

Characteristics of Traits that are Related to Accuracy of Personality Judgments

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Abstract

Personality traits are characteristics of individuals that predict patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior over time. Research focusing on accuracy of judgments of the traits of others has found that certain traits are more easily judged than others. Traits such as extraversion tend to be judged with high levels of accuracy, while other traits such as neuroticism and openness to experience are more difficult to judge. Several factors play a role in these findings, such as the observability and ratability of traits, favorability and evaluativeness of traits, and the types of situations and relationships in which judgments are made. In this chapter, research investigating how these factors are related to accuracy of judgments for different traits is described, potential ways to improve accuracy of less easily-judged traits are proposed, and directions for future research are identified.

Keywords: personality traits, accuracy, observability, ratability, favorability, evaluativeness, situation, relationships, improving accuracy

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Can I trust my friend to pay back money he borrows from me? Which of my co-workers or classmates would be best to work with on an important project? Should I agree to a second date with her? Should I accept a marriage proposal from him? When we make important decisions about others, they are based in part on what we think they are like. We should lend money to an honest and reliable person, work on important projects with competent and responsible people, and date and marry people with whom our own personalities are compatible. We make better decisions when they are based on accurate judgments of characteristics or personality traits related to the decision, but what characteristics or traits are we most likely to accurately judge? The answer to this question is the focus of this chapter. We will explore what is known about relationships between accurate trait judgments and characteristics of the traits themselves, the situations in which the judgments are made, the type of relationship between the person making the judgment and the person being judged, and whether a person is judging the self or someone else.

Definitions

Let's start with some definitions. *Personality traits* are the unique, broad characteristics that make up "an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns" (Funder, 2016, p. 5). Traits provide descriptions of an individual's typical thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and are assumed to predict what the person does across time and situations. By investigating accuracy of personality judgment at the trait level, it is possible to understand why some characteristics are relatively easier to judge compared to others, and how individual differences and varying circumstances play a role in the accuracy of judging certain traits. *Judges* are the people making

the judgments, while *targets* are the people being judged. Judges rate targets, and it is possible for an individual to be both a judge and a target simultaneously. Within dyads, triads, or even larger groups of people, an individual may be a judge and target of multiple individuals.

Realistic Accuracy Model

David Funder (1995, 1999, 2012) proposed the *Realistic Accuracy Model* (RAM) to describe the process that makes accurate judgments possible and the *moderators* that are related to higher vs. lower levels of accuracy (see Ch. 2 by Letzring & Funder in this handbook). Within RAM, accurate judgments are described as the result of judges *detecting* and correctly *utilizing* cues that are *relevant* to the trait being judged and *available* to the judge. The four moderators within RAM are the *good judge*, *good target*, *good trait*, and *good information*, meaning that some judges, targets, and traits are easier to judge than others, and that accuracy is higher when many high-quality cues are available to judges (see the other chapters in Section II of this handbook for in-depth discussions of the judge, target, and information moderators).

The current chapter focuses on the good trait and summarizes the research findings that indicate that certain traits tend to be judged more accurately than others (Funder & Drobth, 1987; Letzring & Human, 2013). Several factors have been examined that may play a role in how accurately different traits are judged, including how easy it is to observe cues that are relevant for a given trait and the perceived social desirability of displaying a trait in a given circumstance. In addition, certain traits become relevant only within certain situations, such as bravery in a dangerous situation or self-control in a demanding situation. These situation-specific traits are typically judged less accurately when the judgments are first impressions formed in unstructured or neutral situations (Hirschmüller, Egloff, Schmukle, Nestler, & Back, 2015; Hirschmüller, Schmukle, Krause, Back, & Egloff, 2018). There is also evidence that some traits

are more easily judged when the person being judged is the self, while other traits are more easily judged by an observer (Vazire, 2010). This chapter will explore these concepts, as well as other factors that are related to the good trait.

Assessing Accuracy

The research discussed within this chapter will cover multiple ways of assessing accuracy. The simplest way to assess accuracy is by determining how well two or more judges agree about a target's personality, which is called *consensus*. The judges could all be close acquaintances of the target, strangers, or a combination such that a judgment from a stranger could be compared to a judgment from a close-other, such as a parent or spouse. However, a problem with consensus is that judges can agree with each other, but all be inaccurate in terms of what the target is really like. For example, people could agree that someone is highly conscientious based on seeing them complete one task on time, but they could all be inaccurate if the target only rarely does this. Another way to assess accuracy is by determining the relationship between judgments of a target and self-ratings from that target, which is referred to as *self-other agreement*. This method of assessing accuracy uses the self-judgment as the criterion and assumes that the self-judgments are valid. This is problematic if the targets do not know themselves well or if they are asked to report on characteristics that are difficult to see in one's self, such as modesty or highly evaluative traits (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). To minimize the bias that is likely in any single judgment of personality, the accuracy criterion could be based on a composite of ratings from multiple perspectives, including self-ratings, ratings from people assumed to know the target well such as family members and close friends, and ratings from trained coders based on behavioral observations. When these ratings agree with each other, the

composite can be used as the accuracy criterion and agreement between the composite ratings and judges' ratings is referred to as *realistic accuracy*.¹

