innovation requires openness: Do not predefine jobs.

“The companies are in a trouble because they do not know the future. They can’t predict the future, but (…) they need to have the ability to get ahead of the wave, if they are to have a competitive advantage over other companies. They need to have employees who are ahead of the wave (…) You can’t really test for this, and you can’t at all see it in a résumé and neither can you see it in grades, unfortunately (…) And a grade sheet and a résumé, they are always retrospective. But it's so hard to figure out what it is, then, that is prospective?” (HR consultant)

“Okay, there are two candidates here who are so talented that we have to take both of them. We really can’t choose. Or maybe the person who had applied for one position is moved to another position. ‘We would really like to have you, but I think we should have you over here instead,’ and then we do some reshuffling afterwards. So, in such cases we try to consider… it's a bit more open. It is not predefined what they are going to do, because we don't know it yet” (in-house recruiter).

Loosen the grip: Trust people, give them autonomy, take a chance – and see how things unfold.

“Then we have to avoid making requirements about what the person has to do, but say: Now you get in here, and then we will build it up [together]” (HR consultant).

“Now we need to find out how you can contribute in our company. We think you're a damn good employee. We have a very good potential to work with. Now, let's follow you for the next two years and (…) then let's build on what's happening” (HR consultant).

“Give freedom to the employees and trust that they will do well” (HR consultant).

Persons, jobs, and organizations coevolve – the match is an emergent potential.

“When we get people in, we test them against a checklist in which we have decided that they must be capable of this and that and that – we think – then we test them. But it doesn’t make sense because they must help build the job. The job is not designed in the company yet” (HR consultant).

“I do not believe in the right candidate. I believe in the best match. And that's very much the essence of this. Taking people into internships for three months might be what ensures the best [match]. It's just very costly and resource intensive. So how can you do that through some kind of process? And that can be everything from [a three-month internship] to events (…) with some gamification and some immersive design” (HR consultant).

“[The assessment of the match] is assumptions. Much of it is assumptions (…) And then, off course, there is the whole onboarding part. How good is the company at integrating the employee?” (agency recruiter).

6. The potentials of a dialogical reframing of personality testing in hiring

Kathrine Møller Solgaard and Morten Nissen

Abstract

Personality testing is highly disputed, yet, widely used as a personnel selection tool. In most research, it is taken for granted that personality tests are used with the purpose of achieving a more objective assessment of job candidates. However, in Danish organizations the personality test is often framed as a 'dialogue tool'. This paper explores the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection by analyzing empirical material from an ethnographic study of the hiring processes in a Danish trade union that declaredly uses personality tests as a dialogue tool. Through an affirmative critique we identify five framings that interact during the test-based dialogue: The 'meritocratic', 'disciplinary', 'dialogical', 'pastoral', and 'con-test' framing. Our study suggests that being committed to a dialogical reframing nurtures the possibility of focusing on what we call the 'con-test': Either as exploring the meta-competences of the candidate or as co-creating embryos through joint reflections on organizational issues. We argue that the long-lasting debates in the field of selection-related personality testing should be much more interested in the question of how personality tests in hiring are used, rather than whether or not they should be used.

Keywords: *Personnel selection, personality testing, hiring tool, dialogue tool, affirmative critique*

Introduction

> Be careful not to give the person profile authority—work with it as the dialogue tool that it really is.[5]
>
> It is quite a good dialogue tool, but… After all, it's a self-image of themselves. And, I mean, without sounding cocky in any way, but I can plot people roughly on their person profile, just by sitting and talking with them.[6]
>
> For me, it's pretty important that it's the conversation that's at the center. Not the test. You should never give the manager the impression that the test is more important than the conversation.[7]

The prevailing logic inherent in personnel selection is that it is possible to figure out which candidates fit the job and the organization best through thorough assessment (Newton, 1994; Ployhart et al., 2017), and that hiring the right people is key to creating an engaged workforce, being competitive on the labor market, and achieving organizational success (Carless, 2009; Ployhart, 2006; Risavy & Hausdorf, 2011; Sangeetha, 2010). Given the importance ascribed to employee selection, it is no surprise that a lot of resources as well as a variety of devices are used for assessment purposes. One popular hiring tool increasingly used is the personality test (Barrick & Mount, 2012; Rothstein & Goffin, 2006; Stabile, 2001; Tett & Christiansen, 2007) that carries with it a promise of a more objective and fair assessment process (Youngman, 2017).

The predictive strength of personality tests remains highly disputed, but the ways in which personality tests are actually *used* are rarely discussed. It is generally taken for granted that personality tests are used to make objective assessments, and, in line with this, that they are used for top-down selection (see e.g., Arthur et al., 2001; Rosse et al., 1998; Youngman, 2017). Even though this might be a common practice, the three introductory quotes suggest that other ways of framing and using personality tests in hiring co-exist. In these quotes, the personality test is rearticulated as a 'dialogue tool', but this perspective is absent in extant research on personality testing in personnel selection.

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[5] Teacher on a personality test certification course, quote from fieldnotes, February 2019.

[6] Headhunter about the use of personality tests in hiring, quote from expert interview, July 2018.

[7] Talent Acquisition Partner about the use of personality tests in hiring, quote from expert interview, July 2018.

This paper explores the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection practices. We make an affirmative critique of a single case from an ethnographic study of hiring processes in a Danish trade union, by analyzing how different framings, in terms of ordering and disordering, interact. We identify two framings prevalent in extant literature—the 'meritocratic' and the 'disciplinary' framing—and suggest that their interplay gives rise to a 'dialogical' reconceptualization of personality tests in hiring practices. We then explore the dialogical ideal in the empirical case and reframe it as 'pastoral power', but through our affirmative approach we point toward another possibility, namely, to frame the use of personality tests in hiring as a 'con-test' that carries with it the hopes and potentials of joint job crafting and organizational development.

Affirmative critique as methodology

At the core of the affirmative approach is what can be characterized more broadly as an 'epistemology of practice' (Nissen, 2020); the recognition that we, as researchers, participate in creating the practices we explore. Or, in other words, that knowledge is performative (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2007; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005; Wenger, 2010) and interacts with the reality it understands (Mol, 2002, 2008). An affirmative critique discusses what is, but also affirms progressive tendencies and shows what could be (Braidotti, 2018; Christensen, 2020; Juelskjær & Staunæs, 2016; Raffnsøe, 2017; Staunæs, 2016, 2018; Staunæs & Raffnsøe, 2019). By pointing out what could be different, it gives voice to some of the excluded ways of thinking and nurtures new possible realities. It engages with the dominant ideology (of, in this case, personality testing) and, by asking 'what if?', it aims at a playful and hopeful openness towards untold stories that may emerge. In the words of Foucault (1997, p. 323), the point is 'not to judge but to bring (…) an idea to life'.

Importantly, the untold stories were already there, perhaps yet at an embryonic stage, as a tendency that contradicts other tendencies. We articulate such contradicting tendencies as relations of ordering and disordering (Cooper, 1986; Putnam et al., 2016), and we explore the performative potential of their interplay. We understand the relation between ordering and disordering dialectically (e.g., Højrup, 1995; Jameson, 2009; Taylor, 1975; Žižek, 2006), as mutually implicative of and enabling one another. In line with Cooper (1986), we treat disordering as a presupposing moment in ordering and organizing, both in practice and in the articulation of such practices (Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016). Since research on personality testing is dominated by ordered ideals of objectivity and rationality, the analytical focus on dis/ordering is used to pave the way for a critique that affirms the dominant order, yet still brings other tendencies into light.

The use of personality tests in hiring

The meritocratic framing of personality testing

The dominant personality testing research paradigm is psychometric and understands personality as the sum of some 'universally present, measurable intra-individual essences' (Danziger, 1997, p. 129). The main focus is on the ability of the tested 'personality' to predict job performance, which is understood as the core purpose of selection devices (Morgeson et al., 2007a). Thousands of empirical studies have been conducted finding low, or at best modest, validity of personality traits in predicting job performance (Barrick & Mount, 2005, 2012; Guion & Gottier, 1965; Morgeson et al., 2007b; Murphy, 2012; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). However, it is still intensely discussed whether the recommendation on this background should be to abandon the personality test in personnel selection (Diekmann & König, 2015; Morgeson et al., 2007a, 2007b; Ones et al., 2007; Tett & Christiansen, 2007).

We term this framing of personality testing in personnel selection 'meritocratic', since it is congruent with the meritocratic ideal of objective assessment and rational decision-making leading to a fair hiring process in which the best fitting candidate gets the job offer. The 'disordered' side of the dialectical relation is also there in the discussions, present but unwanted, since it obstructs the order of a meritocratic system. The risk of failed predictive validity, whether it is due to a weak link between personality and job performance, deliberate response distortion, a false self-image, bias in the test instrument, too broad or narrow personality traits etc., fuels the ongoing discussions, creating a deadlock.

The meritocratic framing does not only exist in the research on personality testing, but also in the personnel selection research discourse more generally (Newton, 1994). Here, the relatively few studies that explore how hiring is actually practiced problematize this framing, arguing that hiring processes are far messier than the ideal of objectivity suggests: Decision-making processes are often based on intuition, ‘gut feeling’, or aesthetic experience, and then rationalized and legitimized afterwards by referring to ‘objective facts’ established by the use of selection devices such as personality tests (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Cohen et al., 1972; Miles & Sadler-Smith, 2014; Stjerne, 2018; Timming, 2011). Yet, while the meritocratic framing is challenged by findings suggesting that affectivity and subjectivity are prominent features of selection processes, these phenomena remain negatively characterized as disordering, rather than unfolded and reframed as a different way of ordering.

Meritocratic personality testing reframed as disciplinary

The meritocratic framing has also been challenged in a quite different way by Foucault-inspired authors, problematizing the power dynamics of personality testing: Personality tests are perhaps the ‘ultimate objectivization’ (Townley, 1994, p. 98), reducing human beings to calculable competences and traits. They are powerful ‘techniques of the self’ (Rose, 1999), since candidates necessarily take their own selves as objects of reflection and try to remake the self that neoliberal governmentality demands (Cromby & Willis, 2013). Personality tests are furthermore criticized for being rooted in assumptions about race, class, and gender, concealed by their seeming objectivity (Nadesan, 1997). The unfortunate consequence is that personality tests can systematically marginalize potential employees through individualized explanations that disguise structural power relations and discriminatory organizational practices (Nadesan, 1997).

The ideal of objective assessment is here reframed as 'disciplinary', as coercing candidates to subjection, while sometimes even obscuring discriminatory hiring practices. While power and subjection appear as the ideal order, the flipside of the dialectical relation, the potential for resistance (Costas & Grey, 2014; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Mumby, 2005), does not get a lot of attention in the Foucauldian tradition and is rarely studied in relation to the use of personality tests in hiring practices. The few studies that come closest explore personality testing in relation to other practices such as leadership development (e.g., Meier & Carroll, 2020) or investigate resistance in other parts of the hiring process (e.g., Bergström & Knights, 2006).

Case and empirical material

On this general background, we present a single-case, in-depth analysis of a test-based dialogue during personnel selection, derived from an ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish trade union. But first, we introduce our case and research process.

Case: The hiring of legal consultants in United Labor

Due to both upscaling and employee turnover, United Labor (UL), our pseudonym for a Danish trade union[8], are primo 2019 in the process of hiring 4-5 legal consultants for case handling in the field of employment law. UL experience a relatively high turnover rate among their legal consultants, which they attribute to their routine operational work in employment law counseling. In exit interviews, the main reason given is that the job is quite repetitive and, after a couple of years, even boring. The hiring team refer to this as the primary personnel challenge of the organization, and yet, UL have not found a way to solve it. The problem is closely related to the '24-hour rule' in UL: All legal cases from the trade union members must be answered within a 24-hour deadline. To ensure this, every legal consultant has fixed periods of duty. As team manager, Hannah, responsible for the current hiring process, puts it: ‘We have put academic work in legal counseling on an assembly line’. The turnover challenge has led to a strategy where UL emphasize the routinized operations and work structure during the hiring process. The rationale behind this is partly to give the candidates an opportunity to refuse a job offer on an informed basis, and partly to ensure that new employees do not get an unpleasant surprise and resign from the job prematurely.

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[8] All the following names of candidates and employees in UL are pseudonyms as well.

UL’s hiring process is structured as follows: After circulating a job advertisement and ranking the incoming job applications and CVs, they conduct two rounds of job interviews. The first is a ‘get-to-know-each-other-interview’ where the candidates meet the hiring manager and another team manager. If they decide to invite the candidate to a second job interview, he or she receives an email with links to a personality test and a cognitive test. The second interview is a dialogue structured around the test results, conducted by Sophie. Hannah passively observes the conversation between Sophie and the candidate from the corner of the room. Occasionally, she interrupts and asks a follow-up question. After the test feedback, Hannah moves to sit next to Sophie and then the three of them have a short dialogue about any remaining issues.

UL use a personality test called ‘The CompetenceProfile’ provided by Garuda AS. It is a typical trait-based test, where the test-taker takes a stand on 320 statements resulting in scores on 16 personality traits presented in a report. However, Garuda AS emphasize that the CompetenceProfile is actually not a test, but a dialogical tool aimed at supporting a job interview. Garuda AS explain that the ‘graphics and the analyses work as the base for the open and equal conversation to come’ and that the ‘CompetenceProfile makes you capable of asking purposeful and qualified questions. From these questions, you will be able to paint the nuanced picture of the way the candidate does his job’ (Garuda AS, n.d.). In other words, the CompetenceProfile is already staged as a tool for dialogue by the test provider.

Research process: Empirical material and case selection

The HR consultant, Sophie, reached out to Solgaard in October 2018 due to their common interest in hiring practices. This led to a fieldwork collaboration, where Solgaard followed UL’s hiring of 4-5 legal consultants in the first quarter of 2019.

Solgaard 'followed the practices' (Nicolini, 2009; van Hulst et al., 2016), the activities and interactions, that led to the hiring decisions. By 'shadowing' (Czarniawska, 2007) the involved actors during all activities of the hiring process, the hiring activities were followed both close-up and over time, revealing micro-dynamics of processes of becoming (van Hulst et al., 2016). Besides field notes and documents (the job advertisement, CVs, cover letters, personality test results, General Mental Ability test results, Sophie's notes etc.) the empirical material consists of audio recordings from 12 job interviews, the hiring team's preparation before and evaluation after each job interview, and 10 semi-structured interviews with hiring managers, candidates, and Sophie.

From the pool of empirical material, we have selected one specific test dialogue between Sophie and Ann, one of the candidates who is subsequently hired, to explore in-depth how a reframing of the personality test as a dialogue tool can play out in practice. We selected this particular job interview because it contains some progressive tendencies; as we shall see, a new way of assigning importance to the personality-test-based dialogue emerges during this interview. Thus, it enables a closer look into the more general phenomenon of using the personality test as a dialogue tool and, at the same time, it serves as a 'prototypical'[9] vehicle for insights into the emergence of new practices.

Analysis

Part 1: From meritocracy and discipline to dialogue

Sophie, the HR consultant, is aware that the validity of personality tests and their ability to make objective assessments are questionable. She is certified in the CompetenceProfile by Garuda AS and is familiar with the dialogical framing of the use of tests. Accordingly, she explains that she does not see the test-generated person profile as a 'complete conclusion' about the candidate, but rather as a 'dialogue tool' that helps her get ‘a little more in depth’. Sophie aims for transparency as she introduces UL’s way of using tests to Ann in the beginning of the second job interview, seeking to recruit Ann into this common account:

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[9] A *prototype* is a singular practice modeled for a wider relevance, yet retaining rather than effacing its situated reference and emergence (see Nissen, 2009; Nissen & Mørck, 2019).

