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FlashReport

Interpersonal sensitivity and self-knowledge: Those chronic for trustworthiness are more accurate at detecting it in others ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explored if chronicity results in greater accuracy in interpersonal sensitivity.
- Chronicity for trustworthiness was determined with Me/Not Me judgments.
- Subjects judged if people cheated or cooperated in a real prisoner's dilemma game.
- Those chronic for trustworthiness could distinguish cheaters from cooperators.
- Signal detection analyses showed better discrimination, not response bias.

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that chronically accessible self-knowledge impacts how corresponding traits are perceived in oneself and in others. Although people perceive and judge others in line with their chronic traits, we know less about the accuracy of these judgments. In the current work, we explored whether chronicity results in greater accuracy in interpersonal sensitivity. Using a response time measure of attribute chronicity, we found that individuals for whom trustworthiness was a chronic trait were better able to distinguish cheaters from cooperators in a real life prisoner's dilemma game. Implications for how self-knowledge affects the accuracy of social perceptions are discussed.

Introduction

Understanding others is critical to social functioning, yet frequently, we must render impressions of others based on scant details in an information-laden world. Although sometimes we benefit from having considerable information about others, often we must rely on more impoverished data, and our initial evaluations may be heavily influenced by observing nonverbal behaviors. In fact, the literature on "thin-slicing" has repeatedly shown that individuals are able to infer a variety of others' states and traits from a distance and with limited knowledge.

For example, trained observers can predict long-term marital stability and happiness from videotaped interactions between newlywed couples (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). This ability, however, is not limited to trained perceivers. Indeed, untrained students can, with impressive accuracy, predict end-of-semester evaluations of instructors based on 2-s silent video clips of an instructor lecturing (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993) or accurately describe others' personalities after viewing their office or bedroom (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). Thus, the thin-slicing literature supports the ability of perceivers to often draw reasonably accurate inferences from small amounts of information.

Research on *interpersonal sensitivity* (i.e., the ability to accurately sense and perceive one's personal, interpersonal, and social environments; Bernieri, 2001) and on the ability to decode nonverbal behavior specifically, varies in terms of both the judgments rendered as well as stimuli assessed for those judgments. For example, perceivers may be asked to make judgments of others' personality traits, to identify emotions (e.g., happiness, anger), and to assess behaviors (e.g., lying) or intentions (e.g., aggression). Research suggests these basic skills are widespread, and in many cases, impressive (for a review, Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). However, individual differences in interpersonal sensitivity exist and domain differences are common (e.g., Hall, 1984; Hall, Murphy, & Schmid Mast, 2006). For instance, researchers have found weak or nonexistent correlations among many measures of interpersonal sensitivity (Hall, 2001), suggesting specific decoding skills rather than a single general ability. For example, an individual's ability to detect deception does not predict their ability to identify others' emotions or to accurately infer others' romantic relationship status (e.g., Hall & Bernieri, 2001).

Despite a number of demonstrations of interpersonal sensitivity in the literature, we still know little about what underlies these abilities

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and why individual differences might exist. Accordingly, the current study examines one possible predictor of interpersonal sensitivity performance, chronically accessible self-knowledge. Indeed, our social perceptions are often guided by highly-accessible self-knowledge, shaping our views of self and others (Bruner, 1957; Higgins, 1989; Markus, 1977; McConnell, 2011). When self-relevant knowledge is activated repeatedly and frequently, it can become "chronic" and filter social perceptions even in the absence of recent activation (Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986; Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982). For example, an individual who is chronic for "trustworthiness" will evaluate both their own (e.g., Markus, 1977) and others' (e.g., Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982) actions in terms of their implications for honest conduct (see also, Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985).

Becoming chronic for attributes such as "trustworthiness" presumably reflects many repeated episodes of attending to and evaluating others with respect to trustworthiness. Because of extensive practice, individuals chronic for trustworthiness may develop relatively greater expertise for developing deception-related contingencies, and thus, they may be especially well-tuned for picking up on cues to dishonesty in others' behavior even if they cannot explicitly articulate them. Thus, the current work investigated whether people with chronic self-knowledge reveal greater accuracy in their interpersonal sensitivity judgments. Specifically, we combine research on self-concept representation and on interpersonal sensitivity to examine the impact of chronically accessible self-knowledge on people's ability to evaluate others based on thin-slices of nonverbal information. Past work has shown that individuals who are chronic for an attribute judge themselves and others based on that trait more *often* (e.g., Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982; Markus, 1977), but no known research has explored whether these judgments are more *accurate*.

