

## **Getting to Know You: The Value of Idle Conversation in Assessing personality<sup>1</sup>**

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First impressions of others based merely on visual cues can trigger inaccurate notions. The present study examined the importance of interactions among people when forming impressions. Participants were randomly assigned to pairs. Some pairs completed personality self-reports before engaging in a conversation with their partner. At the end of the conversation, they were asked to complete the same inventory again, but this time providing answers they believed their partners would have given. The inventories were cross scored for accuracy. The remaining pairs completed the same tasks but in the reverse order (partner first, self last). As expected, even the brief opportunity provided for people to interact resulted in greater accuracy in assessing personality.

### **Introduction**

Our personality seems to influence how we react and behave in all situations in our lives. The better we understand personality the better we may understand why and how we behave in all situations. Researchers have studied personality with the use of inventories. An inventory is a questionnaire designed to show what type of personality characteristics a respondent possesses. Psychologists have used inventories such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, The Five Factor Model, and The Meyer's Brigg, among others. The use of these personality inventories has taught individuals about how their personality traits relate to their behavior in certain situations.

In 2010, Bjorkelo, Einarsen, and Matthiesen examined personality traits among whistle blowing behaviors. They gave participants a definition of whistle blowing and then asked them to answer yes, no, or on occasion to if they would partake in whistle blowing. They were then given the Norwegian version of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems to measure the personality traits of an unseen speaker. The traits of the speaker were shown through specific words that were used in the sentences or paragraphs. The traits that were prominent among whistleblowers were high levels of extraversion and dominance, and low levels of agreeableness. People with those traits were more in favor change and acted toward it. The major results were that people who had those traits were more proactive in whistle

blowing. These findings show how our personality relates to our behavior with an emphasis on specific factors like whistle blowing. By looking at personality traits among whistleblowers, we can see how knowing personality can help us in determining how a person may behave in a certain situation. That would be beneficial in that, for certain situations, we could adjust how we act in order to accommodate other people.

Mairesse, Walker, Mehl, and Moore (2007) found a link between understanding another's personality based on mere utterances. Subjects were given sentences, small paragraphs, and clips of conversations and were to then determine the personality of the speaker. The findings indicated that persons can simply read or read and listen to small bits of conversation and are able to pick out another individual's personality without being present with them. People were able to pick out personality characteristics by specific words that were used, length of sentences, tone of voice, different linguistic styles, and topics. These results strongly suggest that a closer examination of conversation could be beneficial to understanding personality assessment.

Weaver and Bossom (2011) questioned if sharing negative attitudes toward a similar object causes someone to perceive closeness with that stranger more so than having weaker positive attitudes. The researchers set up a situation in which a shared attitude about a professor was negative and looked at how close students felt to

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each other when they had negative attitudes toward the third party. The hypothesis proved to be true and people sharing the negative attitudes felt they knew each other more because of the common dislike. The finding is quite shocking in that people feel more of a bond with someone they share something negative in common with which the opposite would be assumed because most people try to avoid negatives. These findings bring about interesting questions relating to personality because they suggest that maybe we do not have to have positive things in common and can both have negative things instead. Since this is the case, figuring out another's personality could be beneficial to deciding compatible people for any kind of team relationship.

Selfhout, Denissen, Branje, and Meeus (2009) studied college freshmen to see how perceived similar personality characteristics in the beginning stage of forming friendships was in comparison to actual and peer rated personality similarities. The Selfhout et al. study really looks at how close a person feels to another when compared to how similar they perceive each other to be. The major finding was that the closer a person feels to someone else, the more similar they believe that they are to the other person in the early stages of forming a relationship. This implies that people tend to feel connected with those whom they believe they are similar to.