> **Sophie**: In our company, we use this test. It is really a way to get to know you better. So, we use it as kind of a dialogue tool, and not to knock you on the head. So, it’s also to explain to you that you really can’t answer any of the questions wrong or right. It is simply so individual how they turn out, these person profiles. And Hannah, she doesn’t sit and note every time you should answer differently or something. So that's just the way it is. So, it’s actually just to dig deeper than the first conversation.

Sophie is clearly aware that test-takers, especially job applicants, are in a vulnerable position, and that the alleged objectivity of the test can become disciplinary. She underscores that UL do not want to contribute to the disciplinary power of the test, but, in line with Garuda AS, that the test instead should be seen as a basis for an in-depth dialogue through which UL can get to know Ann. She stages the dialogical use of the test as a way of overcoming the potential lack of validity as well as the oppressive power of the test.

Part 2: Caught in the ‘objectivity’ of the test

However, the test design carries with it some disciplinary aspects that turn out to be difficult to avoid:

> **Sophie:** The next trait we are going to look at is what they call holistic orientation (…) On the one side, you can be detail-oriented. On the other side, holistic oriented. Well, compared to the norm, you are placed towards detail-oriented. You have answered in that direction twelve times, and only one time in the other direction (…) And that may also mean - and I don't know, it's something I need to find out with you - that it can be difficult for you, maybe, if there are several tasks at the same time. That it can put you a little bit under pressure regarding, argh, then you don’t have time to dive into the details that you really would like to fix.
>
> **Ann:** No, I’m actually used to having a lot of different tasks, and also to tasks coming in on an ongoing basis. But it’s probably true that I… So, I want to make sure it’s correct. So, I like to dive into detai… In that way, I am detail-oriented. But I typically have a lot of different tasks in one day (…)
>
> **Sophie:** Yes. Yes, but I think, you know, in relation to deadlines…

> **Ann:** I am good at that.
>
> **Sophie:** Yes, but… Do you get a stomach-ache if you…
>
> **Ann:** No.
>
> **Sophie:** Are you the type who would rather deliver on time and then half-done, or would you rather exceed the deadline and then be absolutely sure that it is honed?
>
> **Ann:** (A short pause, thinking) I think it depends a lot on what it is, you know (…) If it's something that, well, sometimes it can't wait, and there is a deadline, and then I am fine with handing it in. Then that's just the givens. No, I don't… It doesn't give me a stomach-ache.

Even though there is a clear lack of correspondence between the test result and Ann's self-image, both Ann and Sophie struggle to change the portrayal of Ann by the means of dialogue. Despite the intention to use the test only as a dialogue tool, it still becomes a carrier of the 'truth' about who Ann is and how she will behave and feel about, in this case, a constructed scenario of an approaching deadline. In the onboarding guidelines that Sophie later writes to Hannah, Ann's preference for details is still emphasized as the first of five personality traits that need special attention from Hannah. The Foucault-inspired tradition would probably argue that we witness the coercive power of numbers and categories that stems from the 'scientific' quality of the instrument that legitimizes certain understandings, questions, or even hiring decisions. Although Sophie and Ann can object to these connotations, they seem to be still caught in 'objectivity', disordering the ideal of joint narrative construction.

Part 3: Dialogue—from disciplinary to pastoral power

As we saw, the dialogical framing seems to reflect an awareness about both the disputed scientific quality and disciplinary power of personality tests. It could be analyzed as an expression of recruiters' resistance towards Townley's 'ultimate objectivization' and a step towards creating more equality and room for diversity. Through our dialogues with recruiters and hiring managers, we have learned that it is a common assumption among those who have a dialogical approach to personality testing that candidates should have the final word if they disagree with test results. As we have seen in the second part of the analysis, it is nevertheless easy to get caught in the seemingly objective test results. One could suspect that the dialogical discourse is merely a positive reformulation that conceals the disciplinary aspects of the test. It obscures the coercive power relations to render resistance more difficult or unlikely, because the candidate is disarmed by its innocent framing as just 'a way to get to know you better'.

Thus, from the dialogical reframing another type of power might appear, a 'pastoral' power that 'cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets' (Foucault, 1982, p. 783). Its objective is to ensure 'salvation' in this world (Foucault, 1982, p. 784), which in the case of personnel selection means ensuring the candidates opportunity to flourish through a good match between candidate and job/organization. In the light of pastoral power, the dialogical framing demands introspection, honesty, self-confession, and, ultimately, self-regulation. But the parameters of success and the power differential remain the same. The dialogical framing is just a more delicate way of exercising power that makes resistance more difficult by concealing (rather than resisting) the oppressive power. Thus, resistance must be performed in ever more refined and creative ways.

Part 4: The performance of subtle resistance

As we saw, Ann objects and tries to reconfigure the depiction of her as too detail-oriented to handle deadlines or multiple tasks at the same time. Ann actually performs some sort of resistance throughout the whole test feedback session. For example, when Sophie presents Ann's score on the trait concerning 'competitiveness' (she scores slightly under the mean), Sophie asks Ann what competition means to her:

> **Ann**: Well, I was just thinking that some of these questions… Maybe these are some of those [questions] where I thought, nah, maybe I don't really think any of those [possible answers] (Ann laughs). Hmm, but I think, maybe it's also about, where you are in your life. Because many of the questions were like: Would you wish you had been a leader? And that's not something I go around and think I must be right now, or that this is a goal right now. But, well, if I got the same question some years from now, it might well be that I answered differently, so, hmm (…) I think that this is a thing that may change a bit over time. At least, that was what I thought with some of those questions (…) I try to live a little in the moment and then it may be… Then maybe it changes a bit along the way.

The personality test portrays the candidate as having the same personality, and a preference for certain ways of behaving, over time and regardless of the specific situation. This version of personality is not immediately compatible with Ann's ideas about 'living in the moment' nor about herself and her dreams as changing and developing over time. By referring to test items that do not match her lived experience, Ann finds a sophisticated way to challenge the test profile. Throughout the job interview she objects to the idea of a static personality. Sometimes she creates a more dynamic self-presentation by providing examples from her current work with context-specific information showing how she behaves differently depending on circumstances, and at other points she uses meta-reflections:

> **Ann:** It depends on the situation (…) I don't think I see myself as, you know, only one… Well, one… That I have one constant personality trait. I think it depends a bit on the situation. So, actually, I would say both [introverted and extroverted].

At another point, she legitimizes her stance by referring to an earlier test situation:

> **Ann:** I have tried to take some different tests; how you are in a team, well, what type you are. And there I have noticed that I turn out as the one who is a little bit of everything. Well, I actually think that's quite accurate. I think, to some degree, that I take on the role that I think is missing in the team.

Overall, Ann manages to create other narratives than those intuitively 'springing' from the test results. Not by rejecting the test paradigm as such—here, she openly argues within the frame of the test paradigm by referring to another test situation—and this provides a ground for her to challenge the person profile. She succeeds repeatedly in finding or creating 'cracks' from where alternative interpretations can emerge.

Part 5: Emergence of the con-test framing—subtle resistance acknowledged as meta-competence

During the ensuing evaluation of Ann's second job interview, it becomes clear that her subtle resistance is appreciated as something beyond resistance, as an attractive meta-competence:

> **Sophie**: Well, just the fact that she is the first to challenge all this about testing and that she seems so reflective, it's just a huge plus in my book.

Hannah: Yeah, she is really reflective.

Sophie: Yeah, she doesn't want to be put into a box. Well, that's just…

Hannah: Yeah, it's cool.

Sophie: I really like that.

Sophie and Hannah emphasize Ann's *handling* of the test dialogue and what it tells about Ann rather than what the *content* of the person profile and dialogue tells about her. We interpret this by turning to pragmatist and ethnomethodological studies (Bowker & Star, 2000; Garfinkel, 1967; Hanson, 1993), which teach us that a test is always more than what it claims to be. There is always also what we might frame as a con-test, i.e., you are tested in your general ability to 'play the game' given by the context. On that account, the specifics of the con-test depends on the contextual framing. When the personality test is used as a dialogue tool, the con-test becomes a game in which all values and realities are elements in a situated negotiation. Here, the con-test requires a meta-competence of performing capabilities more specific than those depicted in the test profile, yet also different from and more general than those unfolded in past and future jobs. The emerging significance of the meta-competence in this case, could be seen as resulting from Sophie's awareness of the problems with the meritocratic framing as oppressive, which is not completely solved by the dialogical framing that makes the power relations even more delicate and subtle. In light of this, the con-test framing emerges as an opportune alternative; to assess meta-competences related to the candidate's handling of the test frame itself.

Consequently, the con-test framing supersedes, i.e., overcomes yet includes, the other framings. For instance, part of the con-test is to use the test as a starting point to create a joint narrative construction of who the candidate is and how the candidate and job/organization match each other. As we have seen, the 'objectivity' of the test repeatedly seduces the dialogue between Sophie and Ann away from the joint narrative construction and into the test jargon (e.g., 'you are high on independency'). Still, Ann manages, supported by Sophie's questions, to ground and nuance those abstractions. She uses the con-test to perform originality and a surplus of mental resources and with this, she succeeds in displaying herself as a colleague who adapts to situations, team members, and organizational requirements. One who is able to become whatever is needed professionally, rather than being something constant in and of herself. In the disciplinary framing, this looks like resistance to the personality theory embedded in the test, but in the con-test framing this adaptability and flexibility is rather a manifestation of Ann's way of playing the game, where she produces her conception of the 'ideal candidate' through her handling of the test dialogue situation.

Part 6: The con-test as embryonic source

Summing up briefly, it was through the dialogical framing that the significance of the con-test framing evolved. When personality testing is ordered around the performance of meta-competences, some of the issues we have pointed out in the other framings are overcome. However, this could still be articulated as a pastoral supplement to the disciplinary framing that stresses self-regulation and the performance of an idealized self. Indeed. But here, our methodological approach reminds us not to judge, but instead to ask 'what if': What if Ann is not only using the test to perform her meta-competences? What if she is crafting early, embryonic versions of new ideas that have the potential to stick and grow? To explore this, we will take a look at how Sophie uses the test as a starting point for a dialogue about the organizational issue of the routinized, assembly-line-like work practices, which UL see as the main reason for the high turn-over rates among their legal consultants. Sophie presents Ann's results on the trait regarding concrete/abstract thinking and follows up by asking:

> **Sophie:** Yeah, great. How do you perceive it if you have to work with very routine tasks?
>
> **Ann:** Hmm… There will always be some routine, so well, I'm fine with that. As long as I am also challenged once in a while, of course (…) But there is always some routine and I like that too, and it isn't because I feel like: Nah, now I just think it's really boring if I get two similar cases. I mean, this can also challenge you, and you can maybe even become better at it, right?
>
> **Sophie:** Yeah, yeah. I also think that there probably always are new nuances even though the cases are a bit similar. (…) But how important is it to you that there are these very complex tasks where you can really get into depth and…

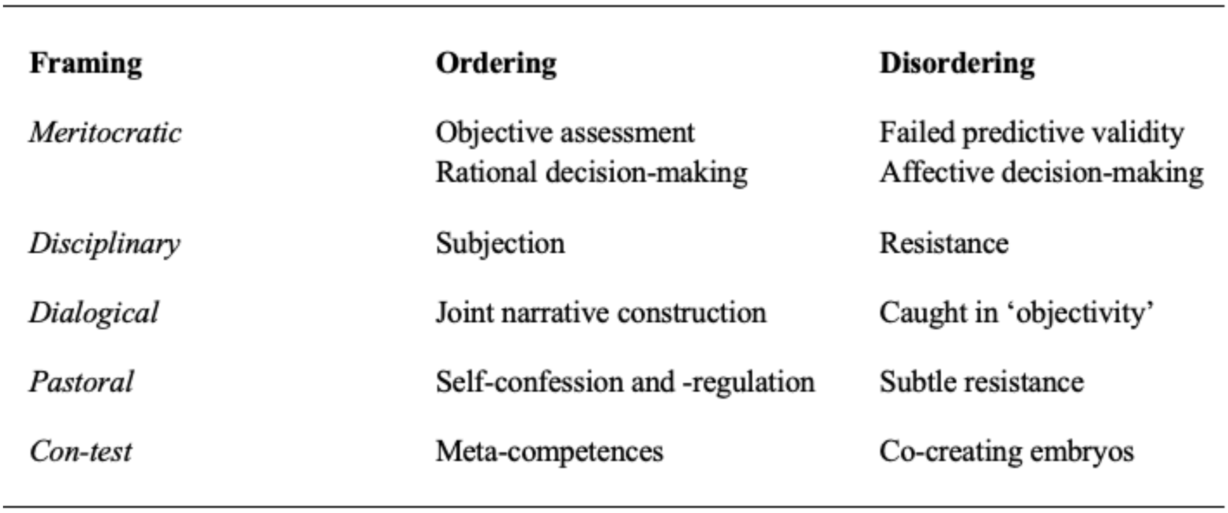
> **Ann:** I think I like both. I mean, I also like that there is something challenging where you maybe immerse yourself in something. I like those too. But it's not like I object and refuse to be doing anything routine, because, you know, it's just part of it. And the thing about getting one type of case several times, I am also used to that from previous work. It just makes you super proficient at that type, doesn't it, because you see it several times. So, I think, all in all, actually a combination, yeah.
>
> **Sophie:** A combination, yes. I don't think we can avoid, at least here, some repetitions. It may well be that the details are slightly different, you know, but well. That's just the way it is.

By asking Ann how she feels about routine tasks and making it clear that they are unavoidable in UL, Sophie makes a 'realistic job preview' (Wanous, 1992) to ensure alignment with Ann's aspirations. Even though this is a core organizational issue, they do not delve further into the problem and how it more specifically materializes in UL. But what if they did?

Even from this brief and rather shallow conversation about an important organizational issue, new perspectives emerge; Ann confirms the alignment, but she does not accept the idea that the routine work practices in UL is exceptional, and she adds that repetition can also be challenging and improve your skills—and Sophie agrees. This could potentially be something more substantial than Ann playing the con-test game of performing her reflective meta-competences, which make us wonder: What if Sophie and Ann actually engaged in unfolding this embryonic narrative? Could it be the beginning of an account that reconfigures the boundaries and distributions between, in this case, routine and development, day-to-day operations and immersion, repetition and freedom? An embryonic source for joint job crafting and, through that, potentially, an improvement that helps overcome the organizational issue? If UL obliged themselves to this approach and cultivated it as a new standard for the use of personality tests in the organization, what new possibilities could it create for the employees and organization? If the con-test was the primary 'test' and UL sought and nurtured curiosity, reflectivity, and critique among their legal consultants, and recognized routine case work as part and parcel of these qualities, as Ann subtly suggests?

