Headword/Title: Realistic Accuracy Model

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Abstract

The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM) outlines a four-stage process necessary to achieve accurate personality judgments. Specifically, information relevant to the trait being judged has to be made available by the target, and the judge has to detect and utilize that information to make a judgment. Additionally, aspects of the judge, target, information, and trait being judged can moderate the accuracy of judgments and make accuracy more or less likely. While research has focused on stages and moderators in regards to personality, the RAM has potential to be applied to other characteristics such as personal values and moral character, emotion, empathy, and meta-accuracy.

Keywords: personality judgment, judgment accuracy, realistic accuracy, person perception, interpersonal perception, interpersonal accuracy, impression formation

Main text

The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM) is a description of the four-step process that describes how accurate judgments are made about the personality traits of others. The model is useful for understanding what has to happen for an accurate judgment to be possible, as well as for identifying moderators of accuracy and ways to increase accuracy. The model was a reaction to the discipline's focus on biases resulting in the misperception of others, and this is the rationale for the explicit focus on accuracy. Furthermore, the model is concerned with judgments of real people based on actual cues that people exhibit, rather than with judgments of hypothetical people based on constructed sentences or descriptions. For this reason, the criterion for determining a judge's level of accuracy is preferably a composite of ratings from the person being judged and others who know this person well.

When discussing this model, and accuracy of personality judgment in general, the term *judge* or *perceiver* refers to the person making the judgments and the term *target* refers to the person being judged. The process of judgment can occur with or without awareness on the part of both the target and the judge. First, targets could attempt to make a certain impression and attend to the cues they give off, and judges could intentionally be attending to targets and attempting to make accurate judgments of their personality. However, targets could also unwittingly emit cues that are relevant to personality and available for others to detect, and judges could pick up on those cues and make judgments without consciously intending to do so.

History

Research on accuracy of personality judgment was first popularized in the decades spanning from 1920 to 1950 by researchers such as Stanley Estes and Philip Vernon. During this time,

research mainly focused on how well personality judgments matched how targets' perceived themselves, which is known as *self-other agreement*. However, a methodological critique by Lee Cronbach led to a drastic decline of the research in this area. Cronbach argued that there were unaddressed issues in the way accuracy of personality judgment was measured, and these issues could lead to inaccurate conclusions. In particular, he argued that accuracy was made up of several components, not all of which reflected accuracy of the judgment per se. Rather than find ways to assess each component, most researchers shifted their focus to the *process* of personality judgment through the use of hypothetical targets. As a result, the concept of accuracy was largely ignored over the next twenty years.

Around the same time, social psychologists began to focus on the "error paradigm," which asserted that people use representative heuristics, or characteristic ideas about a situation or outcome, to make judgments. This led to the idea that people are actually much more inaccurate in their judgments about others, and further fueled the arguments against studying accuracy. Additionally, attributing behavior to personality, instead of to the situation, was conceptualized as an error that would lead to inaccurate perceptions of others. This error was labeled the *fundamental attribution error* (FAE) by Lee Ross in 1977. Research on the FAE was popular for many decades, and further isolated accuracy research.

In the early 1980's, researchers such as David Funder and William Swann began to challenge the widely-held concepts of inaccuracy and the fundamental attribution error, and instead argued that people are surprisingly *accurate* in their judgments of others. Accuracy research made a return, but the important question of what criteria would be used to measure accuracy still remained. Different approaches developed in answer to this question. The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM), proposed by David Funder in 1995, is one such approach that focuses

on how accurate judgments are made. RAM draws inspiration from Egon Brunswik's Lens Model, which represents the relationship between an object/person and an accurate judgment of that object/person. According to this model, objects give informational cues from which judgments can be inferred. These cues vary in their validity, in terms of how relevant they are to the attribute being judged. In the second stage of the model, a judge utilizes the cues. Accuracy will be highest when a judge utilizes cues with high validity and does not utilize cues with low validity. RAM expands upon this model, and identifies four stages of the judgment process.

Stages of the Realistic Accuracy Model

According to the model, the four stages must occur in a specified order to result in accurate judgment: *relevance*, *availability*, *detection*, and *utilization*. These stages are conceptualized to be multiplicative, meaning that in order for accuracy to be perfect, all stages must be perfectly completed. Imperfect completion of any one stage will result in decreased accuracy. Furthermore, failure at any one stage will render accurate judgments impossible.

