CrossMark

The detection of personality traits in employment interviews: Can "good judges" be trained? ☆

Deborah M. Powell [a,*], Joshua S. Bourdage [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, Guelph Ontario, N1G 2W1
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4

ABSTRACT

The present study examined processes underlying training individuals to accurately identify personality in the interview context. Specifically, 144 undergraduate students were assigned to one of four conditions informed by the Realistic Accuracy Model: (a) control, (b) detection, (c) utilization, and (d) detection and utilization combined. After training, students watched 5 videos containing interviews, and rated the Big Five personality traits of each interviewee. Accuracy was determined relative to (a) self-reports from the interviewee, and (b) expert ratings (i.e. the average of ratings provided by 10 "expert" judges). Results indicated that across both self-ratings and expert ratings, the overall profile accuracy of participants did not improve over the control group when "detection" training was provided, but did improve after training targeted at enhancing the "utilization" stage. Training combining both detection and utilization did not lead to a significant increase in profile accuracy above utilization training alone. Findings were more variable at the "trait" level, with detection of Extraversion being most amenable to training. Supplementary analyses indicated those with higher Dispositional Intelligence were more accurate at the profile level, while analyses on a subset of participants ($N = 70$) indicated that those high on Emotionality were more accurate at evaluating specific traits.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Within the workplace, personality traits are related to a number of important organizational consequences, such as job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000), job satisfaction (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002) and person-organization fit (Cable & Judge, 1997). As such, knowledge of personality may be particularly important to glean during the personnel selection process. Given the near universality of the employment interview (Huffcutt & Culbertson, 2011), the ability to make accurate personality judgments in an interview context presents potential practical benefits.

Making accurate personality judgments requires having information available about the person's thoughts, feelings or behaviours. For this reason, the accuracy of personality judgements of others tends to improve the longer one knows the other person, a phenomenon known as the acquaintanceship effect (Colvin & Funder, 1991). The longer people know each other and the more situations they see a person in, the more information about that person's personality they can acquire.

Indeed, research shows well-acquainted others' reports of personality tend to converge reasonably with self-reports on many traits in both the day to day (Lee & Ashton, 2006) and workplace contexts (De Vries, 2012). However, in the case of an employment interview, interviewers are limited in both the length of time they interact with a person and the types of situations they see a person in. Given these constraints, the question remains as to how can we improve interviewers' accuracy at making personality judgements of job candidates.

Within this realm, research has focused on how and why individuals may go about making accurate personality judgments in the interview context. For instance, Schmid Mast, Bangerter, Bulliard, and Aerni (2011) found that professional recruiters, presumably because of their experience in making these judgements, made more accurate ratings of interviewees' personality profiles than did non-experts. Others have examined training as a way to improve accuracy (Powell & Goffin, 2009). The primary goal of the present study was to focus on this latter area – namely, training as a way to improve the accuracy of personality judgments. Specifically, we created three different training conditions informed by the Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 1995), which articulates the processes through which individuals come to accurately assess personality. Through this, we empirically examined which specific aspects of training lead to increased accuracy of personality judgments in the interview context.

Second, we investigated the role of rater characteristics in influencing rater accuracy. Theoretically, some individuals are posited to be

better judges of personality (Funder, 1995). Consistent with this, past research has found that certain individual differences, such as General Mental Ability (Christiansen, Wolcott-Burnam, Janovics, Burns, & Quirk, 2005) are related to accuracy. In the present study, we examined two variables and their impact on rating accuracy: Dispositional Intelligence (Christiansen et al., 2005), and the personality dimension of Emotionality (Lee & Ashton, 2008).

1.1. Realistic Accuracy Model

In the present study, the training intervention was guided by Funder's (1995) RAM model of person perception. According to the RAM, accurate personality judgment occurs in several stages: (a) relevance, (b) availability, (c) detection, and (d) utilization. First, the person being judged must emit some kind of information relevant to the personality trait being judged. For example, a highly conscientious person might show up early to a meeting. Second, this information must be accessible or available to the judge to see. These first two stages occur in the social environment. The final two stages depend on the perceiver or judge. In the third stage, the judge must detect (and remember) the personality-related cues that are available. Finally, the judge must interpret (i.e. utilize) the information correctly, in terms of what the behaviour implies about the personality of the individual being judged. For example, the judge must know that punctuality is a behaviour that is indicative of Conscientiousness in order to accurately judge Conscientiousness. According to Funder's model, any variable that makes accurate personality judgment more or less likely has its effect on one of these stages. Importantly, he also considered that the stages are multiplicative, such that a "zero" on one stage would mean that the entire process would be unsuccessful – there must be at least a minimal threshold of fulfilment of each stage for any level of accuracy. Any attempt to improve accuracy should be targeted toward one or more of the stages in this process. The focus of this research is stages three and four - detecting cues, and the utilization of behavioural cues. Specifically, we attempted to determine if a targeted training program could improve judges' ability to detect cues and to utilize cues to make personality judgements in the context of an employment interview.

