

Accurate Personality Judgment

David C. Funder

University of California, Riverside

Abstract

Personality traits are patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that are relatively consistent over time and across situations. Judging the traits of others and of oneself is a ubiquitous and consequential activity of daily life, which raises two important questions. First, *how* does accurate personality judgment happen? According to the Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM), accuracy in such judgments is achieved when relevant behavioral information is available to and detected by a judge who then utilizes that information correctly. Second, *when* are personality judgments accurate? The RAM identifies four principal moderators of accurate personality judgment, which are properties of the target of judgment, the trait that is judged, the information upon which the judgment is based (i.e., its quantity and quality), and the individual making the judgment. People usually manage to make personality judgments that are accurate enough for navigation of the complex social world; research on accuracy seeks to understand how and when this happens.

Keywords

accuracy, person perception, personality, personality judgment

Personality traits are patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that are relatively consistent over time and across situations. They can be described with familiar words such as “reliable,” “sociable,” or “cheerful,” as well as more specialized terms such as “narcissistic,” “authoritarian,” or “conscientious.” Psychology has developed an impressive and useful technology for assessing personality traits, but personality assessment is not limited to psychologists: Everybody does it, every day. We all make judgments about our own personalities as well as of the personalities of people we meet, and these judgments are consequential.

Consequences of Personality Judgment

Personality judgments are consequential for the person who makes them. If you lend an acquaintance \$100 because you deem her to be reliable, and your judgment is wrong, you have made an expensive mistake. If you invite someone to a party because he seems to you to be sociable and cheerful, and your judgment is wrong, your party will probably not be as enjoyable as it could have been. Numerous decisions about who to trust, befriend, hire, date, and even marry are largely based on personality judgments, and the consequences of mistakes in these judgments can range from embarrassing to disastrous.

Personality judgments are equally consequential for the person who is judged. If you are deemed unreliable, nobody will loan you money even if you really would pay them back. Similarly, your social life and your success in the workplace depend to a critical degree on other people’s judgments of your personality.

Therefore, it matters greatly whether judgments of personality are accurate, and this issue has motivated much of my research for more than 30 years (Funder, 1980). When I began investigating this topic, accuracy was, strangely, almost completely ignored by psychological research—in fact, a major textbook asserted that “The accuracy issue has all but faded from view in recent years, at least for personality judgments” (Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979, p. 224). Instead, research focused on putative biases and errors in judgment—which is not at all the same as studying accuracy (Funder, 1987; Krueger & Funder, 2004). In studies of bias and error, the question is: Does the process of judgment follow normative rules derived from mathematics, statistics, or formal logic? In studies of accuracy, the question is: Is the judgment correct? The answer to one of these questions is not necessarily the same as the answer to the other, because biases may stem from heuristics that aid accuracy in realistic environments, whereas formally correct processes can lead to judgments and decisions that are wrong outside of artificial, controlled contexts (Gigerenzer, Todd, & ABC Research Group, 2000). After a slow start, accuracy research has burgeoned in recent years; one early landmark was a special issue of the *Journal of Personality* on accuracy in personality judgment (Funder & West, 1993). Many psychologists are now engaged in the topic.

Corresponding Author:

David C. Funder, Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521
E-mail: david.funder@ucr.edu

Capturing Accuracy

“Accuracy” is a fraught word, and over the years, many psychologists have shied away from it because of its seeming implications for ultimate truth. However, all fields of science require evaluations of validity, reliability, theoretical cogency, and many other attributes of data and theory that, in the end, must remain uncertain. Accuracy is no different: It can be scientifically evaluated on the basis of multiple criteria, and although final conclusions about accuracy may remain forever tentative, confidence in conclusions will increase to the extent that different criteria agree.

For the evaluation of accuracy in personality judgments, three criteria are central. The first, and most often used, is *self-other agreement*. Many studies have evaluated accuracy in terms of the degree to which acquaintances’ judgments agree with a given target’s judgment of his or her own personality. A criterion used somewhat less often is *other-other agreement*, also sometimes called “consensus”: the degree to which two (or more) people agree in their judgments of the same person. Of course, neither criterion is perfect. People might distort their self-judgments to protect their self-esteem or hide secrets, and multiple judges might share biases that make them all wrong. Still, both of these criteria allow confidence in accuracy to be called into question: If a person and his or her acquaintances disagree about what that person is like, or if judges cannot achieve consensus in judgments of his or her personality, then somebody must be mistaken. When they all agree, therefore, confidence that their judgments are accurate can legitimately increase even though certainty is never achieved.

