



Acquaintanceship and self/observer agreement in personality judgment[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2017

Revised 4 May 2017

Accepted 8 May 2017

Available online 10 May 2017

Keywords:

Self/observer agreement

HEXACO

Acquaintanceship

ABSTRACT

Self/observer agreement on HEXACO-PI-R scale scores was examined as a function of observers' subjective ratings of acquaintanceship. For each participant ($N = 2199$), personality self-reports were obtained along with observer reports from a friend. Each factor-level scale displayed a different pattern of upward accuracy (agreement) trends in personality judgment. Self/observer agreement for Extraversion, Emotionality, and Openness was noticeably stronger at lower acquaintanceship than that for Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Honesty-Humility. Conscientiousness showed a steep upward accuracy trend across acquaintanceship levels, reaching a level of accuracy comparable to that of Extraversion and Emotionality. Self/observer agreement for Honesty-Humility and Agreeableness showed slower upward trends than that of Conscientiousness. In several cases, facet-level traits within the same broad factor differed in their accuracy trends.

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1. Introduction

Personality self-reports tend to show fairly high agreement with observer reports made by close acquaintances. For example, in the case of scales measuring the “Big Five” personality factors, meta-analyses have shown that self/observer agreement correlations typically fall in the range of the 0.30s and 0.40s (Connolly & Ones, 2010). In the case of the factors of the HEXACO Personality Inventory–Revised (HEXACO-PI-R), self/observer agreement correlations have ranged from 0.46 (Honesty-Humility) to 0.61 (Emotionality) in a sample of over 2800 respondents (Lee & Ashton, *in press*).

Although past research has shown that it is hard to identify moderators of self/observer agreement in personality (Allik, de Vries, & Realo, 2016), two lines of research have shown the importance of acquaintanceship in determining self/observer agreement. One approach is to compare self/observer agreement in personality for persons having relationships that generally differ in the level of acquaintanceship (e.g., close friends versus strangers; see Colvin & Funder, 1991; Funder & Colvin, 1988). In general, self/observer agreement tends to be much higher between spouses, between family members, and between close friends than between stran-

gers, supporting the positive effect of acquaintanceship on the accuracy of personality judgment (see Connolly & Ones, 2010).¹

The second approach is to adopt a longitudinal design. For example, in a 15-week longitudinal study involving 103 pairs of female college roommates (i.e., $N = 206$), Kurtz and Sherker (2003) found that Big Five Agreeableness showed low accuracy, 0.10, at Week 2, which increased to 0.37 at Week 15. The other Big Five factors also showed a positive effect of acquaintanceship on personality judgement accuracy (see also Paulhus & Bruce, 1992).

Despite such evidence, previous studies comparing relationship types or using a longitudinal design have some limitations. First, although some types of relationship tend to be closer than others (e.g., spouse versus coworker), it could well be that levels of subjective acquaintanceship vary widely within these relationship types. Second, comparing the results obtained from pairs of strangers with those obtained from pairs of closely acquainted persons does not give any sense of how self/observer agreement develops across continuous levels of subjective acquaintanceship. Third, regarding the longitudinal studies, the time periods involved in these studies have understandably been short, which limits the representation of closely acquainted pairs in those studies.

[☆] This research was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant 410-2011-0089.

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¹ Although the criteria used to determine the accuracy of personality judgment are multifaceted (Funder, 1995) and go beyond convergence with self-reports of personality, we will interpret the self/observer agreement to indicate observers' judgmental accuracy, given that self-reports of personality are in general more accurate than reports provided by “average” observers (Paunonen & O'Neill, 2010).

In the present research, we used a large sample consisting of pairs of friends, and asked each participant to provide subjective ratings of acquaintanceship with their friend (i.e., “how well do you know this person?”). As such, the present research constitutes one of the few studies in which subjective acquaintanceship level is directly measured on a common metric (e.g., Paunonen, 1989; Starzyk, Holden, Fabrigar, & MacDonald, 2006). Specifically, we divided the sample into several groups based on subjective ratings of acquaintanceship and examined the trends of self/observer agreement over acquaintanceship levels.

This approach allows us to address some questions not examined in previous research. First, it allows us to explore the trajectory in accuracy of personality judgment as a function of acquaintanceship level. Second, this approach also allows us to find out whether the effect of acquaintanceship on judgemental accuracy differs depending on the personality trait being rated, both at the level of broad personality factors and at the level of the narrow personality facets that define those factors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We began with a dataset consisting of 3008 participants (1504 dyads) who completed both self- and observer report forms of the HEXACO-PI-R between 2008 and 2015. Subsamples from this dataset have been used in many published articles, examining a variety of research questions in personality psychology. We recruited pairs of persons (overwhelmingly undergraduate students) who had known each other at least for one year. Most of the pairs were friends (78.4%), but some were romantic partners (15.2%), spouses (4.2%), or family members (1.3%).