Of course, we do not know the answers to such questions. Part of doing an affirmative critique is to ask, 'what if', and thus to affirm already existing tendencies by engaging with them in new ways. To use the personality test not only for a dialogue about who the candidate is or for assessing the candidate's meta-competences, but even for creating embryos in terms of joint reflections on organizational issues, could perhaps over time help UL overcome issues such as high turn-over rates. During the hiring process, such embryos would appear as disordering. Partly because they invite an unpredictable openness and playfulness from the involved actors, and partly because they are incomplete in the sense that they are emerging ideas. They still have not materialized or even found their form, they may change direction or content, and they may or may not unfold in the aftermath. In this imagined scenario, the 'realistic job preview' would not only facilitate alignment through selection or subjection, but also by inviting candidates to find new solutions to organizational issues: First by producing embryos together with the hiring team, and later together with their team and team managers through their engagement in the routinized work practices. Through immersing themselves into the routinized work practices, the legal consultants could perhaps use their reflectivity to monitor, scrutinize, and potentially transform the work structures to a more efficient, interesting, and meaningful setup.

Table 16. Framings of personality testing in personnel selection



Framing	**Ordering**	**Disordering**
Meritocratic	Objective assessment Rational decision-making	Failed predictive validity Affective decision-making
Disciplinary	Subjection	Resistance
Dialogical	Joint narrative construction	Caught in 'objectivity'
Pastoral	Self-confession and -regulation	Subtle resistance
Con-test	Meta-competences	Co-creating embryos

Discussion

We have articulated five interacting framings: The meritocratic framing expresses the ideal of objectivity and rational decision-making processes, with the underlying promise of a fair and valid assessment that makes it possible to find the best candidate to the job. With the concomitant threat of lack of validity, or subjective or affective decision-making processes, leading to costly failed hires, the debates on the usefulness of personality testing in hiring prevail. The flipside to the meritocratic ideal is the disciplinary power inherent in the personality test, disguised by exactly the claimed objectivity and scientific status of the test, leading to subjection but potentially also resistance.

From the co-existence of these two framings, the dialogical framing emerges as an alternative that focuses on joint narrative construction of who the candidate is and how this relates to the organization and the requirements of the job, rather than an objective assessment that risks being disciplinary. Yet, the meritocratic and disciplinary framings are still present in the test-based dialogue, when the involved actors get caught in the objectivity, and resistance is performed in return. The dialogical ideal can also be reframed as pastoral power that supplements and confirms the disciplinary framing. The pastoral framing rearticulates the ideal of joint narrative construction as a requirement of self-confession and -regulation. It suspects that the dialogical approach is merely a positive reformulation that conceals the disciplinary power of the personality test and makes resistance more unlikely, or at least requires a similarly subtle and refined performance of resistance.

But our analysis also points toward another possibility, namely, to frame the use of personality tests in hiring as a con-test. The dialogical framing gives rise to the performance of a delicate resistance, which can be acknowledged as a valuable meta-competence of critical reflection. We suggest that this even can be cultivated as an embryonic source that carries with it the hopes and potentials for job crafting and new solutions to organizational issues. This way, the overall problem of personnel selection—who is the best candidate for the job?—can be solved not only through applicant selection or subjection, but additionally through joint job crafting. Obviously, however, affirmative critique does not mean taking off into a dreamland of unrealistic solutions to problems that persist in reality. For instance, it may be difficult for newcomers to come up with ideas that are actually meaningful or useful to the organization. And in the case of UL, it depends on specific conditions largely unknown to us to what extent and how they can in fact move toward a reconfiguration of their organizational issue, or what the more ordered materialization of the embryonic disordering could look like. Ideally, the unfolding relevance of this prototype would teach us about its constraints and limitations.

Figure 4. Personality testing as a dialogue tool—the interacting framings

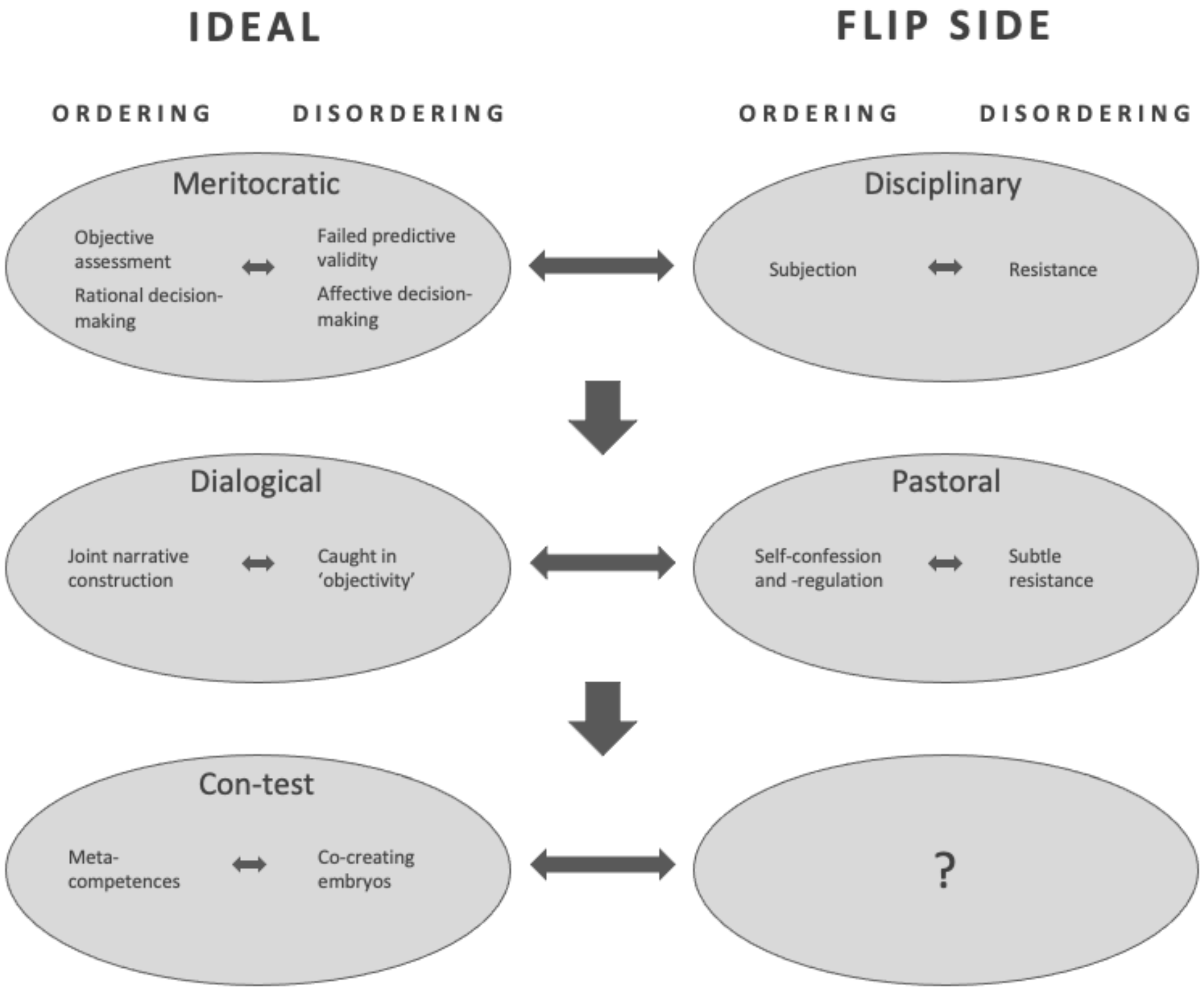

IDEAL
FLIP SIDE
ORDERING
DISORDERING
ORDERING
DISORDERING
Meritocratic
Objective assessment
Rational decision-making
Failed predictive validity
Affective decision-making
Disciplinary
Subjection
Resistance
Dialogical
Joint narrative construction
Caught in 'objectivity'
Pastoral
Self-confession and -regulation
Subtle resistance
Con-test
Meta-competences
Co-creating embryos
?

Figure 4: The model displays the interacting framings of ordering and disordering in hiring-related personality testing and points to the performativity immanent in their relations.

Overall, our study suggests that being committed to a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection nurtures three potentials: First, it becomes possible to object to test results and make more nuanced performances of 'personality' that take, for instance, the specific context and temporality into account. Second, the test becomes a dialogue-structuring platform that invites other conversations, questions, and responses than what the dialogue during a regular job interview allows for. It sets the stage for new creative performances of your fitness as a candidate. Third, it becomes possible to supersede the meritocratic and disciplinary issues by focusing on the con-test; either as exploring the meta-competences of the candidate or as co-creating embryos in terms of joint reflections on, and potentially solutions to, organizational issues that may or may not unfold in the aftermath.

Conclusion

Personality testing is highly disputed, yet widely used, as a hiring tool. To date the dispute mostly concerns what we have conceptualized as the 'meritocratic' and 'disciplinary' framings that refer to issues regarding the scientific quality, or issues of power related to the scientific quality, of personality tests. This paper adds some more practice-based perspectives to this debate and probes the usefulness of personality tests in hiring beyond their ability to predict job performance. Through a study of a Danish trade union that claims to use personality testing as a 'dialogue tool', three additional framings emerged: The 'dialogical', 'pastoral', and 'con-test' framing. More specifically, our study suggests that being committed to a dialogical reframing nurtures the possibility of focusing on the con-test: Either as exploring the meta-competences of the candidate or as co-creating embryos in terms of joint reflections on organizational issues. Such embryos could be first steps in what later turns out as job crafting, an improvement of inconvenient work structures, and new solutions to organizational issues. Overall, our study suggests that research on personality testing should be more curious about how practitioners actually implement and use personality tests. It may push forward the long-lasting disputes in the field of selection-related personality testing toward expanding the criteria by which the usefulness of the test is evaluated.

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7. Moving targets

Criteria as temporal sensemaking devices in employee selection

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Abstract

How do selection criteria support selection and deselection of job candidates? Despite prior research suggesting selection criteria as both a possible solution to and source of discrimination, this question has been largely overlooked. Drawing on a temporal sensemaking approach and process data from an ethnographic study of a hiring process, this paper explains why and how criteria act as moving targets in selection processes. Our study identifies four types of selection criteria that enable different, yet complementary, temporal sensemaking processes supporting different de/selection decisions: *Visionary criteria* support the first coarse sorting of candidates, *trajectory criteria* help selectors distinguish between candidates, *scenario criteria* make candidates commensurable, and *connecting criteria* unequivocally connects a specific candidate to the organization. Our study contributes to research on employee selection processes. First, by advancing a temporal understanding of employee selection suggesting that criteria emerge from attempts to connect the past and future of candidates and the organization. Second, by revealing how different types of criteria play complementary roles in drawing temporal connections that drive de/selection decisions. Third, by arguing that discrimination cannot be prevented by promoting formal, objective criteria. As a practical implication, our study calls for increased temporal reflexivity in employee selection.

Keywords: *Temporal sensemaking, temporality, criteria, employee selection, hiring processes, selection decisions, fit trajectories*

Introduction

Employee selection processes are fundamentally temporal as they are organized around a number of temporal processes to infer fit (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013; Jansen and Shipp, 2019; Stjerne, 2018). For instance, personnel selectors evaluate candidates' past job experiences against selection criteria that are supposed to mirror future organizational needs. Often candidates are asked how they would handle imagined future scenarios, and they are expected to back up their answers with references to similar events from their past. By questioning candidates about future job scenarios, selectors attempt to envision a potential future fit between the person and the job to progress towards de/selection decisions. The linear temporal structure of selection processes as consisting of a series of steps entails an expectation of a cumulative process that enables a qualified selection decision at the end of the process.

However, despite selection processes being temporally organized, there is a lack of temporal reflexivity about their organizing. This is problematic because the way selection processes are organized inevitably implies temporal norms and biases that overrepresent some people who fits into the temporalities while marginalizing others (Feuls et al., 2022). For instance, the disadvantage of an unemployment gap in the résumé is well-known, and so is the age-biased norms that depreciate the short future horizon of older workers (Cutcher et al., 2022). Young workers struggle to get their first job because of their lack of past job experiences to put in a résumé. Temporal discrimination is a very real problem in selection along with discrimination based on, for instance, skin tone (Derous et al., 2017), sexual orientation (Drydakis, 2015), or religious attire (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013).

In the effort to minimize discrimination, selection criteria have been discussed as both the potential solution (by using objective criteria and quotas) but also the problem. The HRM literature recommends that selection criteria be applied in a temporally linear and objective manner to ensure merit-based selection. That is, to conduct an initial job analysis to establish the objective selection criteria against which applicants are subsequently assessed (Brannick et al., 2012; Voskuijl, 2017). However, studies on how employee selection is carried out in practice indicate that the abstract, ambiguous character of formal selection criteria may create room for non-meritocratic selection decisions (Bozionelos, 2005). Early process studies demonstrated that selection criteria are used retrospectively to account for decisions already made, rather than prospectively to produce courses of action (Salaman and Thompson, 1978; Silverman and Jones, 1976). More recently, Bolander and Sandberg (2013) showed that selection criteria are used as sensemaking devices to produce versions of candidates, both as ex post facto justifications and as prospective creation of possible futures. These studies foreshadow the temporal role of selection criteria in selection decisions, yet the temporal processes through which selection criteria emerge and are used remain largely uncharted territory requiring further research.

Building on these studies, and drawing on a temporal sensemaking perspective (Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022; Jansen and Shipp, 2019; Wiebe, 2010), we advance current insights into the temporal processes of selection decisions and criteria. Adopting this perspective, we view selection processes as attempts to meaningfully connect candidates' pasts and the organizational future to infer fit in an ongoing present. Selection is a mere process of imagining futures that provides selectors with an experience of fit or misfit in the present (Stjerne, 2018). It is most likely that selection criteria play a key role in how actors draw these connections between past, present, and future to arrive at de/selection decisions. Against this backdrop, we ask the following research question: *How do selection criteria support temporal sensemaking processes and, thereby, selection and deselection of candidates?*

To answer this question, we draw on ethnographic process data from a hiring process in a Danish municipality. Our analysis demonstrates that selection criteria emerge and allow for different kinds of temporal sensemaking processes throughout the hiring process. Based on our findings, we build a model that outlines four temporal processes through which criteria emerge. Each type of criteria allows for certain processes of connecting past, present, and future that all are important to advance towards de/selection. We theorize selection criteria as *temporal sensemaking devices* and suggest that informal criteria are a prerequisite to accomplish selection. These insights advance existing understandings of how and why selection criteria emerge and nuance current understandings of the role of selection criteria in discrimination.

Theoretical framework

Selection criteria to achieve 'objective' decisions

Selection criteria play a key role in employee selection theory and practice. In HRM literature, selection criteria are usually conceptualized as the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) critical for job performance (Ployhart et al., 2017). The prescriptive model recommends that you '[h]ire those with the highest scores on measures of the KSAOs critical for effective performance on the job' (Ployhart et al., 2017: 291). This recommendation builds on a rational, linear view of the hiring process in which the selection criteria are defined in the beginning of the hiring process through job analysis (Brannick et al., 2012; Voskuijl, 2017), and selectors gain an increasingly deep understanding of the candidates throughout the selection process. In this view, selection 'is the application of assessment instruments – tests, interviews and so on – which will predict performance by determining which individual(s) possess the necessary attributes (the "selection criteria") in fullest measure' (McCourt, 1999: 1013). In short, selection criteria are conceived of as predefined, objective benchmarks against which applicants are rationally evaluated to ensure merit-based selection. An objective understanding continues to play a dominant role in both HRM literature and practice, although evidence on the effectiveness of this approach is mixed, as the following section will show.

