Reports

Nice or smart? Task relevance of self-characteristics moderates interpersonal projection ☆

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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated the impact of trait relevance to a specific task on people's projection of their characteristics onto a cooperative partner. We either measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Study 2) the relevance of a trait to a specific cooperative task. In both studies, participants first rated themselves on a list of traits. Then they imagined completing a cooperative task with an unknown partner. Finally, they rated the partner on the same list of traits. In Study 1, we found partner ratings to be positively influenced by self ratings and the idiosyncratic measure of trait relevance. In Study 2, participants rated the self and the partner on competence and warmth traits while completing an intellectual or a social task. We found partner ratings to be positively influenced by self ratings more on competence than on warmth in the intellectual task, but more on warmth than on competence in the social task. These results suggest that people project onto others in a way that maximizes their chances to succeed in cooperation.

Introduction

People make frequent judgments about others' suitability for cooperative interactions. If people had the possibility to select the perfect partners for collaborative tasks, what characteristics would they hope to find? Past research suggests two possibilities. On the one hand, people value in others those characteristics that are relevant to interdependent interactions (e.g., honesty, kindness, intelligence, and trustworthiness; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007). On the other, people exhibit a clear preference toward those partners who are similar to them (Byrne, 1971), and they tend to expect similarity with cooperative partners (Toma, Yzerbyt, & Corneille, 2010). The present research examined the possibility that both types of factors, that is, trait relevance and self-related information, could be simultaneously taken into account when forming impressions about collaborative partners. Specifically, we argue that people construe egocentric representations of their partners by projecting their own traits, but that this projection is differentially used as a function of the traits' relevance for a given cooperative task.

Trait relevance in construing the ideal partner

People should select their interaction partners with care, seeking out others likely to promote beneficial interdependent interactions and avoid those likely to impede task effectiveness. For example, intimacy and warmth are more desirable for ideal friends than leaders, whereas competence and success are more desirable for ideal leaders than friends (Lusk, MacDonald, & Newman, 1998).

With regard to cooperation, several approaches offer insights into the relevant characteristics that people value in others. For example, the literature on impression formation suggests that people primarily value features related to honesty, kindness, and intelligence (Anderson, 1968). Research on human values offers similar insights and considers that people place greatest importance on others' benevolence (e.g., honesty, loyalty, helpfulness, forgiveness, and responsibility; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). When selecting partners for close cooperative relations, kindness, intelligence, physical attractiveness, youth, status and loyalty appear to be important (Buss, 1989; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000).

More recent research conducted by Cottrell et al. (2007) documented that whereas people generally value trustworthiness and cooperativeness (see also Willis & Todorov, 2006), they also differentially value other characteristics in their partners depending on the relevance of the characteristics to the specific tasks or problems faced. This point is consistent with a functional approach of social perception (e.g., Gill & Swann, 2004; Swann, 1984), according to which different traits are relevant in different social contexts and person perceivers are in the business of knowing targets in specific contexts

and in specific tasks shared with the perceiver. For example, extraversion may not necessarily be a relevant trait in every cooperative situation, but may act as an important indicator of leadership and dynamism if cooperative tasks indeed require these features.

Self-other similarity in construing the ideal partner

Although construing an ideal partner for cooperation based on relevant traits might be a wise strategy, we argue here that the easiest strategy to use when construing the representation of others, especially when limited information is provided about the target, is to draw on self-information. Self-information is often used to form impressions of others and may drive people's propensity to construe ideal partners. Literature has documented that people tend to overestimate self-other similarity when making judgments about other people's behavior (Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), personality (Krueger, 1998; Lemon & Warren, 1976) or attitudes and preferences (Katz & Allport, 1931; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). People value similarity in others and report greater interpersonal attraction toward those who are similar to them in attitudes (Byrne, 1971) and personality (Neimeyer & Mitchell, 1988).

Research on social projection, that is, the process by which people expect others to be similar to them (Robbins & Krueger, 2005), shows that this tendency is magnified under cooperation. In other words, more social projection is observed in cooperative contexts both at the interpersonal and intergroup levels. At the intergroup level, Riketta and Sacramento (2008) found that people are more likely to see an outgroup as similar to themselves if it is cooperating rather than competing with the ingroup. At the interpersonal level, Toma et al. (2010) recently showed that people see a target person as more similar to themselves when they anticipate cooperation rather than competition with the target person.

