

THE VALIDITY OF WORK HISTORIES
OBTAINED FROM SUBJECTS AND FROM EMPLOYERS*

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The question of the validity of employment history data obtained from the worker himself, whether in a counseling, placement, selection, or research context, has frequently been raised and occasionally been investigated (Bancroft, 1940; Keating et al., 1950; Weiss, et al., 1961). The most recent of these studies reached negative conclusions concerning the validity of work history data obtained from the worker, even when they are sought for research purposes by independent researchers. After comparing five-year work histories obtained in home interviews with similar data obtained from employers by means of a mail questionnaire, Weiss, Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1961) conclude as follows: "The use of interview-obtained work history information without further validation is unwarranted, certainly for research purposes, and for applied, that is, practitioners' purposes as well."

This conclusion casts serious doubt on much published sociological and psychological research in careers, in occupations, and in social mobility. For the Career Pattern Study, a current longitudinal investigation of vocational development which relies heavily on data

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obtained from subjects by means of questionnaires and interviews, the generalizability of the conclusions reached in the Minnesota study just quoted is a vital issue.

For this reason, the Minnesota study was replicated with Career Pattern Study data, in so far as methods used and items covered permitted. This paper reports the results.

Procedures

Work Histories

Work history data were obtained in 1962 from ⁴95 per cent of the men who had been members of the ninth grade in Middletown, New York, in 1951-²54. This basic group of 140 subjects of the Career Pattern Study had been intensively studied in the ninth grade (Super et al, 1957; Super and Overstreet, 1960), and again in the 12th grade in 1955; they had been followed up by means of a mailed questionnaire in 1958, with an 88 per cent return; and in 1962, at age 25 or thereabouts, they were followed up and were the subjects of a full day of individualized study by means of an integrated battery of tests, questionnaires, and interview, with participation by ²133 of the surviving 140 men. The questionnaire covered civilian work experience as well as military experience, education, and personal history since the last mail contact. Subjects who had failed to cooperate in the earlier questionnaire were asked to supply missing data for the earlier period. A total of 92 men were engaged in civilian employment at the time of this study; this number was reduced to 83 by the self-employment of some subjects and by the fact that others worked for near relatives or for employers who would not supply the information in the validation study.

The employer data were obtained by the Retail Credit Corporation, a concern which also makes credit and personnel investigations for

employers. The names of all subjects, together with their purported work histories during the years 1958 to 1962, were turned over to the RCC for investigation according to their standard procedure, supplemented to increase the focus on duties performed and on the satisfactoriness of the employee's work. RCC field representatives made contact with employers, either by phone or by means of personal visits. The subjects did not know that this independent check would be made, and it was made after the data had been obtained directly from the subject by a CPS staff member. It should be noted that the RCC procedure for collecting data from employers differed from the Minnesota mail questionnaire method; it involved personal contact by experienced agency representatives known to employers to engage routinely in this kind of investigation for credit and personnel purposes.

Defining Validity

Validity was defined operationally in this study as in the Minnesota study (Weiss et al., 1961), but for reasons which will be made clear the terms here used are more strictly operational: the focus is on agreement between subject and employer-reported data, obtained by a questionnaire and by a research-staff interviewer on the one hand, and by a credit and personnel investigator on the other, without arguing the issue of which source or medium is the more valid. The same items of information are compared, the analysts are of the same types and numbers, and data analysis methods are the same as in the Minnesota study.

One additional type of comparison was made in the analysis of job titles and duties: the subject-reported title and duties were placed side-by-side with the employer-reported title and duties after the first type of analysis had been completed; CPS staff members rated the similarity of the two reports on the basis of substance rather than of DOT coding

(as in the first procedure). The decision of two out of three judges was used as a second basis for deciding on the agreement or disagreement of subject and employer reports of job title and duties, a procedure which seems to have been warranted by the different emphases placed by worker and by employer on various aspects of the work. An extreme example of this is the young man who described himself as a slaughterhouse worker, with duties consisting of butchering animals and driving a delivery truck, whose employer at the packing house described him simply as a truck driver. Both gave valid reports, but the worker's was more detailed and had a different emphasis which actually made it more complete than the employer's. Disagreement, still less apparent disagreement leading to different coding, does not necessarily mean that the worker has given an invalid report.

Variables Compared and Controlled

As this study deals with a smaller and more homogeneous group than the Minnesota project, certain variables cannot be studied. The subjects are all men, of about age 25. The number is too limited for breakdown into white and blue collar categories, into handicapped and normal subjects. As these were shown not to be significant variables in the Minnesota study, their neglect (or control through the age and sex of the sample) is of no consequence here.

Results

The results of the analysis are reported in Tables 1 and 2. In Table 1, the first two columns under each period report numbers and percentages of CPS cases for whom subject and employer data agreed, while the third column reports the comparable percentage for the Minnesota study (Weiss et al., Table 2).

It should be noted that when the more searching comparison of job titles and duties is made, as in Row 2, the percentage of agreement between subject and employer reports goes from 66 to 88 per cent, making all types of subject-employer data on the current job agree both substantially and better than in the Minnesota study. This holds also for the two earlier periods except in the case of final pay, for which subject-employer reports are in substantial disagreement in both the Columbia and Minnesota studies.

