



Inferring social attitudes at zero acquaintance

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Abstract

This study examines whether strangers can infer political attitudes of target persons on the basis of minimal information. Eight judges rated 48 participants on an right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and conservatism scale (Altemeyer, 1998; Wilson & Patterson, 1968) based on short videos, showing every participant reading a weather forecast. Consensus among the judges was high ($\alpha = .82$ for RWA, $\alpha = .86$ for conservatism). More importantly, stranger reports correlated significantly with the targets' self-reports (partial correlations controlling for age, gender, and setting: $r = .33$, $p < .05$ for RWA, $r = .36$, $p < .05$ for conservatism).

Introduction

First impressions – are they based only on prejudices and stereotypes, or do they also reflect accurate information about a person? How much and what kind of information do we need in order to form an accurate first impression? These and other questions are investigated by zero-acquaintance studies.

The accuracy of personality judgements by zero-acquaintance is shown in many studies, other traits like self-esteem or social dominance orientation were also investigated (Albright, 1988; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Yeagley, Morling, & Nelson, 2007).

There are consistent findings of high assortative mating for authoritarianism and conservatism in couples, $r = .60$ (Riemann, in press). It remains under discussion whether these similarities are given at the beginning of a relationship or if they are the result of the time couples spend together (Lykken & Tellegen, 1993).

Based on these findings we decided to examine the zero-acquaintance judgments of authoritarianism and conservatism, in order to understand the importance and salience of these traits at first sight.

This Study

The reliability and accuracy of judgments of authoritarianism and conservatism based on minimal information about the target person is investigated. The reliability is represented by the agreement of the judges about the attitudes of one person, while the accuracy of the judgment is measured through the convergence of the self- and stranger-ratings.

Hypothesis 1: The correlations between the different judgments for one person will be statistically significant (consensus of the judges)

Hypothesis 2: The correlations between self- and stranger-ratings will be statistically significant for the Right-Wing-Authoritarianism- and Conservatism-Scale (accuracy of the judgments).

Method

In this study political attitudes are measured with the Right-Wing-Authoritarianism-Scale (RWA-Scale, 12 Items) and the Conservatism-Scale (C-Scale, 21 Items) (Altemeyer, 1996; Funke, 2003; Wilson & Patterson, 1968; Schiebel, Riemann, & Mummendey, 1984; Stöbel, Kämpfe, & Riemann, 2006). Both scales used a Likert scale from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*.

48 students from the University of Münster and the University of Applied Science Bielefeld (24 females and 24 males) were the self-raters ($M = 22.96$ years, $SD = 2.57$).

Their political attitudes varied from $M = 2.47$, $SD = .54$ for authoritarianism and $M = 2.39$, $SD = .36$ for conservatism. Possible effects of the different settings (see Figure 1) were considered.

The 48 participants were filmed while reading out a weather forecast (Videolength: 60 sec.). After making the video they filled out the RWA- and C-Scales.

Eight female psychology students from the Bielefeld University were the judges ($M = .24.63$ years, $SD = 8.79$). The judges saw the 48 Videos and filled out the RWA- und C-Scales for every participant. There was a control-question for former acquaintance at the beginning of the questionnaires. A judgment was made only if the judge and the participant were unacquainted.

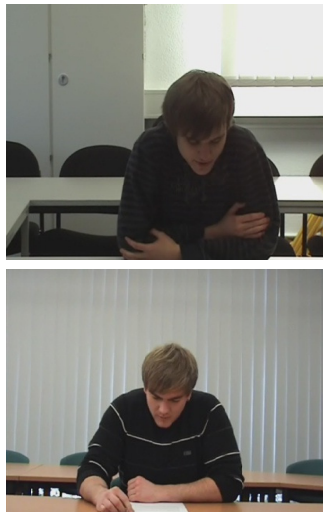


Figure 1. Above the setting in Münster, below the setting in Bielefeld.

Results

The reliability of the judgments varied from $\alpha = .82$ for the RWA-Scale to $\alpha = .86$ for the C-Scale (see Table 1).

There was a significant high correlation between self-reports and stranger-ratings, $r = .33$ to $r = .39$ for the RWA-Scale and $r = .36$ to $r = .44$ for the C-Scale (see Table 2).

These results can be considered as confirming both hypotheses.

The variables „Age“ and „Gender“ had a negative, but not significant, influence on the correlations. The variable „Setting“ had a positive influence on the correlations and is therefore a suppressor-variable.

Table 1

Reliability of Stranger Ratings of the Overall-, RWA- und C-Scales.

| Parameters → Variables ↓ | Cronbach's Alpha | SD | M |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|------|-------|
| Judgment Overall-Score ¹ | .85 | 3.22 | 20.00 |
| Judgment RWA-Score | .82 | 3.74 | 20.60 |
| Judgment C-Score | .86 | 3.49 | 21.56 |

| Table 2 | Overall-Score | RWA-Score | C-Score |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Validity of strangers judgments: Correlations between Self- and Stranger-Ratings | Stranger-Rating | Stranger-Rating | Stranger-Rating |
| Overall-Score ^a Self-Rating | .46** | .43** | .49** |
| RWA-Score Self-Rating | .43** | .39** | .46** |
| C-Score Self-Rating | .44** | .42** | .44** |
| Control Variables | Overall-Score Self-Rating | .37* | .40** |
| Age, Gender & Setting ^b | RWA-Score Self-Rating | .38* | .39** |
| | C-Score Self-Rating | .38* | .36* |

Notes. The correlations in bold are relevant to the hypotheses. $DF = 47$.

^a The RWA- and C-Scores together, all 33 Items. ^b Whether the video was made in Münster or in Bielefeld. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Both scales showed low discriminant validity. The correlation between self-ratings on the RWA- and C-Scale was $r = .78$. The judges could not reliably distinguish between authoritarianism and conservatism. The correlation between stranger ratings on the RWA- und C-Scale was $r = .95$.

The male students were significantly more conservative and authoritarian than the female students, which is consistent with previous research. There were no other gender effects.

Discussion

Both hypotheses were confirmed. High consensus between the judges and statistically significant correlations between self- and stranger-ratings were found. This study sets premises for further research, on e. g. what cues are used for the forming of an accurate judgments of the investigated traits.

Furthermore the study shows results supporting the hypothesis, that partners are similar in their political attitudes at the beginning of the relationship rather than that attitudes adjust over time. If people can accurately assess political attitudes so fast and given so little information, it is probable that they will consider such fast judgments in the mating process too.

Further research is needed in order to answer reliably the question of what cues are used and what role do political attitudes play in the mating process.

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