

Perceived Versus Observed Accuracy in Judging Others¹

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Within seven seconds of first meeting someone we form an opinion of them. Such “judgment calls” do not appear to be idiosyncratic as research has shown agreement among individuals in describing others’ personalities. The present study examined judgment-accuracy. Volunteers brought opposite-sex friends or lovers. Participants were asked to complete the Personal Questions Inventory (PQI). Next, they completed the PQI again as they believed their partner had completed it. Data from 68 couples were examined with two issues in mind: 1) Does familiarity predict accuracy, and 2) does accuracy vary as a function of whether people hold that “opposites attract” or that “birds of a feather flock together.”

Method

There were 68 couples tested in the present study (participants were instructed to arrive with an opposite-sex acquaintance).

After reading and signing a consent form, each subject was given a “background questionnaire” to complete that included:

- A Likert-scale rating of how well they believed they knew their counterpart (1 = not very well);
- Length of relationship (in years);
- A question regarding which cliché best described their relationship philosophy: “Birds of a feather flock together” or “Opposites attract.”

Following the background questionnaire, each volunteer completed the “Personal Questions Inventory” (PQI); a copy of which is appended to this document.

Finally, participants were asked to complete the PQI again, however, this time they were to respond with the answers they believed their companions had given.

Results

The PQI responses were compared three ways:

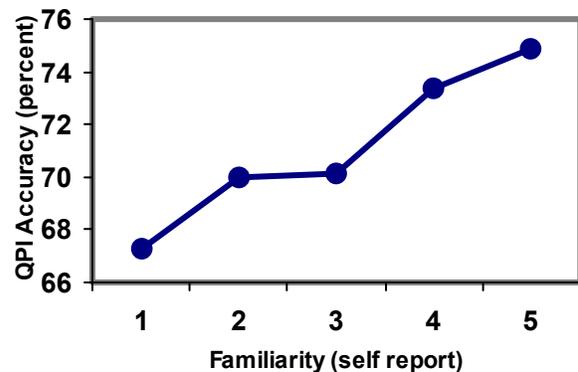
Actual Similarity Measure:

Percentage of identical responses each pair made to the PQI items about themselves. (*No significant differences found.*)

Accuracy Measure:

The percentage of item responses that were actually guessed *correctly* by each pair-member. A main effect was found for Reported Familiarity, $F(4, 131) = 3.62, p < .01$. As can be seen in Figure 1, accuracy increased with reported level of familiarity (1 = least familiar).

Figure 1: QPI accuracy by familiarity.



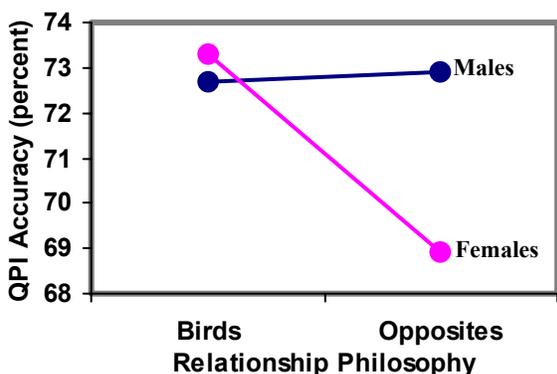
Also found was a main effect for Relationship Philosophy, $F(1, 138) = 4.06, p < .05$. Where those holding the “birds” philosophy were more accurate overall (73.0%) than those holding with the “opposites” philosophy (70.9%).

Finally, the Relationship Philosophy by Gender interaction was significant, $F(1, 136) =$

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3.94, $p < .05$. As can be seen in Figure 2, this interaction resulted because females who held the “opposites” philosophy were less accurate than any other group.

Figure 2: Interaction between Relationship Philosophy and Gender.



Egocentrism Measure:

The percentage of PQI guesses about the partner that actually matched each participant’s own PQI responses. (*No significant differences were found.*)

Conclusions

First, it was no surprise to see that self-reported familiarity was related to accuracy. However, what was surprising was that accuracy was as low as it was.

Given that 50% accuracy would be expected by *chance*, it is not very impressive to see a four-point difference in stated familiarity (e.g., from 1 to 5) contributing only an additional 7.6% accuracy.

Second, it was interesting that relationship philosophies were unrelated to how similar responses were between partners.

Those who believed that “Birds of a feather flock together” were as similar (or different) in their responses to the PQI as those who held that “opposites attract” (66.8% similar for opposites attract and 67.9% similar for birds of a feather).

Finally, if PQI accuracy indicates how well we know others, why does a relationship philosophy of “opposites attract” only affect (hurt) accuracy for women?

One possibility has to do with the age-old observation that men are not nearly as expressive as women (failing to communicate).

In the case of “Birds of a feather...” regardless of how little communication goes on, an assumption of similarity would result in higher accuracy in guessing partners’ PQI answers.

On the other hand, with “Opposites attract,” men would have the advantage in knowing about their partners (due to women being more forthcoming than men).

This means that women are less accurate because they may be making wrong assumptions about their partners who are “failing to communicate.”

