A Thin Slice Perspective on the Accuracy of First Impressions

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Abstract

The accuracy of first impressions was examined by investigating judged variable (negative affect, positive affect, the Big 5 personality variables, intelligence), exposure time (5, 20, 45, 60, 300 s), and slice location (beginning, middle, end). 334 judges rated 30 targets. Accuracy was defined as the correlation between a judge's ratings and the target's criterion scores on the same construct. Negative affect, extraversion, conscientiousness, and intelligence were judged moderately well after 5-s exposures; however, positive affect, neuroticism, openness, and agreeableness required more exposure time to achieve similar levels of accuracy. Overall, accuracy increased with exposure time, judgments based on later segments of the 5-min interactions were more accurate, and 60-s yielded the optimal ratio between accuracy and slice length. Results suggest that first impressions are not uniformly right or wrong but depend on the type of judgment made and the amount of exposure judges have to targets' social behavior.

Keywords: FIRST IMPRESSIONS, ACCURACY, PERSON PERCEPTION, THIN SLICES

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A person's first impression of a stranger's characteristics is, by definition, based on impoverished information and until recently, of uncertain utility. Allport (1937) noted long ago that people make broad generalizations about personality based on limited exposure to others. The ubiquity of personality judgments derived from limited information and the social consequences of these judgments make this an important topic of inquiry. The term "thin slices" has been used to describe the approach of using short excerpts of social behavior that perceivers use to draw inferences about states, traits, and other personally-relevant characteristics (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000) and is an approach that is well suited for studying the accuracy of first impressions. In the current study, we will use the thin slice approach to study when first impressions are right and wrong, and examine the amount of exposure that judges need to increase the likelihood of producing an accurate judgment.

Considerable research has addressed the degree to which inferences based on thin slices are accurate, or can predict other meaningful attributes of the stimulus person. Nevertheless, significant gaps in knowledge remain in the thin slices literature. In this study, we address four issues that have yet to be fully studied: (a) Previous empirical studies have not fully investigated the impact of slice "thickness" (i.e., length) on accuracy across a range of constructs. (b) Little is known about how the location of a slice within a behavioral stream might influence judges' accuracy about target individuals. It may be the case, for example, that slices of social behavior derived from the start of a social interaction may be less informative about a target's personality than slices taken later in an interaction when individuals feel comfortable disclosing their real selves. (c) It is not known to what extent accuracy may differ according to the type of construct being judged. Thus far, no single research study has investigated differences in accuracy for emotions, personality, and cognitive ability. Furthermore, research has not yet investigated whether the effects of slice length and location generalize across different types of judged constructs. (d) Finally, the stimuli presented to judges for evaluation have been highly variable from study to study (e.g., naturalistic interactions vs. posed expressions, college students vs. community members, get-acquainted conversations vs. people reading a prepared script, etc.) introducing possible confounds if a researcher attempts to address the foregoing questions by comparing results between studies. The present study addresses these gaps by systematically varying slice length, slice location within the behavioral stream, and the constructs judged, all within the situational context of two college students participating in a getting acquainted interaction.

We will examine how the thickness of a behavioral slice affects accuracy and/or prediction. The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 2001) and the Weighted Average Model (WAM; Kenny, 1994) both describe when and how accuracy is achieved in person perception. These models agree that judgmental accuracy should increase as the amount of available information increases, suggesting that accuracy should be greater for “thicker” slices. However, research does not always support this hypothesis, which we discuss in more detail below. In the discussion that follows, we describe the different methods researchers have used that may account for inconsistent findings, and then we will introduce the methodological approach to be used in the current study.

