

It's After 12... Do You Know Who Your Child Is?*

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Most would agree that the longer you know a person, the better you should know that person. Research has shown that this is only true to a degree. One hypothesis is that mistakes in predicting character occur because we assume others are more like us than they really are. Because parents have known their children for the child's entire life, undergraduates and their parents completed personality surveys to determine how accurately the parents would predict their child's responses. We predicted either: (1) parents would be accurate in their predictions, (2) parents would not be accurate in their predictions, or (3) accuracy would vary with gender (same/different) between parent and child.

It seems reasonable that to "know" a person is to know that person's personality. It also seems reasonable that the longer one knows a person, the better one knows that person's personality traits.

Vogt and Colvin (2003) hypothesized that interpersonal relationship and accurate judgment of personality share a positive relationship. Comparing self descriptions to those provided by parents and friends, Vogt and Colvin concluded that interpersonal relationship does share a positive relationship with accurate judgment of personality. However, the accurate personality judgments provided by parents and friends may have been due to projection and stereotyping. That is, when describing another's personality, people often draw on knowledge about themselves and the average person.

Kurtz and Shurker (2003) examined whether the amount of time we know people influences our accuracy. Females who never met before living together rated one another's personalities after two weeks of living together, then after fifteen weeks of living together. As expected, the longer the acquaintance, the more accurate the identification of personality traits. It is reasonable to expect, then, that very long-term relationships should yield the highest levels of accuracy.

The relationship between parent and child exists

longer than almost any other relatively intimate relationship. Halverson et. al. (2003) had parents answer questions about their children's behavior problems, social and emotional characteristics, and personality differences. Halverson et. al. utilized the ratings to determine an accurate way to measure the personalities of the offspring. The fact that parents' ratings of their children's personalities were used in determining a method of measuring child personality reveals that many people rely on the assumption that parents are able to accurately predict their children's personalities.

The depth of interpersonal relationship, or length of acquaintance, may not always reflect the accuracy of a personality prediction. It seems reasonable that parents who have lived with their children for 18+ years would know their children very well.

The focus of the present study was to determine how well parents are able to predict their children's personalities. Furthermore, the focus of the current study is to measure how well one knows a person affects how well one is able to predict that person's personality.

Vogt and Colvin (2003) reveal that people often look at themselves or stereotypes in order to accurately predict personalities. Therefore, parents may predict their children's personalities by

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assuming that their offspring are very similar to themselves. If so, it would be likely that mothers would be more similar in responses to their daughters than their sons, and fathers more similar to sons than to daughters. In conclusion, although it seems reasonable that parents are accurate judges of their offspring's personalities, it may not always be the case. However, it may be the case that same-gender comparisons would be more likely to be similar than cross-gender comparisons.

Participants

The participants were ten undergraduates from Robert Morris University and their parents. (More data are currently being collected.) Participants were recruited from a *Marriage and the Family* class and received course credit for volunteering.

Design

A 2 (student's sex) x 2 (parent: mother; father) mixed design was used to measure how accurately parents were able to predict their children's responses to a personality survey.

Materials

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was used as a question base for which to compare parent and student responses.

Procedure

Student volunteers were asked to complete the MBTI during their *Marriage and the Family* class with the understanding that they would keep their survey responses to themselves until the completion of the study.

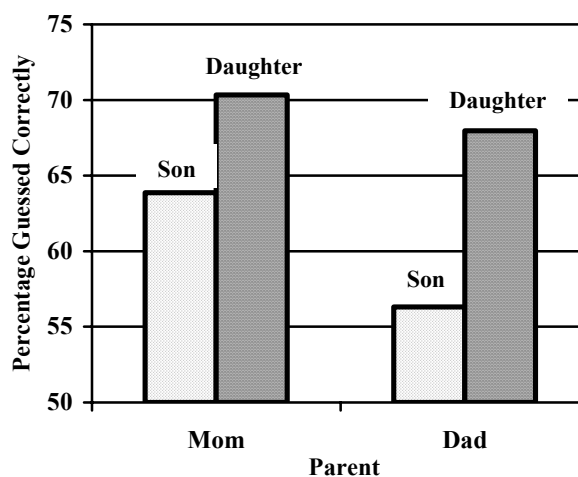
Next, each student was asked to deliver a packet to their parents. The packet contained consent forms, blank copies of the MBTI, and instructions as to how each parent should proceed. Mothers and fathers were first asked to complete the MBTI for themselves. The parents were then asked to each complete another MBTI questionnaire, except this second time they were to answer with the responses they believed their child had originally responded. When all forms were completed, they were enclosed in the packet which was then sealed and returned to the researcher for data entry and analysis.

All survey sets were numbered arbitrarily and these numbers were never associated with student names. This was to ensure that data could never be associated with any specific student.

Results & Discussion

A two-factor mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on parents' prediction accuracy for sons versus daughters. Given the small sample size, no significant effects emerged from this analysis. However, as can be seen in Figure 1, there is a trend in the data to suggest that fathers are less accurate than mothers overall. And, in particular, fathers seem to be at an even greater disadvantage in predicting their son's responses compared with their daughter's.

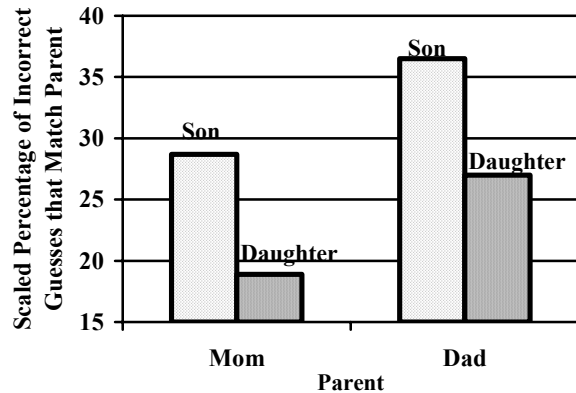
Figure 1. Which parent is most accurate and does accuracy vary with gender of child?



Another analysis was performed to determine whether the errors in personality guessing tended to show a bias toward parents possibly believing that their child was more like themselves. These data were determined by first calculating the proportion of the predictions that were missed by parents but that were identical to the responses they themselves had made on the MBTI. This was further weighted by dividing the proportion of "hits" that the parent had made with their child. This "correction" was made in order to take into account the overall accuracy of parents' predictions so that few misses would not result in an inflated score in this analysis.

From this analysis the degree to which fathers and mothers differed in the degree to which they incorrectly viewed their child more like themselves approached significance, $F(1, 8) = 3.492, p < .10$. As can be seen in Figure 2, fathers appeared somewhat more likely to view their child as having responded more like themselves, when in actuality, they did not.

Figure 2. Who is more likely to match a wrong answer with their own answer (child perceived to be more like mom or dad)?



From the present findings, one possibility seems to be that daughters may be more open with their parents than sons. In which case, it makes sense that the accuracy for daughters would be better for both mothers and fathers.

As for the relatively big difference in accuracy between daughters and sons for fathers, one possibility is that sons are more willing to share their personal thoughts with their mothers than their fathers. This would naturally put fathers at a relative disadvantage compared with mothers. On the other hand, it may be that mothers are simply more sensitive to their child than are fathers.

One final possibility that needs to be considered is that fathers are less accurate in predicting their son's responses because they falsely believe that their sons are more like themselves than is actually the case.

Given the relatively small number of participants, the present findings must be treated as tentative at best. Therefore, whichever of these possibilities is ultimately found to be correct (if any) will obviously depend on additional data (which is still underway).

References

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