

Interpersonal Sensitivity, Status, and Stereotype Accuracy

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Abstract

A classic question in social and organizational psychology is whether low-status persons are more accurate in the perception of their high-status partners than the latter are in their perception of their subordinates. In a series of studies, Snodgrass (1985, 1992) tested this idea. She found that subordinates were more accurate at judging how their bosses viewed them than bosses were at judging how their subordinates viewed them, but that bosses were more accurate at judging how subordinates viewed themselves than subordinates were at judging how bosses viewed themselves. We believe, however, that these results were obscured by stereotype accuracy. Using previously collected data, we found that stereotype accuracy does lead to the pattern previously observed by Snodgrass. We also discovered that when we controlled for stereotype accuracy, subordinates' perceptions were generally more accurate than those of their bosses, which supports Snodgrass's original hypothesis.

Keywords

accuracy, power, interpersonal perception, stereotype

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The effects of status and power on interpersonal sensitivity have been long-standing questions in social and organizational psychology. In fact, the effect of power on interpersonal sensitivity has recently been the subject of some debate (Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). One perspective is that in dyadic relationships, the low-status member should be more perceptive than the high-status member (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, 2008). Because a low-status member's rewards or resources depend on the whim of the high-status member, it is more important for the low-status member to be aware of the feelings of the high-status member, to please him or her and earn the rewards, than it is for the high-status member to be aware of the feelings of the low-status member. This view has received partial support in the literature (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2006; Gonzaga et al., 2008; Hall, Rosip, Smith LeBeau, Horgan, & Carter, 2006; Snodgrass, 1985, 1992; Snodgrass, Hecht, & Ploutz-Snyder, 1998), although other studies have found that high-status individuals' perceptions of low-status individuals are more accurate than low-status individuals' perceptions of high-status individuals (e.g., Hall & Halberstadt, 1994; Hall, Halberstadt, & O'Brien, 1997; Schmid Mast et al., 2009; Snodgrass, 1985, 1992; Snodgrass et al., 1998).

Despite this debate, the primary researcher who has examined the effect of status on different types of interpersonal sensitivity (meta-accuracy and partner accuracy) is Snodgrass

(1985, 1992). Although she was most interested in the effect of status, her inclusion of two types of accuracy uncovered an interesting interaction between role (subordinate vs. boss) and type of perception (meta-accuracy vs. partner accuracy) that cannot be examined in studies assessing only one type of interpersonal sensitivity. This interaction suggests that subordinates' perceptions of how their bosses view them are indeed more accurate than bosses' perceptions of how their subordinates view them (meta-accuracy). However, bosses are more sensitive to how their subordinates view themselves than subordinates are to how their bosses view themselves (partner accuracy). The latter type of perception (partner accuracy) is how interpersonal sensitivity is typically defined in the literature, and, thus, Snodgrass's results are in line with previous research suggesting that high-status individuals are more accurate in their perceptions of low-status individuals than vice versa (e.g., Schmid Mast et al., 2009). Boucher, Hancock, and Dunham (2008) replicated Snodgrass's (1985) interaction, not only in face-to-face interactions, but also in computer-mediated interactions.

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We argue here that the differential effects of status on meta- and partner accuracy observed in studies using Snodgrass's (1985, 1992) paradigm (which relies on profile correlations to measure interpersonal sensitivity; e.g., Boucher et al., 2008; Snodgrass, 1985, 1992; Snodgrass et al., 1998) may be explained by separating two types of accuracy that have been conflated in these profile correlations in previous studies: stereotype accuracy and relational accuracy. The key questions we raise in this article are (a) whether the interaction found by Snodgrass (1985, 1992) and Boucher et al. (2008) remains once both types of accuracy are accounted for and (b) what happens to the main effect of role.