Relevance. The first stage is relevance, which speaks to the quality of the information emitted by the target. In other words, information is highly relevant if it is related to the trait being judged. For example, timid behavior is relevant to shyness. Further, cues will be more relevant when the target is behaving in a genuine manner and not trying to create a false or misleading impression. Cues are also likely to be more relevant to personality when situational demands are weak to moderate, which means that people have more flexibility in terms of their behavioral choices; whereas cues are less likely to be relevant to personality in strong situations in which behavior is constrained and therefore less likely to be related to personality.

Availability. The second stage is availability. A cue is available when it can be detected by a judge. Available cues are found in both verbal and nonverbal overt behavior. A thought or

emotion is likely to be relevant to personality, but unless that thought or emotion is expressed in a manner that makes it available to a judge, it will not facilitate accurate judgment. Therefore, targets play a major role in a cue's availability by being expressive and acting in a way that is consistent with their personality. There is also a situational aspect to availability because some situations will elicit cues to some traits and not others. For example, cues to sociability are more likely to be available at a social gathering, whereas cues to work ethic are more likely to be available in a work setting. Another situational factor that can influence the availability stage is the behavior and characteristics of the people with whom the target is interacting. If the interaction partners are able to create a situation in which targets feel comfortable to express their true nature, then more relevant cues are likely to be available.

Detection. The third stage is detection, during which the judge becomes aware of the relevant and available cues produced by the target. Accuracy will be lower when the judge fails to pick up on the cues emitted by the target, which could result from not being in the same physical location as the target, or from being distracted or disinterested when in the same physical location. Conversely, accuracy will be higher when the judge is in the same situation as the target and pays attention to the target.

Utilization. The fourth and final stage is utilization, during which the judge correctly uses the relevant cues that were detected to make an accurate personality judgment. Accuracy of judgments of the same targets based on the same cues will vary if judges use the information differently to arrive at a judgment. Furthermore, each personality trait has multiple relevant cues, so judges must correctly combine these multiple cues in order to make accurate judgments.

Moderators of accuracy

An explicit consideration in the development of RAM was the ability to theoretically account for variables that make accuracy more or less likely. Such variables can be organized into four categories: aspects of the judge, characteristics of the target, features of the trait, and properties of the information on which judgments are based. David Funder identified these four moderators of accuracy as the *good judge*, *good target*, *good trait*, and *good information*. *Good* precedes each of the moderators to highlight the focus on the factors that make accurate judgments *more* likely.

   Good judge. The idea that individual differences exist in the ability to accurately judge others is the foundation of the *good judge* moderator. This moderator is primarily a consequence of the utilization and detection stages of RAM. However, aspects of the judge could also prompt targets to divulge more relevant information, which would affect the relevance and availability stages. Investigating this notion, Tera Letzring found that several characteristics and behaviors of judges were related to accuracy of personality judgment. For instance, being agreeable and having 'purpose in life' were positively related to accuracy. Behaviorally, the use of basic social skills (e.g., eye contact, expressing warmth), enjoyment of the interaction, and liking of the target, among other aspects, were positively related to accuracy. Alternatively, yet intuitively, needing reassurance, undermining, and seeking advice were negatively related to accuracy. It was concluded that such a pattern of results supports the idea that good judges elicit more cues from the target that can then be used when making judgments. Given this, one would expect that others in the multi-person interaction or even observing the interaction should also have that information available to them for making more accurate judgments. Indeed, when judges made ratings based on observing recorded interactions, there was a positive relationship between the

number of partners for a target who were good judges and the accuracy with which that target was judged.

Good target. Much like the good judge, individual differences in how accurately targets are judged, which is known as *judgability*, have been found by several researches, including C. Randall Colvin, Lauren Human, and Jeremy Biesanz. From a theoretical perspective, the *good target* moderator is a product of the availability and relevance of information because people who make more relevant cues available for others to detect are easier to accurately judge. According to Daryl Bem and Andrea Allen, individuals who behave consistently across situations and over time are more likely to be judged accurately because this allows for relevant cues to be available to judges on an ongoing basis. Similarly, targets who are behaviorally active emit more information that can be detected, thus providing more relevant cues to judges and thereby increasing how accurately they are judged. Judgable individuals are often described as warm, cheerful, and dependable; whereas less judgable individuals are described as hostile, deceitful, and moody. Moreover, people with high social status, good psychological adjustment, and high levels of socialization are likely to be good targets.