Accuracy can also be calculated in multiple ways, which can lead to some confusion about exactly what is being assessed. First, *trait accuracy* can be used to assess accuracy for a single trait and reflects how accurately a judge orders a set of targets on a given trait, or how accurately a set of judges orders a set of targets when each judge rates only one target.² High trait accuracy means that a single judge was able to correctly identify which targets were higher vs. lower on a trait, or that across a set of judge-target pairs, the targets were ordered accurately. For example, a judge may correctly rate Aaron as being kinder than David and Darlene. The other approach to calculating accuracy is based on correlations between judge ratings and the accuracy criteria for a set of items for a single target, which are referred to as *profile correlations*. These correlations reflect how accurately a judge can order a set of items or traits for an individual target. For example, a strong and positive profile correlation means the judge was able to correctly determine whether a target was more kind than competent, or more dominant than anxious (e.g. that Aaron is more kind than he is competent, and that Darlene is more dominant than she is anxious).

Accuracy of Judging Different Traits

To illustrate the idea of judging different traits, think back to a time when you were first introduced to an important person in your life. Think back to your first interactions with this person, and the behaviors that stood out right away. There were probably certain characteristics

¹ It is usually preferable to use a composite for the accuracy criteria, but this is not always feasible and self-other agreement is quite commonly used in research in this area.

² It is possible to calculate correlations in this matter for single items within a personality measure when it is assumed that each item represents an individual trait, and this is referred to as *item-level correlations*.

that you could not help but notice, such as how talkative this person was, their social etiquette, and the facial expressions they made as you interacted together. You may have quickly noticed their ability to make a great first impression and how much they seemed to enjoy talking to you even though you had just met. It is also possible that you noticed quite the opposite about this person, in that they were shy and quiet and didn't seem to enjoy talking to you at all. Even within these first few moments, certain characteristics about this person probably stood out to you very quickly, and there is a good chance that you were able to make at least some accurate judgments about this person within this first interaction.

Now, consider the characteristics you discovered about this person over the course of your relationship. Over time you began to learn new information about this person that was not as apparent within that first interaction. You may have discovered that this individual was very organized after visiting their tidy home for the first time. You may have also discovered that under certain situations this individual became upset very easily and that they were happiest when engaging in artistic endeavors compared with more structured tasks. The more ways you engaged with this person over time, the more you learned about the more nuanced aspects of his/her personality that didn't stick out right away. Perhaps this person was organized with their physical possessions, but they could not seem to get to appointments on time. These examples demonstrate that while certain personality traits are more easily judged, even with relatively little information that can be learned during a first interaction, other personality traits are not accurately judged so readily.

Before we examine what makes a trait easy vs. difficult to judge accurately, it will be useful to describe a commonly-used model of personality traits that identifies five broad-level traits that are useful for describing people. This model is called the *Five Factor Model* (FFM)

(Goldberg, 1999; John et al., 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1999; Soto & John, 2017) which is also sometimes referred to as the *Big Five*. The Big Five include the traits of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience/Intellect, and Neuroticism/Emotional Stability. Each trait can be used to predict patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors people are likely to experience or engage in across situations and relationships. The traits are conceptualized at a broad and decontextualized level, which means that they describe what people are like in general across all situations they are in and over time.

Extraversion refers to how talkative, assertive, energetic, enthusiastic, outgoing, sociable, active, and prone to positive emotion an individual is. People with low levels of extraversion can be referred to as introverted, and highly introverted people like to spend time alone, are often relaxed and rarely get irritated, and typically let others take the lead. *Agreeableness* refers to how cooperative, trusting, appreciative, forgiving, caring, generous, kind, sympathetic, and likeable a person is. People high on agreeableness tend to behave in ways that are altruistic, emotionally supportive, and compliant, while people low on agreeableness can be described as antagonistic and tend to look down on others. *Conscientiousness* refers to how efficient, organized, planful, reliable, responsible, thorough, careful, competent, achievement-oriented, and self-disciplined an individual is. People high on conscientiousness behave in ways that are responsible, productive, and ethical, while people low on conscientiousness can be described as messy or careless and are somewhat likely to break the rules. *Openness to experience* refers to how curious, imaginative, insightful, open to ideas, and artistic an individual is. This trait is also referred to as Intellect in some models, which highlights the importance of basic intelligence, how people approach intellectual matters, and wisdom. People high in openness are likely to have unusual thought processes and to behave in unconventional ways, while people low in openness are conservative,

traditional, and prefer routine. *Neuroticism* refers to how moody, reactive, anxious, self-pitying, tense, nervous, and prone to negative emotion an individual is. People high in neuroticism tend to worry a lot, be impulsive, have fluctuating moods, and behave in self-defeating ways. People who are low on this are emotionally stable, relaxed, and comfortable with themselves. The research discussed in this chapter will largely focus on the Big Five personality traits because this model is most commonly used in accuracy research. However, findings based on other traits, such as trait mindfulness (May & Reinhardt, 2018), supernumerary traits³ (Paunonen & Kam, 2014), personal values (McDonald & Letzring, 2016), and self-esteem (Hirschmüller et al., 2018) will also be included.