The third criterion for accurate judgment—perhaps the gold standard—is behavioral prediction. If a judgment of personality can predict a behavior or a life outcome related to behavior, then it is probably accurate in some sense. Research using behavioral predictions is difficult to conduct, and success in such research requires not only valid measurements of personality and behavior but the ability to match a given trait to the correct behavioral outcome. However, a good deal of research has shown that personality judgments derived from acquaintance in daily life can predict behavior in laboratory contexts (see Fast & Funder, 2008, for just one example), and an increasing body of evidence has shown that personality

judgments predict important outcomes such as job performance and even longevity (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Few, if any, researchers have the resources to contemporaneously measure self-other agreement, other-other agreement, and behavioral prediction in one study, but as research on accuracy in personality judgment accumulates, the literature as a whole increasingly relies on converging conclusions based on all three criteria.

The Realistic Accuracy Model

How do accurate personality judgments happen? This question concerns the cognitive and interpersonal processes that make accurate judgment possible, and it is addressed by the Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 1995; Fig. 1). The RAM describes the process that connects a person’s personality trait with a perceiver’s correct judgment of that trait.¹ For this connection to be established—for accurate judgment to be achieved—four things must happen. First, the person being judged must do something *relevant* to the trait. A friendly person who never emits a friendly utterance or behavior will not be judged as friendly, regardless of his or her inner feelings, thoughts, or motivations. (Indeed, shy people, who often claim to have friendly feelings, are typically judged as cold and aloof; Zimbardo, 1977.) Second, the trait-relevant behavior must be *available* to the judge. If the behavior happens in a context that the judge does not share with the target—for instance, if the target performs a trait-relevant behavior only at home and interacts with the judge only at work—then the judge will be unable to take advantage of this information. Third, the trait-relevant, available behavior must be *detected*. If the judge is unperceptive, perceptually impaired, self-conscious, or otherwise distracted, then accurate judgment will again be stymied. Fourth, the trait-relevant, available, and detected information must be *utilized* correctly. A truly friendly smile must be interpreted as friendly and not misinterpreted as insincere, sarcastic, or manipulative.

It is important to note that the RAM does *not* describe what always happens in personality judgment, nor does it claim to describe what usually or even often happens. Rather, it describes what *must* happen for accurate personality judgment to be achieved. If a relevant behavior is not displayed, or it is

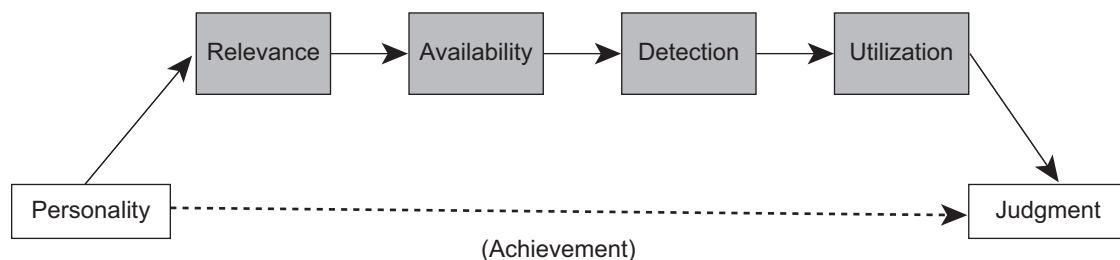


Fig. 1. The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM): Accurate judgment of personality (“achievement”) can occur only to the extent that relevant behavioral information is available to and detected by a judge who then utilizes that information correctly.

not available to the judge, or the judge does not detect it, or the judge misinterprets it, then accuracy will not be possible. A second important point is that the RAM implies that accurate personality judgment is difficult. Much of the literature on judgmental bias seems to reflect astonishment that human judgment is so often wrong (Krueger & Funder, 2004). The RAM illustrates why it might be wiser to be amazed that human judgment of personality is ever correct—for only if all four stages are traversed successfully can accurate judgment occur, and failures at each stage combine multiplicatively.