Selection criteria as subjectively interpreted and socially constructed

In contrast to the prevailing stance of the HRM literature, organizational scholars have advanced a social constructionist view of employee selection. Yet, organizational research on the topic remains fragmented. Although scholars have critically scrutinized various aspects of recruitment as an organizational phenomenon (e.g., Ashley and Empson, 2013; Cutcher et al., 2022; Murdoch and Geys, 2014), studies of how selection processes unfold 'in practice' (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013) and 'in real life situations with real life candidates' (Zysberg and Nevo, 2004: 118) remain scarce. Given our research interest, we build on this scarce body of work that has pointed to the temporal dimension of hiring processes and advanced a processual understanding of selection decisions and criteria through in situ observations.

Bozionelos's (2005) study of an academic hiring process advances a view of the job interview as a political power game, which may result in selection outcomes that are inconsistent with the projected future ambitions of the organization. The study reports how selectors drew on informal criteria emerging from encountering the candidates 'that were not entirely relevant to merit, or were speculative and unrelated to the job' (Bozionelos, 2005: 1619), such as the mere likeability of a candidate. Bozionelos argues that ambiguous formal selection criteria expand the room for power games at the expense of merit-based selection.

The ambiguity of formal criteria and how it creates room for discrimination is a theme that was taken up already in early processual studies of employee selection. In 1978, Salaman and Thompson demonstrated how class determined selection outcomes could hide behind seemingly neutral formal criteria, due to the abstract and decontextualized character of the criteria. According to both Salaman and Thompson (1978) and Silverman and Jones (1976), formal selection criteria provide a means to legitimize selection decisions, but no basis for making selection decisions. Thus, the inevitable gap between abstract criteria and concrete assessable behavior renders criteria useful for *retrospective* explanations and useless for *prospective* decision-making – even though this is what they appear to be used for.

The temporal understanding that early studies touched upon, has been refined in Bolander and Sandberg's (2013) study of decision-making processes. The authors show how projections of candidates and decisions coevolve, moment by moment, and mutually shape each other in a process of 'practical deliberation' (see also, Bergström and Knights, 2006). In contrast to the retrospective focus of the early studies, Bolander and Sandberg argue for a 'retrospective-prospective orientation mean[ing] that the selectors *simultaneously* consider the version of the candidate and the selection decision in the light of available standards of accountability' (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013: 304). In short, they argue that during selection meetings, the 'rewriting of history', which we have known for decades (Salaman and Thompson, 1978; Silverman and Jones, 1976), happens alongside 'prospective forming of the future' (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013: 306). The authors conceptualize formal criteria as ‘sensemaking devices’ that help the hiring committee in ‘moulding myriad impressions of the candidates into successively more specific versions’ (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013: 303), thereby reducing ambiguity and providing the foundation for the next step of the process.

Several of the studies above touch upon the emergence of informal criteria. This is taken up more comprehensively by van den Brink and colleagues who have investigated how selection criteria are situationally constructed in academic hiring processes (Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011; Van Den Brink et al., 2010). Their findings suggest that actors struggle to articulate selection criteria and, therefore, selection decisions are better described as a negotiation process than a technical endeavor. Both studies show that ‘[t]he official criteria do not provide detailed guidelines on which to base the decision’ (Van Den Brink et al., 2010: 1473). Instead, informal, individual qualities enter the assessment process (e.g., perceived personality and leadership potential) and attain a role of ‘common-sense criteria (…) that can overrule other, more formally specified criteria’ (Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011: 515).

In a similar vein, Llewellyn and Spence (2009) have demonstrated how informal selection criteria may emerge during job interviews, for instance, through the ways in which interviewers implicitly expect candidates to answer questions in a specific way. The anticipation of a specific answer renders deviations from this anticipation ‘noticeable, accountable and thus rate-able’ (Llewellyn and Spence, 2009: 1429). Likewise, Campbell and Roberts (2007) and Roberts and Campbell (2007) have shown how informal criteria, such as the ability to synthesize personal and organizational discourses or produce certain narrative structures during job interviews, may emerge and become decisive in selection processes.

Klingenberg and Pelletier (2019) have investigated the practice of value-based selection in nursing. They observed that selectors struggle to translate the abstract criteria (some predefined personal values) into measurable and recordable attributes. Their study documents the translation work during the selection process through which values are constructed as essentialized attributes of applicants. The authors show that through the translation work, selection criteria construct the same attributes for which they are a benchmark. That is, the translation work ‘constructed applicants as similar in precisely those ways that formed the basis for differentiating between them' (Klingenberg and Pelletier, 2019: 322). Thus, the formal criteria are difficult for selectors to use to distinguish between applicants, because these criteria make applicants into the 'same' in terms of potential attributes.

In conclusion, these organizational studies of hiring processes extend from extant HRM research in three main ways. First, they consistently reveal the socially constructed character of selection criteria and employee selection processes. Second, they move beyond an objective view of selection criteria, showing how criteria are subjectively interpreted (Bozionelos, 2005), collectively negotiated (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013; Klingenberg and Pelletier, 2019), and emerging during selection events (Llewellyn and Spence, 2009; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011). Finally, these studies hint at the temporal dimension of hiring processes and criteria.

Advancing a temporal understanding of hiring processes and selection criteria

In this study, we extend the emerging social constructionist view of hiring processes by advancing a temporal understanding of employee selection processes and selection criteria. First, our study follows a hiring process over time, from initiation to final selection decision, responding to Bozionelos's (2005: 1627) call that 'future work also needs to consider other stages of the selection process, and maybe the entire hiring process'. Prior studies have mostly considered empirical snapshots of the hiring process (e.g., a single round of job interviews), thereby overlooking how the passing of time affects the connections actors draw between past, present, and future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hernes, 2014, 2022).

Indeed, most studies consider *either* how actors retrospectively account for decisions already made *or* how they construct future projections as a basis for de/selection decisions. Most studies have overlooked how past experiences shape the future projections, or how projections of the future may trigger search in the past to support or change future projections. Recent research on 'fit trajectories' (Jansen and Shipp, 2019) underlines the importance of attending to temporal sensemaking, demonstrating how actors make sense of fit by connecting past, present, and future into a fit trajectory. Their study resonates with work on the temporal constitution of careers and professional identities more generally (e.g., Bosley et al., 2009; Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015; Obodaru, 2012, 2017). According to Jansen and Shipp (2019), critical events, such as job changes, trigger reshaping of fit trajectories, indicating that hiring processes may be sites of redrawing temporal connections to construct fit.

Second, we zoom in on the role of selection criteria in drawing such connections between past, present, and future. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that actors subjectively reinterpret and collectively negotiate criteria, and even that new, informal criteria emerge during hiring processes (e.g., Llewellyn and Spence, 2009; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011). However, given the empirical snapshots that these studies are based on, they do not show how the role of selection criteria changes over the course of the hiring process, when and how informal criteria emerge, and to which effects. Given the crucial role of criteria as 'sensemaking devices' in socially constructing fit in the moment (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013), and the inherently temporal character of 'fitting' (Jansen and Shipp, 2019), it is most likely that selection criteria play a key role in how selectors draw temporal connections.

Extant research has demonstrated the usefulness of a sensemaking perspective in studying employee selection (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011) and, particularly, the temporal dimension of fit (Jansen and Shipp, 2019). Building on these studies, we analyze the temporal dimension of employee selection by employing a sensemaking approach, attending to the interplay between the past-oriented (retrospective) and future-oriented (prospective) aspects of sensemaking (Gephart et al., 2010; Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Ravasi et al., 2019; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, 2020; Wiebe, 2010). More specifically, we draw on a 'temporal sensemaking' approach, that is, 'the act of (re)configuring the relationship of past, present, and future' (Wiebe, 2010: 231). We assume sensemaking to take place in an ongoing present in which past and future become mutually constitutive, as actors meaningfully connect past, present, and future (Dawson and Sykes, 2019; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022).

Following Bolander & Sandberg (2013), we view selection criteria as sensemaking devices as we examine how actors draw meaningful temporal connections. Selectors engage in an ongoing process of creating an ‘intersubjective sense of shared meaning’ (Gephart et al., 2010: 284) to reach selection decisions. A sense of shared meaning emerges when selectors succeed in forging a fit trajectory that connects shared understandings of a candidate’s past and the organizational future (cf., Jansen and Shipp, 2019). Such fit trajectories are created by connecting evoked pasts and future projections, the latter being ‘the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971).

Method

To explore the temporal emergence and outcome of selection criteria over time, we conducted an ethnographically inspired, longitudinal case study of a hiring process in a Danish municipality. In the following, we will provide a brief introduction to the case (all names are pseudonyms), followed by a description of the process through which we collected and analyzed our data.

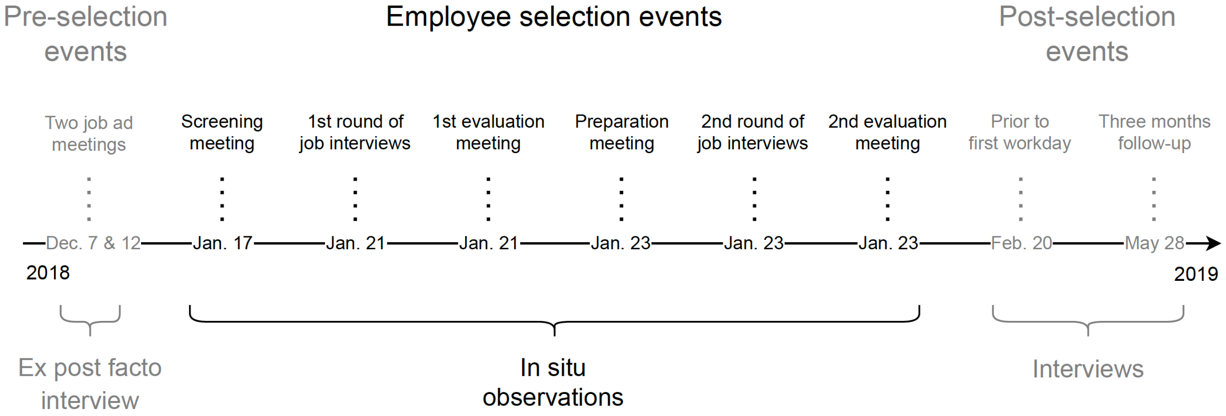
Research setting: A new Team Manager to Benefits

‘Benefits’ is a department in the Labor Market Center in a Danish municipality, responsible for the calculation and payment of benefits in accordance with the law. Benefits consists of three teams: A Sickness Benefits Team of three employees and two Cash Benefits Teams of seven employees each. The Labor Market Center has been through a reorganization recently, and the former manager of Benefits has been offered new opportunities in the organization. Therefore, in the period from December 2018 to January 2019, Benefits is in the process of finding a new Team Manager. The hiring manager (Jane) is responsible for the hiring process together with a committee of three employees (Sarah, Kate, and Lisa). Jane’s manager, Eva, head of the Labor Market Center, participates during the second round of job interviews.

Our case represents a standard hiring process and can, as such, be seen as a ‘paradigmatic case’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006), that is, a case that highlights general characteristics of employee selection processes. The hiring process unfolded as follows (see also Figure 5): In December 2018, Jane and the hiring committee held two pre-selection meetings to make a job profile and write a job advertisement. They posted the job advertisement and received 17 job applications. Jane and the committee reviewed the incoming applications separately before they met to discuss the applicants during a screening meeting. From the pool of applicants, they selected six candidates to invite for a first round of job interviews. After these six job interviews, the candidates were evaluated and three of them were invited for a second, and final, job interview. Before running the second round of job interviews, Jane and the committee met to prepare a new interview guide. After the second round of job interviews, they had a final evaluation meeting where they discussed the three remaining candidates and decided to offer the Team Manager position to an internal applicant named Melanie.

The steps in the hiring process were in alignment with formal procedures in the municipality. From the outset of the selection process, Jane decided to set an upper limit of six applicants for the first round of job interviews and three applicants for the second interview round, followed by a final job offer selection decision.

Figure 5. Overview of the hiring process and data collection


Pre-selection events
Employee selection events
Post-selection events
Two job ad meetings
Screening meeting
1st round of job interviews
1st evaluation meeting
Preparation meeting
2nd round of job interviews
2nd evaluation meeting
Prior to first workday
Three months follow-up
Dec. 7 & 12
2018
Jan. 17
Jan. 21
Jan. 21
Jan. 23
Jan. 23
Jan. 23
Feb. 20
May 28
2019
Ex post facto interview
In situ observations
Interviews

Data collection

The first author followed three complete hiring processes in three different organizations to study the temporality of selection processes and criteria in the period from December 2018 to August 2019. Her fieldwork in each organization combined methods of participant observation, audio recording, repeated interviewing, and collecting relevant documents. For this paper, we present data from one of these cases to enable a detailed, in-depth analysis of the temporal emergence and use of criteria over time. The hiring process that we present data from ran from the beginning of December 2018 to the end of January 2019 and the fieldwork furthermore included a three-month follow-up in May 2019. This data set consists of four preparation and evaluation meetings, nine job interviews, five semi-structured interviews, as well as more than 90 pages of organizational documents. The first author was invited into the hiring process just after the job advertisement was posted, and therefore we have field data from the third meeting onward, and interview-based ex post facto reconstructions of the two pre-selection meetings that had already taken place.

The first author attended all employee selection events in situ (see Figure 5), audio recorded them, and recorded her observations in field notes. During the meetings, interviews, and evaluations the first author was a passive bystander. However, during lunch breaks and the like, she participated in the conversations, also those concerning the hiring process. All relevant documents were collected, such as the job profile, job ad, job applications, résumés, emails about the selection process, and organizational documents about hiring procedures.

During the employee selection events, the research design allowed the first author to experience the hiring process as if she was part of the hiring committee. Although she did not participate in the conversations during the selection events, and therefore did not express her own thoughts or opinions, she used her field notes as a dialogue partner, memoing her own initial insights and reflections on the data (Birks and Francis, 2008; Makri and Neely, 2021). These reflections from the notes supported the process of mapping the emergence of criteria.

Data analysis

After the audio recordings were fully transcribed, we read through all transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents and noted any initial thoughts and ideas. Already here, selection criteria emerged as paramount to the process; selectors discussed and benchmarked applicants against both formal and informal criteria to infer future fit and move towards decisions. Furthermore, we noticed that selection criteria emerged, disappeared, and changed over time and that the use of criteria revolved around constructing past-present-future connections. As an anchoring point for representing this processual study (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013; Zilber and Meyer, 2022), we therefore organized our data around the temporal emergence of criteria. More specifically, we included the following five steps in our analysis:

First, we coded each hiring event and gathered all material concerning each candidate into separate codes. This allowed us to follow the trajectory of each candidate over time. Second, we started searching for all criteria that played a role in the selection process. We identified both formal criteria that were part of the job advertisement, and informal criteria that emerged during the selection process. Following prior studies (Campbell and Roberts, 2007; Llewellyn and Spence, 2009; Roberts and Campbell, 2007; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011), what we identified as informal criteria was points of attention that emerged during the selection process as something that the selectors liked or disliked that were used to construct mis/fit. All in all, we identified 45 criteria that each were tagged with a content name.

Third, we cross analyzed each criterion with the hiring events to establish the trajectory of each selection criterion over time. By following these trajectories, we were able to investigate when each selection criterion emerges, changes, and/or terminates. Furthermore, by cross analyzing the trajectories of criteria and candidates, we were able to examine how the trajectories of criteria and candidates interact and influence each other.

