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Observers spontaneously use Intelligence, Extraversion, Neuroticism and Psychoticism when evaluating personality

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Abstract

Scant attention has been paid to how individuals spontaneously categorise the personalities of people with whom they are familiar. 67 individuals who had extensive experience watching the participants in a reality-television programme (Big Brother) were shown all possible pairings of the participants' names and photographs and rated the overall similarity of each pair. They then completed a rating-form of a standard personality inventory for each participant, and also rated the Intelligence of each participant. Non-metric multidimensional scaling of the averaged similarity data showed that the observers considered two features of the participants when assessing the similarity of their personalities. Correlational analyses showed that one of these features was a mixture of the participant's Intelligence and emotional stability, and the other a combination of Extraversion and Psychoticism.

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1. Introduction

There are three distinct approaches to conceptualising and assessing personality. The psychometric model is based on ratings or self-ratings on adjectives or adjectival phrases. The finding

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that self- or other-ratings on some adjectives co-vary from person to person (i.e., produce factors) suggests that a person's behaviour may be conveniently described in terms of a small number of traits whose origins and biosocial correlates are then explored. Social psychologists, drawing on Mischel's (Mischel, 1968) criticisms of trait theory, view personality assessment as a process of social construction. Hence implicit personality theory focuses on how and why characteristics are attributed to others (e.g., the attribution that intelligent people are happy). Curiously, the early work failed to consider the possibility that such 'biases' were in fact accurate. The third approach focuses on how an individual views others or 'the self', for example using the Q-sort or repertory grid. The disadvantage of such methods is that different people use different constructs, and so they do not lead to a means for the objective assessment of personality.

An extensive literature shows that ratings of personality based on standard personality inventories are frequently consistent between raters and can agree well with self-ratings of personality (McCrae, Stone, Fagan, & Costa, 1998). This is true even if the raters have had no opportunity to confer and have observed the participants in completely different social environments (Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Kenny, Albright, Malloy, & Kashy, 1994). Unsurprisingly, better agreement is obtained the longer the individuals have been acquainted (Kurtz & Sherker, 2003). Scores derived from adjective-based scales such as the First Impression Interaction Procedure (King & Pate, 2002) can also show good agreement with self-ratings.

The usual interpretation of such findings is that observers are sensitive to cues that indicate personality (Borkenau & Liebler, 1995). However this interpretation is not necessarily correct. Consistent correlations between rating scales and/or self-report inventories merely demonstrate that observers can focus on and evaluate particular trait-relevant behaviours when they are asked to do so. It does not follow that observers notice either these behaviours or the traits which influence them when they discriminate between people in everyday life, without the benefit of questionnaires or lists of adjectives to cue them as to which behaviours may be important. Indeed, the literature shows that partners appear to be neither similar nor complementary with respect to personality (Clark & Reis, 1988) which raises the question of whether personality traits are irrelevant for relationship-formation, or whether individuals seeking relationships simply fail to notice behaviours that 'mark' the main personality traits. Surprisingly, the general issue of how people categorise personality without the benefit of checklists does not appear to have been considered before in the literature. The aim of the present study is therefore to discover whether observers consider trait-relevant information when comparing people with respect to personality.

2. Method

2.1. Background

To address the issues outlined above it is necessary to gather data from observations of behaviour where each observer sees the same set of people behaving in several different situations over a long period of time. The impression-formation literature suggests that personality attributions are only made once a person has information about several (e.g., eight) pieces of trait-relevant behaviour; prior to this the person is described in terms of isolated behaviours (Sherman & Klein, 1994). Unfortunately this study supplied observers with written facts about the person to be rated, rather

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