Agreement and Prediction as Indicators of Accuracy

It is relevant to distinguish between two operational indicators of accuracy: agreement and prediction. To illustrate the differences, assume that you are trying to determine the level of extraversion of your new acquaintance. After some period of observation and interaction, you decide that she is highly extraverted. During a subsequent conversation, she tells you that she views herself to be a raging extravert. The two of you agree she is highly extraverted and, despite the possibility that both of you are wrong, chances are good that she really is an extravert. This scenario is about agreement, which we define as the match between a thin-slice judgment and a criterion where both are measured on a similar scale on the same content (e.g., judge and new acquaintance rating of extraversion). For example, researchers have found that judgments of sexual orientation based on 1-s and 10-s slices agreed with targets' actual sexual orientation (Ambady, Hallahan, & Conner, 1999); judgments of intelligence based on thin slices agreed with targets' actual IQ scores (Murphy, Hall, & Colvin, 2003; Reynolds & Gifford,2001); and judgments of personality traits based on thin slices agreed with targets' self-rated personality traits (Borkenau & Liebler, 1995; Lippa & Dietz, 2000). Moreover, several studies have found that judges' evaluations of emotion from thin slices of behavior exhibit agreement with criteria for those states (Nowicki & Duke, 1994; Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979).

Returning to our example above, now assume that you decide your new acquaintance is highly extraverted and you use this evaluation to predict that she will be outgoing at the party you invited her to next week. In this example, a personality judgment is used to predict a future behavior. This is predictive validity, and in this context it refers to the relation between ratings of thin slices and characteristics or outcomes of the target persons that are *different* in content from the rating. For example, Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) showed that thin-slice judgments of enthusiasm, attentiveness, and warmth (among others) predicted semester-end teacher evaluations. Many of the studies in Ambady and Rosenthal's (1992) meta-analysis similarly demonstrate thin-slice predictive validity. There is no theoretical requirement that the impact of slice length or location should be the same for studies that utilize agreement and predictive validity.

Definition of Accuracy

A second source of possible discrepancy in results stems from differences, and possibly lack of clarity, in how the term “accuracy” is defined and discussed. To make a claim for accuracy, a researcher performs a statistical test against a null or chance value (what that value is depends on methodological factors; Hall, Bernieri, & Carney, 2005). If the test is significant, one might conclude that the thin-slice judgment exhibits accuracy. But what does this mean? To find that a coefficient reflecting average agreement or predictive validity exceeds chance may not be saying very much. Such a coefficient can be significantly better than chance even if it is actually small in an absolute sense. For example, Zebrowitz, Hall, Murphy, and Rhodes (2002) found in a meta-analysis of published research that intelligence was inferred with significant accuracy from facial expressions, but the average of the individual perceivers’ correlations between inference and criterion was a modest r = .19. Similarly, other research has shown that accuracy of individual perceivers’ judgments of rapport between two people having a conversation (calculated as in the preceding study) was significant but also only r = .19 (Bernieri, Gillis, Davis, & Grahe, 1996). Although the magnitudes of these correlations are considered to be modest to moderate on the accuracy continuum, the sweeping conclusion that there is “accuracy” may create a misleading impression if the distinction between significance test and magnitude is not made clear.[1] Furthermore, broad statements about accuracy that do not distinguish larger from smaller effects are also problematic.

Moreover, there is no inherent incompatibility between finding that there is accuracy at very brief exposures and finding that accuracy increases with exposure length. These are separable questions that can be obscured if one refers in a loose sense to thin-slice accuracy.

Judged Construct

Thin-slice research has addressed a wide range of constructs, including personality traits, affective states or emotions, status or dominance, relationships, attitudes, deception, and intelligence (Hall & Bernieri, 2001). Unfortunately, it is rare for more than one construct to be included and compared within the same study. One exception is the study by Borkenau and Liebler (1993), who measured judgmental accuracy for several personality traits. In studies of emotion judgment, it is common to include and compare accuracy for a range of different emotions, but studies that include and compare both states and traits, or qualitatively different kinds of states, are extremely rare and perhaps non-existent.[2] Comparisons between different constructs are therefore typically done on a between-studies basis, but such comparisons are confounded by all the other methodological differences between the studies (e.g., slice length). In the present study we included eight judged constructs: the states of positive affect and negative affect, the Big Five traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and cognitive ability (overall intelligence).