Fourth, based on the steps above, we then studied the different ways in which the selection criteria were temporally organized. By scrutinizing the ongoing present through which selection criteria emerged, our analysis revealed how selectors' attempts to make sense by combining past and future events led to the emergence of criteria. More specifically, we were able to identify four different types of attempts to meaningfully connect past, present, and future that provided impetus for the emergence of selection criteria. Thus, we analytically separated the criteria into four types based on the specific characteristics of the attempts to connect past and future from which the selection criteria emerged.

Fifth, and finally, we scrutinized the four types of selection criteria to probe into their role in the selection process and their interplay over time. We observed that the different types of criteria were layered in the selection process, yet each type of criteria varied in prominence in different stages of the process. The four types were useful for different temporal sensemaking processes that supported different de/selection decisions in different stages of the selection process. All in all, the four types were complementary in the sense that all of them were needed to, over time, arrive at the final selection of the new Team Manager. In the following findings, we present episodes where each type of criteria emerged as particularly prominent.

Findings: The temporal role of selection criteria

The four types of criteria play different roles in the process of selecting and deselecting candidates. The selection process started with a job advertisement stating the formal, yet fuzzy, *visionary criteria*. These criteria were helpful for the initial screening process but did not support a more fine-grained sorting of the short-listed candidates. From the scarce information that application materials and job interviews made available about candidates' past, candidate *trajectory criteria* then emerged. While trajectory criteria supported the envisioning of candidates in the job role, the criteria did not make candidates commensurable. To create a common basis for the assessment, organizational *scenario criteria* emerged. That is, selectors imagined future organizational scenarios and 'populated' these with candidates to reconnect with the visionary criteria and make the candidates commensurable. While scenario criteria concretized future organization-candidate connections, these future connections became untrustworthy because they were disconnected from the candidates' pasts. To advance towards decisions temporal *connecting criteria* emerged, unequivocally connecting the past and future of a specific candidate and the organization. In the following, we unfold the four different ways in which criteria were used for temporal sensemaking to select and deselect candidates.

Visionary criteria: The first coarse sorting

The formal main criterion in our case is a ‘People Manager with a capital P’ (from now onward, the ‘Capital P’ criterion). The criterion is *visionary*; it is a utopian future projection of an abstract ideal type, establishing a horizon that the involved actors collectively orient towards. It draws on the selectors’ common past in the organization and expresses their collective wishes for the future. The vision is precise enough to provide the selectors with a sense of a common direction, yet still ambiguous enough to contain their divergent hopes for the future and be embodied by many different candidates. In our case, several visionary criteria were established as formal criteria in the beginning of the hiring process, such as a manager ‘with knowledge about and experience with operation management’ (job advertisement). However, since the Capital P criterion was the most prominent, we focus on this criterion in the following.

When the hiring manager, Jane, and the committee get together for their first pre-selection meeting, Jane asks them what they are looking for in a new Team Manager. The first thing all three committee members mention as a future projection of a need, is ‘a skilled people manager’, whereas in-depth knowledge about the legislations is of less importance. To underscore the importance of people management, they emphasize it in the job advertisement stating that ‘You must be a People Manager with a capital P’. Furthermore, under the heading, ‘We are looking for’, the first item is ‘A skilled manager with experience in people management’. All visionary criteria were established during the first pre-selection meeting as formal criteria that were communicated to potential applicants in the job advertisement and approved by the head of the Labor Market Center and all employees in the department.

During the pre-selection meetings, the visionary criteria seem clear and helpful for the future stages of de/selecting candidates. However, already during the screening meeting they run into their first challenge. They are discussing two internal candidates, Susan and Melanie, when a member of the hiring team proclaims:

> We are looking for a People Manager with a capital P – that’s what is written in our job ad. And none of them [Susan and Melanie] have experience with people management, and therefore I don’t think that they are, you know in my opinion, quite by the book.

However, this statement is contested by the rest of the hiring team. They start searching in their collective past to mold and clarify the visionary Capital P criterion in a way that includes Susan and Melanie, for instance:

> [Our former manager] also had no experience as a People Manager, but we decided to give him a chance to prove that he had the capabilities. And, you know, (…) all in all, I think he has done well (…) So, even if they don't have management experience, they can succeed in solving the task in a way that make the rest of us happy and satisfied, right?

By bringing several of such past experiences into their present conversation, the selectors disrupt the pure linear projection of the initial Capital P criterion in which prior formal experience was necessary to realize the vision. Because visionary criteria are vaguely defined, they are malleable and can be modified - in this case, to embrace applicants without people management experience. During the screening meeting, the selectors also create a new connection between the Capital P criterion and another visionary criterion, experience with the benefits legislations. According to the job advertisement, applicants 'may have experience with the benefit area and especially with the [two legislations], but this is not a requirement'. However, Jane, the hiring manager entwines the two visionary criteria in the following way:

> I'm a little inclined to prefer that it is someone who actually knows something professional about the area. I fully understand that operations management and people management are very important, but for me it is also, because... It is no secret that I have no professionalism in the field, so there is also some sense of safety in it (…) That if we choose someone who has no professional roots, can you then as a new team manager go the distance?

The hiring team agrees and elaborates on the importance of knowing the legislations to take the lead as a Team Manager, and one of them provides a colorful example from her past in another municipality, where she had a terrible manager with no knowledge about the benefits area. Through this process, they collectively recreate their vision of a People Manager with a capital P to necessarily entail experience with the benefits legislations. Thus, the Capital P criterion is expanded, pushing their focus towards experience with the legislations that has now become part and parcel of the Capital P criterion.

The hiring manager, Jane, decided from the outset of the hiring process that they could invite a maximum of six applicants for the first round of job interviews.

During the screening meeting, the visionary criteria were useful in facilitating that the initial seventeen applicants were reduced to six. Triggered by projections of the future, selectors searched in the past to evoke experiences thar could mold the visionary criteria to include exactly the agreed number of applicants, without any real disagreements, while excluding the remaining applicants. So far, the selection process was running smoothly. It appears that visionary criteria are useful for the first coarse sorting not despite of but because of their abstract, ambiguous character.

Trajectory criteria: Characterizing and distinguishing

Whereas the visionary criteria frame all shortlisted candidates as potentially the 'same' (People Manager with a Capital P), trajectory criteria emerge to characterize the candidates and make distinctions. When selectors encounter the candidates, they start projecting specific events from each candidate's past onto the organizational future, establishing potential candidate trajectories. Thus, trajectory criteria establish concrete possible futures populated by specific applicants. However, trajectory criteria do not provide a meaningful basis for comparing candidates. Because the possible future trajectories primarily are informed by interpretations of each candidate's past, they generate future candidate-organization connections that are often incommensurable and even disconnected from the projected future organizational needs.

During the evaluation meeting after the first round of job interviews, Jane and the hiring committee are challenged by the Capital P criterion. The combination of an ambiguous visionary criterion and limited insights into the candidates' pasts means that they struggle to make a more fine-grained sorting. The only resources available in the ongoing present are applicants' written and spoken words about their people management experiences (if they have any), and this is hardly enough to know what someone will be like as a People Manager:

> **Lisa:** It is very difficult, and what we are talking about is expertise, and this wasn't our point of departure. We keep drifting away. And that is also my problem with Carl. That's the people thing. Because that was our argument in the initial round. What would we emphasize? It was people management and expertise in the legislation. And we can't assess

> him in any possible way [in people management], since he doesn't have any experience, right. So, we can't really judge what type he is. It’s a bit hocus-pocus.
>
> **Sarah:** And you can say that it’s not possible with the other one, Helen, either. They can easily sit and talk about how good they are, but…

Basically, the challenge of the hiring team is that they can’t populate the visionary future with specific candidates to infer fit if they have no concrete past resources to fuel their imagination. The past is a necessary resource to generate possible future trajectories. In the vagueness of the past in our case, most of the trajectory criteria that emerge cling to the few facts that the selectors know for sure about the candidates, such as age or spelling skills. For instance, since the applicant, Carl, from the extract above has no prior experience as a People Manager, the emerging trajectories have no history to be informed by. Instead, the fact that he is ‘only’ 30 years old, becomes the main source to forge future projections. Both during the screening meeting, first evaluation, and second evaluation, the starting point for most conversations about Carl is that ‘he is very young’, for instance:

> Well, he is very young. That was kind of my complaint with him (…) especially when we talk about people management, empathy, and stuff like that. You may not have experienced that much and… [When one of you have a] sick child, parents who are sick and so on and so forth. But, of course, [he] can be an empathetic person anyway.

In this extract from the screening meeting, Jane takes Carl’s age as a starting point for generating a likely past (that he doesn’t have a lot of life experience) that can be used to generate a probable future (employees who need to discuss private issues). They elaborate on this future trajectory, but are undecided about how the ‘young’ Carl will act in this future:

> **Lisa:** You say that it is important that the person is understanding towards us as staff if we get into trouble, or if you are in a bad situation, that you cannot come [to work] because of this and because of that (…) I just think, you know, the range is wide. After all, it is limited how much understanding you have for such situations if you haven’t experienced it yourself.
>
> **Sarah:** I just think that's wrong. Now, I'm 30, and it's not like I don't understand if your mother is about to die or [if you have] divorce problems and, you know…

They generate several future scenarios that they populate with the version of Carl as young. For instance, they create two alternative trajectories about him in front of a strong group of employees; one trajectory, in which his age is no problem and one, in which he is too young to take the lead. They also generate a totally different trajectory that they return to several times during the hiring process in which his age makes him shapeable (‘we could make a new Chris [their former manager] out of him, a clone maybe’).

Trajectory criteria implies that applicants are discussed and evaluated on their own terms. For instance, when the selectors discuss Helen, who had many spelling mistakes in her application, they evaluate her against a future in which she needs to handle written mayoral inquiries. When they discuss Karen, whom they perceive as a very soft person, they evaluate her against a future in which she stands face-to-face with a very tall and angry citizen. And when they discuss ‘young’ Carl, they evaluate him against a future of emotionally difficult conversations with employees. The new Team Manager will probably encounter situations like these scenarios and many more. By such, all the trajectories are relevant considerations that both characterizes the candidates and add details to what the visionary criteria imply.

However, trajectory criteria do not provide a common basis for comparing and evaluating the candidates. As we have seen with the example of Carl, selectors generate alternative trajectories and keep them open-ended, as possibilities; they construct pasts and imagine different futures and, during the hiring process, they maintain these alternative trajectories. However, the hiring process demands that selectors progress towards closure in terms of temporary stabilizing trajectories to reach decisions. Sometimes selectors succeed in stabilizing trajectories without comparing candidates with each other, for instance, Helen is deselected during the final evaluation without any reference to other applicants (we will return to this later). But often, selectors feel the need to make comparisons between candidates, and here trajectory criteria fall short. The trajectory criteria are helpful for making characterizations and distinction, but not for making comparisons between candidates to move towards decisions.

Scenario criteria: Reconnecting and comparing

Scenario criteria emerge from attempts to concretize the visionary criteria and take the organizational memory as a starting point to generate concrete future scenarios.

The selectors either present the scenarios to the candidates for them to explicate how they would act in this concrete future, or the selectors present the scenarios to each other to push the de/selection process forward. By such, scenario criteria aim at reconnecting with visionary criteria to create a basis for comparing and evaluating candidates. By populating the same imagined organizational future with several applicants, scenario criteria are used as a proxy for observing and comparing how candidates would behave in the job.

Before the second round of job interviews, Jane and the hiring committee meet to discuss points of attention for the interviews to come. They agree that their primary focus during the interviews should be on people management. They still struggle to get a feeling of the candidates in relation to the Capital P criterion, and therefore they 'need to uncover that thing about people management'. During the preparation meeting the selectors make an interview guide that contains both individual questions, general questions, and imagined future scenarios. Most of these questions and scenarios are designed to capture the core of the Capital P criterion.

Some of the questions stay on a quite abstract level, for instance, 'what is good people management for you?', whereas other questions invite for responses that perhaps are more concrete, for instance, 'how will you motivate your employees to perform at their best?'. The future scenarios that the selectors generate from the organizational past, however, are way more concrete than any of the questions. The scenarios are designed to give the candidates a chance to 'show, don't tell', at least as much as it is possible during a job interview. Some of the envisioned scenarios are brief and present candidates with challenges that they will encounter in the near future as the new Team Manager, for instance: 'Holiday planning: Here [at our workplace], holiday planning means a lot and there are always problems with whom can get their holiday at the times they want. How will you approach that task?' Other scenarios are more elaborate, and the creativity which always goes into reconfiguring past events to create future scenarios becomes apparent, for instance:

> 'You are having a busy and stressful morning at work. Your inbox is full, and there are three emails you must act on.' And then I ask them to choose the order - one, two and three - and explain why they choose to take action in that order (…) The first is a mayoral complaint that has been made in which a citizen is angry and frustrated due to a refusal, and therefore a response must be sent. One of the other team leaders wants an interdisciplinary meeting

> on the same day - there are problems in the workflows between the departments. The third email is about an employee who has sent an email saying that she needs to talk because there are some private matters that are affecting her workday. And then, finally, see which one they think is most important to act on first, and then how and why. And then again… Do they choose to prioritize the employee as most important, or is it the mayoral complaint?

By inviting the candidates into these scenarios during the second job interview, the selectors seek to assess the candidates' people management approach. How the candidates perform hinges inevitably on how the hiring team imagine the future. Nevertheless, by inviting all applicants into the same imagined future that concretizes the Capital P criterion, scenario criteria have the potential to overcome both the vagueness of the visionary criteria and the incommensurability of the trajectory criteria. Unfortunately, in our case, the attempt to create an equal basis for comparison through scenario criteria largely fails: '[Carl] answered the priority question well. They all did. They answered the same. It was a bit of a shame', one of the selectors declares during the final evaluation meeting. At the same time, they realize that the scenario criteria fail to facilitate connections between past and future:

> [Carl] did fine. But he was also very monotonous in his answers: 'Involve, involve, and involve'. It is a nice word, but how will he involve us? Well, that's of course difficult to say if you haven't tried it before. Perhaps, just give one concrete example of what it would be like if you were to involve [your employees]

Because the performances of candidates in the future scenarios are disconnected from the past, the selectors start questioning the trustworthiness of their performances. In selection processes, the past is always precarious and to some extent vague, yet pivotal. In our case, the vagueness of the past becomes very noticeable, because some of the applicants are inexperienced in people management. In the vagueness of the past, the hiring team have emphasized, or maybe even overemphasized, future scenarios.

Connecting criteria: Stabilizing fit trajectories

Connecting criteria emerge as attempts to connect the future organizational needs with the past of only one specific candidate. When connecting criteria are successful, a certain de/selection decision materializes. These criteria provide closure if they succeed in temporary stabilizing a past-present-future trajectory that unequivocally connects a specific candidate to the organization. In our case, there are several attempts to introduce temporal connecting criteria, but only a few of these attempts are successful. We will give examples of both.

During the final evaluation, Helen is promptly deselected based on several connecting criteria. For instance, one selector emphasizes that Helen during the job interview mentioned that she sometimes withdraws if she is under a lot of pressure, which the selector then connects to the organizational future by stating that as a Team Manager 'you cannot just turn around and leave'. By doing so, the selector connects Helen's past (i.e., she sometimes withdraws) to an organizational future in which you can't withdraw, and thereby she makes an unambiguous misfit trajectory. Another example is when Jane explains that the organization can't meet Helen's salary expectations. This is also a connecting criterion, because it establishes a strong connection between Helen and the organizational future. Connecting criteria forge a trajectory of mis/fit that points indubitably to only one decision and thereby provides closure.