In the present research, we decided to include only respondents who participated in the study with their friend ($N = 2358$ persons). This decision was made because the highest acquaintanceship groups contain a disproportionate number of spouses and romantic partners compared with the lower acquaintanceship groups, thus complicating the interpretation of agreement differences as being due to relationship type or to acquaintanceship level. In this final sample of respondents, women were 68.2%, and the mean age was 20.3 years ($s.d. = 2.9$). The average time that participants had known each other was 4.9 years ($s.d. = 3.8$).

2.2. Measures: personality and acquaintanceship

We administered the 100-item version of the HEXACO-PI-R (e.g., Lee & Ashton, *in press*). Internal consistency reliabilities ranged from 0.80 (Openness) to 0.86 (Extraversion) for the factor-level scales and from 0.52 (Unconventionality) to 0.80 (Greed Avoidance) for the facet-level scales. Absolute intercorrelations between factor-level scales were all below 0.32 for self-reports and all below 0.39 for observer reports.

Subjective ratings of acquaintanceship (i.e., “how well do you know this person?”) were made on a one-item scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely well*). The mean subjective rating of acquaintanceship in this sample was 8.0 ($sd = 1.2$). The two members of each dyad showed a substantial agreement in their subjective ratings of their degree of acquaintanceship ($r = 0.67$). In forming the acquaintanceship groups, we used acquaintanceship ratings provided by observers. However, the numbers of participants whose friends' acquaintanceship ratings were 5 or lower were quite small, with the largest sample size being 86 for the acquaintanceship rating group of 5. We therefore retained only the 2199 participants who belonged to one of the following five acquaintanceship groups: 6 ($N = 227$), 7 ($N = 534$), 8 ($N = 707$), 9 ($N = 488$), and 10

($N = 243$). The smallest sample closely approaches the critical sample size in which a true correlation of 0.20 is expected to be fairly stable (see Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013).

3. Results

Means and standard deviations of the six personality scales, along with some demographic information such as age, gender, and years of acquaintanceship, are shown in Table 1. Of note, standard deviations for the observer reports—but not the self-reports—are consistently larger for groups with higher acquaintanceship rating, averaging 24% higher in the most acquainted group than in the least acquainted group. This result suggests that personality descriptions made by closer friends are likely to contain more true-score variance than are personality descriptions made by less close friends (cf., Allik et al., 2010).

3.1. Factor-level self/observer agreement

Self/observer agreement coefficients for the factor-level HEXACO scales are shown in Fig. 1 and in Supplementary Table 1. As expected, self/observer agreement tended to increase as acquaintanceship increased. Extraversion and Emotionality showed high levels of self/observer agreement in the lowest acquaintanceship group ($rs \geq 0.55$), and these two factors showed a similar increasing trend as a function of rated acquaintanceship. Openness to Experience started with a moderately high level of self/observer agreement ($r = 0.45$), but showed a somewhat shallow increase across acquaintanceship levels.

The other three personality dimensions—Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness—showed noticeably lower levels of self/observer agreement in the lowest acquaintanceship group than did the other three personality dimensions (rs ranging from 0.25 to 0.33). Conscientiousness showed a steep and linear increase in self/observer agreement as acquaintanceship increased, reaching in the highest acquaintanceship group a level ($r = 0.68$) slightly exceeding those of Emotionality and Extraversion. Agreeableness also showed a similar pattern, although the increase in agreement across acquaintanceship groups was less steep than that of Conscientiousness. Honesty-Humility showed much higher agreement at acquaintanceship group seven than at acquaintanceship group six (0.43 versus 0.25), but showed a relatively slow increase in judgement accuracy after that point, thus reaching at the highest acquaintanceship category a level of agreement about equal to that of Agreeableness (i.e., 0.53 versus 0.54).

To examine the effect of target and rater gender on accuracy, we repeated the analyses for the whole sample after standardizing the personality scale scores within four groups defined by the gender of the members of each pair (i.e., women rated by women [$N = 1239$], women rated by men [$N = 218$], men rated by women [$N = 203$], and men rated by men [$N = 389$]). The results were generally similar to what was described earlier in this section, but the accuracy levels were somewhat lower for Emotionality (in the order of acquaintanceship, 0.45, 0.48, 0.55, 0.56, and 0.60) and Honesty-Humility (in the order of acquaintanceship, 0.21, 0.38, 0.38, 0.45, and 0.49). Nevertheless, judgemental accuracy in Emotionality and Honesty-Humility is largely maintained after controlling the gender of the targets.

To summarize, accuracy in personality judgement within the lowest acquaintanceship group was noticeably higher for Emotionality and Extraversion than for Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Honesty-Humility, with Openness to Experience falling in between. All of the personality dimensions showed generally

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