Familiarity breeds simplicity: Brief interactions decrease differentiation of personality judgments

James W. Fryer[1], Andrew Beer[2], and Brendan McGrath[3]

[1]State University of New York at Potsdam, [2]University of South Carolina Upstate, [3]St. Lawrence University

Introduction

Initial judgments of personality may be somewhat accurate, even in very limited acquaintance settings (Borkenau & Liebler, 1992). However, the more we interact with a person, the more accurate our judgments become (Funder & Colvin, 1988). The mechanisms through which accuracy increases are still largely unclear.

One way our judgments may change is through a heuristic known as implicit simplicity (IS), which is the tendency to reduce the complexity in our judgments of others (Beer & Watson, 2008; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010). Implicit simplicity may be observed in multiple ways, both at the between-person level (i.e., the factor structure of personality judgments) and the within-person level (i.e., the variability of judgment ratings).

The current research extends prior work on person perception by examining the complexity of personality judgments over early stages of impression formation.

Method

Participants

This study involved 34 (12 male, 20 female) undergraduate students who participated in the study for extra credit.

Procedure

- Participants were first **photographed** in a natural posture when they arrived to the experiment site.
- Then, participants completed **self-ratings** for 10 personality traits, using single items developed for this study. These traits were openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, ambition, attractiveness, intelligence, athleticism, and self-confidence. All ratings were completed using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*).
- After this, they were shown photographs of selected other participants ,and made **zero-acquaintance ratings of the other participants** on the same ten traits, using only the photographs taken at the beginning of the study.
- Once this was completed, the participants were **paired off for a brief (8 minute) interaction**.
- Next, participants were asked to rate the **enjoyment** of the interaction (partner likability, $\alpha = .87$).
- Finally, participants **re-rated their interaction partner** and **re-rated themselves** on the same ten traits.

Measurement of between-person variability

Between-person trait stability was assessed through standard factor analytic techniques. The ten traits were factor analyzed using principal components analysis; these analyses were conducted for self-ratings and other-ratings, both before and after the brief interaction. Here, a decrease in the number of observed factors can be interpreted as less variability (and evidence for implicit simplicity) among the trait ratings.

Measurement of within-person variability

We assessed within-person stability in personality traits through the use of ipsative continuity (Ozer, 1993). Ipsative continuity represents the level of stability exhibited in an individual's configuration of constructs over time. To measure changes in profile dispersion, we used changes in within-person standard deviations to determine the variability of personality judgments over time. Here, a decrease in profile dispersion can be interpreted as less variability (and evidence for implicit simplicity) among the trait ratings.

Results

Stability of Self- and Other-Perceptions

Self-ratings were found to be highly stable over time for all traits (βs between .474 and .915, all ps $< .05$). All ratings of others were stable from pre-interaction to post-interaction (βs between .327 and .583, all ps $< .02$), although the stability of openness was marginally significant ($\beta = .180$, $p = .098$).

Judgment Accuracy

Participants were able to accurate judge three traits at zero acquaintance, solely from the targets' photographs – extraversion ($\beta = .341$, $p = .006$), attractiveness ($\beta = .295$, $p = .021$), and activity level ($\beta = .360$, $p = .004$). When participants re-rated others after the brief 8-minute interaction, there were three traits that participants were able to accurately predict – ambition ($\beta = .263$, $p = .038$), attractiveness ($\beta = .583$, $p = .038$), and activity level ($\beta = .442$, $p = .001$). The prediction of extraversion was marginally significant ($\beta = .322$, $p = .059$).

Between-person analyses

A factor analysis of the initial other-ratings (prior to the interaction) produced three factors, accounting for 68.2% of the variance. The factor structure of the post-interaction other-ratings only contained two factors, accounting for 64.2% of the variance. This pattern was mirrored in the self-ratings over time – the pre-interaction factor structure (four factors, 72.5% of the variance) was more complex than the post-interaction factor structure (three factors, 67.8% of the variance).

Within-person analyses

The average profile dispersion of the other ratings was not significantly different from pre-interaction ($SD = 1.17$) to post-interaction ($SD = 1.09$; $t = 1.31$, $p = .196$). However, the variability did significantly decrease in the self-ratings, from pre-interaction ($SD = 1.45$) to post-interaction ($SD = 1.14$, $t = 6.09$, $p < .001$), suggesting that we think about our own traits as less variable over time (but not necessarily the traits of others).

Influence of interaction enjoyment

Partner liking significantly predicted five traits: openness ($\beta = .519$, $p < .001$), extraversion ($\beta = .615$, $p < .001$), agreeableness ($\beta = .314$, $p = .019$), attractiveness ($\beta = .392$, $p < .001$), and confidence ($\beta = .467$, $p < .001$); this suggests that we are more accurate in our judgments of those traits as we enjoy our interactions more.

However, interaction enjoyment also influenced the simplicity of our judgments. Although the change in profile dispersion for other-ratings was not significant, there was a significant relation between interaction enjoyment and the decrease in profile dispersion ($r = -.354$, $p = .004$).

Discussion

The current research examined the accuracy and the complexity of personality judgments over a short interaction period. Evidence for implicit simplicity was observed, in both the factor structure and profile dispersion of judgments. As we get to know others, our ratings on several notable and relevant aspects personality begin to converge. This change in complexity was also influence by interaction enjoyment; essentially, the more we like an interaction partner, the more simplistically we think about them.

This study had several limitations – single-item measures of personality were used, and the participants may not have been complete strangers (although accuracy analyses controlled for level of acquaintance). However, it is notable that participants in this study only got to know each other for a very brief time, but still reduced the complexity in their judgments after only eight minutes. Future research will continue to examine how judgment complexity changes over longer periods of time.