Throughout the accuracy literature, certain traits are consistently found to be judged with high levels of accuracy, while other traits are typically judged with lower accuracy. The trait of extraversion, for example, tends to be judged with higher levels of accuracy compared to any other Big Five trait regardless of the context or situation, and even when judges have access to very limited amounts of information about targets (Beer & Watson, 2008; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Letzring & Human, 2013). On the other hand, traits such as neuroticism, self-esteem, and openness to experience/intellect⁴ all tend to be judged with lower levels of accuracy (Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Funder & Dobroth, 1987; John & Robins, 1993; Kilianski, 2008; Yeagley, Morling, & Nelson, 2007). Other traits, such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, are not

³ The Supernumerary Personality Inventory assesses 10 traits that do not map on to the Big Five traits. These traits are Conventionality, Seductiveness, Manipulativeness, Thriftiness, Humorousness, Integrity, Femininity, Religiosity, Risk-Taking, and Egotism.

⁴ Sometimes people think that people who are high in openness reveal a lot of relevant cues about the self, which leads them to think that openness should be more accurately judged. However, revealing information about the self is unrelated to openness.

considered to be especially easy or difficult to judge, with levels of accuracy generally varying depending on other factors (Connelly & Ones, 2010).

The following sections will explore research involving several factors related to accuracy of judgments of different traits, which include observability, favorability, the role of the situation, and different types of relationships, among others. As you will learn, research has investigated a variety of factors related to how accurately traits are typically judged, but it is important to keep in mind that some research findings are mixed and that there are still many unanswered questions within this literature.

Observability and Ratability of Traits and Accuracy

Observability (also termed *visibility*) refers to how likely it is for cues relevant to a given trait to be made available by targets, especially early in the acquaintance process and in many different situations. Levels of observability are typically determined by asking a group of research participants to rate how easy vs. difficult they think it is to observe or judge a certain characteristic or trait in another person (Funder & Dobroth, 1987; John & Robins, 1993). These ratings showed that people do think that traits differ in terms of how easy they are to judge in others, which is consistent with the idea that traits vary in the number of relevant cues that are easily observable in most situations and initial encounters (Funder, 1995, 2012). Consider again the illustration in which you became acquainted with an especially important person in your life – it is very likely that certain characteristics stood out much more readily than others, and this can be explained by observability. For example, extraversion is a highly observable trait because the behavioral cues related to this trait (e.g., talkativeness, sociability, dominance, energy level) are made available in many kinds of unstructured situations and are relatively easy for any type of judge to detect, including strangers. On the other extreme, neuroticism is much less

observable because the behavioral manifestations (e.g., feeling depressed and tense, worrying a lot, and not handling stress well) are less likely to be made available in unstructured situations and are often difficult for others to detect.

Observability is also positively related to self-other agreement with close acquaintances for traits beyond the Big Five, including Honesty-Humility as assessed by the HEXACO-PI-R (De Vries, Lee, & Ashton, 2008; De Vries, Realo, & Allik, 2008), and moral character as rated by close acquaintances (Helzer et al., 2014). For moral character, the highest level of agreement was found for the temperance facet and the lowest agreement was for the compassion facet. However, observability was not related to self-other agreement among close peers for ratings of facets of trait mindfulness (May & Reinhardt, 2018).

One of the first studies to examine how properties of traits are related to self-other agreement was conducted by Funder and Dobroth (1987). Participants in this study rated the 100 trait descriptors of the California Adult Q-Set (CAQ), which describes various aspects of personality, for how easy they thought it would be to judge each trait in another person. It was found that traits more strongly related to extraversion were seen as easier to judge, while traits more strongly related to neuroticism were seen as somewhat more difficult to judge. Then, self-other agreement (where the other-ratings were from peers who were acquainted with the targets) and peer-to-peer agreement (or consensus) were calculated and averaged to form interjudge agreement ratings for each trait, and these ratings were then correlated with ease-of-judgment. The results of this analysis are consistent with the subjective ratings of ease of judgment, as traits that were rated as easy to judge also had higher interjudge agreement, and traits that were rated as difficult to judge had lower interjudge agreement. This relationship between ease-of-judgment and accuracy has been replicated. For example, it has been replicated in multiple studies in the

United States (Funder & Colvin, 1988; John & Robins, 1993; Watson et al., 2000) as well as in Estonia and the Netherlands (De Vries et al., 2016). Findings have also replicated in studies involving close acquaintances of the targets (De Vries et al., 2016) and among judges who had only viewed a 5-minute interaction between two people whom they did not know (Funder & Colvin, 1988). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 24 studies with round robin designs⁵ found support for the positive relationship between observability and self-other agreement, with the effect being stronger with small group sizes and for people who were unfamiliar with each other prior to making ratings (Kenny & West, 2010).