The RAM can serve as a framework for understanding the circumstances that make accuracy in personality judgment more or less likely. When relevance, availability, detection, or utilization is enhanced, accuracy becomes more likely; anything that undermines any of these four stages makes accuracy less likely.

Moderators of Accurate Personality Judgment

Research has identified four moderating variables as important for determining the degree to which personality judgments are accurate. Accuracy is most likely when a “good target” or a “good trait” is being judged, when the judgment is based on “good information,” or when a “good judge” makes the judgment.

A “good target”

Everyday observation suggests that some people are easier to figure out than others, and research confirms that most people can tell whom among their acquaintances they can judge most accurately (Biesanz et al., 2011). “Judgeable” individuals are relatively transparent in their thoughts and feelings—thus, their observable behavior is more relevant to their underlying personality—and their behavior is more consistent from one situation to the next, making valid observations of their personality more available. An observation of a friendly behavior performed by such a person is not a fluke; it is part of a consistent overall pattern that can easily be seen by even a casual acquaintance (Human & Biesanz, 2011a).

Good targets of judgment are relatively extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable (Colvin, 1993), a pattern that might occur for several reasons. Concealing emotions can be harmful to physical health and mental well-being (Berry & Pennebaker, 1993), and acting in a way that is contrary to one’s actual personality takes effort and can be psychologically tiring (Gallagher, Fleeson, & Hoyle, 2011). Moreover, recent evidence has suggested that greater behavioral consistency is a result of “normal” behavior in both the statistical and the evaluative sense (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2012). Your best self may be your true self (Human, Biesanz, Parisotto, & Dunn, 2012). Most people act in a positive, socially desirable manner most of the

time, and people who most consistently act this way also have the most consistent behavior overall—and are therefore the easiest to judge.

A “good trait”

Traits such as extraversion, expressiveness, and talkativeness are more visible than traits such as introspection, fantasy proneness, moodiness, and deceptiveness. In terms of the RAM, more visible traits are more available, easier to detect, and able to be judged with better self-other and other-other agreement than are less visible traits (Funder & Dobroth, 1987). Although this finding could be rephrased as the truism that “more visible traits are easier to see,” it has two interesting implications. First, ordinary observers are aware of the difference between more and less visible traits. When lay raters were asked to estimate the degree to which traits measured by the 100 personality items of the California Q-Set were easy vs. hard to judge, their ratings correlated well ($r = .42$) with the overall accuracy (interjudge agreement) with which the items were rated by an independent sample of participants (Funder & Dobroth, 1987). Second, this finding implies that judges agree with each other not merely because they share biases or socially construct impressions of targets without any basis in reality (as has sometimes been suggested), but because they base their judgments on actual observations of their targets’ behavior. When judges can observe the same behaviors more readily because they manifest more visible traits, the judges agree better.

Further research has shown that different traits are judged more accurately by the self and by others. According to Vazire’s self-other knowledge asymmetry (SOKA) model, traits that are less visible should be judged more accurately by the self, but traits that are very high or very low in social desirability should be judged better by others. So, for example, tendencies to worry or feel anxiety would be more accurately judged by the self, whereas intelligence or irritability may be judged more accurately by acquaintances (Vazire, 2010).

“Good information”

The information upon which personality judgment is based can be “good” in two ways. First, quantity: More is better. People who have known each other for years are more accurate in their judgments of each other’s personality than are people who have been acquainted for only a few weeks or months (Funder & Colvin, 1988). An experimental study showed that self-other agreement in personality judgments was significantly better after 30 minutes of observation than after 5 (Blackman & Funder, 1998). Thus, longer observation makes more information available (Biesanz, West, & Millevoi, 2007; Carney, Colvin, & Hall, 2007).

