



Interpersonal perception and personality disorders: Utilization of a thin slice approach [☆]

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Abstract

Study 1 expands upon previous research by looking at the ability of untrained raters to detect pathological traits within a normal population of college students. In Study 1, 30-s video clips of 81 target persons were shown to 42 raters. Ratings of traits of personality disorders made by thin slice raters reliably predicted scores on the personality pathology measures obtained from the targets themselves and from close peers. Study 2 is a preliminary examination of how pathological rater traits impacts thin slice accuracy. In Study 2, peer and self-report data were examined regarding 87 thin slice raters. Raters who exhibited traits of narcissistic personality disorder were significantly less accurate in making personality predictions regarding targets. Three clusters of personality items were identified based on rater characteristics related to accuracy in predicting behavior.

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1. Introduction

Interpersonal difficulties are a hallmark of personality disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000); one of the most common forms of psychopathology afflicting between 10 and 15% of the adult population (Mattia & Zimmerman, 2001). Many of these interpersonal difficulties may have their roots in first impressions that are made quickly, often without intention or awareness. Research on thin slices of expressive behavior has demonstrated that fairly accurate judgments about strangers can be made on the basis of minimal information (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). Once formed, these impressions can have a lasting impact on subsequent judgments about others (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). With regards to personality disorders, first impressions are of interest in two domains: the person being judged and the individual making judgments. People who are viewed negatively by others at the outset of a relationship may have difficulty overcoming the impact of this impression in future interactions. Additionally, people who form less accurate first impressions of others may also encounter problems in developing relationships.

Initial studies of the relation between first impressions and personality pathology have focused on broad personality features of the person being judged. Untrained undergraduate raters were able to make reliable personality judgments of military recruits based on a 30-s excerpt of a videotaped interview (Oltmanns, Friedman, Turkheimer, & Fiedler, 2004). First impressions, recorded in terms of the five-factor model of personality, were systematically related to evidence of personality pathology in the target persons. Raters found individuals with personality features related to schizoid and avoidant personality disorders to be low in extraversion, agreeableness, and openness. They also rated them as being less attractive. In contrast, they found individuals with features of histrionic personality disorder to be high on the same three personality traits and also more attractive. These patterns were found regardless of whether the target person's pathological personality characteristics were originally assessed using a semi-structured diagnostic interview or using peer nominations. Our second study (in a different sample of target recruits) examined the basis for these impressions by decomposing the signal that was presented to raters. We found that impressions of individuals with pathological traits were based on information that is present in several informational channels; similar effects were found when thin slice raters were presented with sound alone, picture alone or a written transcript (Friedman, Oltmanns, Gleason, & Turkheimer, 2006).

In the studies outlined above, thin slice judges were asked to rate target persons on broad personality dimensions. They were not asked to make judgments about the presence of specific pathological personality features, such as grandiosity or paranoia. Extensive evidence supports the utility of the five-factor model in the conceptualization of personality disorders (Costa & Widiger, 2002; Lynam & Widiger, 2001) and our findings were consistent with these predictions. We originally chose the five-factor model as a descriptive format for our thin slice raters because it employs terms that do not require knowledge of psychiatric jargon and are intuitively obvious to untrained student raters. In fact, it lends itself well to this purpose. The five-factor model has been described as a “psychology of the stranger” (McAdams, 1992) because it provides a broad summary of the kinds of things one would want to know about another person if no other information were available. Our results suggested that, at this broad level, thin slice judges do form modestly accurate impressions of people who exhibit pathological personality features. In the present study,

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