Additional evidence for the relationship between trait observability and accuracy comes from a study that examined ratings of traits other than the Big Five, as assessed by the Supernumerary Personality Inventory (SPI; Paunonen & Kam, 2014). Rating of items that described behaviors resulted in higher self-other agreement among roommates than did ratings of items that described attitudes and beliefs. This evidence supports the role of observability in accuracy, as behaviors are more observable than attitudes and beliefs.⁶ Finally, a more recent study that examined the relationship between ease-of-judgment and self-other agreement among acquaintances using the International Personality Item Pool's (IPIP; Goldberg et al., 2006) 100-item version of the NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised-domains (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and a standard measure of personal values (the Schwartz Values Survey; Schwartz, 1992) did not find relations between ease-of-judgment and self-other agreement or consensus for either traits or personal values (McDonald & Letzring, 2016), nor did an early study that used ratings on the CAQ (Funder, 1980). There is not a clear explanation for this lack of replication, as the

⁵ In round robin design, a group of people rate themselves and every other member of the group.

⁶ However, it is interesting to note that self-other agreement did not differ for behaviors vs. attitudes and beliefs when items related to religiosity were included.

McDonald and Letzring (2016) study used the same method to assess observability as Funder and Drobth (1987), and also assessed self-other agreement among acquaintances in the same way. Overall, research evidence supports the positive relationship between trait observability and accuracy, and the idea that traits that are easy to see are judged more accurately.

A construct that is closely related to observability is *ratability*, which includes observability, but also includes whether cues relevant to a trait are more likely to be made available in public vs. private situations and how difficult it is to describe the trait itself (Letzring & Funder, 2018; Paunonen & Kam, 2014). One study found that items from the Schedule for Nonadaptive and Adaptive Personality (SNAP; Clark, 1993), which is a measure of 12 nonadaptive and adaptive personality traits and temperaments,⁷ had *ratability* scores that correlated positively with self-other agreement among close friends (Ready, Clark, Watson, & Westerhouse, 2000). *Ratability* was also found to be positively correlated with self-other agreement among roommates for ratings of the Big Five traits but is less strongly correlated for ratings on the SPI (Paunonen & Kam, 2014). There is not yet enough evidence for a positive link between *ratability* and accuracy to claim that this is an important factor related to self-other agreement, but the existing studies certainly point in that direction.

Favorability and Evaluativeness of Traits and Accuracy

Favorability of traits (also referred to as *social desirability* or *desirability*) reflects how favorably a person would be viewed if he or she was high or low on a particular trait. Levels of favorability are typically determined by ratings of how socially desirable it is to have a given trait or characteristic (Funder, 1980), or how favorably vs. unfavorably a person would be

⁷ The SNAP includes scales for mistrust, manipulateness, aggression, self-harm, eccentric perceptions, dependency, exhibitionism, entitlement, detachment, disinhibition, impulsivity, propriety, workaholism, positive temperament, and negative temperament.

viewed if he or she possessed a given trait or characteristic (John & Robins, 1993; McDonald & Letzring, 2016). Favorability is positively related to observability for personal values (McDonald & Letzring, 2016) and the traits described by the CAQ (Funder, 1980), but not for the Big Five traits⁸ (McDonald & Letzring, 2016). This relationship is important to keep in mind, as favorability and observability may be linked and therefore it is difficult to independently evaluate the effects of these factors on accuracy.

Findings are mixed in regards to the relationship between favorability and accuracy of trait judgments. Two of the earlier studies of this aspect of traits found positive relationships of moderate strength between favorability and self-other agreement among peers who knew the targets well (Funder, 1980; Funder & Colvin, 1988). It is interesting to note that this finding only held when judges were close friends or roommates of the targets, but not when judges were strangers who observed 5-minute recorded interactions (Funder & Colvin, 1988). Other research has found a curvilinear relationship between favorability and self-other agreement among acquaintances for judgments of the Big Five traits, such that agreement was higher for neutral traits than for highly favorable and unfavorable traits (John & Robins, 1993).

In contrast to the evidence of a positive relationship between favorability and self-other agreement, other research has found no relationship. This lack of a relationship has been seen among roommates or close friends for ratings of traits other than the Big Five, including traits assessed with the SPI (Paunonen & Kam, 2014) and the SNAP (Ready et al., 2000), personal values (McDonald & Letzring, 2016), and trait mindfulness (May & Reinhardt, 2018).

Additionally, some studies have even found negative relationships of moderate strength between

⁸ Favorability for personality traits was significantly correlated with a total observability score that was a composite of several ratings but was not significantly correlated with any of the individual observability ratings.

favorability and self-other agreement for the Big Five traits (McDonald & Letzring, 2016) and moral character (Helzer et al., 2014). On the whole, there is not evidence to support a robust relationship between favorability and self-other agreement.

