

Conclusions and Future Directions for the Study of Accurate Personality Judgment

Tera D. Letzring

Abstract

This chapter identifies several well-established findings and overarching themes within personality trait accuracy research, and highlights especially promising directions for future research. Topics include (1) theoretical frameworks for accuracy, (2) moderators of accuracy and the context or situation in which judgments are made, (3) the important consequences of accuracy, (4) interventions and training programs to increase judgmental ability and judgmentability, (5) the generalizability of previous findings, and (6) standardized tests of the accuracy of judging personality traits. The chapter ends by stating that it is an exciting time to be a researcher studying the accuracy of personality trait judgments.

Keywords

trait judgment accuracy, personality judgment accuracy, moderators of accuracy, context, situation, consequences of accuracy, interventions, training programs, standardized test

The goal of this chapter is to offer concluding remarks based on the other chapters in the *Oxford Handbook on Accurate Personality Judgment*. In general, people can be accurate when making judgments of the personality traits of others and of themselves, and this is not the first time this overall conclusion has been made (see Murphy, 2016). Additionally, people vary in how accurately they judge others and are judged by others, and understanding this variability is useful for many reasons. This chapter identifies several major themes and well-established

findings within personality accuracy research, and highlights especially promising directions for future research.

Theoretical Frameworks for Accuracy

One major theme of this book is the importance of theoretical models or frameworks that can be used to understand the underlying process of making accurate judgments. It is highly useful to understand the factors that are related to this process and how they affect levels of accuracy. One influential theoretical framework that has contributed significantly to our understanding of accurate personality judgment is provided by the realistic accuracy model (RAM). RAM, which was proposed by Funder (1995), was largely based on the ecological approach of Brunswik (1955) as described in his lens model (Funder & Sneed, 1993). Ecological approaches to accurate trait judgment attempt to identify the factors that impact how judges detect and utilize relevant cues to a target's personality, and ultimately how these factors affect the accuracy of personality judgments. RAM and the lens model have guided a large portion of the research on personality judgment accuracy, and are discussed and applied in many chapters in this handbook. These chapters review previous work that has tested various aspects of RAM and used the lens model framework, and also provide a roadmap for how future work could be inspired by these models.

Another important model for personality judgment is the social relations model (SRM), which was proposed by Kenny and LaVoie (1985), and later reconceptualized as the PERSON model (Kenny, 2004). SRM and PERSON models focus on specification of how various sources of information contribute to consensus, or agreement among judges, about what targets are like. These models also have relevance for the study of the accuracy of personality judgments, as is

evident in the models proposed by Malloy in chapter 3 of this handbook that are based on the SRM and PERSON models.

In addition to these more theoretical models, an analytical model was proposed by Biesanz (2010) to facilitate analyzing data that are gathered to test predictions about accuracy of personality judgments (see chapter 5 by Biesanz in this handbook). An important aspect of this model is the simultaneous estimation of distinctive accuracy and normative accuracy or normativity. Distinctive accuracy reflects the degree to which judgments are consistent with how targets are distinctive or different from the average person, while normativity reflects the degree to which judgments of targets are consistent with what the normative or average person is like. Much research evidence supports the importance of considering the components of distinctive accuracy and normativity separately, as results often differ depending of the type of accuracy that is assessed (Human, Sandstrom, Biesanz, & Dunn, 2013; Krzyzaniak, Colman, Letzring, McDonald, & Biesanz, 2019; Letzring & Human, 2014).

Research has also supported the validity of the process of accurate judgment and the importance of the moderators of accuracy as described in the RAM, and the importance of the components or sources of information that contribute to judgments of others identified in the SRM and PERSON. It is important that researchers remain grounded in theory to facilitate the cumulative nature of knowledge in this area, to think about which model or models apply best to their research questions, and to propose expansions or modifications of models to fit new processes (such as meta-accuracy) or contexts (such as judgments based on social media).