In the 13 Minnesota comparisons which are strictly comparable to the Columbia data, the median percentage of agreement between subject and employer reports is 71; for the same Columbia comparisons, the median percentage of agreement is 81.5. If the mechanical comparison of DOT codes is dropped, and the more judgmental (subjective but searching) job title and duty comparison is substituted, then the median agreement in the Columbia study is 88 per cent. Either way, it is clear that the work histories obtained from the CPS subjects, unlike those obtained from the subjects of the Minnesota study, do agree highly with those obtained for the same persons from their present and recent employers, and may therefore be called valid.

Table 2 reports results of a second kind of analysis of CPS data comparable to one made by the Minnesota study, ascertaining the extent to which disagreement between subject and employer reports involves upgrading or distortion of data in favor of the subject. It is noteworthy that when the comparisons are of DOT codes assigned to job titles and duties, the lack of agreement most frequently involves either no change of level or a distortion actually unfavorable to the subject. But when uncoded job descriptions are compared there is virtually no downgrading.

Since distortion favorable to the self is more to be expected it appears that comparison of DOT codes is defective and the use of job descriptions is the more valid procedure. The few distortions which take place in length of job and of final salary are in the socially desirable direction, while type of separation shows a slight tendency in the undesirable direction. This last, the reading of histories suggests, is probably because of the effect of official reports of type of separation on social security benefits: employers do tend to seek to let discharged workers have such benefits. Disagreement of subject and employer data is no proof of the invalidity of subject reports, for in some instances the employee reports more correctly even the socially undesirable facts.

Conclusions

In this study, we have reported the results of a comparison of work history reports obtained from subjects and from their present and past employers. The principal findings are not in agreement with those of a previous study whose data analysis procedures were replicated with similar information obtained by somewhat different methods. It is apparently unwise to generalize from one study of the validity of interview data to other interview data obtained under even slightly differing conditions. The conclusions justified by this study are:

1. The validity of work history information obtained by questionnaire and interview from the subjects themselves can be quite high, as in this study, or low, as in the Minnesota study, when compared with employers' reports;

2. Job titles and duties are carelessly reported by employers with sufficient frequency to justify viewing them with as much doubt as is used with subject reports, and to make essential the more searching analysis of instances in which apparent discrepancies occur;

3. There are differences in the extent of subject-employer agreement on different types of work history data, the Minnesota and Columbia studies agreeing on the relatively low validity of reports on rates of pay, and on the relatively high validity of data on type of separation, but disagreeing on the relative validity of employment dates and length of jobs;

4. Subject's report of certain types of data, such as pay, is in a direction which favors the subject, but this is not true of other data such as coded job titles and duties, and report of type of separation is, in fact, generally unfavorable to the subject.

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Table I
Agreement and Disagreement of Subject and Employer (via RCC) Work History Data

ITEM	N*	PERIOD I: Present (1962)		N	PERIOD II: 1960-61		N	PERIOD III: 1958-59	
		Per Cent Agree	Minnesota Per Cent Agree		Per Cent Agree	Minnesota Per Cent Agree		Per Cent Agree	Minnesota Per Cent Agree
1. Title and duties: judgment based on independent DOT coding	83	66	70	57	68	75	49	76	65
2. Title and duties: judgment based on comparison of reports	83	88		57	84		49	90	
3. Starting date	83	96	80	58	88	72	49	90	70
4. Ending date	-	-	-	58	91	77	49	90	60
5. Length of job	83	95	-	58	84	68	49	82	58
6. Final or present pay	62	77	-	22	68	68	-	-	62
7. Promotions: pay	43	95	-	-	-	39	-	-	41
8. Promotions: title	24	92	-	-	-	68	-	-	81
9. Type of Separation	-	-	-	44	77	86	31	81	82

*N refers to the number of jobs for which the information on the items was available from both the subject and the employer (via Retail Credit Corp.)

Table II
Relative Frequencies of Upgrading and Downgrading in Subject-Employer Disagreement

	PERIOD I			PERIOD II			PERIOD III								
	No. of Jobs	Disagree- ment	Type	Per Cent	No. of Jobs	Disagree- ment	Type	Per Cent	No. of Jobs	Disagree- ment	Type	Per Cent			
Title: Judgments based on independent DOT coding	83	28	Upgrade Downgrade Equal	7 5 16	8 6 19	57	12	Up Down Equal	5 2 5	9 4 9	49	12	Up Down Equal	5 0 7	10 0 14
Title: Comparison- based judgments	83	10	Upgrade Downgrade Equal	5 0 5	6 0 6	57	9	Up Down Equal	4 1 4	7 2 7	49	5	Up Down Equal	2 0 3	4 0 6
Length of job	83	4	Upgrade Downgrade	3 1	4 1	58	9	Up Down	7 2	12 3	49	9	Up Down	6 3	12 6
Final salary	62	14	Upgrade Downgrade	11 3	17 5	22	7	Up Down	6 1	27 5	-	-	-	-	-
Separation	-	-	-	-	-	44	10	Up Down	4 6	9 14	31	6	Up Down	3 3	10 10