Context

Different studies have used thin-slice samples from a wide range of settings, tasks, and populations such as standardized interviews about a movie (Carney, 2005); office spaces and bedrooms (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002); university employees (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2004); college students having a competitive discussion (Bernieri et al., 1996); community-dwelling adults reading a weather report (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993); college men role-playing being a television announcer (Lippa & Dietz, 2000); or college students getting acquainted or talking with a close friend (Vogt & Colvin, 2003). Such variation contributes to the ability to generalize if the results converge across studies. However, comparisons *between* studies can be confounded by these contextual differences. In the present study we held context constant by basing all analyses on one set of expressors in one context (college students in an opposite-gender get-acquainted situation).

Slice Length

Research is mixed on whether slice length is related to accuracy. It was found that observers' accuracy in judging targets' personality increased with the number and variety of targets' videotaped behavioral contexts, such as introducing oneself versus telling a joke versus solving a logical problem versus telling a dramatic story (Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004). Other research has shown that across 100 personality items, there was a statistically significant linear increase in agreement between observers' and targets' ratings as a function of exposure time. In this latter study, accuracy increased from r = .22 when judgments were based on 5-10 minutes to r = .26 when judgments were based on 25-30 minutes (Blackman & Funder, 1998). Ambady et al. (1999) found that judgments of sexual orientation increased from r = .35 at 1-s exposures to r = .52 at 10-s exposures. Rosenthal et al. (1979) reported on a version of the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS test) in which the exposures to videotaped face and body cues were 1/24 s, 3/24 s, 9/24 s, and 27/24 s. Accuracy was significantly greater than chance even at 1/24 s, but increased dramatically after that (with not much change across the longer exposure lengths). Some researchers have found a linear trend in accuracy for judging basic facial emotions across exposure lengths of 1/15 s, 2/15 s, and 3/15 s (Matsumoto, LeRoux, Wilson-Cohn, Raroque, Kooken, Ekman, Yrizarry, Loewinger, Uchida, Yee, Amo, & Goh, 2000).

On the other hand, the meta-analysis of Ambady and Rosenthal (1992) found that across 38 studies of thin-slice accuracy, there was no linear increase in correlations from slices of under 30 s to slices of 300 s in length. Moreover, Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) showed that prediction of end-of-semester teaching evaluations did not vary when slices of 2 s and 5 s were compared (prediction based on 10 s was stronger but not statistically significantly so). Bernieri and Gillis (2001) compared accuracy of judging rapport for slices varying from 5 s to 60 min and found only minimal increases as more information was made available to perceivers.

It appears that there is little consensus on whether exposure length makes a difference. Again, due to methodological differences, comparisons between studies that examine different slice lengths are problematic. For example, it would be inadvisable to compare accuracy for 2-s slices of affect conveyed in the voice (Rosenthal et al., 1979) to accuracy for 5-min slices of personality conveyed in full video (Vogt & Colvin, 2003). In reality, slice length may matter only under some circumstances, for some constructs, or within a specific range of slice lengths. It is also important to reiterate that finding accuracy at very short exposures is not inherently incompatible with finding an effect of slice length. Furthermore, there may be a linear effect up to a point and no evident gains beyond that, or there may be threshold effects. Clearly, much more research is needed on the question of slice length. In the present study we examined five slice lengths: 5 s, 20 s, 45 s, 60 s, and 300 s (i.e., the full 5-min interaction).

Slice Location

Very little is known about where in the behavioral stream thin slices are most diagnostic and whether slice location may be related to accuracy. It has been argued that accuracy is enhanced when judges are exposed to “good” information (i.e., information derived from contexts in which individuals freely express their underlying personality characteristics) as opposed to less valid information (Funder, 2001). In addition, Funder noted that “the quality dimension is just beginning to receive its due attention, but already it seems clear that some kinds of acquaintanceship and contexts of observation are more informative than others” (p. 133).

We will examine whether the location of the behavioral stream from which a slice is excerpted (first min, third or middle min, and fifth or last min) is related to accuracy. We reasoned that when strangers “get to know each other” during a 5 min interaction, as in the current study, information contained in the beginning of the behavioral stream may be wrought with awkwardness as the two strangers settle in. Then, as the strangers begin to feel more comfortable with their environment and with each other, the information may be optimal for making accurate assessments because, presumably, they are acting more “like themselves” as they feel more comfortable. We predicted that judges’ accuracy would be highest in the third and fifth mins and lowest in the first.

