



## Brief Report

## An experimental examination of the “good judge”

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## ABSTRACT

Many personality traits have been proposed to predict a person's ability to judge another. The predictive abilities found for these traits have been inconsistent. Funder and others (e.g., Gilbert, 1989; Trope, 1986) suggested that social knowledge, motivation to read others, and the ability to multitask are essential components of accurate judgment. In this study, we manipulated participants to be high or low in each of these characteristics and examined the impact of these manipulations on IPT-15 performance. As predicted, participants manipulated to be high in social knowledge, motivation to read others, and multitasking showed superior performance on the IPT-15 compared to participants in the corresponding low conditions. These results support Funder's “good judge” construct as a predictor of judgmental accuracy.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers have long sought to identify the “good judge,” someone who can “read” the temporary states and enduring dispositions of others, (e.g., Taft, 1955), yet the good judge's existence remains a topic of controversy (Bernieri, 2001). Although a recent meta-analysis revealed several personality traits that significantly predicted interpersonal sensitivity (i.e., extraversion, openness, tolerance, empathy, internal locus of control; Hall, Anderzejewski, & Yopchick, 2009), a review of specific studies in the literature reveals an inconsistent relationship between personality traits and the ability to read others. This study attempts to experimentally test the characteristics of the “good judge” using the framework provided by Funder's (1999) Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM).

The RAM explains accuracy in interpersonal perception using a collection of situational and personal factors: the good target (i.e., an individual who is easy to read), the good trait (i.e., a trait that is easy to read), good information (in terms of quantity and quality), and the good judge (Funder, 1999). Funder hypothesized that good judges possess three characteristics: social knowledge, motivation to read others, and cognitive ability (including multitasking ability).

Funder describes social knowledge as the understanding of how behavior reveals trait dispositions. For example, while observing workplace interactions, knowledge about typical behavior of employers allows one to interpret cues (e.g., eye contact) that indicate status differences between targets.

Funder (1999) also believed that greater motivation to read targets leads to a greater likelihood of detecting important cues. These judgments may become more accurate if observers believe that the judgments will produce important social outcomes or if they expect to interact with that target later (Flink & Park, 1991).

Funder (1999) described two types of cognitive ability: perceptual and multitasking (i.e., the process of pursuing multiple goals simultaneously). He suggested that perceptual ability contributes to accuracy because some individuals can detect subtle mannerisms of which others remain unaware. Differences have also been found in one's ability to recall those cues (Hall, Murphy, & Schmid Mast, 2006).

The importance of multitasking becomes clear when considering how limited cognitive resources influence judgment. Person perception judgments often involve multiple steps. In his two-stage model of attribution, Trope (1986) suggested that observers attempt to identify a target's behavior (identification) before they infer the reason for the behavior (attribution). For example, when first meeting someone, we first categorize the person's behavior (e.g., an angry expression), then make a correspondent inference (e.g., the target is angry).

Identification and attribution are largely automatic and involve few mental resources, but Gilbert (1989) has argued for a third step, one that requires higher order processes to reason and correct the initial inference (e.g., the target was attacked as opposed to the target is speaking loudly to a partially deaf person). Since this correction stage happens slowly and involves cognitive resources, disruption can occur. Gilbert (1998) repeatedly demonstrated that overloading a judge's mental resources interrupts the correction phase, which could lead to incorrect judgments. Therefore, greater

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multitasking ability allows one to overcome possible interference and still make accurate judgments.

In this study, we attempted to experimentally manipulate the three facets of Funder's good judge construct to examine their impact on interpersonal sensitivity. Although this fails to provide a classic examination of the relationship between psychometrically derived traits and behaviors, we know that certain situations make certain responses more likely (e.g., frustration eliciting aggression) and according to the Functional-Interactivist Theory, individuals identified as having certain personality traits are likely to display these dominant responses with a lower threshold (i.e., "aggressive" people require less frustration before aggressing than "non-aggressive" people; Mischel & Shoda, 1999). Thus, through experimental manipulation, we are attempting to elicit dominant responses from individuals with these traits.