In this study, we focused on people who were and were not chronic for trustworthiness, reasoning that increased attention to honesty-related behaviors should lead perceivers to develop relevant cue-outcome contingencies over time, providing an advantage in accurately judging honesty in others. Such people might become particularly adept at detecting dishonest behavior because of its considerable diagnostic value (vs. honest behavior, which is less informative) in understanding others (Fiske, 1980; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). Repetition is critical for the development of expertise, which results in better and more efficient performance (e.g., Proctor & Dutta, 1995; Simon & Chase, 1973), typically in domain specific ways (Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996). Similarly, being chronic for trustworthiness may reflect having greater expertise in decoding behaviors related to honesty and dishonesty. In our study, participants completed a widely-used measure of chronicity, and then they completed interpersonal sensitivity tasks in which they judged strangers based on thin-slices of information (photographs or short 4 s videos).

Method

Participants

44 Miami University undergraduates participated in exchange for credit in their introductory psychology courses.

Measure of chronicity

We used Markus's (1977) Me/Not Me task to assess the extent to which trustworthiness was a schematic trait for our participants. In this task, the respondents were presented with synonyms and antonyms of three traits commonly used by students to describe themselves and others (i.e., extraverted, trustworthy, vain) one at a time on a computer monitor, and they were instructed to press one of two keys, labeled *me* and *not me*, to indicate whether each trait was descriptive of themselves. Past research has shown that faster "me" responses to a trait attribute indicates greater chronicity (e.g., Brown & McConnell, 2009; Markus, 1977).

In the current study, judgments involved four words each related to trustworthiness, vanity, and extraversion. The trustworthy items (i.e., trustworthy, honest, deceitful, liar) were selected to capture the extent to which "trustworthiness" was relatively more accessible. We included vanity items (i.e., vain, arrogant, modest, humble) as comparison words because individuals in our participant pool express great certainty about their standing on this dimension, allowing us to have a reliable response latency covariate. Finally, we included extraversion-related items (i.e., extraverted, outgoing, introverted, shy) as control words. Past research in our lab (McConnell, Rydell, & Leibold, 2002) and elsewhere (Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981) has shown that undergraduates have relatively uncertain beliefs about their own extraversion and that simple self-perceptual processes can influence self-evaluations on this dimension. To create our measure of attribute chronicity, we computed a Trustworthy Accessibility Index by subtracting participants' average response times (RTs) for trustworthiness items from their average RTs for vanity items, with larger scores reflecting relatively greater accessibility for trustworthiness than vanity. A strength of this approach is that it allows us to control for individual differences in RTs (by taking into account the RTs for a comparison construct where participants have clear and certain self-knowledge), reducing the impact of extraneous variability such as conscientiousness, hand–eye coordination, and self-certainty.[1]

Interpersonal sensitivity tasks

After completing the measure of chronicity, the participants completed two interpersonal sensitivity tasks during which they made judgments from thin-slices of nonverbal information (order counterbalanced). The first interpersonal sensitivity activity, the smile task, was borrowed from Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, and Claypool (2008), who presented participants with 20 videos (approximately 4 s each) depicting a male or female target one at a time, with each video beginning with the person exhibiting a neutral expression, then smiling, and then returning to a neutral expression. Of these 20 faces, 10 displayed genuine smiles and 10 displayed fake smiles. In the current smile task, the participants were asked to judge whether each smile was real or fake.

During the second activity, the cheater detection task, participants were shown 26 still images of target individuals at the moment when they indicated their choice in a computer mediated, one-trial prisoner's dilemma game (PDG) for real money (Verplaetse, Vanneste, & Braeckman, 2007). The PDG is a 2-player mixed-motive game (Rapoport & Chammah, 1965) in which an individual can make a cooperative choice (equally benefitting themselves and their partner) or a noncooperative choice (acting selfishly in order to win a larger payment at the expense of a cooperative partner). The participants viewed a still image of different target people right at the moment when they indicated their choice to their PDG partner, with 13 making a cooperative decision and 13 making a noncooperative decision. Thus, half of these targets were attempting to "cheat their partner" by not conveying their noncooperative choice. After being told in general terms about the nature of PDGs, participants in our study were asked to indicate whether they believed that the target in each picture had made a cooperative decision or made a non-cooperative decision (i.e., were cheating their partner).

[1] Supplemental analyses showed that vanity RTs did not predict any dependent variables, suggesting that any observed results with the Trustworthy Accessibility Index cannot be interpreted as the product of chronic vanity and support the value of using vanity responses to control for individual differences in RTs. Analyses were also conducted using only the trustworthiness RTs without the vanity items serving as a covariate, and the pattern of results was similar to those using the Trustworthy Accessibility Index.