After Helen is deselected, the deliberations revolve around whether the hiring team prefer Melanie or Carl as their new Team Manager. It is a difficult decision and several unsuccessful connecting criteria are introduced as attempts to reach a conclusion. For instance, to move forward in their discussions, one selector introduces the imagined future reactions of their colleagues and suggests that it may give rise to gossip if they select the internal candidate, Melanie. Jane turns the suggestion upside down and asks: 'What will the gossip be about if we have chosen a young man who doesn't have much experience?' Both inputs are attempts to introduce connecting criteria, since the inputs seek to connect the past of the candidates (i.e., Melanie as internal and Carl as inexperienced) with the organizational future (i.e., gossip in the employee group). However, none of these attempts lead to a closure. Instead, the way the selectors answer Jane's question indicates that they suddenly realize, or admit, that they have changed the visionary Capital P criterion:

> **Kate:** Then I think the feedback would be: Why did you select someone who has no experience in people management at all? That's what we were looking for. That was the most important thing for us.

> **Lisa:** Well, we deselected those.
>
> **Kate:** Yes, we did.
>
> **Eva:** So, there were actually some [applicants] with experience in people management?
>
> **Jane:** Yes, they were there in the pile [of applications] too.
>
> **Lisa:** We were also very much in doubt when we came in on Monday. Had we actually selected the right ones?

Since their colleagues have not taken part in the unfolding selection process, they still have the pure linear projection of the initial Capital P criterion in their minds, in which prior formal experience is necessary to live up to the visionary criterion. The selectors, on the other hand, have drifted onto other paths as they have ongoingly molded the criterion. At first sight, the outcome of introducing this connecting criterion is that both Carl and Melanie become misfits; none of them have people management experience. Therefore, when the history of each of the two applicants is connected to the organizational future through the eyes of their colleagues as a connecting criterion, the result is two temporary stabilized future trajectories of misfit, pointing unambiguously towards deselecting both of them. Interestingly, this is not what happens. Probably because it is endogenous to the hiring process not to deselect every single one of the applicants, the connecting criterion does not lead to a closure.

After almost an hour of deliberation, and two minutes before the hiring team reach their final decision of selecting Melanie, Jane adds two connecting criteria that successfully ensure a direct link between the organizational future and Melanie's past, exclusively. Jane states that the organization should 'sometimes let some of [its] own people get a chance' and she emphasizes the question of with whom of the two candidates she, as the Department Manager, 'feels most safe' (which, inevitably, is with the internal candidate she already knows). The connecting criteria are accepted and supported by the other selectors: Eva, Head of the Labor Market Center, affirms that it is important to her that Jane feels safe, and another selector supports the connection by evoking a past event, the hiring of their former manager, Chris, who also was an internal candidate: 'It was also the argument, that he should be given a chance'. By accepting the connecting criteria, the decision is clear; Melanie becomes the 'one'. The final evaluation ends with Jane using the formal, visionary criteria to construct a story that facilitates collective sensemaking and legitimizes their decision:

> I think that what we will say - because everyone will ask about it - is that it has been a completely open process. Everyone has had the opportunity to apply (…) There were also good external candidates, there were indeed. But when we assessed them on their abilities in people management and their abilities in operations management, this was the choice we made. I think this should be the narrative.

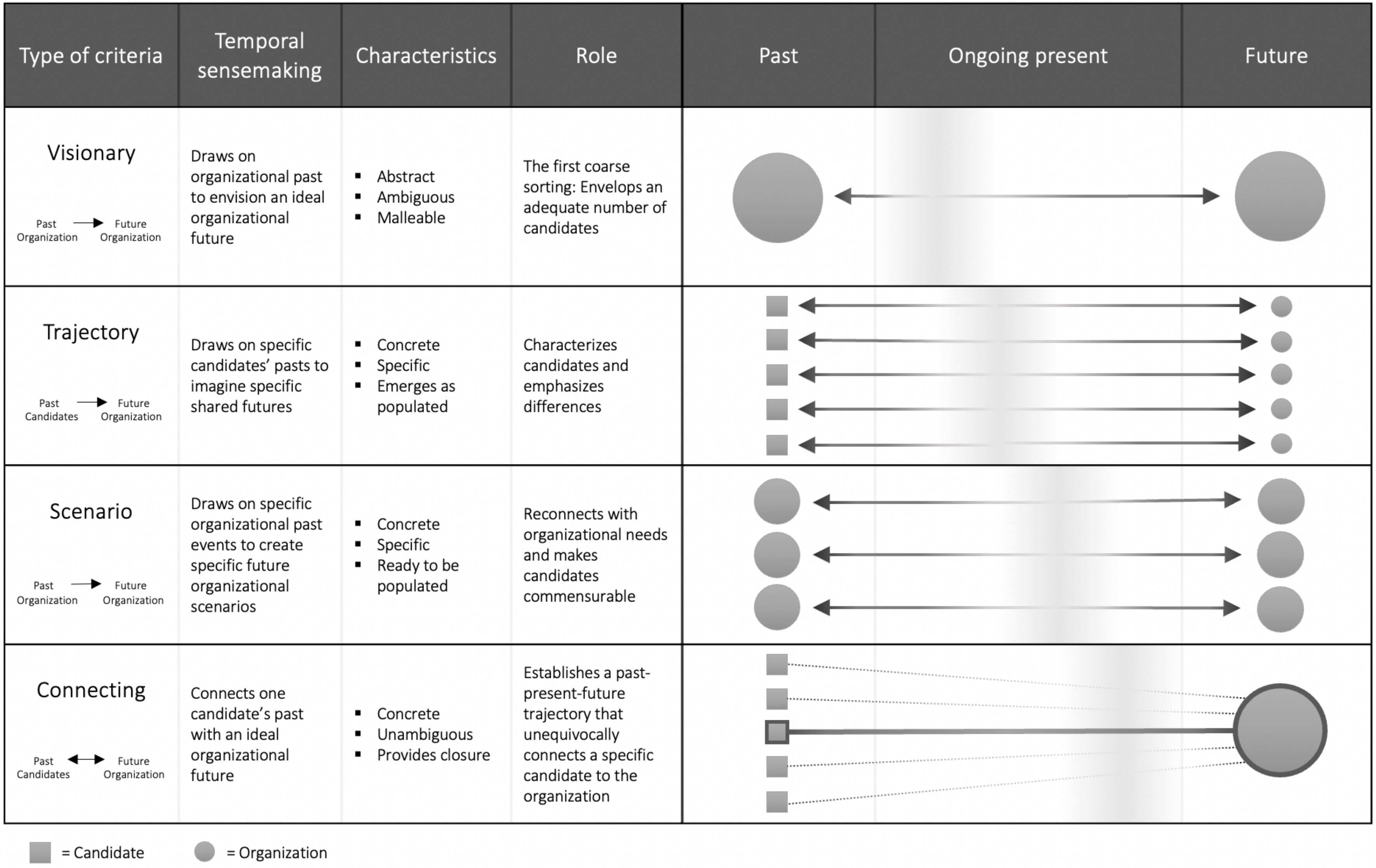
A model of selection criteria as temporal sensemaking devices

In this study, we asked: How do selection criteria support temporal sensemaking processes and, thereby, selection and deselection of candidates? Based on our findings, we propose a model explaining how each type of selection criteria are temporally organized and used as temporal sensemaking devices to arrive at decisions (see Figure 6). In the following, we will first summarize the temporal sensemaking processes that each type of criteria allows for and then explicate their interplay as temporal sensemaking devices.

We identified visionary criteria as drawing on the organizational past to express the future organizational needs. To explore potential fit, interpretations of candidates' past experiences are projected onto the envisioned future. These future fit projections may trigger search for additional past events to reconfigure the visionary criterion. Through these temporal sensemaking processes, the first coarse sorting of candidates can take place. Our findings indicate that abstract, visionary criteria are useful for the first coarse sorting because they are undefined enough to be embodied my many different candidates; malleable enough to include an adequate number of candidates; and, yet, precise enough to provide an 'intersubjective sense of shared meaning' (Gephart et al., 2010: 284).

Whereas the visionary criteria make the candidates into potentially the 'same', which concurs with the findings of Klingenberg and Pelletier (2019), trajectory criteria emerge to make distinctions. Trajectory criteria populate the organizational future with versions of candidates that emphasize specific aspects of their pasts.

Figure 6. A model of selection criteria as temporal sensemaking devices



Type of criteria	Temporal sensemaking	Characteristics	Role	Past	Ongoing present	Future
Visionary Past Organization → Future Organization	Draws on organizational past to envision an ideal organizational future	▪ Abstract ▪ Ambiguous ▪ Malleable	The first coarse sorting: Envelops an adequate number of candidates			
Trajectory Past Candidates → Future Organization	Draws on specific candidates' pasts to imagine specific shared futures	▪ Concrete ▪ Specific ▪ Emerges as populated	Characterizes candidates and emphasizes differences			
Scenario Past Organization → Future Organization	Draws on specific organizational past events to create specific future organizational scenarios	▪ Concrete ▪ Specific ▪ Ready to be populated	Reconnects with organizational needs and makes candidates commensurable			
Connecting Past Candidates ↔ Future Organization	Connects one candidate's past with an ideal organizational future	▪ Concrete ▪ Unambiguous ▪ Provides closure	Establishes a past-present-future trajectory that unequivocally connects a specific candidate to the organization			

■ = Candidate ● = Organization

Since the envisioned organizational futures emerge from encountering the candidates, they mirror the specific version of the candidate that selectors attempt to explore. Thus, every candidate is projected onto their own version of the organizational future to infer fit. Our findings suggest that this temporal sensemaking process allows for characterizations of candidates, but the resulting trajectories are often unsettled and become incommensurable. Trajectory criteria are reminiscent of the informal criteria discussed by, for instance, Bozionelos (2005) and Van Den Brink and Benschop (2011) because they likewise emerge from encountering the candidates.

We furthermore identified scenario criteria. These criteria emerge to make candidates commensurable and to reestablish a connection to the visionary criteria. Inspired by the vision, selectors evoke past organizational events and make them into concrete future scenarios. By inviting or projecting the candidates into these scenarios, selectors populate the same imagined organizational future with several applicants. Thereby, applicants are made commensurable because they can be assessed by the same standard. However, our findings demonstrate that by overemphasizing the organizational future the emergence of scenario criteria may lead to a disconnect between the organizational future and candidates' pasts.

Lastly, we identified connecting criteria that emerge as a missing link that connects the individual and organizational past and future and establish a past-present-future fit trajectory that unequivocally connects a specific candidate to the organization. To make decisions, selectors need an unambiguous connection between a candidate's past and the organizational future to be temporarily stabilized. Our findings suggest that connecting criteria emerge to provide such missing links. When selectors agree that a clear fit trajectory have emerged, the selectors have arrived at a de/selection decision.

Our study shows that a meaningful and unambiguous connection between a candidate's past and the organizational future is a prerequisite for arriving at selection decisions. The model displays the finding that the four types of criteria were layered in the selection process, yet each type of criteria varied in prominence at different stages of the process, depending on what kind of temporal connections selectors needed to move forward in the process. The four types of criteria are useful for different temporal sensemaking processes. However, our analysis indicated that it was not only the search for meaningful temporal connections that sparked the emergence of criteria but also the unfolding selection process per se. A linear understanding of employee selection as an accumulative process through which selectors advance towards a final decision is endogenous to the selection process and drove the emergence of criteria.

Our longitudinal study allowed us to show that the different types of criteria are complementary. They emphasize different temporal aspects and, in our case, all of them were needed to arrive at the final selection decision. Visionary criteria cannot stand alone as temporal sensemaking devices because they cannot be used for differentiating between candidates. Trajectory criteria cannot stand alone because they neglect the future organizational needs. Scenario criteria cannot stand alone because they emphasize the future organizational needs at the expense of the candidates' pasts. And connecting criteria can only convincingly create a clear temporal connection on top of prior attempts to connect past and future by other means.

Concluding discussion

Advancing a temporal understanding of employee selection processes

The main contribution of our study is that we advance a temporal understanding of employee selection processes. Although organizational scholars have foreshadowed the importance of the temporal dimension in employee selection processes (e.g., Bolander and Sandberg, 2013; Stjerne, 2018), a temporal understanding remains underdeveloped in the field. Prior literature has tended to consider *either* how selectors use selection criteria to retrospectively account for decisions already made (Bozionelos, 2005; Salaman and Thompson, 1978; Silverman and Jones, 1976) *or* how selectors construct future projections as a basis for de/selection decisions (Bergström and Knights, 2006; Bolander and Sandberg, 2013; Stjerne, 2018). Thereby, they have overlooked how the past and future become mutually constitutive in the ongoing present (Dawson and Sykes, 2019; Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022; Jansen and Shipp, 2019).

Our study goes beyond these prior theoretical insights into *either* ex post facto justifications *or* prospective creation of possible futures by showing that selection criteria are emerging processual outcomes. We show how criteria emerge from temporal sensemaking processes, that is, from attempts of making meaningful connections between past and future to select and deselect candidates. Selection criteria emerge precisely as selectors attempt to connect past and future into fit trajectories, and it is these connections that allow selection and deselection to happen. A meaningful and unambiguous connection between a candidate's past and the organizational future is a prerequisite for arriving at selection decisions. To select and deselect candidates, different types of selection criteria emerge as selectors re/configure the relationship of the past and future of the candidates and organization to make sense in the ongoing present. Our study thereby provides an elaborated understanding of the temporality of how new employees are selected that stresses the crucial role of selection criteria in temporal sensemaking and, hence, in selection decisions.

Selection criteria as temporal sensemaking devices

Based on the finding that selection criteria emerge to re/configure the relationship of past, present, and future, we propose a reconceptualization of selection criteria as 'temporal sensemaking devices'. To make this conceptualization, we combine theoretical insights into selection criteria as 'sensemaking devices' (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013), fitting as a temporal sensemaking process (Jansen and Shipp, 2019), and temporal sensemaking more broadly (e.g., Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022; Jansen and Shipp, 2019; Wiebe, 2010). By doing so, our study extends current understandings of the role of selection criteria in employee selection processes and provide insights into why new criteria emerge during selection processes.

Prior studies distinguish between the formal, predefined selection criteria and the informal selection criteria that emerge during the selection process. Both types of criteria have been criticized for interfering with merit-based selection. Formal criteria have been demonstrated to create room for subjective interpretations and political power games (Bozionelos, 2005) and be used as means to *legitimize* selection decisions, rather than means to *make* selection decisions (Klingenberg and Pelletier, 2019; Van Den Brink et al., 2010). Informal criteria, on the other hand, are problematic because they are used to *make* selection decision, even when they have no legitimized relevance for the given job (Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2011) and contribute to discrimination (Campbell and Roberts, 2007; Roberts and Campbell, 2007).

By focusing on how criteria are temporally organized, this study goes beyond current understandings of criteria as either formal or informal. By doing so, our study reveals four types of criteria that emerge from different attempts to connect past, present, and future. We thereby provide fresh insight into the importance of new criteria emerging throughout the unfolding selection process. De/selection decisions imply meaningful past-present-future connections. Because the predefined visionary criteria are too abstract, and the concretized alternative expressed as scenario criteria are too future-oriented, other criteria that do not necessarily reflect the future organizational needs become a prerequisite to advance towards decisions in the selection process. This means that when formal criteria fall short and challenge the creation of meaningful temporal connections, informal criteria emerge as attempts to overcome the lack of meaningful connections, resulting in a lack of insight into the fit or misfit of candidates. Our findings suggest that the ongoing emergence of criteria are necessary to accomplish employee selection. Without new criteria, it is difficult to advance beyond the first coarse sorting of candidates that the initial visionary criteria allow for.