A similar way to conceptualize favorability of traits is with the concept of *evaluativeness*. There is a u-shaped relationship between favorability and evaluativeness in that traits with high and low favorability are high on evaluativeness, whereas traits that are neither favorable nor unfavorable are low on evaluativeness. In other words, highly evaluative traits are those that are either very favorable or very unfavorable, whereas low evaluative traits are those that are neutral in terms of favorability. Evaluativeness can be used to explain the curvilinear relationship between favorability and self-other agreement as a negative linear relationship between evaluativeness and agreement because agreement was higher for traits with low evaluativeness and lower for traits with high evaluativeness (John & Robins, 1993). Some research suggests that a highly evaluative trait is intellect and the traits of extraversion and emotional stability are some of the least evaluative (John & Robins, 1993). However, other studies have not found a direct relationship between evaluativeness and self-other agreement with close informants for ratings of the Big Five traits, the HEXACO, and the SNAP (De Vries et al., 2016; Ready et al., 2000). Additionally, the study by De Vries and colleagues found that the relationship between these variables was mediated by the amount of variance in the ratings of the targets. In other words, traits that were less evaluative had more variability in how they were rated, and traits with more variability were rated with higher levels of self-other agreement.

Overall, there is not a clear picture of how favorability and evaluativeness are related to accuracy. Perhaps this relationship depends on other variables that have not yet been examined in multiple studies, such as item variance. It may also be useful to investigate various factors

related to trait accuracy in a more systematic way, such as the type of relationship between judges and targets, the types of traits that are being judged, or the method of determining levels of favorability.

Other Factors that Influence Trait Accuracy

As we have learned so far, there are several factors that can influence the accuracy of a trait judgment, including the observability, ratability, favorability, and evaluativeness of a given trait. We will now look at research that investigates how other factors can influence the accuracy of judgment of specific traits. These other factors include the type of situation in which an interaction occurs, the type of relationship two people share, and whether people are judging their own personality or the personality of another. As you will see, these factors can help to explain why some traits are judged more easily and accurately than others.

The Situation

Have you ever experienced a moment when a person you thought you knew very well did something that surprised you? Perhaps it was the time you worked on a time-sensitive project with a work-colleague and you noticed how calmly she handled the pressure and stress. You may have invited this same person to a dinner party and seen a different side of her compared to her work-persona. The more different kinds of situations you saw this person in, the more subtle aspects of her personality you started to see as she behaved consistently or differently across the situations.

The stages of RAM, as described previously, are important in consideration of research involving the *situation*, or the different contexts in which the individual engages with the world. When we are placed into a new situation with someone, it is possible to discover new things about that person because the situation might elicit cues that are not usually exhibited in other

contexts. In terms of the language of RAM, relevant cues to a given trait are more likely to be available in some situations than others. For example, behaviors related to one's level of courage or bravery are only likely to be available in dangerous or risky situations, and behaviors related to how one handles stress are more likely to be available when working on important and time-sensitive projects than in other situations. More internal personality traits that are not related to as many behavioral cues are less likely to be made available in most situations, because expressing those cues in an external way simply is not as likely. Because of this, the different situations we are in with others can influence which trait-specific behaviors are performed, which in turn can influence our ability to accurately judge different traits.

Research has investigated accuracy of trait-specific judgments with the use of different types of situations. For example, research has found that neuroticism tends to be more accurately judged when judges observe targets in more socially stressful situations in which cues about neuroticism are relevant and more likely to be externally displayed (Hirschmüller et al., 2015). In a similar fashion, unacquainted judges are able to accurately judge the self-esteem of targets in a public self-presentation situation (although accuracy is still considered to be relatively low; Hirschmüller et al., 2018). Additional research found that openness to experience was judged with higher levels of accuracy when judges examined the offices or bedrooms of targets, as opposed to engaging directly in interactions or observations (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). Research that intentionally selects situations that are likely to elicit cues to certain traits, especially traits that are typically judged with lower levels of accuracy, demonstrates that it is possible for judges to accurately judge these more difficult traits as long as the situation pulls for cues relevant to the trait of interest.

Relationships

Now let's add yet another piece to this puzzle. Consider the types of relationships you have with different people in your life, such as friends, family, coworkers, and your significant other. While some traits can be accurately judged regardless of relationship-type, many traits show benefit from a more personal and intimate relationship. In this way, the type of relationship you have with a person is important in terms of accuracy because judgments of less observable and more internal traits made by strangers are typically less accurate compared with judgments of casual acquaintances; which in turn are less accurate compared with judgments of close friends, spouses, and family members (Connelly & Ones, 2010; see also Ch. 9 by Beer and Ch. 17 by Luo & Watson in this handbook). While most personality traits require a more personal relationship to be judged with especially high levels of accuracy, extraversion is the consistent exception throughout the literature because it is judged with high accuracy even among strangers (Beer & Watson, 2008; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Borkenau, Brecke, Mottig, & Paelecke, 2009; Letzring & Human, 2013; Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009) and sees the least improvement in accuracy as relationships become more intimate (Connelly & Ones, 2010).

