



# Confidence of social judgments is not just error: Individual differences in the structure, stability, and social functions of perceptual confidence



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 10 June 2015

### Keywords:

Confidence  
Person perception  
Judgment  
Social Relations Model  
Group interaction  
Status  
Power  
Self-enhancement  
Zero-acquaintance  
First impression

## ABSTRACT

The present research uses a Social Relations Model approach to focus on individual differences in *perceptual confidence* – a person's confidence in her or his impressions of others. Across two samples of group interactions, we found that the majority of variance in perceptual confidence was explained by individual differences in how people tended to perceive others (i.e., perceiver effects). A smaller percentage of variance was explained by differences in how people tended to be perceived by others (i.e., target effects). Both these individual differences were stable over time, were related to relevant personality measures, and group outcomes. Together, these results demonstrate that although perceptual confidence may not be substantially related to accuracy, it exists as a stable individual difference dimension that has important consequences for social interactions.

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## 1. Introduction

The decisions a person makes in life are based not only on her or his impressions of the world, but also on the confidence the person places in those same impressions (defined here as *perceptual confidence*). For example, when getting to know a potential romantic partner, a person forms both an impression (e.g., “she is outgoing, kind, and funny”) as well as a feeling of confidence about whether that impression is correct or incorrect (“I’m confident that she is outgoing, kind, and funny.”) From deciding which potential romantic partner to pursue (or whether even to pursue a romantic partner in the first place) to which employee to promote, perceptual confidence is present in everyday life interactions. People generally have high levels of confidence in their impressions across a variety of domains, from the diagnoses of clinicians (Oskamp, 1965) to assessments of performance (Dunning, Griffin, Milojkovic, & Ross, 1990) to impressions of a partner's past sexual history (Gill, Swann, & Silvera, 1998).

These feelings of confidence appear to matter. When people are confident about their judgments they are more likely to purchase products (Fazio & Zanna, 1978) and be satisfied with those purchases (Spreng & Page, 2001; Yi & La, 2003), report eyewitness

testimony as valid (Deffenbacher, 1980), and gamble (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012; Fischhoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 1977) than when they are not confident about their judgments. As Swann and Gill (1997) write, “confidence serves as a psychological gatekeeper of sorts, systematically determining whether people translate their beliefs into action” (p. 747).

Unfortunately, there is reason to believe that this psychological gatekeeper does not do a very good job. Past research suggests that levels of perceptual confidence are *too* high and may be unwarranted in general because the confidence a person feels about his or her impressions of others thus is not substantially related to the accuracy of those same impressions (e.g., Ames & Kammrath, 2004; Dunning et al., 1990; Gill et al., 1998; Swann & Gill, 1997). Recent research has assessed confidence across ratings of multiple targets in order to demonstrate that a person's relative feeling of confidence is positively related to the person's relative accuracy (Ames, Kammrath, Suppes, & Bolger, 2009; Biesanz et al., 2011; Carlson, Furr, & Vazire, 2010). However, the effect sizes reported in these studies are small, and further emphasize that a large percentage of variance in confidence is not related to accuracy.

In this paper, we turn the focus away from questions about the relationship between confidence and accuracy and toward questions about the large variance in perceptual confidence itself. Below, we apply the Social Relations Model (Kenny & La Voie, 1984) to judgments of confidence, and explain how this approach helps to integrate past research to answer both new and

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longstanding questions about the sources and stability of variance in confidence, whether variance in confidence is explained by individual differences, and whether confidence might actually serve important social functions.

## 2. Past research on perceptual confidence

Research on the sources of perceptual confidence can be organized broadly into research on the characteristics of people who generally feel confident in their perceptions of others and research on the characteristics of people who are generally perceived confidently by others.

### 2.1. People who rate others confidently

One line of research focuses on perceptual confidence at the level of the *perceiver* – the person who forms judgments about others. This research examines the characteristics of people who tend to rate others confidently, and identifies broad cognitive and motivational tendencies that explain why some people may be unwilling or unable to acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge, hold unrealistic expectations for their own performance, or form impressions with inflated confidence (e.g., Dunning, 2005; Dunning, 2012; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

For example, some researchers argue that feelings of confidence are motivated by people's needs for positive self-evaluation (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Dunning, 2012). However, empirical research is mixed about the specific processes that underlie this motivation. Some researchers report that self-esteem correlates with a person's perceptual confidence (e.g., Wolfe & Grosch, 1990), whereas other researchers report that overconfident perceptions are related to narcissism (e.g., Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; John & Robins, 1994; Robins & John, 1997).