Moderators of Accuracy and the Impact of Contexts and Situations

A second major theme in this handbook is the importance of moderators and the context or situation in which judgments are made. The four chapters in Section II are each devoted to one

of the moderators originally identified in the RAM, which are the good judge, good target, good trait, and good information. Additionally, the level of accuracy that can be expected in a research study or real-world situation is influenced by many factors that often interact with each other. For example, research has demonstrated the importance of the situation for judgment accuracy, largely because cues relevant to different traits are likely to be available in different situations. It is also possible that targets might be more willing to make relevant cues available in some situations (e.g., Hirschmüller, Egloff, Schmukle, Nestler, & Back, 2015; see also chapter 8 by Krzyaniak & Letzring and chapter 14 by Wall & Campbell in this handbook), such as when meeting with a new medical professional or counselor for whom accurate personality judgments might lead to more appropriate treatment recommendations. To add to the complexity, targets with certain characteristics might strive to make relevant cues available in certain situations, while targets with other characteristics might attempt to be deceptive. For example, an athlete trying out for a team who has high levels of determination and passion would likely want the coaches to judge these traits accurately and would strive to make relevant cues available, whereas an athlete with low levels of determination and passion would not want the coaches to be accurate and would strive to be deceptive. A more systematic evaluation of interactions between moderators, and between moderators and context, would likely deepen our understanding of what is needed for highly accurate judgments to be possible and illuminate possible ways to increase accuracy of judgments.

Finally, additional research on the generalizability of previous findings to newer contexts, such as social media, will allow for important refinements of theory and models of accuracy. Most simply, accuracy should be examined in additional physical and psychological contexts. For example, Wall and Campbell (see chapter 14 in this handbook) suggested examining how

accurately people could be judged based on their cars, where there are likely to be many cues to personality. As the internet continues to grow and expand, accuracy researchers should also consider new ways that personality could be expressed in online contexts and examine the accuracy of judgments based on exposure to these contexts. Examining these additional contexts addresses questions about the generalizability of previous findings and may reveal important nuances and insights about the process of accuracy or the availability, validity, and use of cues in various situations.

Relatedly, there has been a renewed interest in the context or situation in personality psychology in general, as evidenced by a new taxonomy of situations (Rauthmann et al., 2014), the International Situations Project (Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010, 2012, 2013), and whole trait theory and the density distribution approach to understanding the variability of state-manifestations of personality traits (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Jones, Brown, Serfass, & Sherman, 2017). Taking the situation into account when deciding what kinds of stimulus materials to use or interactions to create between participants will be important in order to more fully understand how situations influence judgment accuracy. Additionally, types of relationships could be thought of as different situations, and therefore examining accuracy in different types of relationships and being clear about the nature of relationships between judges and targets is important (see chapter 17 by Luo & Watson in this handbook for a discussion of accuracy in romantic relationships). Furthermore, different information is likely to be available in different types of relationships, and this may also have important effects on accuracy of judgments.

Accuracy of Contextualized Personality

Another way to think about context is in terms of different levels of personality. For example, McAdams (1995) proposed three levels of personality in which the second level is personal concerns that are contextualized in time, place, and role of the individual. This includes constructs such as motivations, intentions, and coping strategies. This differs from the first level, which consists of broad and decontextualized personality traits that are relatively consistent across time and situations. Most personality accuracy research focuses on this broad level. Future research that examines personal concerns would be informative about the process and accuracy of judgments for aspects of personality that are not expected to be highly consistent and stable across time and situations.

Important Consequences of Accuracy

A third major theme is that accuracy has many important consequences for life outcomes and behaviors, romantic relationships (see chapter 17 by Luo & Watson in this handbook), clinical assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and prediction (see chapter 18 by Oltmanns & Oltmanns in this handbook), and successful employee hiring and other workplace issues (see chapter 19 by Blackman in this handbook). This theme highlights that research on trait accuracy seeks to answer consequential questions that matter to everyone and will promote the basic goals of increasing relationship satisfaction, job productivity and satisfaction, and overall well-being and quality of life. Researchers should continue to examine how trait accuracy predicts important outcomes so we have a more complete understanding of the implications of this skill and the consequences of high and low levels of accuracy.

Interventions and Training Programs to Increase Accuracy

Many chapters include suggestions for how to use empirical findings to design interventions to increase judgmental ability and judgability, for both accuracy and meta-

accuracy. The chapters in Section II describe many factors that are related to accuracy in terms of the four moderators that were originally proposed with the RAM, and much is known about how accuracy relates to the characteristics of judges, targets, traits, and information. Other chapters also point out ways to increase accuracy, such as using self-observations of behavior, providing feedback to increase meta-accuracy (see chapter 12 by Carlson & Elsaadawy in this handbook), being aware of how traits are related to cues in different contexts (see chapter 14 by Wall & Campbell in this handbook), and increasing how much information is available when decisions are made about who to hire for a job (see chapter 19 by Blackman in this handbook). Chapter 20 by Blanch-Hartigan and Cummings is specifically focused on training and improving accuracy of trait judgments. This information could be used to design more effective training programs by increasing people's awareness of what is needed to make more accurate judgments and the situations in which the attainment of accuracy tends to be especially easy or challenging. Research in this area has primarily focused on how to make judges more accurate, but it would also be useful to know what targets can do to increase how accurately they are judged by others. Future research should continue to explore how to most effectively increase accuracy for judges and targets in multiple situations (including casual and professional settings) and for multiple purposes (making decisions about potential new friends or romantic partners and work-related decisions).

