Accurate Personality Judgment

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Abstract

Personality traits are patterns of thought, emotion and behavior that are relatively consistent over time and across situations. Judging the traits of others and of the self is a ubiquitous and consequential activity of daily life, which raises two important questions. First, *how* does accurate personality judgment happen? The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM) describes accuracy as achieved when relevant behavioral information is available to and detected by a judge, who then utilizes that information correctly. Second, *when* does accurate personality judgment happen? RAM helps to explain the four principal moderators of accurate personality judgment, which are properties of the target of judgment, the trait that is judged, the information upon which the judgment is based (its quantity and quality), and the individual who does the judgment. Usually people manage to make personality judgments that are accurate enough to navigate the complex social world; research on accuracy seeks to understand how and when this happens.

Keywords: accuracy, person perception, personality, personality judgment

Accurate Personality Judgment

Personality traits are patterns of thought, emotion and behavior that are relatively consistent over time and across situations. They are described by familiar words such as "reliable," sociable," and "cheerful" as well as more specialized terms such as "narcissistic," "authoritarian" or "conscientious." Psychology has developed an impressive and useful technology for assessing personality traits, but personality assessment is not limited to psychologists. Everybody does it, every day. We all make judgments about our own personalities as well as of the personalities of people we meet, and these judgments are consequential.

Consequences of Personality Judgment

Personality judgments are consequential for the judge. If you lend an acquaintance $100 because you deem her reliable, and your judgment is wrong, you have made an expensive mistake. If you invite someone to a party because he seems sociable and cheerful, and your judgment is wrong, your party will probably not be as enjoyable as it could have been. Numerous decisions about who to trust, befriend, hire, date, and even marry are largely based on personality judgments and the consequences of a mistake can range from embarrassing to disastrous.

Personality judgments are equally consequential for the person who is judged. If you are deemed unreliable by the people who know you, nobody will loan you money even if you really would pay them back. Similarly, your social life and success in the workplace will depend to a critical degree on the way your personality is judged by others.

Therefore, it matters greatly whether judgments of personality are accurate, and this question has motivated much of my research for more than 30 years (Funder, 1980). When I began investigating this topic, accuracy was, strangely, almost completely ignored by psychological research, with a major textbook asserting that "The accuracy issue has all but faded from view in recent years, at least for

personality judgments" (Schneider, Hastorf & Ellworth, 1979, p. 224). Instead, research focused on

putative biases and errors in judgment -- which is not at all the same as studying accuracy (Funder,

1987; Krueger & Funder, 2004). The bias/error question is: does the process of judgment follow

normative rules derived from mathematics, statistics or formal logic? The accuracy question is: is the

judgment correct? The answer to one of these questions is not necessarily the same as the answer to

the other, because biases may stem from heuristics that aid accuracy in realistic environments, while

formally correct processes can lead to judgments and decisions that are wrong outside of artificial,

controlled contexts (Gigerenzer, Todd & ABC Research Group, 2000). After a slow start, accuracy

research has burgeoned in recent years, with one early landmark being a special issue of the *Journal of

Personality* on accuracy in personality judgment (Funder & West, 1993). Many psychologists are now

engaged in the topic.

Capturing Accuracy

"Accuracy" is a fraught word, and over the years many psychologists have shied away because

of its seeming implications for ultimate truth. But all of science requires evaluations of validity,

reliability, theoretical cogency and many other attributes of data and theory that in the end must

remain uncertain. The concept of accuracy is no different. Its evaluation can be scientifically

accomplished through multiple criteria and while the final conclusion will remain forever tentative, the

confidence of one's conclusions about accuracy will increase to the extent that different criteria agree.