### 1.1. The IPT-15

For our outcome variable, we selected a single, easy-to-use, standardized, face-valid judgment task, the Interpersonal Perception Task (IPT; Costanzo & Archer, 1994). The IPT-15 is a widely used measure that requires participants to watch 15 short video clips of individuals in various social situations (e.g., talking to the camera about a basketball game, talking on the phone). After each clip, participants are asked to make inferences based on subtle verbal or bodily cues and provide a response using a multiple-choice format (e.g., Who won the basketball game? Is the person on the phone talking to a man or a woman?). Ultimately, participants receive a score based on their number correct, ranging from zero to 15. The entire task takes approximately 20 min. This measure has high test-retest reliability (.73, Costanzo & Archer), and rather than relying on self-report, which may not necessarily reflect one's interpersonal sensitivity (Ames & Kammrath, 2004), the IPT-15 requires that participants see and hear others. A final advantage of the IPT-15 is that it has clear criteria for accuracy assessment (Kenney, 1994).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred fifty-five undergraduates (67 males and 188 females) received extra credit for participation. Participants were assigned randomly to one of eight conditions in a 2 (social knowledge)  $\times$  2 (motivation)  $\times$  2 (cognitive load) between-subjects design. Sixteen participants were dropped from the study (12 due to incomplete data and four after failing the manipulation check for cognitive load).

### 2.2. Materials

Participants completed the IPT-15, which entails viewing 15 short video clips of social situations and providing a multiple-choice response for each clip. The task takes approximately 20 min and participants receive a score between zero and 15.

### 2.3. Procedure

#### 2.3.1. Manipulating social knowledge

Participants in the high social knowledge condition received a social cue prior to each IPT-15 scene that was theoretically and empirically linked to the correct response (e.g., participants received the cue, "children are more relaxed around family members," for a clip featuring two adults and two children, for which they were asked to identify whether the adults were parents of

one or both of the children). The social cues were drawn from the IPT-15 manual, in which the authors explicitly identify the various cues that one can use to correctly identify the clip. Participants in the low social knowledge condition completed the IPT-15 without any cue instruction. Although this manipulation may seem overly simplistic, social knowledge is, by definition, situation specific, which creates difficulty in providing a subtle, yet still useful, manipulation within the time frame utilized by this study.

To check the social knowledge manipulation, participants were asked to record the verbal and nonverbal cues they used in making their judgments. Those given the correct cues ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 2.58$ ) listed a greater number of appropriate cues than those not given cues ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = .98$ ),  $t(88) = 4.18$ ,  $p < .01$ .

#### 2.3.2. Manipulating motivation to read others

Participants in the high motivation condition completed the IPT-15 as instructed by Costanzo and Archer (1994). Although these standard instructions might be more accurately described as the "control motivation" condition, for the sake of continuity, we will continue to use the "high motivation" designation.

Participants in the low motivation condition received the standard instructions, plus instructions intended to lower extrinsic motivation. Participants were told that they would watch the video tape to excite their brains and "warm it up" for the actual task. The experimenter assured them that, "The tape is not part of the actual experiment, so I will not be grading it. In fact, I do not even have the correct answers for the task." Not keeping score is the quintessential way to reduce the motive to achieve on a task (Rosen & D'Andrade, 1959). After they completed the IPT-15, participants were asked if they would like to take other longer versions of the task. Participants could choose to stay for no clips, 30 clips, 45 clips or 60 clips. As expected, participants in the high motivation condition were more willing to stay for longer versions ( $M = 19.35$ ,  $SD = 13.81$ ) than those in the low motivation condition ( $M = 15.12$ ,  $SD = 12.02$ ),  $t(247) = 2.58$ ,  $p < .01$ .

In addition, we inserted another interpersonal perception task requiring participants to rate pictures of people, deciding whether they were attractive and intelligent. They were told that, "they did not have to complete the form because it was for another condition, but it is an interesting task involving reading others." Participants were given a score of 0 ("none of task complete"), 1 ("some of task complete"), or 2 ("all of task complete"). As expected, those in the higher motivation condition were more likely to work on the picture task ( $M = .98$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) than those in the lower motivation condition ( $M = .61$ ,  $SD = .90$ ),  $t(234) = 3.51$ ,  $p < .01$ . Participants also were asked directly using a nine-point Likert-type scale how much effort they put into the task. Those in the higher motivation condition reported putting forth more effort ( $M = 6.76$ ,  $SD = 4.91$ ) than those in the lower motivation condition ( $M = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ),  $t(246) = -2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ .

#### 2.3.3. Manipulating multitasking ability

Participants completing the standard version of the IPT-15 were placed in the "high multitasking ability" category. Those in the "low multitasking ability" category (i.e., those with a high cognitive load) completed a digit-recall task while completing the IPT-15. This group received a different seven-digit number prior to each scene and instructions to rehearse and remember this number throughout the scene. After the scene ended and the question was answered, the participants were asked to recall the number. Participants had to recall more than half of the seven digits for more than half of the 15 questions to be considered for the analysis. Only four participants failed to meet this requirement, possibly indicating that they didn't devote the requisite amount of attention to the digit-recall task, and were excluded from the analysis.