The Present Research

A better understanding of the scope and boundaries of thin-slice accuracy requires research that systematically varies the various parameters of interest. Without such research, few definitive conclusions can be reached about the influences of slice length and location within the behavioral stream, making it extremely difficult to develop an understanding of the generality of such effects across a range of different judged constructs.

The present study is concerned with accuracy defined as the correlation between a perceiver’s thin-slice ratings of a construct (e.g., extraversion) and a criterion measure of the same construct, calculated across a set of stimulus individuals (targets). Based on 5-min videotapes of college students having a get-acquainted conversation, perceivers made ratings in different conditions created by crossing slice length, slice location, and judged construct. Aside from the overall goal of describing accuracy as a function of these factors, we made predictions about constructs, exposure length, slice location, and gender differences.

What Will Judges be Accurate About at the Briefest Exposures?

Judgments of affect. Previous research has found accuracy for judging affective variables at very short exposure lengths (e.g., Matsumoto et al., 2000; Nowicki & Duke, 1994; Rosenthal et al., 1979). This finding is consistent with an evolutionary or functional approach to emotion (e.g., Darwin, 1872/1965; Izard, 1991) that emphasizes the adaptive value of recognizing others' emotional states. In addition, research has demonstrated that skin conductance responses can be elicited in response to subliminally presented faces expressing negative affect, but not positive affect (Esteves, Dimberg, & Ohman, 1994). Thus, we expected that judges would be more accurate at detecting negative than positive affect after extremely brief exposure.

Judgments of personality. Funder's (2001) RAM suggests that the achievement of accuracy requires, in part, valid and available cues. Research on the relevant and available behavioral correlates of each of the Big 5 personality factors was extensively cataloged and revealed that extraversion had the greatest number of valid and available behavioral cues (Funder & Sneed, 1993). Other research has demonstrated that with only minimal behavioral observation, judges can accurately assess the extraversion of strangers (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Borkenau & Liebler, 1993; Funder & Colvin, 1988; Funder & Dobroth, 1987; Gifford, 1991; Lippa & Dietz, 2000; Norman & Goldberg, 1966; Watson, 1989).

Although they possess fewer observable cues than extraversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness were also found to have valid and available behavioral cues (Funder & Sneed, 1993). These factors also can be relatively accurately judged by strangers Borkenau & Liebler, 1993, and Lippa & Dietz, 2000, for conscientiousness and Borkenau & Liebler, 1993, and Gifford, 1991 for agreeableness). The most difficult personality factors to judge are neuroticism and openness to experience (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993; Funder & Dobroth, 1987), presumably because there are few or conflicting behavioral cues (Funder & Sneed, 1993). We predicted that judges would be most accurate when judging extraversion and conscientiousness, with some accuracy for agreeableness, and relatively less accuracy for neuroticism and openness. Specifically, it was predicted that the personality constructs deemed most easily judged in previous research (extraversion and conscientiousness) would be most easily judged at the shortest time lengths (e.g., 5 s) and would be the least likely to benefit dramatically from increases in exposure time. In contrast, neuroticism and openness were not expected to be accurately judged at the shortest time lengths and but should benefit the most from an increase in exposure length.

Judgments of intelligence. Research on the accuracy of intelligence judgments has not used slices any shorter than 1 min in duration. Reynolds and Gifford (2001) and Murphy et al. (2003) found significant accuracy with slices of this length, as did Borkenau and Liebler (1993) with 90-s exposures. Zebrowitz et al. (2002), in a meta-analysis as well as in a new study of judgments of facial photographs, found significant accuracy. We thought it possible, therefore, that even our shortest exposures would contain enough information for intelligence to be judged better than chance.