For the evaluation of personality judgment, three criteria are central. The first, and most often

used, is self-other agreement. Many studies evaluate accuracy in terms of the degree to which ratings

by the target of judgment agrees with judgments made by others. A criterion used somewhat less often

is "other-other agreement," also sometimes called "consensus," the degree to which two (or more)

judges of the same person agree. Of course, neither criterion is perfect. People might distort their self-

judgments to protect their self-esteem or hide secrets, and other judges might share biases that make them all wrong. Still, each of these criteria allows confidence in accuracy to be undermined: if the self and others disagree about what the person is like, or judges cannot achieve consensus, then somebody must be mistaken. When they all agree, therefore, confidence that they are accurate can legitimately increase even though certainly is never achieved.

The third criterion for accurate judgment, in some sense the gold standard, is behavioral prediction. If a judgment of personality can predict a behavior or a behaviorally-related life outcome, then it would seem likely that it is accurate in some sense. Such research is difficult to conduct, and success requires not only valid measurement of personality and of behavior, but matching the correct trait to the correct outcome. But a good deal of research does show that personality judgments derived from acquaintance in daily life can predict behavior in laboratory contexts (Fast & Funder, 2008, for just one example), and an increasing body of evidence shows that personality judgments predict important outcomes such as job performance and even longevity (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Very few if any studies have the resources to utilize self-other agreement, other-other agreement, and behavioral prediction all at once, but as research on accuracy in personality judgment accumulates, the literature as a whole increasingly relies on converging conclusions based on all three criteria.
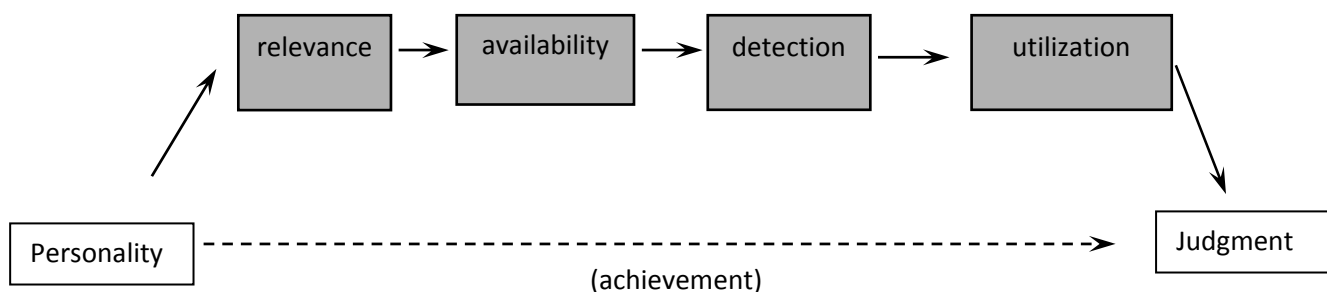
The Realistic Accuracy Model

How does accuracy personality judgment happen? This question concerns the cognitive and interpersonal processes that make accurate judgment possible, and is addressed by the Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 1995; Figure 1). The RAM describes the process that connects a personality trait of a person with a correct judgment of that trait in the mind of a perceiver.[1] According to RAM, for this connection to be established – for accurate judgment to be achieved – four things must

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[1] The RAM model in some respects resembles the "lens model" of perceptual judgment by Egon Brunswik (1956), and "achievement" (see Figure 1) is the term Brunwik used for correct judgments and perceptions.

happen. First, the person being judged must do something *relevant* to the trait. A friendly person who

never emits a friendly utterance or behavior will not be judged as friendly, regardless of his inner

feelings, thoughts or motivations. (Indeed, shy people, who often claim to have friendly feelings, are

typically judged as cold and aloof; Zimbardo, 1977.) Second, the trait-relevant behavior must be

available to the judge. If the behavior happens in a context that the judge does not share with the

target – such as only at home, whereas the judge only knows the target at work – then the judge will be

unable to take advantage of this information. Third, the trait-relevant, available behavior must be

detected. If the judge is unperceptive, perceptually impaired, self-conscious, or otherwise distracted,

then accurate judgment will again be stymied. Fourth, the trait-relevant, available and detected

information must be *utilized* correctly. A truly friendly smile must be interpreted in that way, and not

misinterpreted as insincere, sarcastic, or manipulative.