1.2. Training to Improve Personality Accuracy

Previous research has demonstrated that training can work to improve personality accuracy judgments in some cases and for certain traits. For instance, Powell and Goffin (2009) tested the hypothesis that explicit practice and feedback at judging personality could improve judge's effectiveness. The trained participants were more accurate as compared to the untrained group in their ratings of two of the three personality traits targeted (Assertiveness and Self-discipline). Interestingly, the training effects were similar for two other personality traits (Cheerfulness and Orderliness), which were not explicitly part of the training program. That the training effect seemed to generalize to traits not specifically trained raised the question: what exactly did the participants learn from the training? The training may have had its effect through an improvement in participants' knowledge of personality. However, such a generalized improvement should have led to the trained group receiving higher scores on a measure of Dispositional Intelligence, which was not the case. Thus, the training did not appear to have its effect through increasing participants' general knowledge of personality. As such, the question remains as to when and why training will increase the accuracy of personality judgments. An alternative explanation is that the trained participants may have been more effective at stage three of Funder's Realistic Accuracy Model – detecting and remembering cues, or stage four – utilizing cues. In the current research we attempt to develop these two stages separately, in order to better understand how people learn to make accurate personality judgments. Because the two components of the training correspond to different stages of the RAM, we hypothesize that training in each component will

improve accuracy, but that combination of both components will lead to the most accurate ratings.

This study included four different conditions. There were three training groups: (i) practice at "detecting" personality-related cues in interview responses (ii) practice at "utilizing" behavioural cues to make personality ratings, and (iii) both types of training "combined", as well as (iv) a no-training "control" group.

1.3. Individual Differences in Accuracy

Funder (1995) argued that the ability to perceive and to use available cues correctly is dependent on a judge's knowledge about personality and how it is revealed in behaviour, which is a function of either interpersonal experience or explicit teaching or study. Schmid Mast et al. (2011) provided evidence for Funder's claim that interpersonal experience may improve accuracy. Specifically, they found that professional recruiters were more accurate at "profile accuracy" (the relative weight of each of the five personality dimensions of the Big Five) than were undergraduate students. Similarly, Barrick, Patton, and Haugland (2000) found that recruiters could rate more traits accurately than could strangers. There appears to be evidence that people do differ in their knowledge of personality and behaviour, and that this knowledge can be gained through experience.

In addition to this, Funder (1995) argues that some individuals are simply better judges than others. Understanding such characteristics is informative from a theoretical perspective, as well as a practical perspective. In terms of practical implications, identifying those individuals that are more accurate judges of personality could be useful in selecting interviewers in an applied setting.

Indeed, there is evidence that certain individual differences are related to judgemental accuracy. Christiansen et al. (2005) developed a measure they called *Dispositional Intelligence*, defined as knowledge about personality and how it is revealed in behaviour, and it was correlated at $r = .41$ with the accuracy of personality ratings of interviewees as measured by a multiple choice test of accuracy. In the present study, we further test this proposition, and hypothesize that Dispositional Intelligence will be related to the accuracy of personality ratings.

In addition to this, we believe that raters who are high on the personality dimension of Emotionality will be more accurate judges of personality. Emotionality is a personality dimension from the HEXACO model of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2008). It describes individual differences related to sentimentality and sensitivity, as well as fearfulness and anxiety. Of relevance to the present study, individuals high on Emotionality tend to be more likely to experience empathic concern and emotional attachment with others (Lee & Ashton, 2006). This increased interpersonal sensitivity and desire to form emotional bonds with others may lead those high in Emotionality to be more keen judges of personality. In the context of the RAM, we believe this increased emphasis on others and their emotional states may lead those high in Emotionality to be more adept at detecting relevant cues.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 144 participants (120 women and 23 men). Participants were university undergraduate students (40% Psychology, 60% other majors) participating for course credit in Psychology classes. In terms of demographic characteristics of the sample, the age ranged from 17 to 37 ($M = 18.7$ $SD = 1.8$), 71% were in the first year of their degree, and 90% spoke English as their first language.

2.2. Procedure

A set of six previously developed videotaped employment interviews were used for this study. One video was used as a "practice"