Good trait. The third moderator, *good trait*, refers to the notion that some traits or characteristics tend to be more accurately judged than others. This moderator is related to the relevance and availability stages of RAM. Traits associated with many cues that are highly visible and frequently available are more accurately judged than traits associated with cues that are less visible and less likely to be available. This aspect of the good trait has been referred to as visibility or observability. For instance, the trait of extraversion is related to behaviors such as talking in a loud voice, moving quickly, and behaving boldly – all of which are highly available – and therefore extraversion is a good trait. On the other hand, the trait of neuroticism is related

to how people interpret situations and feelings of anxiety and other negative emotions – which are often not highly available – and therefore neuroticism is not a good trait. However, the ease with which a trait is judged can depend on who is making the judgment, especially in terms of whether judgments are made about the self or another person. Although neuroticism is difficult to judge in another person, the thoughts and feelings related to neuroticism are available to the self and therefore this trait is more accurately judged by the self than by others. Conversely, traits such as extraversion are commonly judged from overt behaviors, which are more salient to another person, thus allowing for more accurate judgments by others than by the self.

Another aspect of traits that is related to accuracy is the level of evaluativeness, or favorability. Oliver John and Richard Robins found that when judging the self as compared to judging others, people are more likely to be affected by a self-enhancement bias. Indeed, discrepancies have been found between self-ratings and ratings by others on highly evaluative traits.

Good information. The *good information* moderator of accuracy posits that aspects of the information emitted by the target influences accuracy of judgments. One aspect of good information is *quantity*, or the amount of information that is available to the judge. Strong evidence has been found by several researchers to support the existence of the *acquaintanceship effect*, or the increase in accuracy that is associated with knowing a person for longer and thereby having access to more information about that person. However, C. Randall Colvin and David Funder identified a boundary on the acquaintanceship effect such that acquaintances and strangers are equally good at predicting behavior when strangers have previously observed the targets in a similar situation.

A second aspect of good information is *quality*, which reflects how relevant the information is to the characteristic being judged. In line with this theoretical view, research by Tera Letzring, Shannon Wells, and David Funder has shown that higher quality information is positively related to accuracy of judgments, when information quantity is held constant. Furthermore, Tera Letzring and Lauren Human found that dyads who discussed their behaviors or thoughts and feelings obtained higher levels of accuracy about how people are unique than did dyads that engaged in activities together. Interestingly, there is also evidence that accuracy of judging different traits is related to disclosing different types of information. Specifically, Andrew Beer and Cody Brooks found that information about values is related to greater accuracy in judgments of neuroticism, whereas factual information is related to greater accuracy in judgments of conscientiousness.

Implications of the Realistic Accuracy Model

There are three important implications of RAM. The first is that making an accurate judgment is difficult because all four stages of the judgment process have to be successfully completed in order for accuracy to be possible. This means there are four stages at which things can go wrong. The second implication is that moderators of accuracy must affect one or more of the stages. The good judge has traditionally been thought to affect the detection and utilization stages, but there is now evidence that judges can also affect the relevance and availability stages; the good target and good trait are related to the relevance and availability stages; information quantity is related to the availability stage and information quality is related to the relevance stage. The third implication is that accuracy can be improved by increasing the level of success at one or more of the stages of RAM. Therefore, accuracy can be increased by making cues more

relevant, increasing the availability of cues, increasing how many relevant cues are detected, and helping judges better utilize cues.

Current emphases

The current emphasis on research related to RAM is on deepening the understanding of the moderators of accuracy. One interesting aspect of this emphasis is the consideration that accuracy may differ as a function of the relationship between the judge and target and of the trait being judged. The Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry model was proposed by Simine Vazire in 2010 to describe this difference, and reflects the finding that accuracy differs depending on whether judgments are about the self or another person. Judgments about the self tend to be more accurate for less visible traits, and judgments about others tend to be more accurate for more evaluative traits.