### 2.2. People who are rated confidently by others

A different line of research focuses on perceptual confidence at the level of the *target* – the person for whom a judgment is formed. This research examines the characteristics of people who tend to elicit confident ratings from others, and suggests that confidence can be influenced by specific information about the target of perception. People's perceptions depend on information being made available to them, and confidence will depend on the extent to which a target signals information (e.g., Griffin & Tversky, 1992; Kenny, 2004; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). For example, Funder (1999) outlined ways in which targets may signal information that perceivers believe is valid (which inflates feelings of confidence), whereas other targets may signal less information (which would not inflate feelings of confidence).

Past research suggests that the amount of information that is available to perceivers does influence perceptual confidence. Oskamp's (1965) seminal research demonstrated that clinicians increased the confidence of their assessments when given more information about target patients. More recently, Swann and Gill (1997) report that relationship length is positively related to confidence among already acquainted friends, Hall, Ariss, and Todorov (2007) found that perceivers who were given information about NBA team affiliation were more confident in their predictions about the team's future performance than perceivers who were not given information about NBA team affiliation, and Borkenau, Leising, and Fritz (2014) demonstrated that confidence increased when perceivers discussed evaluations of a target with each other.

### 2.3. Limitations of the past research

Together, this research presents a variety of explanations for why people vary in their levels of perceptual confidence. However, many of these studies assess perceptual confidence using single rating tasks, which prevent researchers from being able to determine whether variance in perceptual confidence is explained by characteristics intrinsic to the perceiver, characteristics of the target, or both (e.g., Dunning, 1999; Swann & Gill, 1997).

Recently, more complex methods of assessment have allowed researchers to understand perceptual confidence at more fine-grained levels of analysis. For example, Ames et al. (2009) and Biesanz et al. (2011) had participants provide confidence ratings for multiple videos of participants to examine the relationship between relative confidence and relative accuracy. Carlson et al. (2010) used a round-robin group rating design to examine the relationship between accuracy and confidence in meta-perceptions. These studies demonstrate ways in which methods that require participants to rate multiple targets (and targets to be rated by multiple participants) can yield new insights about confidence. However, like much of the existing research on confidence, these studies focus their advanced methods on the relationship between confidence and accuracy. Might similarly sophisticated methods allow researchers to better understand confidence itself?

Additionally, few studies have examined changes in perceptual confidence over time; those that do assess the stability in confidence in contexts where the amount of information made available to perceivers is experimentally manipulated (Oskamp, 1965; Peterson & Pitz, 1988). Little is known about how people update the confidence of their impressions of other people when faced with new information in real-life social interactions. Do perceivers maintain their initial levels of confidence when they get to know more about what other people are like, or do they adjust levels of confidence to take into account the new information? Are targets rated more confidently with time as perceivers learn more about what they are like?

Furthermore, many studies have assessed perceptual confidence in tasks not directly involving interpersonal perception (e.g., Ames et al., 2009; Dunning, 2012; Hall et al., 2007). As a result, researchers have not yet tested whether perceptual confidence holds any social functions in interpersonal domains. Although perceptual confidence may only be somewhat related to accuracy, it may serve other social functions.

## 3. The present research

With these limitations in mind, we assessed participants' ratings of perceptual confidence across multiple targets to understand differences in the tendency to rate others confidently and be rated confidently by others. We also assessed confidence at two time points to answer questions about perceptual confidence's stability and change when participants are presented with more information about targets. Finally, we studied these effects in the context of real-life group interactions to test for potential social functions of perceptual confidence.

Below, we describe in detail how our methodological approach allows us to focus on two different aspects of perceptual confidence. We then outline four distinct questions about perceptual confidence based on this approach.

### 3.1. The Social Relations Model

The Social Relations Model (SRM) describes a statistical method that decomposes variance into distinct components related to the perceiver making the ratings, the target being rated, or the unique

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