The second way in which information can be good is in terms of quality. Recent research has shown the range of

information that is relevant to personality judgment to be surprisingly broad. Accurate judgments can be made on the basis of facial appearance (Rule & Ambady, 2008), musical taste (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006), and even the way one tells a story (Küfner, Back, Nestler, & Egloff, 2010). Relevant information is easier to detect in person than via a telephone conversation (Blackman, 2002), and unstructured situations that allow targets to express their individuality yield better information than do highly structured settings that allow less behavioral variation. An experimental study showed that people could make more accurate personality judgments after watching someone in a free conversation than after watching someone perform a highly structured, competitive task (Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006). The take-home message of these findings is that knowing someone longer is likely to allow you to judge him or her more accurately, but it is also important to observe that person in settings in which his or her personality has a chance to be expressed. If you want to understand your colleagues better, socializing with them after work makes sense.

A “good judge”

Although the “good judge” was the principal target of accuracy research in the first wave of studies of personality judgments in the 1930s and 1940s, replicable findings were elusive because of confusion concerning methodological issues raised by Cronbach (1955) and others, and perhaps also because most people are good judges—personality judgment is a necessary skill for social survival—and individual differences are therefore minor (Haselton & Funder, 2006). More recent research has indicated that, on average, women might be better judges of personality than men, because they have a more accurate view of what the normative or typical person is like (Chan, Rogers, Parisotto, & Biesanz, 2011). Another recent study showed that people who tended to make more positive interpersonal judgments, which are accurate for most targets, were more accurate as a result. “Good judges” of personality are characterized by others as agreeable, consistent, and content with life, and not narcissistic, anxious, power-oriented, or hostile (Letzring, 2008; see also Human & Biesanz, 2011b; Wood, Harms, & Vazire, 2010).

In one study, a videotape of getting-acquainted conversations among three people showed that good judges of personality talked about positive topics, made eye contact, expressed warmth, and seemed to enjoy themselves (Letzring, 2008). In an interesting follow-up study, videotapes of these conversations were shown to unacquainted observers who were asked to judge the personalities of the participants. If a conversation included at least one person who was a good judge, the unacquainted observers made more accurate judgments of all the participants! This finding implies that one important skill of a good judge is the ability to create an atmosphere in which people express their true personalities—which, according to the relevance stage of the RAM, is critical for accurate judgment.

Conclusion

Though accuracy in personality judgment was once a lonely topic of research pursued by only a few investigators, innovative studies on it are now appearing at a rapid rate. Two major trends are evident. First, researchers are developing new, creative methods to capture the information that people use to make personality judgments and to develop criteria for evaluating their accuracy. Going far beyond the questionnaire measures that used to be standard, current research examines personality judgment on the basis of cues to personality including facial structure, taste in music, the contents of one’s Facebook page, and even the tidiness of one’s bedroom. The increasing use of social media opens exciting and challenging opportunities for capturing social interaction and its relationships to personality “live,” as it happens (Back et al., 2010; Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011). A second trend is that social psychology is finally moving away from its own formerly overwhelming bias in favor of studying bias in personality judgment (Jussim, 2012; Krueger & Funder, 2004). Although it is easy to prove that lay judgments of personality are not perfect, it is also trivial. People know a lot about each other, and they even know a lot about what they know (a phenomenon known as “meta-insight”; see Carlson, Vazire, & Furr, 2011).

Gordon Allport (1937) noted many years ago that we are usually able “to select the gifts that our friends will like, to bring together a congenial group at dinner . . . or to pick a satisfactory employee, tenant or room-mate” (p. 353). The mission of research on accuracy in personality judgment is to understand how and when people are able to do this and, thereby, to help them do it better.

Recommended Reading

- Funder, D. C. (1999). *Personality judgment: A realistic approach to person perception*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press. A thorough but now somewhat out-of-date summary of the research referenced in this article, along with more work by other investigators.
- Jussim, L. (2012). (See References). A lively and thorough summary of research that provides a compelling correction to the bias toward bias in social psychology.
- Vazire, S., & Carlson, E. (2011). Others sometimes know us better than we know ourselves. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20, 104–108. A highly accessible and up-to-date summary of one of the most creative current programs of research in personality judgment.

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Note

1. The RAM in some respects resembles the “lens model” of perceptual judgment proposed by Egon Brunswik (1956); “achievement” (see Fig. 1) is Brunswik’s term for accuracy.

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