Figure 1: The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM) Accurate judgment of personality (achievement) can

occur only to the extent that relevant behavioral information is available to and detected by the judge,

who then utilizes that information correctly.

It is important to note that RAM does *not* describe what always happens in personality

judgment, nor is any claim made that it describes what usually or even often happens. Rather, it

describes what *must* happen for accurate personality judgment to be achieved. If a relevant behavior is

not displayed, or it is not available to the judge, or the judge does not detect it, or if the judge misinterprets it, then accurate judgment will not be possible. A second important point is that RAM implies accurate personality judgment is difficult. A large amount of research on judgmental bias seems to reflect astonishment that human judgment is so often wrong (Krueger & Funder, 2004). RAM illustrates why it might be wiser to be amazed that human judgment of personality is ever correct. For, only if all four stages are traversed successfully can accurate judgment occur, and failures of perfection at each stage combine multiplicatively.

RAM can serve as a framework to understand the circumstances that make accurate judgment more and less likely. When relevance, availability, detection or utilization is enhanced, accuracy becomes more likely; anything that undermines these four stages makes accuracy less likely.

Moderators of Accurate Personality Judgment

Research has identified four moderator variables as important for determining the degree to which personality judgments are accurate. Accuracy is most likely when a "good target" or a "good trait is being judged, when the judgment is based on "good information," or when a "good judge" makes the judgment.

Good target. Everyday observation suggests that some people are easier to figure out than others, and research confirms that most people can tell who, among their acquaintances, they can judge most accurately (Biesanz, Human, Paquin, Chan, Parisotto & Gillis, 2011). "Judgable" individuals are relatively transparent in their thoughts and feelings – thus their observable behavior is more relevant to their underlying personality -- and are consistent in their behavior from one situation to the next, making valid observations of their personality more available. An observation of a friendly behavior is not a fluke in such a person; it is part of a consistent overall pattern that will be easily seen by even a

casual acquaintance (Human & Biesanz, 2011a). Good targets of judgment are relatively extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable (Colvin, 1993).

This pattern might occur for several reasons. Concealing emotions may be harmful to physical health and mental well-being (Berry & Pennebaker, 1993), and acting in a way that is contrary to one's actual personality takes effort and can be psychologically tiring (Gallagher, Fleeson & Hoyle, 2011). Moreover, recent evidence suggests that greater behavioral consistency is a result of "normal" behavior in both the statistical and evaluative sense (Sherman, Nave & Funder, 2012; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). Your best self may be your true self (Human, Biesanz, Parisotto & Dunn, 2012). Most people act in a positive, socially desirable manner most of the time, and people who most consistently act this way are the also the most consistent overall – and easiest to judge.

Good trait. Traits such as extraversion, energy level, and talkativeness are more visible than traits such as introspection, fantasy proneness, moodiness, and deceptiveness. In terms of RAM, such traits are more available and are easier to detect. More visible traits are judged with better self-other and other-other agreement than less visible traits (Funder & Dobroth, 1987). While this finding could be rephrased as the truism that "more visible traits are easier to see," it has two interesting implications. First, ordinary observers are aware of the difference between more and less visible traits. When lay raters were asked to estimate the degree to which the 100 personality items of the CAQ were easy vs. hard to judge, their ratings correlated well (r = .42) with the overall accuracy with which the items were rated in an independent sample of participants. Second, this finding implies that judges agree with each other not merely because they share biases, or socially construct impressions of targets without any basis in reality (as has sometimes been suggested), but because they base their judgments on actual observations of their targets' behavior. When judges can observe the same behaviors more readily because they manifest more visible traits, the judges agree better.

Further research shows that different traits are judged most accurately by the self and others. According to Vazire's Self-other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) model, traits that are less visible should be judged more accurately by the self, but traits that have significant evaluative implications should be judged better by others. So, for example, tendencies to worry or feel anxiety would be more accurately judged by the self, whereas intelligence may be judged more accurately by acquaintances (Vazire, 2010).