Our findings furthermore nuance prior understandings of the role of formal criteria by showing that they are moving targets, changing throughout the selection process. Whereas prior studies have suggested that formal criteria are useless for guiding action (e.g., Van Den Brink et al., 2010), our findings indicate that the initial formal criteria, what we refer to as visionary criteria, provide useful guidance on the first coarse sorting of applicants in a selection process. Precisely because of the ambiguous nature of formal criteria, which prior studies also have pointed to (Bozionelos, 2005; Salaman and Thompson, 1978; Silverman and Jones, 1976), they are malleable and can be used to include and exclude an appropriate, often predefined, number of applicants. Hence, nuancing the findings of prior studies, we argue that formal criteria provide useful guidance for the initial screening process. They are a prerequisite to make progress in the early stages of a hiring process because they project organizational past directly onto an unpopulated visionary organizational future. Formal criteria may fall short when distinguishing between candidates, but by rearticulating visionary criteria as scenario criteria, formal criteria are potentially useful for making otherwise incommensurable candidates commensurable. Only in the final stages of the process, when the most fine-grained sorting of the shortlisted candidates is needed, they start serving merely legitimization purposes.

Our findings have significant implications for the current understanding of the role of criteria in discrimination during selection processes. Our study reveals the inability of formal criteria to mediate all the kinds of temporal sensemaking processes that are necessary to arrive at a final selection decision. Informal criteria that complement the formal criteria appears to be a prerequisite for accomplishing employee selection. Based on these findings, it is most likely that discrimination cannot be prevented by promoting formal, objective criteria. Selectors engage in a range of different temporal sensemaking processes and use informal selection criteria because they cannot infer future fit and make selection decisions out of thin air. For pragmatic reasons, 'formal' criteria must be ambiguous and malleable, and new criteria must emerge throughout the process. Our study therefore calls for increased temporal reflexivity.

Implications for practice

Our findings suggest that formal selection criteria expressed as visionary criteria are useful in the beginning of a hiring process but may be useless and cause frustrations in later stages of the process. Acknowledging the limitations of visionary criteria may prevent these criteria from providing a cover for discrimination and political power games, while it also calls into question that discrimination can be prevented by using non-biased wording and objective selection criteria in job advertisements. Although it may ensure more diversity in the pool of candidates (Gaucher et al., 2011; Mao et al., 2021), sticking to an objective, linear view of formal, visionary criteria, may result in selectors revisiting these criteria later in the process. Because these criteria do not support further de/selection decisions, they most likely end up as legitimization devices that only obscure how decisions were really made.

This study provides important insight into how the final selection decision is an ongoing accomplishment that happens throughout the entire hiring process. Even when selectors strive for assessing candidates against predefined objective criteria, what emerge from the process is a wide range of other criteria. Because selection processes are essentially temporal sensemaking processes, the attempts of making past-present-future trajectories to assess fit result in informal criteria emerging as a prerequisite for de/selection decisions. In the vagueness of candidates' pasts and the organizational future, informal criteria act as the necessary glue that connects past, present, and future and, hence, make temporary stabilizations of fit trajectories possible. Limiting discrimination and making the selection process less tense and contradictory would require selectors to become aware of the temporal sensemaking processes and cultivate temporal reflexivity, increasing their awareness of the pitfalls of temporal discrimination stemming from selection processes and criteria.

Limitations and directions for future research

By advancing a temporal understanding of selection criteria in employee selection processes, we have shown how criteria emerge from attempts to make the past-present-future connections that are necessary to de/select candidates. Since criteria play a crucial role in many other HRM processes as well, such as team compositions, talent management, promotions, salary negotiations, and bonus payments, it seems likely that our study is relevant beyond the field of employee selection. Further research should be carried out in other HRM fields in which criteria play a key role to establish the scope of the identified four types of criteria as well as of our conceptualization of criteria as temporal sensemaking devices.

In addition, further work needs to be done to establish whether all four types of criteria emerge in every single employee selection process, and whether other types of temporal sensemaking criteria may emerge in other selection processes. Based on our theorizing of the findings, we assume that visionary, trajectory, and scenario criteria are always a prerequisite to accomplish selection. On the contrary, we suspect that connecting criteria only emerge if the other three types of temporal sensemaking processes have not led to an unequivocal fit trajectory. Based on these insights and limitations, we call for more longitudinal studies of employee selection processes to fully understand the interconnections of the four types of criteria and further advance the insights into the temporal organizing of selection criteria.

In conclusion, our findings highlight that temporal sensemaking is central to employee selection, and that an employee selection process is a dramatic densification of a process that takes its beginning in the past and reaches into the future, constantly seeking to make a meaningful connection between the two. Such findings highlight the promising potentials of further advancing a temporal understanding of employee selection processes.

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8. Conclusions

Scientific rationality as a generous constraint

The analytical tension that has motivated this doctoral study is related to the research-practice gap in employee selection. Over and over, research has documented that selectors rarely follow the relatively well-tested and unambiguous recommendations, established by the dominant psychometric paradigm and reiterated in the HRM literature (Fisher et al., 2021; Rynes et al., 2002). Several explanations of the gap have been suggested (see e.g., Gill, 2018; Highhouse, 2008; Rynes et al., 2018), but none of these take as a premise that the logic of practice is a different one that the scientific rationality of the psychometric paradigm (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). None of these explanations let go of the normativity of the prescriptive agenda and inquire into the epistemology of selection practice to study “the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage” (Schön, 1983, p. VIII). As a result, to this day, what the world of employee selection looks like from the perspective of those who work with selection in practice remains to a large extent a blind spot in the research field. Little is known about *why* practitioners do not follow the guidelines and *how* they perform employee selection instead. In essence, the main curiosity that has motivated this dissertation has been to understand this *why* and *how*, based on the assumption that there might be some very good reasons for why practitioners do what they do, which we still have very limited knowledge about.

In this final chapter of the dissertation, I will summarize the findings of each of the three papers and draw the findings together to answer my overarching research question. I will furthermore highlight what I believe can be learned from this research project. Finally, I will outline the research contributions and directions for future research, followed by some implications for practice.

Answering the overarching research question

To address the analytical tension described above I have drawn inspiration from practice theory. From a practice theoretical perspective, the interactions between an actor and the world are always mediated by some cultural means (Miettinen et al., 2009; Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005). In other words, practices are carried out through, and made possible by, a wide range of cultural tools, artifacts, symbols, and signs (Nicolini, 2013). Norms, culture, and institutions influence our situated actions through mediation, all while our situated actions (re)produce and potentially transform these social regularities (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Since all action is mediated by tools, and tools embody history, institutions, and sociocultural norms (Nicolini, 2013), this dissertation presupposes that mediators play a key role in understanding how employee selection is practiced and why practice seemingly deviate from what research prescribes. Against this backdrop, this doctoral study set out to investigate the following overarching research question: *How do ideational and material tools mediate the performance of employee selection?* In what follows, I will recapitulate the findings of each paper and wrap it all up to provide a concluding answer to the overarching research question (for an overview of the three papers, see Table 17).

In the first paper (chapter 5), I studied how selectors handle the pressure for meritocratic standardization all while maintaining routine flexibility to be able to accomplish employee selection in the specific hiring situations in which they are involved. The primary purpose of the paper was to explore the constraints that the

Table 17. Overview of research questions, findings, and contributions

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Research question	How do selectors use co-existing supra-organizational ostensive patterns to handle competing demands for standardization and flexibility in performing hiring routines?	What are the potentials of a dialogical reframing of the use of personality testing in personnel selection practices?	How do selection criteria support temporal sensemaking processes and, thereby, selection and deselection of candidates?

Main findings	- Identifies four supra-organizational ostensive patterns (traditional, strategic, hire-for-potential, and coemergence) that enable situational flexibility - Shows how competing demands for standardization and flexibility are handled by harnessing the meritocratic ideal to legitimize routine multiplicity	- Identifies five interacting dis/ordering framings (meritocratic, disciplinary, dialogical, pastoral, and con-test) in a personality test dialogue during a job interview - Shows how a dialogical framing nurtures the possibility of focusing on the con-test: Either as exploring meta-competences (ordering) or as co-creating embryos through joint reflections (disordering)	- Identifies four types of criteria (visionary, trajectory, scenario, and connecting) that enable different, yet complementary, temporal sensemaking processes - Shows how each type of criteria are necessary to temporary stabilize a fit trajectory that unequivocally connects one candidate's past to the organizational future to arrive at the final decision
Main contributions	Extends understandings of coexisting ostensive patterns by: - revealing how overarching ideals can be harnessed to legitimize multiple ostensive patterns - demonstrating how competing demands for standardization and flexibility are managed by nurturing routine multiplicity Extends understandings of the research-practice gap by: - showing that selectors draw flexibly and pragmatically on different research traditions and theoretical resources to compensate for the shortcomings of the best practice model	Extends understandings of personality testing in employee selection by: - Unfolding in detail an empirical example of how personality tests are used as dialogue tools in employee selection (a hitherto unnoticed practice in the research literature) - probing the usefulness of personality tests in hiring beyond their ability to predict job performance - arguing that a dialogical framing provide impetus for new framings that may help overcome the prevailing meritocratic and disciplinary issues inherent in personality testing	Extends processual understandings of employee selection by: - theorizing employee selection as a temporal sensemaking process in which selectors ongoingly (re)configure the relationship of past, present, and future to construct fit trajectories - revealing how selection criteria are both the outcome of and the starting point for temporal sensemaking processes that support selection and deselection of candidates - conceptualizing selection criteria as temporal sensemaking devices

overarching ideal of merit-based, objective selection imposes on selection practice, and how it is handled by selectors. In short, I argued that the overarching ideal is harnessed by selectors to legitimize the flexibility that it constrains. By reconstituting "merits" to the needs of the specific context, selectors expose the contingency and malleability of the ideal and of its entwinement with the standardized best practice model of selection. Thus, in practice, merits become "more than one and less than many" (Mol, 2002a, p. 247). Selectors create room for a multiplicity of hiring routines that they can mobilize as needed, while still retaining the legitimacy of the ideal in the relationship with clients and peers.

In the second paper (chapter 6), we made an in-depth study of a prevalent but scarcely described employee selection practice: The use of personality tests as dialogue tools. Overall, the purpose of our study was to understand how a central employee selection tool, that is, a personality test, embodies what Nicolini (2013) describes as "multiple layers and strands of history" (p. 114). These multiple layers coexist in productive tension, both enabling and constraining the situated activity of using personality tests in employee selection. By adopting a dialectical approach, we critically analyzed and affirmed the coexisting framings of ordering and disordering in personality testing to articulate the performativity of their interplay. Particularly, we showed that the dialogical framing has a constitutive potential because it creates a productive tension from where new practices emerge that may be cultivated as new local standards.

In the third paper (chapter 7), we studied the temporal emergence and use of selection criteria in employee selection processes. The main objective of this study was to understand the role of criteria in selection processes, and to probe into their situated use beyond either objective assessment or retrospective justification, as prior literature suggests. The study provides insight into how selectors' search for temporal sensemaking organizes the emergence of criteria, which in turn give shape to the unfolding selection process. In essence, we argued that emerging selection criteria help selectors gradually move towards a temporary stabilization of a past-present-future fit trajectory that unequivocally connects a specific candidate to the organization to arrive at a final selection decision.

The findings of all three papers have highlighted how the practice of employee selection is both *constituted and constrained by the scientific rationality* underpinning best practice selection. For instance, the first paper showed how the meritocratic ideal immediately calls for standardized best practice that constrains the flexibility of hiring routines. Only through great effort and skillful ingenuity are selectors able to expand the “space of possible paths” (Pentland et al., 2020) to gain and maintain the flexibility required to accomplish selection in practice. The second paper demonstrated how selectors get caught in the seemingly objectivity of the personality test results. Thereby, the scientific rationality inherent in the test tool challenges the joint narrative construction that the selectors were aiming at. Finally, the third paper showed how the members of a hiring committee keep revisiting the initial and formal criterion for purposes of “objective” selection, despite its uselessness for decision making in the later stages of the selection process. Again, the scientific rationality inherent in formal criteria challenges their progress towards selection decisions.

Hence, when employee selection is enacted in practice the mediatory tools call for attempts to put the logic of scientific rationality into action. But the practice of employee selection requires progression, that is, cumulative advancement towards a final decision. My findings indicate that the scientific rationality inherent in selection ideals, tools, and criteria tends to challenge the required progression. As explicated in the paragraph above, the mediatory tools carry with them a logic of scientific rationality that establishes an obstacle course in the situated performances of employee selection. Again and again, selectors get caught in the scientific rationality immanent in the mediatory tools and the required progression is challenged. Taken together, this suggest, first, that the *scientific rationality is brought into the situated enactments of employee selection by the mediatory ideational and material tools* that carry with them the sociocultural heritage of HRM and, second, that the *scientific rationality tends to challenge the required progression* inherent in selection practices. To keep the pace and ensure the progress that the practice of employee selection requires, my findings suggest that *selectors creatively use and harness the mediatory tools*: They rearticulate the meritocratic ideal (paper 1), they reframe the use of personality tests (paper 2), and they invent new criteria to arrive at decisions (paper 3). By doing so, actors overcome the constraints that the logic of scientific rationality imposes on practice.

Against this background, how do ideational and material tools then mediate the performance of employee selection? My study suggests that they mediate practice by acting as *generous constraints* (Gomart, 2002). According to Gomart (2002), generous constraints are forces that are constraining, but at the same time “induce into movement” (p. 521) and “initiate new associations” (p. 539). My study indicates that the constraints the mediatory tools impose also provide impetus for movement. Precisely because the scientific rationality inherent in the mediatory tools becomes an obstacle to the situated performance of employee selection, the same mediatory tools also induce movements to overcome the obstacles and accomplish employee selection. Many of these movements, or new associations, are one-off performances, yet all of them have a transformative potential and can be cultivated over time as new selection practices.

Research contributions and directions for future research

As summarized in Table 17, each of the three papers makes separate contributions to current understandings of employee selection. In the following, I will aim at drawing the separate contributions together to outline some more overall contributions of the dissertation. Cumulatively, the dissertation contributes to employee selection literature, first, by providing an ethnographic study of how employee selection unfolds in situ and, second, by conceptualizing employee selection both as a routine, practice, and process.

How employee selection unfolds in situ

Employee selection is a research field with significant paradigm consensus (McCourt, 1999). The dominant psychometric paradigm aims at promoting a rational and objective understanding of employee selection and, thereby, fails to grasp the logic of practice (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). As I argued in chapter 2, the most concerning gap in the employee selection literature is the lack of studies that seek to grasp the logic of practice. That is, there is a lack of studies that seek to describe, interpret, and explain how employee selection unfolds in everyday organizational life. Studies of how selection processes unfold "in practice" (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013) and "in real life situations with real life candidates" (Zysberg & Nevo, 2004, p. 118) are of paramount importance but remain relatively scarce. More specifically, calls have been made for studies that consider the entire hiring process (Bozionelos, 2005), look closely at how selection criteria are a product of in situ interactions (Klingenberg & Pelletier, 2019), and investigate how different selection tools are used in practice (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). In the following, I will elaborate on the contributions this dissertation makes by responding to these calls.