Although the research on social projection offers evidence that people project their characteristics onto cooperative partners, it remains unclear whether projection is involved in the process of construing an ideal partner for cooperation. The possibility we suggest here is that projection emerges in cooperation because people believe that their partner's similarity to themselves increases the chances of success in cooperation. Stated otherwise, people seem to perceive similarity in others in a way that maximizes their own interests and goals (Kunda, 1987; Maner et al., 2005).

If people project in cooperation because they want to maximize their chance of succeeding, it stands to reason that they should be more prone to see their partner as similar to themselves on those characteristics that ensure success. Another possibility here is that relevant traits are more readily accessible, and by consequent, more likely to drive the projection process (Krueger & Stanke, 2001). In line with these conjectures, the current research tests the possibility that projection in cooperation occurs mainly on those characteristics that are the most relevant for success on the specific task. Moreover, we hypothesize that this effect should occur independently of the valence of the trait.

Overview of the studies

We conducted two studies that measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Study 2) trait relevance for a specific cooperative task. In both studies, participants first rated themselves on a list of traits. Then, they imagined completing a cooperative task with an unknown partner. Finally, they rated the partner on the same list of traits. We predicted more social projection on task-relevant than on task-irrelevant traits.

In Study 1, we used the Big Five dimensions in order to provide evidence that the relevance of a trait may influence the extent to which people see partners for cooperation as similar to themselves (two-way interaction). Big Five personality traits are generally considered as relevant for selecting partners likely to meet with success in cooperation (Buss, 1996). We, however, excluded the agreeableness dimension considered as semantically related to cooperation (see Riketta & Sacramento, 2008). This allowed us to exclude the possibility that our participants would judge these traits as relevant for cooperation because of their semantic features.

A second distinctive feature of Study 1 is that we used an idiosyncratic measure of trait relevance, which was done for two reasons. First, consistent with Cottrell et al. (2007), we contend that although Big Five factors are relevant for cooperation, each trait conveys different information to different people and different people may consider different traits as being relevant. By using the idiosyncratic measure of trait relevance we can secure a more sensitive and valid test of our hypothesis. Second, trait relevance could vary as a function of trait attribution to the self. If person A rates her/himself as very open and person B rates her/himself as not very open, the openness may likely be seen as more relevant for cooperation by person A than by person B. Therefore, by using the idiosyncratic measure of trait relevance we control for the potential covariation of trait relevance with self traits.

In Study 2, we directly manipulated trait relevance based on the two fundamental dimensions of social judgment: competence and warmth (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; for recent reviews, see Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2011). More specifically, we asked participants to imagine working with another person on an intellectual task or on a social task. Our rationale was that in the intellectual task, the most relevant traits refer to competence, whereas in the social task the most relevant traits refer to warmth. We predicted that participants confronted with an intellectual task should project more on their competence traits, whereas participants confronted with a social task should project more on their warmth traits. In Study 2, we thus expect the degree to which the self is projected into the target partner to be based on an interaction between the type of trait and the type of task (three-way interaction).

Study 1

Method

Participants and design

Forty-one participants (29 females), university students in various disciplines, took part in a study of spontaneous impression formation. They ranged in age from 18 years to 35 years (M = 21.85, SD = 3.51).

Procedure

On the first page of the questionnaire, participants rated themselves on a list of 16 personality traits (8 positive and 8 negative). These traits were selected to represent four of the Big Five personality traits (extraversion, emotional stability, consciousness, and openness to experience; four adjectives for each trait). These traits were borrowed from Riketta and Sacramento (2008) who pre-tested them to be semantically unrelated to cooperation. Participants had to indicate the extent to which each of the traits (e.g., progressive, creative, and slow) characterized them on a 9-point rating scale ranging from 1 (= not at all) to 9 (= very much).

On the second page, participants read a scenario in which they had to imagine working in cooperation with another student (the target partner). They learned that they were about to finish a final year project with this student and that the university lecturer responsible for the evaluation of the project would give the same grade to both students. Participants were told that obtaining a very good grade for this project was of utmost importance because, according to the scenario, the participant would like to continue with a M.A. program and thus good academic results were required. Participants were then asked to imagine the student with whom they will work in cooperation.