Perceiving others is so simple: Implicit simplicity of personality perceptions in a dyadic design

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ABSTRACT

People judge others on simplified trait structures when evaluating the Big Five, which is referred to as implicit simplicity (IS: Beer & Watson, 2008). The present study investigated IS in minimally acquainted informal dyads. Hundred and eighty-six participants interacted for a short time on a task, and then provided self- and peer-ratings on the IASR-B5 (Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990). IS manifested in a global evaluative "halo-factor" with some accuracy and was related to perceivers' interpersonal attraction ratings and personality traits. The driving forces behind IS are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Knowing how others tick is essential. However, it is costly and time-consuming to evaluate every cue of each person in detail, and therefore we have evolved different explicit and implicit heuristics ("shortcuts") when evaluating others: we automatically form impressions of other people. These evolutionary adaptive social cognition mechanisms may trade-off accuracy for efficiency (e.g., Haselton & Funder, 2006). One such heuristic in personality judgments is *implicit simplicity* (IS), the tendency to simplify the trait structure in one's ratings of others (Beer & Watson, 2008; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010) so that actually distinct personality dimensions converge. For example, others are judged more simplified on their Big Five (Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010).

While interpersonal perception has long focused more on fallacies in perceptions (Funder, 1999), IS as a valid person perception mechanism went largely unreported and "needs to be explored at different levels of acquaintanceship, in different contexts, and with different Big Five scales" (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010, p. 526). So far, it has been explicitly explored at zero-acquaintanceship (Beer & Watson, 2008) and at minimal acquaintanceship in groups (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010; Srivastava et al., 2010). The present study extends previous literature by investigating (a) IS in informal dyads (Does it occur?), (b) the relationship of IS to attraction ratings (How does it occur?), (c) personality traits associated with IS on the perceivers' side (Who engages into IS?), and (c) associations between IS and self-other agreement, projection, and dyadic reciprocity (How accurate are simplified judgments?).

1.1. Implicit simplicity

Beer and Watson (2008) referred to the tendency of converging trait dimensions in peer-ratings (e.g., the Big Five) as "implicit simplicity". Concerning the tendency to stably perceive others in a certain manner due to implicit person(ality) theories and generalized others-models (e.g., "All peer-reviewers are kind and nice"), IS is closely associated with Kenny's (1994) perceiver effects in the Social Relations Model (Srivastava et al., 2010). Yet, IS refers to a different variant of perceiver effect: A person evaluated as scoring high/low on Trait A is also evaluated as scoring high/low on Traits B, C, D, and so forth (which is referred to as IS), thus converging *traits* against each other in one person. However, the Kenny perceiver effect, also labeled assimilation, concerns the convergence of *people* on one trait.

IS may be seen as an adaptive perceptional heuristic emerged as a trade-off between accuracy and speed/efficiency (Gigerenzer & The ABC Research Group, 1999; Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002; Haselton & Funder, 2006) to reduce complexity and prevent mental overstrain, but with errors as a by-product such as oversimplification. It should, however, not be equated with a fallacy

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or bias of person perception. IS could be adaptive in the sense that we capture the "gist" of the other person: Is this a good or bad person to be with? Thus, ratings with IS might contain a kernel of truth and be accurate to some degree (e.g., if the target is "simple", then "simple" judgments are accurate), while nonetheless containing illusory simplicity (e.g., simplicity in judgments that is not accounted for by the "simple" target and thus lie solely in the eyes of the beholder). The current work will address to what extent IS ratings show accuracy.

1.2. Reasons for implicit simplicity

IS could result from a host of reasons, and – inspired by Funder's Realistic Accuracy Model (1999) – can be roughly attributed to properties of the (a) judge (e.g., cognitive complexity, working memory capacity and load, implicit personality schemata, motivation, judging abilities), (b) target (e.g., complexity, judgability and expressiveness, physical attractiveness, likeability), (c) trait (e.g., evaluative, socially desirable, or valence-related; manifestability), (d) trait-information (e.g., quality, quantity), (e) context (e.g., communication; private vs. public place), and (f) research design (e.g., constraints on the interaction; scales used). This work focuses as a first step on two potential explanations for the occurrence of IS: attraction and perceivers' personalities.

1.2.1. Attraction
Positive feelings about another person are referred to as interpersonal attraction (Huston & Levinger, 1978). Particularly physical attractiveness is a salient cue in brief, short-term interactions at zero to minimal acquaintanceship which can guide our attraction towards someone (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2011). It may also determine how we describe a person because "beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972): Attractiveness might entail a halo-effect that has us positively biased and ascribe an attractive person more desirable traits. This could lead to IS because trait-ratings would converge towards the socially desirable (or undesirable) end, as a function of the target's (un-) attractiveness as perceived by the judge, and thus cluster more strongly together.