First, the research design has allowed me to shed new light on how selectors *flexibly adapt their selection approach* to accomplish selection in specific contexts. Extant research has successfully demonstrated that the standardized best practice model is adequate only in some sectors (Lockyer & Scholarios, 2004, 2007; Timming, 2011). However, these studies have overlooked what a more fine-grained processual study can reveal; that the adequacy of different selection approaches is a dynamic and situated phenomenon that may change even over the course of a single selection process. By drawing on longitudinal process data, generated from following three hiring processes over time, I have been able to reveal how selectors may shift between different ostensive patterns, even during a single hiring routine, to respond adequately to the specific contextual demands they face (paper 1). The issue of how selectors flexibly adapt in the moment is an intriguing one which could be usefully explored in further research, for instance, by shadowing the same recruiter over an extended period of time. Thereby, it would be possible to examine more closely how practitioners orient and reorient towards different patterns and which contextual cues that influence their orientation.

Second, by conducting a longitudinal study, this dissertation *advances a temporal understanding of hiring processes and selection criteria*, responding to Klingenberg and Pelletier's (2019) call to examine how selection criteria are a product of in situ interactions. Extant in-practice studies on selection criteria consistently point to the importance of the temporal dimension, yet they tend to consider only an empirical snapshot of the hiring process, for instance, a single round of job interviews (e.g., Bergström & Knights, 2006) or only the selection decision meetings (e.g., Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). My longitudinal design has allowed us to reveal four types of criteria that play different temporal roles throughout the selection process, demonstrating how they complement each other in supporting the temporal sensemaking processes needed to arrive at selection and deselection decisions (paper 3). Based on this finding, the dissertation extends the current understanding of selection decisions as processes of practical deliberation that take place during a final evaluation meeting (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). This study shows how attempts to meaningfully connect the past and future happen in an ongoing present throughout the entire hiring process. Further longitudinal research on selection criteria should be carried out to establish to what extent these findings also apply to other settings and to other HRM practices in which criteria play a key role. In particular, the study has demonstrated that temporal sensemaking is a fruitful approach to process studies of employee selection and selection criteria.

Third, the dissertation stresses that it is more important to focus on the *situated use of selection tools*, rather than on whether certain tools are used or not. By examining both how selection criteria and personality testing are used in situ, the dissertation responds to Bolander and Sandberg's (2013) call for studies that investigate how different selection tools are used in practice. Most studies on selection tools have focused merely on their ability to predict job performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2016), overlooking that they may play other important roles in selection processes, for instance, as "sensemaking devices" (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). As Bozionelos (2005) argues in relation to job interviews, "it is not the interview that is flawed as a selection tool, but it is the way it is utilized that makes it appear as such" (p. 1625). Concurring with this perspective, and in contrast to the prescriptive model of the psychometric paradigm, the findings of this dissertation emphasize the importance of studying the *how*. For instance, even when formal selection criteria are predefined in the beginning of the selection process as prescribed, how they are used in the unfolding selection process is another story (paper 3). As another example, when personality tests are used in employee selection, it may not be with the purpose of achieving a more objective assessment of applicants but to facilitate a more subjective and nuanced dialogue (paper 2). Against this background, this dissertation contributes to recent debates concerning the research-practice gap (e.g., Gill, 2018; Rynes et al., 2018) by stressing that whether practitioners implement the recommended tools may only be the tip of an iceberg. As soon as you look below the surface of the water, a plethora of usages of selection tools come into view. More research on how selection tools are used in practice is definitely needed. Further research could usefully work towards developing an expanded framework for how the usefulness of selection tools can be evaluated. A framework, that goes beyond the current narrow focus on their ability to predict job performance, is highly needed.

Taken together, this dissertation argues for the importance of studying *how employee selection plays out in practice*. Across the three papers, the dissertation shows that only by paying attention to how selection is carried out in everyday life is it likely that we will develop new theories and understandings that can raise the quality of the processes through which new employees are selected. The wide variety of ways in which employee selection is carried out in practice and the required situational flexibility make current efforts to refine measures of validity coefficients impractical and somewhat pointless, if they stand alone. Overall, my dissertation highlights the great potential of ethnographic fieldwork to study employee selection. Among extant in-practice studies, only very few have studied an unfolding selection process over time (e.g., Klingenberg & Pelletier, 2019; Stjerne, 2018). This dissertation provides insight into how empirical snapshots may fail to notice how selection decisions are established. The findings of my dissertation suggest that selection decisions are not the mere outcome of negotiations during a final evaluation meeting (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013), but rather ongoing processes of (re)constituting candidate trajectories and organizational futures to forge a fit.

The strength of my research design has been that it has allowed me to make varying types of analyses. The design has allowed me both to identify patterns across organizations (paper 1), to make a detailed in-depth study of the emergence of progressive tendencies in situ (paper 2), and to study how the passing of time affects a selection process (paper 3). However, the design also has certain limitations, particularly that it lacks the kind of in-depth insights and understandings that only an ethnographic single case study can provide. Therefore, future research might want to study employee selection processes ethnographically within a single organization, allowing for deeper insight into how the practice of employee selection is entwined with other organizational practices and how it may serve other organizational purposes, such as ritualistic (re)production of the institution (Campbell & Roberts, 2007) or political power games (Bozionelos, 2005).

Conceptualizing employee selection as routine, practice, and process

The empirical papers of this dissertation have probed into the potentials of three different conceptualizations of employee selection: Selection as routine, practice, and process. Following Nicolini (2013) who states that "[p]ractice approaches are fundamentally processual and tend to see the world as an ongoing routinized and recurrent accomplishment" (p. 3), I have argued that these three theoretical lenses are compatible. This dissertation concurs with Hernes and Schultz (2020) emphasis on the strengths of combining the focus on situated activities from routine and practice approaches with the more developed temporal view of process studies. By viewing employee selection as not only a practice but also a routine and a temporal process within a broader practice theoretical framing, this dissertation has extended current social constructionist views of employee selection in four ways.

First, the practice and routine approaches have allowed me to address the *mutually constitutive relations between human action and social structures*. Prior studies have tended to emphasize either the strong influence of social structures on the situated employee selection actions (see e.g., Derous et al., 2017; Drydakis, 2015; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Salaman & Thompson, 1978), or the situated micro-dynamics of interaction during job interviews or evaluation meetings (see e.g., Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Llewellyn & Spence, 2009). Drawing on practice theory and routine dynamics theory has allowed me to focus on how the situated mundane activities of everyday work life produce and reproduce the social structures that, in turn, constrain and enable those same actions. This approach extends current views of situated actions in the in-practice studies by theorizing how social orders, such as the ideal of merit-based best practice selection, influence the situated practice of employee selection, yet are reproduced and potentially transformed through the situated actions of selectors.

Second, by introducing the concept of *mediated action* (Miettinen et al., 2009; Nicolini, 2013), this dissertation contributes to studies on how selection tools and criteria are used to construct versions of candidates and selection decisions. I advance prior understandings by stressing the *recursive relations between the situated use of selection tools and social institutions*. Extant research has theorized selection tools as “inscription devices” that are used to translate selection criteria into assessable qualities of candidates (Klingenberg & Pelletier, 2019) or as “sensemaking devices” that are used to make sense and produce factual versions of candidates (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). Although these studies have come a long way in advancing a socially constructed understanding of selection tools, they have failed to address the sociocultural heritage that selection tools embody. By theorizing selection ideals, tools, and criteria as mediating action, this study expands prior understandings by stressing how both ideational and material tools are carriers of certain social institutions, conventions, and orders, particularly the logic of scientific rationality. Bolander and Sandberg (2013) have suggested that the rules of selection tools are used as interpretive schemes establishing a range of possible actions without dictating any specific actions. By theorizing selection tools as mediators of action I develop their understanding and show that the rules embody a sociocultural heritage that selectors not only comply with, adjust, or disregard (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013, p. 303) but also harness to invent new rules. Thus, the concept of mediated action introduces social institutions into the situated selection practices, yet without neglecting the agency and creative power of actors that a focus on social institutions sometimes implies.

Third, the practice perspective has also allowed me to shed new light on discussions about the *research-practice gap* in employee selection. In contrast to previous studies that have explained the gap as resulting from practitioners’ shortcomings (Fisher et al., 2021; Gill, 2018; Highhouse, 2008; Rynes et al., 2018; Rynes et al., 2002), the findings of this dissertation have consistently shown that *selectors skillfully compensate for the shortcomings of the best practice model*. Practitioners flexibly adapt their selection approach to the circumstances (paper 1), ongoingly invent criteria to create progress in the process (paper 3), and even invent new ways of evaluating candidates on the go (paper 2). In contrast to the dominant psychometric paradigm, I have articulated knowledge as a situated activity and a practical accomplishment (Corradi et al., 2010; Gherardi, 2009). Based on such practice-theoretical assumptions and following scholars such as Schön (1983) and Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011, 2015), I suggest an alternative explanation for the gap as resulting from the scientific rationality of the dominant psychometric paradigm that fails to address the entwined relationality that characterizes practice. Although this dissertation has come some way in exploring the kind of knowing that practitioners engage in, more studies are needed to unravel the epistemology of selection practice. Because my findings indicate that the scientific rationality inherent in the prescriptive model tends to challenge progress towards selection decisions, this dissertation calls for further research that further the objective of generating what Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) refer to as "practical rationality theories" or what Schön (1983) refers to as "repertoire-building research" to support the endeavors of practitioners and bridge the research-practice gap.

Finally, this dissertation extends the emerging social constructionist view of employee selection by *advancing a temporal understanding of selection processes* (paper 3). Although both practice and routine dynamics perspectives are fundamentally processual (Feldman, 2016; Feldman et al., 2021; Nicolini, 2013; Schoeneborn et al., 2016), they still lack a more developed temporal view that can be found in process organization studies (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Previous in-practice studies of selection decisions have emphasized either the retrospective processes of justification (e.g., Salaman & Thompson, 1978; Silverman & Jones, 1976) or the prospective processes of inferring a future fit (e.g., Bergström & Knights, 2006; Stjerne, 2018). By drawing on methodological insights from process studies (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013) and adopting a temporal sensemaking approach (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Wiebe, 2010) this dissertation advances current temporal views of employee selection by suggesting that the process of drawing meaningful connections between past, present, and future forges fit trajectories and allows selection and deselection to happen.

Some concluding reflections and implications for practice

This dissertation has aimed at providing insight into how employee selection is carried out in everyday organizational life. As an industrial PhD, I have had the privilege of discussing my preliminary findings throughout the project period with practitioners working with employee selection. These dialogues have been an opportunity to explore new ideas and practices. Often small elements from my research have created fertile ground for conversations that went beyond the research itself. For example, the reframing of the dialogical ideal as pastoral power in the second paper made one of my colleagues start a conversation about how the balance of power would shift if the recruiters brought their own personality test results to the job interviews as well. Although I believe that dialogues and reflections like these are more valuable than just another set of directions for practice, I will however try to highlight a few practical implications that can be derived from my dissertation.

First, my findings indicate that there is not one optimal procedure for selecting new employees, but that the best strategy is to cultivate a repertoire of selection approaches that can be mobilized to perform adequately in the specific complexity of each hiring situation. My findings suggest that flexibility and ingenuity are prerequisites to accomplish employee selection. It seems reasonable to assume that these requirements are particularly pronounced among agency recruiters who hire for different companies, but even for in-house recruiters and hiring managers the tasks are never the same. Distant circumstances, such as the labor market balance, change but also more immediate circumstances, for instance, available time or the quality of the applicant pool. My findings indicate that to succeed in meaningfully connecting past, present, and future to construct fit trajectories in each hiring process, selectors must be diverse and flexible in their approach. They must be quick to reframe their evaluation strategy (paper 2), orient themselves towards a different pattern (paper 1), or invent a new criterion that repairs a temporal disconnect (paper 3). Taken together, this indicates that acquiring a rich repertoire of ways to approach the selection work may be worthwhile.

Second, because the practical circumstances require flexibility attempts to standardize practice will inevitably create challenges for selectors. Recommending standardized best practice selection is basically well intended, aiming at supporting economic growth by selecting the best qualified candidates and ensuring unbiased selection based on mere merits. Although my findings demonstrate that selectors deviate from the best practice prescriptions, my findings also show that selectors tend to ongoingly revisit and draw on some of the prescribed methods. As already explicated, my findings indicate that resorting to the scientific rationality of the best practice model tends to challenge the progress towards selecting a candidate. Against this backdrop, this dissertation invites for discussions about whether and when it is meaningful to pursuit the scientific rationality in the performance of employee selection. If the pursuit does not contribute to meritocratic selection but rather complicates the selection process, it may merely be a impractical convention. In addition to such discussions, my findings also call for increased reflexivity in the situated performances of employee selection. Ongoing reflexivity about what the methods, artifacts, and ideals do to the situated practice of selecting new employees are of paramount importance.

This leads me to the third implication for practice, which may be better described as a reflection with potential implications for practice, that I will share as a final concluding remark. My dissertation has highlighted that the meritocratic ideal in employee selection is highly entangled with the psychometric ideal of objective assessment. Best practice methods are generally assumed to be a means to achieve merit-based selection. However, the findings of my dissertation clearly demonstrate that the entwinement of best practice methods and merit-based selection is not an absolute truth, but a cultural-historically derived practice that we have come to take for granted. The findings of the first paper of this dissertation reminds us that merits are not just *one* thing but that different ontologies coexist in selection practices. When we start assuming that current selection practices are just the “natural” order of things, we stop considering how they could be different. Psychometric scholars have unequivocally proclaimed “general mental ability” (i.e., intelligence), or what they refer to as “g”, to be the best predictor of job performance. In this way, research practices also contribute to bringing a certain ontology of merits into being. But when we take it as an absolute truth that *g* is the best predictor of job performance, we forget that it has not always been like that, and it could be different – and it probably will be different again.

Against this background, I will conclude with a call for increased ethical reflexivity in employee selection. For instance, is it desirable, reasonable, and fair to sort potential employees based on *g*? It is difficult to draw a connection between general mental ability testing and the *egalitarian* principle of the meritocratic ideal, whereas the connection to capitalist concerns about the right of employers to *maximize utility* for their own gain is clear. If we for a moment broaden the perspective and consider the overall interests of society, then we are left with the question that Born and Scholarios (2017) also raise: What do we do with all the low *g* individuals? It is about time that decisions about which employee selection methods and tools to use are based not only on considerations of validity and utility, but also on ethical considerations of marginalization and societal consequences.

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CO-AUTHOR STATEMENT

Title of paper	The potentials of a dialogical reframing of personality testing in hiring
Journal and date (if published)	International Review of Theoretical Psychologies, 2021

1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem to be investigated and its operationalization into an appropriate set of research questions to be answered through empirical research and/or conceptual development

Description of contribution:

Kathrine had noticed an interesting development in the empirical materials. She had an initial idea and invited Morten Nissen to co-author the paper. The research problem and research question have been developed in collaboration.

2. Planning of the research, including selection of methods and method development

Description of contribution:

Kathrine planned the research and selected the methods.

3. Involvement in data collection and data analysis

Description of contribution:

Kathrine collected the data. The analysis was made in a collaboration between Morten and Kathrine.

4. Presentation, interpretation and discussion of the analysis in the form of an article or manuscript

Description of contribution:

Both authors contributed equally.

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