Personal Questions Inventory
(some interesting findings)

Gender Differences:

- Do you exercise at least 7 hours per week?
Males = “YES” Females = “NO”
- Have you ever caused damage to someone’s property and not owned up to it?
Males = “YES” Females = “NO”
- If you had to have a prosthetic hand, would you want a functional hook or a useless hand that looked real?
Males = “HOOK” Females = “HAND”
- If you could only be one, would you rather be famous as an actor or athlete?
Males = “ATHLETE” Females = “ACTOR”

Least Accurate Questions:

- Would you rather have X-ray vision or the ability to be invisible? (49.3%)
- Which would be worse, to have AIDS or to have terminal cancer? (52.2%)
- If a friend had weird sexual preferences, would you confront him/her? (52.9%)
- Do you prefer the toilet paper roll to hang its loose end over the top away from or close to the wall? (53.7%)
- If you knew that you would not smell bad, would you go without a shower? (55.9%)

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Most Accurate Questions:

- Is your ideal lover of the opposite sex? (96.3%)
- Do (did) you want to have children? (90.4%)
- Do you speak more than one language fluently? (87.5%)
- Do you smoke at all? (87.5%)
- Do you wash your hands after using a public restroom? (86.0%)
- Would you happily own a pet? (85.3%)
- How many sexual partners have you had? (85.3%)

PERSONAL QUESTION INVENTORY

For each of the following 50 questions, circle one response that comes closest to reflecting your best answer. If you feel that either answer might apply to you at one time or another, then choose the one that is most often or most recently true.

1. Do you exercise at least seven hours per week? (Y/N)
2. For the most part, are you an organized person? (Y/N)
3. Do (would) you perform public displays of affection? (Y/N)
4. If your best friend (or lover) did recreational drugs, would you see this as a problem? (Y/N)
5. Have you ever caused damage to someone else's car (property) and not owned up to it? (Y/N)
6. Do you enjoy participating in outdoor activities? (Y/N)
7. Do you have a police record? (Y/N)
8. Would you happily own a pet? (Y/N)
9. For vacation, do you usually prefer to Travel/Stay home?
10. Do you pay your bills before they are due? (Y/N)
11. Do you play a musical instrument? (Y/N)
12. Is practicing a form of religion important to you? (Y/N)
13. Do you wash your hands after using a public bathroom? (Y/N)
14. Do you prefer to sleep in the nude? (Y/N)
15. Do you smoke at all? (Y/N)
16. Do you speak more than one language fluently? (Y/N)
17. Do you watch more than 3 hours of TV a day? (Y/N)
18. Have you been tested for STD's recently (past 12 months)? (Y/N)
19. Have you ever called a psychic hotline? (Y/N)
20. Have you ever looked for a relationship on the internet? (Y/N)
21. Approximately how many alcoholic drinks do you consume in an average week? Fewer than 5/5 or more
22. How many sexual partners have you had? <6/6+
23. If you did not have protection, would you have sex with someone you've recently met? (Y/N)
24. If you found a wallet full of money would you try to return it to the rightful owner? (Y/N)
25. If you found out that your friend had weird sexual preferences, would you confront him/her? (Y/N)
26. If you had the choice, would you rather be married to the person of your dreams for one year, knowing that he/she would die after that one year, or never be married at all? (Y/N)
27. If you had to have a prosthetic hand, would you want a functional hook or a useless hand that looked real?
28. If you had to choose, would you shoot yourself or your best friend?
29. If you spilled something on your best friend's carpet, would you blame it on their pet if you knew you could get away with it? (Y/N)
30. If you knew that you would not smell bad, would you go without a shower? (Y/N)
31. If you were late for class and had to go without brushing your teeth or without underwear, which would it be?
32. If you were so drunk that you couldn't stand up, would you drive a friend to the hospital? (Y/N)
33. If your friend's most beloved pet cat scratched you, would you physically abuse it? (Y/N)
34. In a fire, would you save your lover or your mother?
35. Is your ideal lover of the opposite or same sex?
36. Do (did) you want to have children? (Y/N)
37. What's your idea of the better date: A romantic candlelight dinner at a fancy restaurant or an afternoon hike through the mountains and stopping at an overlook point for a picnic dinner?
38. Where would you rather spend a happy hour: in a coffee shop or a Pub/Bar?
39. Would you marry a distant relative if you'd fallen in love with him/her? (Y/N)
40. If you could only ever be one of these, would you rather be famous as an actor or an athlete?
41. Which is worse, being blind or deaf?
42. Would you rather be poor & happy or rich & miserable?
43. Do you prefer to fly or drive long distances?
44. Which is worse, to have AIDS or terminal cancer?
45. Would you rather have X-ray vision or invisibility?
46. Would you rather spend your free time relaxing at home or going out with friends?
47. Would you rather vacation on the beach or ski in the mountains?
48. Do you prefer the toilet paper roll to hang its loose end over the top away from the wall or close to the wall?
49. Your spouse is terminally ill and there is only one drug in the world that can cure him/her. However, there's absolutely no way that you could ever afford it. Would you steal the drug or come to grips with the reality that there is nothing that you can do and spend the remaining time with each other?
50. Have you lied on this questionnaire? (Y/N)