Gender Differences

Accuracy research often demonstrates that female judges are more accurate than male judges, particularly when judging emotions (see meta-analyses by Hall, 1978, 1984; and McClure, 2000). Women's greater accuracy has also been observed for judgments of personality traits and intelligence (Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995; Lippa & Dietz, 2000; Murphy et al., 2003; Vogt & Colvin, 2003). Overall, past research suggests that women may be more accurate than men on all the constructs we assessed in the current study.

Method

Phase 1: Collecting and Assembling the Stimulus Material

Targets and materials. Across two waves of data collection which spanned approximately six months each, 55 female and 47 male college students completed the project. Participants came to the laboratory on five separate occasions for a two hour research session. Participants were paid for their time and could earn up to one hundred dollars for completing all five research sessions. All participants were videotaped while engaging in a 5-min dyadic interaction with an opposite sex partner. They were instructed to "talk about whatever you like" in an attempt to create a relatively unstructured situation, and as a result, permit the expression of individual differences in behavior.[3] From this body of videotaped social interactions, 30 (15 female and 15 male) individuals (only one individual from a given dyad) were chosen to be *targets* on the basis that the videotaped segment was in good condition (i.e., contained clear audio and video). Targets were measured on eight criterion variables (constructs): positive affect, negative affect, neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and intelligence. Each of the eight constructs was measured with multiple different measures and/or measurement methods, or a performance measure (IQ test). Table 1 lists the criteria with associated internal consistency coefficients. Below, each is discussed in detail.

Affective variables. Trained coders evaluated the videotaped social behavior of each target using the Riverside Behavioral Q-set (RBQ; Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 2000). The RBQ consists of 64 items pertaining to directly observable behavior in a dyadic or group setting, each printed on a separate card, that coders sort into nine piles ranging from 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic of the participant*) to 9 (*extremely characteristic of the participant*). Of the 64 RBQ items, nine behaviors describe positive affect (appears to be relaxed and comfortable, laughs frequently, smiles frequently, shows high enthusiasm, expresses sympathy, expresses warmth, seems to enjoy interaction, behaves in a cheerful manner, and acts playful) and 10 behaviors describe negative affect (is reserved and unexpressive, shows physical signs of tension, acts irritated, expresses hostility, behaves in a timid or fearful manner, expresses guilt, says negative things about self, blames others, expresses self-pity, and seems detached from the interaction).

Personality. The Big Five factors of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were calculated for each target by using an average of self report, peer report, and parent reports on the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992; peer and parent reports are further described in Vogt & Colvin, 2003).

Intelligence. Intelligence was measured with the Wonderlic Personnel Test (Wonderlic, 1984), a 12-min 50-item measure that is highly correlated with established IQ tests (Dodrill, 1983).

Stimulus tapes. The 5-min interactions for each of the 30 target individuals were assembled onto three stimulus video tapes containing 10 targets each. Three separate minutes from the behavioral stream were chosen to represent the beginning (first min), middle (third min), and end (fifth min) of the interaction. From each point in time, different slice lengths were chosen, 5 s, 20 s, 45 s, 60 s, and the full 5 min; each slice length beyond 5 s included the same information contained in the shorter slice lengths along with the additional information provided by the lengthened clip.

Phase 2: Collecting Judgments of the Stimulus Material

Design and participants. The stimulus tapes configured into a 4 (slice length; 5 s, 20 s, 45 s, 60 s) x 3 (slice location; first, third, fifth min) + 1 (5 min) between-participants design. Three hundred thirty-four participants (199 female and 132 male; 80% Caucasian) were recruited to view and judge one of the three stimulus tapes containing 10 targets (the full video, including both audio and video, was shown). Judges ranging in age from 18 to 43 (M = 19) were recruited from the Northeastern University Participant Pool for partial course credit. Judges were randomly assigned to experimental conditions.