How might stereotype accuracy explain the interaction found by Snodgrass (1985, 1992) and Boucher et al. (2008)? *Stereotype accuracy* is a potentially misleading and confusing term, but it is the term that Cronbach (1955) used. We can conceptualize two ways that bosses could be accurate about subordinates. First, bosses could predict the responses of subordinates in general. This type of accuracy is not concerned with specific predictions of bosses about their own subordinates. Stereotype accuracy can be measured as the profile correlation across items between the average perception of all bosses and the average of the subordinates' responses. Alternatively, a boss could be especially accurate about the reactions of his or her specific subordinate. This second type of accuracy, which removes the effects of stereotypes, is called *relational accuracy*. Thus, individual bosses and subordinates who accurately predict their own partners' responses—which was what Snodgrass (1985) originally conceptualized as interpersonal sensitivity—demonstrate relational accuracy. If, however, participants are accurate at knowing what characteristics go with the roles of boss and subordinate, they would display stereotype accuracy.¹

We report a study in which we reanalyzed the data of Boucher et al. (2008) and investigated the role of stereotype accuracy in the effects of status on interpersonal sensitivity. We hypothesized that the interaction between status and type of perception is driven by stereotype accuracy. Consequently, when stereotype accuracy is removed, this interaction should disappear. As we argued earlier, it is more important for low-status individuals to be aware of their superiors' specific feelings than for superiors to be aware of their subordinates' specific feelings, so once one removes the effects of stereotype accuracy, levels of both meta-accuracy and partner accuracy should be higher for low-status individuals than for high-status individuals.

The Snodgrass Paradigm

In the Snodgrass (1985, 1992) paradigm, participants are randomly assigned to the roles of boss and subordinate. The participants are assigned to pairs and complete a task in which the boss interviews the subordinate. After the interaction, participants rate themselves and their partners on three sets of measures. Consequently, there are six types of measures (see Snodgrass, 2001):

- Measure 1: subordinate's self-perception
- Measure 2: subordinate's perception of the boss
- Measure 3: subordinate's metaperception (how the subordinate thinks the boss sees him or her)
- Measure 4: boss's self-perception
- Measure 5: boss's perception of the subordinate
- Measure 6: boss's metaperception (how the boss thinks the subordinate sees him or her)

Each of these six measures uses the same 13 items, although the point of view changes depending on the type of perception. For instance, measures of self-perception include the item "I was the dominant one." For measures of other-perception and metaperception, the point of view is changed: "My partner was the dominant one" and "My partner thought I was the dominant one," respectively.

From these six measures, one can calculate four accuracy correlations:

- *Subordinate meta-accuracy*: how much the subordinate's perception of the boss's view of him or her (Measure 3) correlates with the boss's actual view of the subordinate (Measure 5);
- *Boss meta-accuracy*: how much the boss's perception of the subordinate's view of him or her (Measure 6) correlates with the subordinate's actual view of the boss (Measure 2);
- *Subordinate's partner accuracy*: how much the subordinate's view of the boss (Measure 2) correlates with the boss's self-view (Measure 4); and
- *Boss's partner accuracy*: how much the boss's view of the subordinate (Measure 5) correlates with the subordinate's self-view (Measure 1).

These are within-dyad, or ideographic, profile correlations in that the 13 items for one partner are correlated with the 13 items on the measure from the other partner (Snodgrass, 1985). Past research has consistently found that subordinates' meta-accuracy and bosses' partner accuracy are greater than bosses' meta-accuracy and subordinates' partner accuracy. It is important to note that the two correlations that have been found to be larger both involve the boss's view of the subordinate, and the two correlations that have been found to be smaller both involve the subordinate's view of the boss.

Reanalysis

We reanalyzed the replication of Snodgrass's (1985, 1992) studies by Boucher et al. (2008). A complete description of the procedure used in that study can be found in their report. Essentially, participants interacted in dyads, with one partner randomly assigned to the role of boss and the other to the role of subordinate. Twenty same-sex dyads completed a role-playing task (conducting a job interview) and then completed the Snodgrass measures described earlier. Only data from

participants in the face-to-face condition in Study 1 of Boucher et al. were included in this reanalysis, because that condition most closely replicated Snodgrass's original studies.

