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# Perceptions of people with personality disorders based on thin slices of behavior

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## Abstract

Strangers made reliable judgments about personality traits after viewing one 30-s excerpt from interviews with anonymous target persons. Ratings were generated for 229 military recruits participating in a study of personality disorders. Approximately 28% of the recruits met DSM-IV criteria for a definite or probable personality disorder (PD). Several untrained undergraduate students rated each video clip with regard to the Big Five personality traits, physical attractiveness, and likeability. The students accurately rated people who exhibited features of paranoid, schizotypal, dependent, and avoidant PDs as being lower in extraversion. The raters also considered these people less likeable. Students accurately rated people who exhibited features of histrionic PD as being higher in extraversion and found them to be more likeable. Laypersons can make accurate judgments regarding some personality characteristics associated with personality disorders, even on the basis of minimal information. These perceptions may influence ways in which people respond to others with PDs.

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## 1. Introduction

Personality and personality disorders are defined by information derived from three principal sources of information: Self-report, observations of behavior, and the perceptions of other people. Most knowledge of personality—in clinical situations as well as research—is based on self-report or the person's own description

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of his or her feelings, thoughts, and motives. Much less is known about the ways in which normal and pathological personality traits are perceived by others (Clark & Harrison, 2001; Oltmanns, Turkheimer, & Strauss, 1998; Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000).

We have studied features of personality disorders in non-clinical samples of young adults (military recruits and college students). Our data indicate that there is substantial consensus among peers when they are asked to nominate members of their group who exhibit features of personality disorders (Thomas, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2003). Furthermore, the factor structure of the peers' data is consistent with both the DSM-IV description of personality disorders and the five-factor model of personality. The information that peers provide, however, is only modestly related to that obtained using self-report. Correlations between self-report and peer-report measures for personality disorders range between .22 and .30. This pattern indicates that the perceptions of other people contain reliable information about personality traits and pathology that is not redundant with subjective information provided by the person.

Many impressions about people with personality disorders are based on thoughtful deliberation following extended observations of inconsistent, puzzling, annoying, and occasionally disturbing behaviors. We also know, however, that some personality judgments about other people are formed quickly and without conscious effort or reason (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). This evidence suggests that some aspects of pathological behavior may be evident to others from the very beginning of an interaction, and these initial impressions may be an important influence on the person's pattern of social relationships. For example, it has been demonstrated that boys with either Attention Deficit Disorder or Learning Disorder are negatively evaluated by peers on a number of dimensions after the peers have viewed one minute of videotaped interaction (Bickett & Milich, 1990). For these boys, difficulties in social relationships may have their roots in first impressions. Similar effects may occur for individuals with PDs. Once an impression has been made, possibly based on very little information, it may have negative consequences for whether others decide to pursue a relationship with people who show evidence of personality disorders.

One way to study first impressions involves the use of "thin slices" of expressive behavior. A thin slice is a brief, dynamic sample of a person's behavior, typically less than 5 min and most often identified as a segment or clip taken from a longer video recording of the person interacting with others or performing some kind of task. Raters can predict accurately some personality traits of strangers after viewing clips of behavior as short as 6 s (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, 1993). Previous studies have focused on the prediction of variations in normal personality traits among strangers. They have not addressed the ability of strangers to perceive variations in personality found among people with personality disorders.

We do not expect laypersons to be able to identify formal diagnostic categories, particularly on the basis of minimal information. Nevertheless, they might be able to recognize broad features of personality that are associated with PDs. Many thin slice studies have utilized the five-factor model of personality. The relationship between the five-factor model and personality disorders has been studied both in

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