Good information. The information upon which personality judgment is based can be "good" in two ways. First, quantity: more is better. People who have known each other for years make more accurate personality judgments than people acquainted for a few weeks or months (Funder & Colvin, 1988). An experimental study showed that self-other agreement in personality judgments increased even between 5 and 30 minutes of observation (Blackman & Funder, 1998). In terms of RAM, longer observation makes more information available (Biesanz, West & Millevoi, 2007).

The second way in which information is good is in terms of quality. Recent research has shown the range of information that is relevant to personality judgment to be surprisingly broad. Accurate judgments can be made on the basis of facial appearance (Rule & Ambady, 2008), musical taste (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006), and even the way one tells a story (Küfner, Back, Nestler & Egloff, 2010). Relevant information is easier to detect in-person than in a telephone conversation (Blackman, 2002), and unstructured situations that allow targets to express their individuality yield better information than highly structured settings that allow less behavioral variation. An experimental study showed that more accurate personality judgment could be made on the basis of watching someone in a free conversation than in a highly structured competitive task (Letzring, Wells & Funder, 2006). The take-home message is that knowing someone longer is likely to allow you to judge them more accurately, but it is also important to observe them in settings in which their personality has a chance to be expressed. If you want to understand your colleagues better, socializing after work makes sense.

Good judge. Although the "good judge" was the principal target of accuracy research in the first wave of studies in the 1930's and 1940's, replicable findings were elusive because of confusion concerning methodological issues raised by Cronbach (1955) and others, and perhaps also because most people are good judges – personality judgment is a necessary skill for social survival – and therefore individual differences are minor (Haselton & Funder, 2006). More recent research indicates that women might be better judges of personality than men, on average, because they have a more accurate view of what the normative or typical person is like (Chan, Rogers, Parisotto & Biesanz, 2011). Another recent study found that people who tended to make more positive interpersonal judgments, which are accurate for most targets, were more accurate as a result. "Good judges" of personality in this sense are characterized by others as agreeable, consistent, and content with life, and not narcissistic, anxious, power-oriented, or hostile (Letzring, 2008; see also Wood, Harms & Vazire, 2010). One study showed that in a videotaped getting-acquainted conversation among three people, they talked about positive topics, made eye contact, expressed warmth, and seemed to enjoy themselves (Leztring, 2008). An interesting follow-up study showed videotapes of these conversations to unacquainted observers and asked them to judge the personalities of the participants. If the conversation included at least one person who was a good judge, the unacquainted observers made more accurate judgments of all the participants! This finding implies that one important skill of the good judge is to create an atmosphere in which people express their true personalities which, according to the relevance stage of RAM, is critical for accurate judgment.

Conclusion

Once a lonely topic of research pursued by only a few investigators, innovative studies on accuracy in personality judgment are now appearing at a rapid rate. Two major trends are evident. First, researchers are developing new and creative methods to capture the information that people use

to make personality judgments and to develop criteria to evaluate their accuracy. Going far beyond the questionnaire measures that used to be standard, current research examines cues to personality including facial structure, taste in music, the contents of one's Facebook page, and even the tidiness of one's bedroom. The increasing use of electronic social media opens exciting and challenging opportunities to capture social interaction its relationships to personality "live," as it happens (Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Schmukle, Egloff & Gosling, 2010; Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman & Gaddis, 2011). A second trend is that social psychology is finally moving away from its own formerly overwhelming bias in favor of bias (Jussim, 2012). While it is easy to prove that lay judgments of personality are not perfect, it is also trivial. People know a lot about each other, and they even know a lot about what they know ("meta insight," see Carlson, Vazire & Furr, 2011).

Gordon Allport (1937, p. 353) noted many years ago that usually we are able "to select the gifts that our friends will like, to bring together a congenial group at dinner…or to pick a satisfactory employee, tenant or room-mate." The mission of research on accuracy in personality judgment is to understand how and when people are able to do this.

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