Application of Findings to Other Cultures and Age Groups

Much of accuracy research has been conducted in western countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and several European countries. These have been referred to as WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) countries, and the acronym fits because most of the world's population is not WEIRD (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

Little is known about whether the findings from accuracy research generalize to other, non-WEIRD countries that are likely to differ in many ways, including how the self and the stability of traits are conceptualized, the level of importance placed on the individual vs. the group, cultural complexity, flexibility, emotional experience and expression, and styles of communication (Benet-Martínez & Oishi, 2008; Triandis, 1989; Triandis & Suh, 2002). These and other culture-level variables could have important implications for typical levels of accuracy and how accuracy is achieved. Additionally, there is little research on the accuracy of cross-cultural judgments of traits. Accuracy of judging emotions across cultures has been examined extensively (Ekman et al., 1987; Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Laukka et al., 2016), and similar research that examines accuracy of trait judgments would reveal the similarities and differences of judging traits of people within and between cultural groups.

Furthermore, most accuracy research has been conducted with college students, young adults, and middle adults, so little is known about whether findings generalize to both judges and targets of younger and older age groups, or how accuracy develops over the lifespan. Learning about the development of the ability to make accurate judgments may also shed new light on the process of accuracy and reveal additional moderators or important outcomes of accuracy.

Standardized Tests of Personality Judgment Accuracy

A final important future direction is based on the fact that there is not a standard way to assess personality accuracy, in terms of how to expose people to personality cues, which cues to include, which situations to sample from, or how to compute accuracy scores, among other issues. Standardized tests exist for assessing accuracy of judgments of other domains, most notably emotions (Blanch-Hartigan, 2011; Buck, 1976; Hall et al., 2014; Nowicki & Duke, 1994; Rosenthal et al., 1979), but there is not a standardized test for accuracy of judgments of

personality. As a start to more systematic and similar stimuli, researchers could share their stimulus materials with others by posting them in online repositories, such as on the Open Science Framework website (<https://osf.io>) or the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR, <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/content/about/>), so that others could use the same materials in their own studies. Researchers would also need to post the accuracy criteria along with the stimulus materials so that other researchers have this information to use when computing accuracy scores. This would help with replicability, reproducibility, and transparency (Asendorpf et al., 2013; Finkel, Eastwick, & Reis, 2017), but it is not the same as creating a standardized test. To create a standardized test, a high-quality set of videos would need to be identified or created, valid accuracy criteria would need to be collected, and the accuracy of judgments that are made based on observations of those videos would need to be evaluated for reliability and validity. Such a test would allow research on trait judgment accuracy to progress at a faster pace because researchers would not have to create their own stimulus materials, and would allow for much easier comparisons of findings across studies and research labs.

Final Thoughts

It is an exciting time to be a researcher who is studying the accuracy of personality judgments. Models of the process of accuracy are well-established, and newer analytic models will allow researchers to examine new questions. A base of knowledge has been acquired about factors and characteristics of judges and targets that are related to accuracy, the importance of the context and situation in which judgments are made, and several important consequences of accuracy. Current and future research will likely build on this knowledge by examining more nuanced aspects of accurate judgments including judgments based on information in new

situations such as social media platforms, accuracy for judgments of contextualized personality, how to most effectively create interventions to increase accuracy, and the applicability of findings to additional cultures and age groups. A useful application of this research will be the development and refinement of methods to help people make more accurate judgments of others and ensure that others are making accurate judgments of them, which will allow people to make better decisions that will increase important outcomes such as job success and performance and relationship quality.

