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Do we know who values us?

Dyadic meta-accuracy in the perception of professional relationships

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Do we know who values us?

Dyadic meta-accuracy in the perception of professional relationships

People often need to know what others think of them—whom do we approach to collaborate, to invite out, or to seek assistance? Research on *meta-perceptions* shows strong evidence for generalized meta-accuracy—knowing whether the rest of the world tends to see us, e.g., as extraverted or intelligent—but less for dyadic meta-accuracy—knowing how different people view us differently (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Levesque, 1997; Malloy & Albright, 1990; Malloy, Albright, Kenny, Agatstein, & Winquist, 1997). In meta-judgments of individual traits and abilities, people generally assume they make the same impression on all interaction partners, rather than differentiating their unique impressions on each (Kenny, 1994). However, for more relational constructs such as friendship, liking, humor, considerateness, and interestingness, perceivers can typically differentiate others' unique evaluations (DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb, & Oliver, 1987; Levesque, 1997; Kenny, 1994).

Why does dyadic meta-accuracy exist for relational constructs? Kenny and DePaulo (1993) theorized it is only because people believe their evaluations will be reciprocated by others. When this assumption is valid, they can introspect about their opinions of others to infer others' likely opinions of them. Kenny and DePaulo (1993) argued that the data are less consistent with a second mechanism—sensitivity to relationship-relevant cues—because these cues are managed actively and interpreted selectively. We present the first evidence for this second mechanism by demonstrating dyadic meta-accuracy when controlling for presumed reciprocity.

Methods

Participants

The entire first-year Master's in Business Administration (MBA) class of a major university completed measures halfway through their first semester. The 239 individuals (69% male, 58% US citizens) were split into 16 round robins of 14-15 people each.

Procedure

Given the importance of building relationships with others who can help students' careers, participants recorded their *perceptions* of "value as a future professional contact" (scale 1=much less than average, 5=average, 9=much more than average) for each individual in the round robin. They also provided *meta-perceptions*, i.e., how they believed each other party rated them.

Analysis

To preserve statistical independence, the group was the unit of analysis for significance tests. Consistent with past work, we report accuracy and reciprocity as within-subjects correlations (DePaulo et al., 1987).

Results

Interpersonal judgments were analyzed using the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny & La Voie, 1984). Examining perceptions, 20% of variance resulted from consistency in how perceivers used the scale, 13% from consensus in ratings of targets, and 67% from dyadic effects and measurement error. Examining meta-perceptions, 37% of variance resulted from consistency in how perceivers believed the rest of the world viewed them, 4% from perceivers' consistent views of others as harsh vs. soft judges, and 59% from dyadic effects plus error. Using formulas from Lashley and Bond (1997), all components were significant at $p_{\text{rep}} > .999$.

Generalized meta-accuracy was significant, $r(237) = .26$, $d = 0.54$, $p_{\text{rep}} = .997$. Individuals knew on average how valued they were by the group. Dyadic meta-accuracy was also significant, $\bar{r} = .44$, $t(15) = 29.7$, $p_{\text{rep}} > .999$, $d = 15.3$, indicating perceivers could distinguish who valued them more vs. less.

Did participants' dyadic meta-accuracy result from a heuristic of presumed reciprocity alone? We first conducted mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986), with Figure 1 illustrating results. Step one was establishing dyadic meta-accuracy, i.e., the association between perceptions of a target "P(T)" and meta-perceptions "T(P(T))." Step two was establishing *dyadic reciprocity*, i.e., the extent to which people genuinely reciprocated each others' opinions, or the correlation between "P(T)" and "T(P)," $\bar{r} = .40$, $t(15) = 19.4$, $p_{\text{rep}} > .999$, $d = 10.01$. Step three was establishing *perceived dyadic reciprocity*, i.e., the association between perceivers' opinions of others and their meta-judgments of what others think of them, or the correlation between "T(P)" and "T(P(T))," $\bar{r} = .70$, $t(15) = 38.2$, $p_{\text{rep}} > .999$, $d = 19.7$. In the fourth step, when reciprocity was included in the model, the coefficient for accuracy decreased from .44 to .19, Sobel test $Z = 5.45$, $p_{\text{rep}} > .999$. However, dyadic meta-accuracy remained significant, $\bar{r} = .19$, $t(15) = 12.3$, $p_{\text{rep}} > .999$, $d = 6.4$. Reciprocity was a partial—but not full—mediator of dyadic meta-accuracy.

We then investigated whether people are sensitive to relationship-relevant cues or indiscriminately apply the reciprocity heuristic. Those people who perceived greater reciprocity were indeed those whose relationships were more reciprocated, $r(237) = .33$. This suggests presumed reciprocity is not merely a heuristic that perceivers apply equally, but is itself a cue that people use to achieve dyadic meta-accuracy.

Discussion

We tested and supported Kenny and DePaulo's (1993) theoretical argument that presuming reciprocity enables perceivers to achieve dyadic meta-accuracy. Projecting their

beliefs accounted for much of perceivers' accuracy, but not all of it. People do not appear to achieve accuracy through introspection and projection alone.

The absence of complete mediation provides suggestive evidence for Kenny and DePaulo's (1993) second mechanism—which they proposed yet dismissed. We suggest perceivers also use feedback from their social landscape to determine their relative standing with others—even if such feedback from interaction partners tends to be rare and noisy (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & McNulty, 1992). Individuals appear to be at least partly sensitive to their regard in others' eyes. This finding has important implications by suggesting people have more insight into their relationships than previously believed. Future research should seek to understand how we achieve this sensitivity. Because dyadic meta-accuracy can help us know which relationships to pursue and which to avoid, these results have important implications for the formation of social networks.

Our results also extend evidence for dyadic meta-accuracy to another type of judgment, that of professional value. One might expect dyadic meta-accuracy across relational constructs for which it is acceptable—and even normative—that people hold different schemas about how to judge others. In the case of personality traits, presumably most perceivers interpret party-going as a sign of extraversion. However, we all have our own taste for who is likable, funny, interesting, or potentially a valuable contact in the future.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Reciprocity is a partial mediator of dyadic meta-accuracy in interpersonal judgments.