While it is certainly impressive that some traits can be accurately judged at high levels by total strangers, it is a very different story for more internal personality traits. Neuroticism and openness to experience are traits that are especially difficult for strangers to accurately judge within most first-impression situations, and research shows that accuracy for these traits, as measured by self-other agreement, sees the most improvement for friends and family compared to the other Big Five traits (Connelly & Ones, 2010). When compared to accuracy of extraversion, neuroticism is judged with much lower levels of accuracy by strangers, but with about the same level of accuracy for dating and married couples (Watson et al., 2000). Friends and cohabitating romantic couples who are not married are more accurate about agreeableness

and conscientiousness compared to other relationship-types (Connelly & Ones, 2010). Thus, it is certainly possible for more internal traits such as neuroticism and openness to experience to be judged with high levels of accuracy, but it is much more likely for this to occur in close relationships than among strangers.

These relationships differ in important ways that can help us understand why there are differences in levels of accuracy for some traits. One of these differences is the level of intimacy. Your interactions with strangers are most likely not at all intimate and involve adherence to social norms and small talk, and not much else. Relationships with coworkers may be more intimate than relationships with strangers, but are likely still on the low end of intimacy. In comparison, you probably have far more intimate relationships with friends, family members, and romantic relationship partners. In more intimate relationships, people are more likely to share their thoughts and feelings, including thoughts and feelings relevant to less-observable traits, and this may partly explain why people tend to make more accurate judgments of friends, family members and romantic partners than of coworkers and strangers (Connelly & Ones, 2010).

In addition to intimacy-level, another factor that varies across relationship types is the number of situations or contexts in which you are likely to see each other. The types of contexts in which you interact with strangers or coworkers are probably very limited in scope (such as only at the grocery store or at work or work-related functions). On the other hand, you've likely seen your family, friends, and romantic partners across a much wider variety of contexts (such as at home, social events, religious events, work parties, and while on vacation). Cues to different traits are more or less likely to be revealed in different situations, so seeing people in more types of situations increases the likelihood that a judge will have access to cues that are relevant to

less-observable traits, and therefore are likely to make more accurate judgments about those traits than people who have seen the targets in fewer situations. In summary, judgments of friends, family, and romantic partners are likely to be more accurate than judgments of strangers, especially for less visible traits, due to increased levels of intimacy and being with other people across many types of situations, which both increase the availability of relevant cues.

Judgments of the Self and Others

Another factor that should be discussed in terms of trait judgments, and perhaps one that you have not yet considered while reading this chapter, is whether we are making judgments of others or of ourselves. We already know people make judgments of others constantly, but people also make judgments about *their own* personality traits. Most people have a fairly good idea of who they are and are able to describe what they are like and what they think and do in different situations. Within the accuracy literature, recall that the accuracy criterion often relies on a self-report measure of personality, other-report measures of personality from individuals who are well-acquainted with the target, or the combination of both (Funder, 1995). Judgments made by the self or by others tell two sides of the story that make up a person, and both are certainly worth considering. While the literature discussed within this chapter up until now has focused on how we make judgments of others, we will briefly discuss the accuracy of our *self-judgments* and which traits are judged more accurately when rating the self vs. others. The idea that there may be differences in judgments made by the self and others is captured in the Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry Model (see Chapter 10 by Bollich-Ziegler in this handbook for a more detailed description of this model).

It can be argued that self-judgments and judgments of others are accurate due to different reasons. The self has access to a plethora of information, including their own thoughts, feelings,

and behaviors across every situation and interaction they have been in over time. Self-perceptions are based on internal experiences of thoughts and feelings, and awareness and observation of one's own behavior, across the lifespan. On the other hand, perceptions of others are primarily based on a more limited outside viewpoint, fewer situations and less time, and a lack of access to internal thoughts and feelings unless they are outwardly expressed. In line with this, some research has suggested that the self is likely to more accurately judge more internal personality traits that are related to emotional experiences (such as neuroticism) because the self simply has more knowledge about these internal traits (Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000).

On the other hand, despite having access to more knowledge and experience than anyone else, the self is not necessarily completely accurate for judgments of all traits. The self has the tendency to provide self-descriptions that are overly positive and to *self-enhance*, which means seeing the self in a more favorable way than is warranted by more objective indicators. This *positivity bias* indicates a possible cause of inaccuracy in self-judgments (Hofstee, 1994), especially for traits that are highly evaluative. Judgments of others are not as prone to this bias, although acquaintances tend to judge targets more favorably than do strangers (John & Robins, 1993). Some research suggests that judgments from outside observers capture unique aspects of a target's personality that the perspective of the self does not provide, indicating that judgments of the self and of others provide somewhat different information about the person (Vazire, 2010). This is especially likely for traits that are related to more behavioral cues such as sociability and arrogance, which tend to be more accurately perceived by others (Vazire & Mehl, 2008).

Summary

We have described how different factors, including the situation and type of judge-target relationship can influence our ability to accurately judge different traits. In review, accuracy for

more internal and less observable personality traits is highly influenced by the situation and relationship-type, while more externalized personality traits are more easily and accurately judged across different situations and with shorter and less intimate relationships. In addition, more internal and less evaluative traits are more accurately judged by the self, while more externalized and evaluative traits are more accurately judged by others. Considering what we have learned so far about the accuracy of different personality traits, we will now discuss some possible ways to increase the accuracy of judgments of some traits, as well as some possibilities for the future of accuracy research that focuses on the good trait moderator.