Another current emphasis is on understanding different components of accuracy, and how these components relate to the moderators of accuracy and other important outcomes. It has long been known that accuracy scores include several important components, but more standardized approaches to decomposing accuracy into these components have only recently emerged. In 2008, R. Michael Furr described how to use a profile similarity approach to examine the components of normativeness and distinctiveness. Profile similarity reflects the similarity between 1) how several characteristics are rated by the judge and 2) an accuracy criterion for those same characteristics (which can be composed of self-ratings, a composite of ratings from people who know the target well, and/or behavioral indicators of the characteristics). Normativeness is the level of similarity between an individual set of ratings and an average set of ratings based on a large group of people. Distinctiveness is the level of similarity between the unique elements of two sets of ratings, typically in terms of how the ratings differ from the

average set of ratings. In 2010, Jeremy Biesanz proposed a multilevel modeling approach for

estimating these two components of accuracy, in which the normative/average and distinctive

ratings are simultaneously used to predict the judges' ratings. Analyses that take these

components of accuracy into account are illuminating ways that the components are

differentially influenced by factors that include whether the judge is motivated to be accurate, the

type of information that is available to the judge, and how accuracy relates to important

outcomes such as perceptions of interpersonal support and life satisfaction of the judges.

Future directions: Extensions and applications

The Realistic Accuracy Model has primarily been applied to judgments of personality

traits, in particular to characteristics contained in the 100-item California Adult Q-set, and to the

traits contained in the Big Five taxonomy (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness,

neuroticism, and openness to experience). Researchers are beginning to extend the model to

judgments of other constructs, including personal values and moral character, risk-taking, and

emotions. The model could be further extended to apply to judgments of empathy and

perspective-taking. Such an extension would allow researchers to examine levels of accuracy for

constructs other than personality traits and would generate important information about the

generalizability of previous findings for additional constructs. Furthermore, all of these

constructs could be examined in both children and older adults, as the existing research has been

conducted mainly on college students and young adults.

Research on meta-accuracy, or how accurate people are about how others see them, could

also incorporate the process and moderators of RAM. Research by Erika Carlson and R.

Michael Furr has examined how meta-accuracy relates to information quantity and quality, but

explicitly examining meta-accuracy within a RAM framework is likely to lead to new research

questions and insights. For example, research could explore whether the moderators work in the same ways for meta-accuracy as they do for accuracy, and the extent to which the process of making an accurate judgment generalizes to making an accurate meta-judgment.

Some research has started to examine the consequences of accuracy as they relate to good judges and good targets, with a consistent finding that the ability to both judge and be judged accurately is related to several beneficial outcomes. For example, judging strangers as similar to the average is related to agreeableness, life satisfaction, positive affect, interpersonal control, and interpersonal support; whereas being a good target is related to psychological adjustment and social status. Additional research is needed to examine how these moderators relate to other important variables and to examine the direction of a causal link between the moderators and these variables.

A final future direction is to begin to examine how the moderators interact with each other to influence levels of accuracy. Some work exists in this area, primarily in terms of the interaction between the good trait and good (quality) information moderators. Additional questions such as the following could be addressed: Are judge with certain characteristics especially well-suited to detect cues to certain traits? What types of characteristics benefit the most from increased information quantity?

See also: wbepid0013, wbepid0040, wbepid0201, wbepid0085

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Brief Biographies

Tera D. Letzring is a Professor of Psychology and the Director of the Experimental Psychology

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Douglas E. Colman received his BA and MBA from Adams State University, his MS in Experimental Psychology from Idaho State University, and is currently a PhD candidate in Experimental Psychology at Idaho State University. His research interests include personality and interpersonal perception, especially when applied to industrial and organizational issues. He is the primary author of *Seeing and feeling your way to accurate personality judgments: The moderating role of perceiver empathic tendencies* (2017, Social Psychological and Personality Science) and *Please "friend" me: Comparing positivity of impressions across introduction platforms* (2015, North American Journal of Psychology).

Sheherezade L. Krzyzaniak is a graduate student in the Experimental Psychology PhD program at Idaho State University. Her research focuses on personality judgment accuracy and its moderators, as well as its relationship to various aspects of physical and psychological well-being.

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