



Mixed impressions: Reactions of strangers to people with pathological personality traits [☆]

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Abstract

This study builds on previous work investigating reactions to people with pathological personality traits based on thin slices of behavior (Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004). Verbal and nonverbal aspects of the signal were separated and examined in a new sample of 150 target individuals (military recruits). Ratings were made after viewing or listening to a 30 s excerpt from an interview that had been conducted with each target person. Undergraduate students (408 total) served as raters in one of the following conditions: transcript, sound only, picture only, or full channel (sound and picture). In all conditions, people with higher scores on histrionic and narcissistic personality traits were rated in a more positive manner, and those with higher scores on schizoid and avoidant personality traits were rated more negatively. The consistency of ratings based on different sources indicates that important and somewhat redundant cues are available in both verbal and nonverbal channels. Initial reactions to people with pathological personality traits are influenced by both verbal and nonverbal cues.

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1. Introduction

First impressions are made rapidly, often without intention or awareness (Uleman, Newman, & Moskowitz, 1996). Surprisingly, people are disinclined to change these opinions across time. First impressions have lasting influence over subsequent judgments about others (Sannafrank & Ramirez, 2004) even when the observers are told that their first impressions were based on incorrect information (Darley & Gross, 1983). Observers will go so far as to find evidence that supports an erroneous assumption about others even if they know that assumption was based on false data (Gilbert & Osborne, 1989). Fortunately, it seems that groups are able to make fairly accurate judgments about others on the basis of minimal information (Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, 1993).

Recent evidence indicates that people who (in other contexts) exhibit symptoms of paranoid, schizotypal, and avoidant personality disorder are perceived unfavorably by people who have viewed no more than a 30-s videotape of their behavior (Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004). Other studies have demonstrated that these personality disorders are associated with impairment in interpersonal relationships and social functioning (Lara, Ferro, & Klein, 1997; Oltmanns, Melley, & Turkheimer, 2002). Clinicians and researchers have traditionally believed that the negative impact of pathological personality traits becomes evident only gradually, during the course of an extended relationship (APA, 2000). The new evidence regarding first impressions suggests that some important elements of this process may actually begin much earlier.

In fact, first impressions of people with personality pathology are mixed. While some personality disorders present negatively as judged from “thin slices” of behavior, others seem to present positively. Oltmanns et al. (2004) found that thin slice raters formed positive initial impressions of individuals who also received high scores with regard to histrionic and narcissistic traits based on nominations from their peers. These people were perceived by raters as being more likeable than other target persons based on 30-s video clips. This initial attraction to histrionic and narcissistic individuals fits with the concept of gradual development of relationship impairment related to personality disorders, which has only been substantiated in studies of narcissism. Paulhus (1998) found that self-enhancers (those with narcissistic tendencies) were initially the most well liked members of small groups, but after several encounters they become the least liked members.

All pathological personality traits are not evident in 30s of behavior. Some people who exhibit pathological personality traits create negative impressions based on minimal information while others create positive impressions (at least initially). Little is currently known about what specific aspects of the 30 s signal provide the basis for

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