Participants were asked to indicate, using a nine-point Likert-type scale, the percent of their attention given to the task. As anticipated, participants in the low multitasking ability condition reported attending less to the judgment task ( $M = 28\%$ ,  $SD = 18.05$ ) than those in the high multitasking ability condition ( $M = 69\%$ ,  $SD = 21.78$ ),  $t(187) = 13.40$ ,  $p < .01$ .

We asked 10 multiple choice questions that required participants to recognize both verbal and nonverbal information from the IPT-15 clips (e.g., “In one of the clips, a man and a woman were planning a trip. Where were they going? A. Africa, B. Japan, C. Spain, D. France”). Participants in the high multitasking ability condition performed better on the recognition questions ( $M = 7.09$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ) than those in the low multitasking ability condition ( $M = 6.52$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ ),  $t(242) = 2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ .

As a brief note, multitasking proved to be the most problematic of the three proposed constructs. Conceptually, experimentally manipulating one's cognitive load is not the same thing as manipulating one's innate multitasking ability. Also, recent examinations of the effect of cognitive load on interpersonal accuracy have produced mixed results. Some studies show that cognitive load interferes with judging the emotions of others (e.g., Tracy & Robins, 2008), while another study determined that the IPT task, in particular, places no demands on working memory (Phillips, Tunstall, & Channon, 2007). For this reason, we were tentative when predicting that increasing cognitive load will negatively impact IPT-15 scores.

### 3. Results

A 2 (social knowledge)  $\times$  2 (motivation)  $\times$  2 (multitasking ability) ANOVA was conducted on the IPT-15 scores to test the influence of the three experimentally manipulated variables. We predicted that the “high” versions of each variable would be associated with higher IPT-15 scores. A preliminary ANOVA revealed that neither participant gender nor ethnicity yielded any significant results and, thus, were dropped from the analysis.

All main effects were significant. Participants in the low social knowledge condition ( $M = 8.35$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ) were significantly less accurate than those in the high social knowledge condition ( $M = 9.50$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ),  $F(1, 244) = 15.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .44$ . Similarly, those in the low motivation condition ( $M = 8.40$ ,  $SD = 2.99$ ) were less accurate than those in the high motivation condition ( $M = 9.47$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ),  $F(1, 244) = 12.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .40$ . Finally, participants in the low multitasking ability (high cognitive load) condition ( $M = 8.10$ ,  $SD = 2.96$ ) were less accurate than those in the high multitasking ability condition ( $M = 9.73$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ ),  $F(1, 244) = 28.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = .63$ . No interactions were significant.

We also conducted a *t*-test to compare the cell featuring participants manipulated to be high in social knowledge, motivation to read others, and multitasking ability with the cell featuring participants manipulated to be low in those three characteristics. Mean IPT-15 scores for the all-low cell ( $M = 7.29$ ,  $SD = 3.52$ ) were significantly lower than the mean scores of the all-high cell ( $M = 11.16$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ),  $t(58) = 5.42$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 1.37$ .

### 4. Discussion

The experimental manipulations of the social knowledge, motivation to read others, and multitasking all produced significant differences in terms of IPT-15 performance. Specifically, high social knowledge, high motivation, and high multitasking ability (i.e., low cognitive load) were all associated with significantly higher IPT-15 scores when compared with the alternative versions of those conditions. These findings all support the efficacy of the

“good judge” component of Funder's Realistic Accuracy Model. We were uncertain whether increasing cognitive load would impact IPT-15 scores. However, it turned out that it was the most powerful predictor of the three factors examined.

One issue worth examining in future research is the role of perceptual ability. Funder (1999) described the cognitive ability associated with interpersonal accuracy as encompassing both perceptual ability and multitasking. This study examined the role of multitasking (by manipulating cognitive load) but failed to address perceptual ability.

The next logical step in this line of research would be to see if these results replicate with other measures of interpersonal sensitivity (e.g., the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity; Rosenthal, Hall, Dimatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979). It might also be helpful to replicate the results after re-conceptualizing the trait manipulations; the social knowledge manipulation used in this study was especially blunt, and one could manipulate motivation to read others to be higher than the control, as opposed to lower. Ultimately, it would be necessary to develop some way to directly measure social knowledge, motivation to read others, and multitasking as individual differences, rather than the artificial manipulations used in the current study. This might be fairly straightforward in terms of multitasking ability, but the other two seem highly situation specific. In any case, one would expect that a valid set of such personality scales would be highly predictive of interpersonal accuracy and would clear up much of the ambiguity in the good judge literature.

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