In our reanalysis, we computed two types of accuracy correlations, which we explain here using the boss as an example. First, bosses' stereotype accuracy was measured by the correlation between the average of the bosses' predictions (e.g., on Measure 6) and the average of all subordinates' responses (e.g., on Measure 2). Second, a boss's relational accuracy was measured by the correlation between a boss's predictions and his or her subordinate's responses, controlling for the overall stereotype of bosses and subordinates. In essence, we partitioned Snodgrass's (1985) interpersonal-sensitivity measure into stereotype accuracy and relational accuracy. This partitioning allowed us to examine which type of accuracy drove Snodgrass's finding that subordinates have better meta-accuracy than bosses, whereas bosses have better partner accuracy than subordinates.

Stereotype accuracy

We examined the perceptions of bosses and subordinates as targets. We averaged the three ratings of subordinates (i.e., Measures 1, 3, and 5) and the three ratings of bosses (i.e., measures 2, 4, and 6) for each of the 13 items. The item means for bosses and subordinates are presented in Table 1. The ratings of the bosses were uniformly high, with all 13 items above the scale midpoint of 4.0. The means for the subordinates were much more variable, with four being below the scale midpoint and five differing from the corresponding mean for the bosses by more than 1 point. Three of the items concern status ("was dominant," "was leader," and "controlled the interaction"), and so, not surprisingly, the subordinate was seen as low on all these measures. These item means provide the important information about the stereotypes of

bosses and subordinates. By examining the items on which bosses and subordinates had very different scores, one sees that, unlike bosses, subordinates were typically described as lacking dominance, leadership, and control of the interaction. Because there was more variability in ratings of subordinates than in ratings of bosses, and because greater variance tends to lead to larger correlations, there would likely be greater stereotype accuracy when subordinates are rated than when bosses are rated.

To obtain measures of stereotype accuracy, we correlated the means of the appropriate measures. As shown in Table 2, the stereotype-accuracy correlations closely mirrored the correlations reported by Snodgrass (1985, 1992). That is, stereotype accuracy was large for the subordinate's meta-accuracy and for the boss's partner accuracy.

In sum, we found strong evidence for stereotype accuracy. It is not that either subordinates or bosses have higher levels of stereotype accuracy. Rather, when the subordinate is the target of judgment, there is greater stereotype accuracy. Thus, we found more stereotype accuracy for meta-perception of subordinates and for partner accuracy of bosses than for meta-perception of bosses and for partner accuracy of subordinates. We now turn to the question of whether people are accurate about their own partner.

Relational accuracy

To remove stereotype accuracy and leave only relational accuracy, we subtracted the mean across participants for each item from each participant's score on that item.² After removing stereotypes, we recalculated the correlation for each perception and averaged the correlations across the 20 dyads. These correlations are presented in Table 2. Two important results should be noted. First, relational-accuracy correlations were much smaller than the original correlations. This is especially true for the subordinate's meta-accuracy and for the boss's partner accuracy. Thus, much of the original accuracy was due to stereotype accuracy. Second, a very different pattern emerged after adjusting for stereotype accuracy. When we considered relational accuracy alone, subordinates appeared to be more accurate than bosses, regardless of the type of perception.

To test the differences in correlations, we transformed them into Fisher's z scores, and we conducted a 2 (role: boss or subordinate) \times 2 (type of perception: meta-accuracy or partner accuracy) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the relational-accuracy correlations (i.e., with the effect of stereotype accuracy removed). We found a statistically significant main effect of type of perception, $F(1, 19) = 5.30, p < .05, d = 0.30$, such that meta-accuracy ($M = .265$) was greater than partner accuracy ($M = .124$). The main effect of role was also significant, $F(1, 19) = 5.20, p < .05, d = 0.30$, with bosses ($M = .126$) being less accurate than subordinates ($M = .264$). Finally, as predicted, the interaction between role and type of perception was no longer significant, $F(1, 19) = 0.001$.