Improving Accuracy of Trait Judgments

While there are many factors related to how accurately specific traits can be judged, it is important to emphasize that under the right circumstances, it may be possible to judge all traits with high levels of accuracy. The topics discussed within this chapter highlight several ways that achieving higher levels of trait accuracy is possible. While this may seem like a daunting task given the complexities we have discussed, research on the good trait suggests how accuracy could be improved. Before we discuss how to improve accuracy for a given trait, consider the answers to the questions we have addressed within this chapter.

First, what makes a trait more observable and is this related to accuracy? An observable trait is associated with an abundance of relevant cues that are made available in many situations. It is easier to judge these traits because it is easier for judges to gather a large enough amount of relevant information about them. Furthermore, there is strong research evidence that more observable traits tend to be judged more accurately.

Second, what are trait favorability and evaluativeness, and are these related to accuracy? A favorable trait is one that is socially desirable to score high on, and evaluative traits are ones

with high or low favorability. The research is less clear on whether and how favorability and evaluativeness are related to accuracy, although highly evaluative traits do seem to be judged more accurately by others than by the self.

Third, how do other factors of a trait judgment contribute to accuracy? First, cues relevant to some traits are more likely to be available in certain situations, and therefore accuracy for certain traits varies across situations. Second, individuals in more intimate relationships, including family members, close friends, and romantic partners, tend to be more accurate about each other than coworkers and strangers, especially when judging less visible or more internal traits. Third, it is possible to be accurate when judging both others and the self, but the process of gathering information and proneness to positivity bias differs for others vs. the self. As a result, judgments of the self tend to be more accurate than judgments of others for more internal and less evaluative traits.

Even traits that are less easily judged, such as neuroticism, can be accurately judged in situations that are likely to elicit cues relevant to those traits, which indicates that it is important to interact with or observe targets in a variety of situations, and especially in situations that are likely to elicit cues for these less-observable traits. As research has shown, observing someone in a socially stressful situation can lead to higher levels of accuracy for judgments of neuroticism compared to less stressful situations (Hirschmüller et al., 2015), and accuracy of self-esteem is possible within public self-presentation situations (Hirschmüller et al., 2018). But what about other traits that are difficult to judge? Can we broadly apply what we know from previous research to identify possible situations in which cues to these traits are more likely to be available? For example, openness to experience is the other trait from the Five Factor Model that tends to be judged with lower levels of accuracy. Perhaps engaging in a task with someone that

requires creativity, discussing philosophical issues, or visiting a museum or art gallery would provide cues relevant to openness and intellect. An aspect of moral character that was judged with lower accuracy was compassion (Helzer et al., 2014), so observing people interacting with or helping others who are in need in some way or asking people to talk about whether they look for and act on ways to help others, could provide cues to compassion. For example, one study examined whether people are able to make accurate judgments of how others perceive risk (Vineyard, 2016). Judgments reached the highest levels of accuracy when judges observed targets discussing their attitudes toward risk as opposed to describing either a risky activity in which they had engaged, or their personality in general. So, if you want to judge less observable and more internal traits with high accuracy, be sure to ask questions that will provide information that is relevant to those traits or observe people in situations that are likely to elicit trait-relevant information.

Research has found that people tend to make more accurate judgments of low-observability traits when they have been acquainted with targets for longer and have developed a more intimate relationship with them (Biesanz, West, & Millevoi, 2007; Connelly & Ones, 2010). Based on this finding, another possible way to improve accuracy is to have longer and more intimate relationships. To perhaps hasten this process, you could spend more time with people, ask questions, and have conversations that are likely to increase the level of intimacy in the relationship. For example, instead of talking about the weather and movies you've seen recently, talk about things that are important to you (such as your life goals and motivations, and philosophical or religious worldviews) and how you typically think and feel in several types of situations. Although keep in mind that how you do this is important, as you want other people to feel comfortable to reveal their true thoughts, feelings, motivations, etc. (see Letzring, 2008). In

addition, more intimate relationships are likely to involve interactions across a wider variety of contexts compared to those that are less intimate, and seeing people in more situations is likely to increase the number of relevant cues that are available to less-observable traits. For this reason, interacting with targets in a larger variety of situations, or asking people to describe what they think, feel, and do across several types of situations, is likely to lead to higher levels of accuracy.

In addition to these suggestions, it is also important to note that targets have access to internal knowledge about themselves that is not always behaviorally externalized (Vazire, 2010). Because of this, it can be beneficial to simply ask someone what they are thinking or feeling; ask them to describe their attitudes, beliefs, or values; ask them to list unusual facts about themselves; or directly ask them what they think are like. If they respond to these questions honestly, this will also be helpful in making more relevant cues available for less judgable traits.

Future Directions

Research investigating judgment accuracy for specific personality traits has advanced our understanding of why some traits are judged more easily than others. However, there are still several areas of research that have not yet been investigated deeply in relation to the good trait and that would be interesting avenues for future work.