1.2.2. Perceivers' personalities
Although no single trait could be consistently linked to judgmental abilities due to different research designs and operationalizations of "accuracy", it would seem that extraverted, agreeable, and socially skilled individuals show more accurate ratings, while cold, defensive, and insensitive individuals less (e.g., Adams, 1927; Davis & Kraus, 1997; Funder, 1999; Letzring, 2008; Taft, 1955; Vernon, 1933; Vogt & Colvin, 2003; cf. Christiansen, Wolcott-Burnam, Janovics, Burns, & Quirk, 2005). Thus, "bright", socially desirable traits such as socio-emotional skills (e.g., empathy, sensitivity to cues of others) should be linked to less IS (i.e., being a good judge), while "dark", socially undesirable traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, or psychopathy should be linked to more IS (i.e., being a poor judge).

1.3. Implicit simplicity and the Big One

Trait-ratings of others converge against each other in IS, resulting in a stronger covariance structure which might give rise to higher-order super- or meta-traits. The Big Five are theoretically orthogonal (i.e., uncorrelated), but empirically there often seems to be enough covariance among self-ratings of the five factors to extract super-ordinate factors (DeYoung, 2006; DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins, 2001; Digman, 1997) and generate hierarchical trait models (e.g., Ashton, Lee, Goldberg, & de Vries, 2009). A General Factor of Personality (GFP: Musek, 2007; Rushton & Irwing, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; van der Linden, Bakker, & Serlie, 2011; van der

Linden, Tsaousis, & Petrides, 2012; p-factor, the Primordinal One: Hofstee, 2003; K: Rushton, 1985) has also been proposed, but with heated debates regarding its existence and substantive interpretation (e.g., Anusic, Schimmack, Pincus, & Lockwood, 2009; Ashton et al., 2009; Holden & Marjanovic, 2012; Hopwood, Wright, & Donnellan, 2011; Muncer, 2011; Rushton, 2012). It is likely that IS would facilitate such a GFP in peer-ratings (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010). Examining how this GFP is formed (e.g., because of interpersonal attraction) can further elucidate its nature in person perception studies.

2. The current study

IS at minimal acquaintanceship in a dyadic task-solving setting with students is examined. Three grand questions are addressed: (1) Does IS occur? (2) What leads to IS? (3) To what extent is IS accurate? The current work thus replicates, corroborates, and extends previous findings (Beer & Watson, 2008; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010; Srivastava et al., 2010) by investigating (a) IS in a dyadic instead of group context and with a different Big Five scale, (b) the driving mechanisms of IS (attraction and perceivers' personalities), and (c) personality perception parameters such as projection (assumed similarity: "I see you how I see myself"), accuracy (self-other agreement: "I see you how you see yourself"), and dyadic reciprocity ("I see you how you see me") (Funder, 1999; Kenny, 1994).

2.1. Question 1: Does implicit simplicity occur?

IS has been found in group settings (Beer & Watson, 2008; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010; Srivastava et al., 2010), but it could have occurred because participants had to focus on many people which can be straining; people might then not form from each and every person a differentiated picture. In dyadic interactions two partners communicate one-on-one and can focus on each other. The current study thus examines IS in a dyadic design with a longer Big Five measure (as opposed to short-scales: Beer & Watson, 2008; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2010). It was hypothesized that IS would also be detected.

2.2. Question 2: What leads to simplified judgments?

It was hypothesized that two factors contribute to IS: attraction of the judge towards the target and the judge's personality traits. First, if simplicity in peer-ratings is driven by interpersonal attraction (e.g., liking of the target), we would implicitly operate according to the principle: who is beautiful is good and simple (see Section 1.2.1). Second, "dark" personality traits (e.g., arrogance, Machiavellianism) should be associated with simpler judgments, and "brighter" traits (e.g., warmth, emotional intelligence) with less simple ones (see Section 1.2.2).

2.3. Question 3: How "accurate" are simple judgments?

The current works examines the extent of accuracy, projection, and dyadic reciprocity (see Funder, 1999; Kenny, 1994) to elucidate how biased IS might be. If there would be no self-other agreement and only projection and/or dyadic reciprocity in simplified ratings, then IS could indeed be considered a biased heuristic or fallacy. However, some targets might indeed be "simple" (i.e., they show a denser clustering of their trait standings) or at least behave simple in a short-term interaction (i.e., their clustered behavioral states are then attributed as dispositions by perceivers), and perceivers may pick up this simplicity. Thus, some accuracy was expected.