Table 1. Average Ratings of the Subordinates and the Bosses for Each of the 13 Measures

Measure	Boss	Subordinate
Enjoyment	4.55	4.87
Felt comfortable	4.38	5.10
Good at role	4.37	5.43
Was self-confident	4.63	5.57
Was dominant	4.77	3.73
Learned about other	4.98	2.73
Made other comfortable	5.19	4.59
Made good impression	5.17	5.36
Controlled interaction	5.05	3.28
Liked other	5.55	5.27
Was leader	5.13	3.30
Took task seriously	4.77	4.80
Enjoyed getting to know other	5.17	4.57

Table 2. Accuracy Correlations

Accuracy measure	Original ^a	Stereotype accuracy	Relational accuracy
Subordinate's meta-accuracy	.546	.882	.285
Boss's meta-accuracy	.186	.289	.166
Subordinate's partner accuracy	.126	.175	.165
Boss's partner accuracy	.486	.848	.035

^aThis column presents results obtained by Boucher, Hancock, and Dunham (2008).

Discussion

One of the most interesting questions in the area of interpersonal sensitivity (Hall & Bernieri, 2001) concerns the effect of status on interpersonal sensitivity. Snodgrass's (1985, 1992) pioneering work in the area examined whether low-status members in dyadic relationships are more accurate at perceiving their partner than are high-status members and whether this effect depends on the type of accuracy being examined. In 1985, she reasoned as follows: "Those in a subordinate role need to be aware of the feelings, thoughts, and responses of their boss to respond to their boss' needs and acquire their favor" (p. 147). Our reanalysis, which first partitioned Snodgrass's operationalization of interpersonal sensitivity into stereotype and relational accuracy and then partialled out stereotype accuracy, supports this hypothesis and shows a main effect of role: Subordinates had higher meta-accuracy and partner-accuracy scores than bosses did. These findings have both theoretical and methodological implications.

Theoretically, one consequence of the decreased relational accuracy of individuals in power is objectification. For those in power, viewing the people under their authority as objects—or as a means of accomplishing their goals—can become an effective means of achieving those goals and can lead to positive affect about the process itself (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008). It is less clear whether this process is as beneficial for the subordinates. In situations in which men have more power than women, this general objectification can quickly turn into sexual objectification (Bartky, 1990).

Methodologically, we believe that our reanalysis emphasizes the importance of controlling for stereotype accuracy when using profile correlations to examine people's ability to gauge others' thoughts and feelings. Although Funder (2001) and other researchers have argued that stereotype accuracy is real accuracy, because knowing what people are like in general does tend to lead to accuracy at the individual level, stereotype accuracy is not what is usually meant by interpersonal sensitivity. In fact, our findings demonstrate that stereotype and relational accuracy may be quite different and produce different patterns of results. In future work examining relational accuracy, researchers should take into account the differential effects of stereotype and relational accuracy and take care that the two are not conflated. The results from this reanalysis supported our suspicion that Snodgrass's (1985, 1992) interpersonal-sensitivity results were driven by stereotype accuracy.

Therefore, although people are good at understanding the general characteristics of people who are in a subordinate role, they are not as good at understanding how well a specific subordinate fits into a subordinate role. Moreover, because the role of a subordinate is more clearly defined than that of a boss, both subordinates and bosses are more accurate at predicting perceptions of the subordinate than at predicting perceptions of the boss. When we removed the effects of stereotype accuracy, we found that subordinates were twice as accurate as bosses, a result supporting Snodgrass's original hypothesis that subordinates are more accurate than their superiors. In short, Snodgrass was right after all!

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. One important issue that we have not addressed is whether the superior accuracy of subordinates over bosses is due to encoding or decoding. Are bosses easy to read? Or are subordinates good at reading them? The evidence (Hall et al., 2006; Snodgrass et al., 1998) supports the position that the advantage is due to encoding. Because we do not have relevant data, we are unable to address this important question.
2. Krueger (1996) suggested another way to remove stereotype accuracy: by treating the means across all perceivers and targets as variables and partialing them out. This method also corrects for individual differences in stereotype endorsement. Mean subtraction is simpler and generally yields the same results.

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