

Accuracy of Personality Impression Is Affected by Social Identity and Mode of Information Gathering

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Abstract

We examined how saliency of social identities and modality of presentation affect the perception of personality traits. 32 psychology students (targets) wrote short open ended self-descriptive paragraphs and completed questionnaires of personality traits. Participants (160 raters) read or listened to the open-ended self-descriptions and rated the targets with the same set of questionnaires. Each target was rated by ten raters. Half of the targets and half of the raters completed the questionnaires after the saliency of their identity as psychology students was raised. The modality by which information was acquired affected perception: both self-other agreement and inter-rater consensus were higher when the rater read the self-descriptions than when they heard them read by the targets. The saliency of social identities also affected perception: when the identity as a psychology student of the raters was salient, there was higher self-other agreement, and higher consensus. Furthermore, saliency of the social identity of the rater and the target interacted: Self-other agreement was lowest when both their identity as psychology students of the rater and the target was not salient. Consensus was highest when both identities were salient. These results demonstrated the important influence of social identity saliency on social perception.

Introduction

People can make accurate judgments of the personality of others on the basis of very little information. (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). But factors affecting accuracy of first impressions are yet to be fully understood. We focused on two factors: target's control of the information provided and saliency of social identity of the target and of the rater.

Modality: the way by which information is provided

People form first impressions of others through a variety of modalities: sometimes we briefly meet, other times we have the opportunity to only hear their voices (Berry, 1991), or have only access to written texts. (e.g., e-mails, Gill, Oberlander & Austin, 2006), or personal Websites, Marcus, Machilek & Schütz, 2006; Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

These ways of acquiring information are likely to affect the accuracy of personality perception. They differ in the amount of available cues, and in the extent of control a person has over the information provided.

We examined two modalities: In one condition raters read brief self-presentation written by the targets. In the other condition the raters heard recordings of the self-descriptions. In the "written" condition the target had full control over the information provided to the raters. In the "recorded" condition, targets had control of the content of the self-description, but had less control over other aspects that can influence social perception: accent, pace of reading, tone of voice (e.g., Furnham, 1990).

Social identity

Salient social identities can affect personality perception in a variety of ways: a person's salient identities affect self-attributed personality characteristics, so that people respond differently to personality inventories when different social identities are salient (e.g. Heller, et al., 2007; Sheldon, et al., 1997). The effect of salient social identities of the rater on first impressions of personality has not been studied yet. But studies on stereotypes indicate that saliency of group membership affects stereotypical perception (e.g., Hogg, 2006).

We examined the effects of raising the saliency of a social identity of the targets and of the raters, on accuracy of personality perception.

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Method

32 psychology students (targets) wrote short open ended self-descriptive paragraphs and completed Saucier's (1994) Mini-Markers inventory. Saliency of identity was manipulated by framing the study as part of a comparison between students from different faculties (salient group) or as a study of human personality (non-salient group).

A different sample of 160 psychology students served as raters. They read or listened to the open-ended self-descriptions and rated the targets with the same set of questionnaires used by the targets. Each participant rated eight targets. Each target was rated by ten raters. Saliency of identity was manipulated modifying the paradigm used by Anderson, Lepper, and Ross (1980, see also: Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989; Sanitioso & Wlodarski, 2004): The salient group read a short of traits description describing psychology students (agreeableness and openness). Then they were asked to write five reasons explaining why psychology students have these traits. The non-salient group read and justified a passage claiming that having a pet increases quality of life.

Results

Self-Other Agreement

Table 1 presents the average self-other agreement correlations. After transforming each self-other correlation to Fisher's Z, we run repeated measure ANOVA, and found significant effect of Rater identity, $F(1,30) = 4.77$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, significant Mode of information gathering effect, $F(1,30) = 6.19$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$ ($\bar{r}_{read} = .48$; $\bar{r}_{listen} = .42$), and significant Rater identity by Target identity interaction, $F(1,30) = 4.85$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. Mode of information gathering by Target identity interaction was marginally significant, $F(1,30) = 3.71$, $p = 0.06$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Target identity and all other interactions were not significant.

Table 1. Average self-other agreement

| | | Rater | | | | |
|--------|----------------------|------------------|--------|----------------------|--------|-----|
| | | Salient identity | | Non salient identity | | |
| | | Read | Listen | Read | Listen | |
| Target | Non-salient Identity | .46 | .44 | .40 | .40 | .43 |
| | Salient Identity | .52 | .42 | .53 | .41 | .47 |
| | | .45 | | .40 | | |
| | | .47 | | .43 | | |

Table 2. Average inter-class correlations

| | | Rater | | | | |
|--------|----------------------|------------------|--------|----------------------|--------|-----|
| | | Salient identity | | Non salient identity | | |
| | | Read | Listen | Read | Listen | |
| Target | Non-salient Identity | .46 | .41 | .38 | .34 | .40 |
| | Salient Identity | .43 | .34 | .43 | .35 | .39 |
| | | .45 | | .36 | | |
| | | .39 | | .38 | | |

Consensus

Table 2 presents average inter-class correlations (ICC). After transforming ICCs using Fisher's ICC-to-Z transformation we run repeated measure ANOVA, and found significant effect of Rater identity, $F(1,30) = 4.50$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$, and significant Mode of information gathering effect, $F(1,30) = 6.26$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$ ($\overline{ICC}_{read} = .42$; $\overline{ICC}_{listen} = .36$). The Target identity by Rater identity interaction was also significant, $F(1,30) = 4.47$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$. Other interactions were not significant.

Conclusions

The modality by which information about the target is acquired significantly influenced accuracy: self-other agreement and consensus among raters were higher when raters read self-descriptions as opposed to listening to the same descriptions reading aloud by the target. Thus, accuracy was higher when the targets had high control over the information conveyed to the raters. It is yet to be studied what specific cues available in the "listen" condition decreased accuracy of personality perception.

Social identities affected perception: when the identity as a psychology student of the raters was salient, there was higher self-other agreement, and higher consensus. Accurate impression formation is an important skill of psychologists. Thus, our findings are in line with the increasing literature showing that positive stereotypes can improve performance (e.g. Ambady, et al., 2001; Shih et al., 1999). These results are also in accord with the finding that priming a stereotype or trait leads to overt behavior in line with this activated stereotype or trait (Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998, Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Saliency of the social identity of the rater and the target interacted in their effects on perception. Saliency of the identity of the rater had greater effect when the identity of the target was not salient.