References

- Asendorpf, J. B., Conner, M., De Fruyt, F., De Houwer, J., Denissen, J. J. A., Fiedler, K., ...
Wicherts, J. M. (2013). Recommendations for increasing replicability in psychology:
Recommendations for increasing replicability. *European Journal of Personality*, 27, 108–
119. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1919>
- Benet-Martínez, V., & Oishi, S. (2008). Culture and personality. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, &
L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research* (3rd ed., pp. 542–
567). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Biesanz, J. C. (2010). The social accuracy model of interpersonal perception: Assessing
individual differences in perceptive and expressive accuracy. *Multivariate Behavioral
Research*, 45, 853–885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00273171.2010.519262>
- Brunswik, E. (1955). Representative design and probabilistic theory in a functional psychology.
Psychological Review, 62, 193–217. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0047470>
- Ekman, P., Friesen, W. V., O'Sullivan, M., Chan, A., Diacoyanni-Tarlatzis, I., Heider, K., ...
Tzavaras, A. (1987). Universals and cultural differences in the judgments of facial
expressions of emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 712–717.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.53.4.712>
- Elfenbein, H. A., & Ambady, N. (2002). On the universality and cultural specificity of emotion
recognition: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 203–235.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.128.2.203>
- Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., & Reis, H. T. (2017). Replicability and other features of a high-
quality science: Toward a balanced and empirical approach. *Journal of Personality and
Social Psychology*, 113, 244–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000075>

- Fleeson, W. (2001). Toward a structure- and process-integrated view of personality: Traits as density distributions of states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *80*, 1011–1027. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.6.1011>
- Fleeson, W., & Jayawickreme, E. (2015). Whole Trait Theory. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *56*, 82–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2014.10.009>
- Funder, D. C. (1995). On the accuracy of personality judgment: A realistic approach. *Psychological Review*, *102*, 652–670.
- Funder, D. C., & Sneed, C. D. (1993). Behavioral manifestations of personality: An ecological approach to judgmental accuracy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 479–490.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *33*(2–3), 61–83.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>
- Hirschmüller, S., Egloff, B., Schmukle, S. C., Nestler, S., & Back, M. D. (2015). Accurate judgments of neuroticism at zero acquaintance: A question of relevance. *Journal of Personality*, *83*, 221–228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12097>
- Human, L. J., Sandstrom, G. M., Biesanz, J. C., & Dunn, E. W. (2013). Accurate first impressions leave a lasting impression: The long-term effects of distinctive self-other agreement on relationship development. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *4*(4), 395–402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550612463735>
- Jones, A. B., Brown, N. A., Serfass, D. G., & Sherman, R. A. (2017). Personality and density distributions of behavior, emotions, and situations. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *69*, 225–236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2016.10.006>

- Kenny, D. A. (2004). PERSON: A general model of interpersonal perception. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8, 265–280. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0803_3
- Kenny, D. A., & La Voie, L. (1985). Separating individual and group effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 339–348. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.48.2.339>
- Krzyzaniak, S. L., Colman, D. E., Letzring, T. D., McDonald, J. S., & Biesanz, J. C. (2019). The effect of information quantity on distinctive accuracy and normativity of personality trait judgments. *European Journal of Personality*, 33(2), 197–213. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2196>
- Laukka, P., Elfenbein, H. A., Thingujam, N. S., Rockstuhl, T., Iraki, F. K., Chui, W., & Althoff, J. (2016). The expression and recognition of emotions in the voice across five nations: A lens model analysis based on acoustic features. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 111, 686–705. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000066>
- Letzring, T. D., & Human, L. J. (2014). An examination of information quality as a moderator of accurate personality judgment. *Journal of Personality*, 82(5), 440–451. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12075>
- McAdams, D. P. (1995). What do we know when we know a person? *Journal of Personality*, 63, 365–396. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1995.tb00500.x>
- Rauthmann, J. F., Gallardo-Pujol, D., Guillaume, E. M., Todd, E., Nave, C. S., Sherman, R. A., ... Funder, D. C. (2014). The situational eight DIAMONDS: A taxonomy of major dimensions of situation characteristics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107, 677–718. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037250>

- Sherman, R. A., Nave, C. S., & Funder, D. C. (2010). Situational similarity and personality predict behavioral consistency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*, 330–343. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019796>
- Sherman, R. A., Nave, C. S., & Funder, D. C. (2012). Properties of persons and situations related to overall and distinctive personality-behavior congruence. *Journal of Research in Personality, 46*, 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2011.12.006>
- Sherman, R. A., Nave, C. S., & Funder, D. C. (2013). Situational construal is related to personality and gender. *Journal of Research in Personality, 47*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2012.10.008>
- Triandis, H. C. (1989). The self and social behavior in differing cultural contexts. *Psychological Review, 96*, 506–520. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0033-295X.96.3.506>
- Triandis, H. C., & Suh, E. M. (2002). Cultural influences on personality. *Annual Review of Psychology, 53*, 133–160. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135200>