Caprara, Vecchione, Barbaranelli, and Fraley (2007) performed a study where they looked at how people are inclined to vote for politicians in regards to their own personalities. They sent out a list of personality adjectives in three different studies. One was sent out to Italian voters about the current prime minister, one to American voters about the current president, and one to the American voters during the election in 2004. The findings showed that people tend to vote for politicians who seem to have similar perceived qualities as the voter. Not only was this a finding in America but it also was found to be true in Italy, suggesting that people feel closer to someone that they like. This finding is important because it is a cross cultural finding showing that this is not just something found in only some regions of the world and generalize to the world's population.

Understanding personality can lead us to make predictions about others. For example, it is known

that acquaintances are more likely to understand another individual's personality than a stranger even though strangers can accurately predict the behavior of another (Colvin & Funder, 1991). The questions that still remain are to determine what assists us in getting to know others; as well as how much time and effort is truly needed.

The broad scope of the present study is to determine the importance that idle conversation has in learning the personality of another. Based on the findings of Mairesse, et al. (2007), it is predicted that after the participants have a variety of conversations they will be able to more accurately predict personality characteristics of a partner than before such interactions.

### Method

#### Participants

Between the two trials of the current study, 32 college students (approximately equal numbers of males and females) participated either for extra credit in class or general interest in the study. Participants were students from a small private university in Western Pennsylvania.

#### Design

A simple two-groups between subjects design was used in which Timing (before-conversation and after-conversation) was examined to determine whether this had an effect on the accuracy of personality inventories across partners. Accuracy was determined by examining responses to personality inventories across partners. That is, S1 responses about "self" served as the answer key to determine the accuracy of S2 responses to "other". Conversely, S2 responses about "self" served as the answer key to determine the accuracy of S1 responses to "other". This method was referred to as "cross scoring".

#### Materials

Two 44 question Big Five Inventory surveys were used. The first inventory was asked about the individual (self) and the second was about the conversation partner (other). That is, in the directions of each inventory it was specified who the responses were to be based on. Each participant completed both inventories which were later used for cross scoring (see appendix).

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## Procedure

All participants were pseudo-randomly assigned into unacquainted pairs and seated together at assigned tables (pairs were well spaced apart from one another for privacy). Each subject had a packet that contained copies of the personality inventories and instructions about how to complete them.

For about half of the participants, the personality inventories were completed immediately. This constituted the entire group tested one evening. On a second evening, another group of participants completed the inventories after the conversation task.

The conversation task consisted of subjects making use of provided lists of questions to ask and discuss with their partners. The questions were distributed across three brief sessions: (1) An initial "Appetizer" list which contained light, easy questions; (2) A middle, and more substantive "Main Course" list, which contained deeper and more thoughtful questions; and finally, (3) a "Dessert" list which contained relatively shallow, imaginative and fun questions.

## Results

Of the participants (N=32) who performed the task, 18 completed the inventories after the conversation task and 14 completed the inventories before the conversation task.

The data were cross scored between partners (partner one's self inventory with partner two's inventory about partner one) to determine accuracy. Accuracy was defined here as the degree of average discrepancy between responses to the personality inventory questions. Scores per item could vary by as much as 4 points (greatest discrepancy) and as little as 0 points (least discrepancy).

An analysis of variance was performed on the accuracy scores for before-conversation compared with after-conversation which yielded a significant main effect,  $F(1,30) = 76.95, p < .01$ . It was found that the accuracy of assessing another's personality resulted in the least discrepancy for those in the after-conversation group (mean = 0.87; SD = 0.13) compared with subjects in the before-conversation group (mean = 1.28; SD = 0.13).

## Discussion

The current study was done in order to determine the potential value of idle conversation in assessing another's personality. The prediction was that the subjects who had a conversation prior to assessing their partner's personality would be more accurate in labeling those traits and in fact, the prediction was supported.

Obviously the present outcome was because of the conversations that took place between partners. It gave participants the opportunity to learn about how their partner thinks and feels about a variety of things, and how they might react to certain situations. Thus all participants gained a broader knowledge of their partners.