It is not yet clear whether and how favorability and evaluativeness of traits are related to how accurately they are judged. Research has found positive linear relationships (Funder, 1980; Funder & Colvin, 1988), curvilinear relationships (John & Robins, 1993), no relationship (May & Reinhardt, 2018; McDonald & Letzring, 2016; Paunonen & Kam, 2014; Ready et al., 2000), and even negative relationships (Helzer et al., 2014; McDonald & Letzring, 2016) between favorability and accuracy. Furthermore, these relationships have been found to vary depending on the relationship between the judges and targets (Funder & Colvin, 1988). One study suggested

that rather than there being a direct relationship between favorability and accuracy, there is an indirect link that goes through variability in how items were rated (De Vries et al., 2016). Future research should attempt to make sense of this link to determine how favorability is related to accuracy and the other variables that moderate and mediate this relationship. This is important because many consequential decisions are based on judgments of evaluative traits, such as who to hire for a job or who to date and/or marry, and information about how to increase the accuracy of judgments of these traits could help people to make better decisions in these areas.

Another important area for future research is to expand work that examines the role of the situation. Research investigating the role of the situation yields consistent findings, in that certain situations are more relevant for certain traits over others (Beer & Brooks, 2011; Hirschmüller et al., 2015; 2018; Letzring & Human, 2013). Future research investigating the role of the situation should investigate a much wider variety of situations, as the vast majority of situations explored within accuracy research are interactions between strangers in a laboratory setting. Many situations encountered in real life occur while someone is by themselves or with people they have known for a long time, as well as in familiar settings in which everyday activities take place.

Future research should also continue to investigate the role of relationship type. It is clear that accuracy for some traits tends to improve over the course of a relationship as more intimate information is more likely to be made available across a wider variety of contexts (Biesanz et al., 2007; Connelly & Ones, 2010; Watson et al., 2000). What is less clear is which traits tend to be more or less relevant across different relationship types, and therefore more or less accurately judged across relationship types (see Ch. 17 by Luo & Watson in this handbook). The type of relationship may certainly influence the type of traits that are more or less likely to be expressed

over time, as a casual friendship could involve very different interactions compared to an employer-employee relationship, a parent-child relationship, a teacher-student relationship, and a marriage, just to name a few.

A third future research direction could investigate how the variability of traits is related to how accurately they are judged. Fleeson (2001) proposed the idea of thinking about personality traits in terms of how states related to the traits vary over time, and later used this idea as part of his Whole Trait Theory (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). Fleeson called this variability in states a *density distribution*, and the main idea is that over time, people behave in ways that are consistent with different levels of traits. For example, when people report on how extraverted they are feeling and behaving in the moment at several points over several days, there are large amounts of variability such that sometimes they report high levels of extraversion, sometimes moderate levels, and sometimes low levels. It is possible to compute a person's average state-level for each trait, as well as the variability in the state ratings (usual in terms of standard deviations). Research supports this conceptualization of traits and has found that individuals vary quite a bit in behavior and emotions related to traits (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson & Law, 2015). However, some traits (especially extraversion, conscientiousness, and positive affect) seemed to have more within-person variability than other traits (such as agreeableness, neuroticism, and intellect; Fleeson, 2001). It is this aspect of trait variability that fits in this chapter on the good trait. If some traits have narrow density distributions, meaning that people act and feel more consistent levels of those traits across situations and over time, then those traits may be easier to judge accurately than traits with wider density distributions. To our knowledge, no one has yet investigated how accuracy is related to density distributions of specific traits, and this could be

another important approach that would increase our understanding of why some traits are judged more accurately than others.

Finally, future research should continue to investigate accuracy of a wide variety of traits and could benefit by also examining accuracy at different levels of specificity or breadth. While most research has investigated accuracy of judging personality traits, and the Five Factor Model in particular, research has also investigated accuracy of judging values (McDonald & Letzring, 2016), trait-mindfulness (May & Reinhardt, 2018), and self-esteem (Hirschmüller et al., 2018). Investigating accuracy of traits other than the Big Five is important to more fully understand how accurately other relatively stable characteristics of individuals are judged and the factors related to the accuracy of those judgments. Furthermore, most research has examined accuracy of judging personality traits at a broad factor level. However, there are lower-levels of these personality factors – called facets – that describe more specific patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Costa & McCrae, 1995; Soto & John, 2009, 2016). Research that examines accuracy of personality trait judgments at the facet level could reveal additional information about how factors are related to accuracy of judgments, such as whether accuracy of judging facets follows similar patterns to accuracy of judging personality traits as a whole and whether certain facets are more observable and relevant depending on the circumstances of the interaction.

Conclusion

Understanding accuracy of person perception for specific traits is not a straightforward process, as you may have deduced from reading this chapter. People and contexts are both complex, and some traits are simply easier to judge than others depending on the circumstances. Several characteristics of traits play a role in why some traits are judged more easily than others, including observability, the situation, and your relationship with a target. Identifying which traits

are easier vs. harder to judge and developing ways to increase accuracy for less easily-judged traits could help people to make more accurate judgments and ultimately to make better decisions based on these judgments. It is important for people to understand that they may have to invest quite a bit of time and thought in order to make the most accurate judgments possible of different traits.

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