Not So Fast: The (Not-Quite-Complete) Dissociation between Accuracy and Confidence in Thin-Slice Impressions

* In three studies of first impressions based on photos and videos, the authors examined accuracy for Big Five trait judgements as well as corresponding reports of confidence. Overall, perceivers showed a limited ability to intuit which of their impressions were more accurate than others, although a curvilinear effect emerged: In the relatively few cases where perceivers reported an absolute lack of confidence, their accuracy was indeed comparatively low
* Perceivers appear to regularly use the wrong sorts of data, such as misguided stereotypes (eg Fiske, 1998), and they frequently fail to make the right sorts of inferential adjustments, especially situational discounting (eg Gilbert, 1998).
* Using a task in which participants judged the status, roles, and deceptive behaviour of videotaped targets, Smith, Archer, and Costanzo (1991) found that participants’ ratings of confidence were associated with performance, and Patterson, Foster, and Bellmer (2001) documented within-judge, across-judgement calibration (although they did not find any between-judge calibration). Another line of research suggesting calibration comes from studies that find perceivers show at least some ability to identify and use valid cues in their judgements of others (rg Funder & Sneed, 1993; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli & Morris, 2002). To the extent that this is the case, perceivers might be able to recognize when they have used valid cues or, just as importantly, when no valid cues have been observed, and they could adjust their confidence accordingly.
* People may rely on cues that they incorrectly believe are valid, leading them to be wrong but not in doubt, eg keeping eye contact and smiling might make a perceiver think the target is agreeable, although these are not the right cues for the agreeableness.
* We expect that judgement extremity (ie strongly agreeing or disagreeing that a target possesses a particular disposition) would predict judgement confidence, although extremity would not necessarily predict accuracy (eg the extreme inference could be based on a misguided stereotype)
* A source of confidence in thin-slice impressions may be consciously observed qualities of the target that activate perceiver’s explicit theories of persons, providing a conscious justification for a perceiver’s automatic intuitions. Ie id a person who perceiver thinks is smart is also wearing glasses, glasses will bolster that impressions and the perceiver will be more confident in his decision. The perceiver can use an explicit justification for an implicit feeling, which could serve to bolster confidence though not necessarily judgement accuracy
* Some perceivers may feel generally confident and comfortable in the domain of intuitive inferences and thinking with their gut. Others may prefer the careful use of logic and evidence (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Pacini & Epstein, 1999). We expect that those favouring an intuitive style would have a greater confidence i their thin-slice impressions – they may be habitually comfortable with their snap judgements even if they are not right in any given instance.
* We believe that encouragement toward embracing an intuitive style would lead to higher levels of confidence in thin-slice impressions but not to improvement in accuracy.
* A second potential source of confidence at the perceiver level is general person perception self-efficacy. We expect that person perception self-efficacy will predict confidence, though not necessarily accuracy, in a specific judgement.
* We expected some accuracy, considerable confidence, and limited covariance between the two. We also expected to reveal sources of confidence that were dissociated from levels of accuracy.
* Study 1 gauged impressions based on photographs; Study 2 focused on impressions based on short video clips. Study 3 also featured video clips; some participants were encouraged to adopt an intuitive thinking style, whereas others were told to be cautious about their intuitions or received no special restrictions.
* Study 1. Based on previous research (Ambady et al, 2000), we hypothesized that perceivers would demonstrate above-chance levels of accuracy in their impressions but that accuracy would vary considerably from judgement to judgement and from perceiver to perceiver. We expected that variation in confidence would show limited or no calibration with variation in confidence would show limited or no calibration with variation in accuracy at either level. In addition, we predicted that judgement extremity would be positively associated with judgement confidence, despite being unrelated to judgement accuracy.
* On balance, perceivers in Study 1 showed some ability to gauge target traits on the basis of photographs. However, the variance in individual judge accuracies was considerable. As expected, perceivers appeared to show no ability to assess the validity of their impressions. Highly confident perceivers were no more accurate than were unconfident perceivers, and within a given perceiver, judgements that were no more confidently held were not correspondingly more accurate. As hypothesized, confidence was associated with impressions extremity, which did not covary with accuracy.
* Study 2. We sought to provide more and different evidence to perceivers, although still within a thin-slice paradigm. We predicted that properties of the inference (judgement extremity), the stimulus (justifiers), and the perceiver (person perception self-efficacy and preferred information processing style) would affect impression confidence but that these factors would be largely dissociated from impression accuracy.
* Whereas accuracy increased slightly with the shift from photos to videos, confidence increased substantially. Our results suggest that the most confident thin-slice judges are likely to be those who think they are very good at judging people in general, who have high faith in intuitive decision making, and who have low need for analytical decision making. Our results additionally showed that when a perceiver made multiple snap judgements, she or he was likely to be most confident when the impression was very extreme, when the target seemed to fit a type, or when the target reminded her or him of someone he or she knew. Among the vast majority (more that 80%) of judgements endorsed with at least some confidence, confidence showed no association with accuracy.
* Study 3. The results from study 2 concerning individual differences in faith in intuition suggest that receiving information advocating the validity of gut feelings may yield a temporary rise in confidence without a corresponding rise in accuracy. If this expectation is confirmed, it would clarify that the processes shaping confidence in snap impressions are at least partly distinct from the factors that yield accuracy in snap judgements. We tested this expectation in Study 3 by giving some participants information about the power of intuitions and gut feelings, cautioning other participants about the dangers of intuitions, and putting yet other participants in a control condition. Participants then recorded their impressions of videotaped targets in a design similar to that used in study 2.
* Participants in study 3 who were encouraged to go with their gut showed greater confidence in their snap impressions of targets but they were no more accurate than were those in control condition or those who were encouraged to use logic and evidence. In general, across and within conditions, judges who were more confident were not more accurate. However, as in study 2, in the relatively small share of cases where perceivers indicated a complete lack of confidence, their judgements did indeed show a corresponding lack of accuracy. Thus, the within-judge, across-judgement calibration effect was a curvilinear one.
* As expected, perceivers were more confident in impressions that were more extreme and those that were more justifiable (an observation of a specific cue, the perception that the target fit a well-defined type, and the perception that the target was similar to a previous acquaintance). In the control and reason conditions, perceivers also expressed more confidence to the extent that they had high global self-efficacy in their ability to read others.