However, before one is tempted to lightly dismiss the present findings as intuitive or obvious, it is important to emphasize a few key points. First, because the experimental manipulation was performed between subjects, there was no opportunity for subjects to prepare themselves for the personality assessment test. Second, the questions that were used were in no way designed to target the personality assessment items. In other words, the present results are based on implicit knowledge gained about partners, and not explicit knowledge. Or, put another way, the present results cannot be attributed to "cramming" or to "teaching to the test." Instead, the present results reveal that a rather insightful understanding of another person may be gained from a mere hour or so of idle conversation.

Future research in this area could elaborate on the present findings by examining larger samples as well as more systematic assignments of conversation partners (e.g., based on sex, major, age, sexual orientation, political leaning, etc.). It might also be worthwhile to examine whether similar results can be obtained with fewer questions (shorter exposure to a conversation partner) or even if there are specific questions that produce sufficient information from a partner to get a more immediate sense of their personality.

## References

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## Appendix

### BFI [1]/[2]

The following statements concern your perception [about yourself]/[of your CONVERSATION PARTNER] in a variety of situations. Using the scale provided, please circle the response that [best indicates the strength of your]/[you believe your CONVERSATION PARTNER would use to describe the strength of their OWN] agreement with each statement. [There are no "right" or "wrong" answers.]/[In other words, you are to fill in this form with the answers you believe your conversation partner would have completed this form.]

*SD = Strongly Disagree D = Disagree N = Neither disagree or agree A = Agree SA = Strongly Agree*

**I see myself as someone who...**

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| Is talkative .....                                  | SD D N A SA |
| Tends to find fault with others .....               | SD D N A SA |
| Does a thorough job .....                           | SD D N A SA |
| Is depressed, blue .....                            | SD D N A SA |
| Is original, comes up with new ideas .....          | SD D N A SA |
| Is reserved .....                                   | SD D N A SA |
| Is helpful and unselfish with others .....          | SD D N A SA |
| Can be somewhat careless .....                      | SD D N A SA |
| Is relaxed, handles stress well .....               | SD D N A SA |
| Is curious about many different things .....        | SD D N A SA |
| Is full of energy .....                             | SD D N A SA |
| Starts quarrels with others .....                   | SD D N A SA |
| Is a reliable worker .....                          | SD D N A SA |
| Can be tense .....                                  | SD D N A SA |
| Is ingenious, a deep thinker .....                  | SD D N A SA |
| Generates a lot of enthusiasm .....                 | SD D N A SA |
| Has a forgiving nature .....                        | SD D N A SA |
| Tends to be disorganized .....                      | SD D N A SA |
| Worries a lot .....                                 | SD D N A SA |
| Has an active imagination .....                     | SD D N A SA |
| Tends to be quiet .....                             | SD D N A SA |
| Is generally trusting .....                         | SD D N A SA |
| Tends to be lazy .....                              | SD D N A SA |
| Is emotionally stable, not easily upset .....       | SD D N A SA |
| Is inventive .....                                  | SD D N A SA |
| Has an assertive personality .....                  | SD D N A SA |
| Can be cold and aloof .....                         | SD D N A SA |
| Perseveres until the task is finished .....         | SD D N A SA |
| Can be moody .....                                  | SD D N A SA |
| Values artistic, aesthetic experiences .....        | SD D N A SA |
| Is sometimes shy, inhibited .....                   | SD D N A SA |
| Is considerate and kind to almost everyone .....    | SD D N A SA |
| Does things efficiently .....                       | SD D N A SA |
| Remains calm in tense situations .....              | SD D N A SA |
| Prefers work that is routine .....                  | SD D N A SA |
| Is outgoing, sociable .....                         | SD D N A SA |
| Is sometimes rude to others .....                   | SD D N A SA |
| Makes plans and follows through with them .....     | SD D N A SA |
| Gets nervous easily .....                           | SD D N A SA |
| Likes to reflect, play with ideas .....             | SD D N A SA |
| Has few artistic interests .....                    | SD D N A SA |
| Likes to cooperate with others .....                | SD D N A SA |
| Is easily distracted .....                          | SD D N A SA |
| Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature ..... | SD D N A SA |