Materials and procedure. Judges made 39 ratings in 3 min after viewing each of the 10 targets on the videotape. Ratings corresponded to the eight criterion constructs (see Table 1). All but IQ were rated on a 1 (*not at all like the target person*) to 5 (*exactly like the target person*) scale. Judges rated targets' positive and negative affect using 10 items from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). For the Big Five personality traits, judges rated 20 items, four each, for neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. For intelligence, judges were told that the average IQ score in the U.S. population was 100, and were then asked to rate the IQ of each target on a 1 to 5 scale using the following anchors: (1) IQ of 93 and below, (2) 94 – 104, (3) 105 – 115, (4) 116 – 126, and (5) 127 and above.

Scoring of Accuracy

Accuracy was calculated for each judge, for each judged construct, across targets using profile correlations (Carney, 2005; Hall et al., 2005; Hall & Carter, 1999; Lippa & Dietz, 2000; Tickle-Degnen & Lyons, 2004; Vogt & Colvin, 2003).[4] After each judge's accuracy score for each construct was calculated, the profile correlations (accuracy scores) were transformed into Fisher's *z* coefficients before any descriptive or inferential statistics were conducted. All analyses were based on the Fisher's *z* transformed accuracy scores and results were converted back into *r* for presentation.[5]

Results

Overall Effects for Constructs, Slice Length, and Slice Location

A repeated-measures ANOVA on the 8 judged variables revealed a main effect of judged construct, $F(7, 304) = 34.09$, $p < .001$. The left column in Table 2 shows the overall accuracy for each judged construct. Pair-wise paired-sample *t*-tests revealed many differences in average accuracy. Table 3 shows that accuracy for judging extraversion was greater than accuracy for judging all other constructs; accuracy for agreeableness was lower than all others; and accuracy for negative affect was greater than all others except positive affect and conscientiousness.

To examine the overall effect of slice length on accuracy, accuracy across the eight judged constructs was averaged and subjected to a linear contrast with appropriate contrast weights (see note at bottom of Table 2). Across all judged constructs, there was a statistically significant linear effect of slice length (bottom of Table 2). These results suggest that overall, accuracy increases with exposure length.

It is important, of course, to understand the effects of slice length and location for individual constructs. In the sections that follow, the eight judged constructs are grouped into affect, personality, and cognitive ability.

Accuracy in the Affective Domain

Positive affect. The first column in Table 2 shows that judges were significantly better than chance at detecting positive affect, averaging across all slice lengths. In addition, Table 2 shows that accuracy for positive affect was not achieved at 5 s; however, it was at 20-s and longer exposures. Because the following comparisons were exploratory, Tukey's post hoc tests revealed that accuracy at 5 s was lower than accuracy at all other slice lengths ($p < .001$ - .09), and the other slice lengths were not different from each other ($p > .57$). There was no linear effect of slice length on accuracy (see last column in Table 2).

To examine the effects of slice location on positive affect, a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was a main effect of slice location, $F(2, 326) = 3.75$, $p < .02$ (Table 4). Accuracy was greatest when judgments were based on the third or fifth min (the comparison of first with third min was not significant). To determine whether slice location mattered for each of the slice-lengths, a series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted on the slice locations for each slice length. A statistically significant one-way ANOVA would indicate that slice location moderated accuracy for a particular slice length. Table 5 displays the mean accuracy achieved at each slice location separately for each slice length. In the column farthest to the right is the one-way ANOVA indicating whether slice location mattered for each particular slice-length. Rows 1 through 4 of Table 5 suggest that slice location appears to matter for all slice lengths and matters the most for 5- and 60-s exposures (Table 5).

Negative affect. Table 2, first column, shows that overall accuracy was significantly greater than chance for negative affect. In addition, Table 2 shows that accuracy for negative affect was achieved at all slice lengths. Planned contrasts revealed no differences in accuracy as a function of slice length ($p > .86$), and there was no linear effect of slice length on accuracy.

To examine the effects of slice location a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was a main effect of slice location, $F(2, 294) = 8.24$, $p < .001$. Accuracy was greatest when judgments were based on the third or fifth min (the comparison of first with third was not significant) (Table 4). In Table 5, the 4 rows associated with negative affect suggest that slice location affected accuracy at the shorter exposure lengths but mattered much less at the longer exposure lengths.

Accuracy in the Big Five Personality Domain

Neuroticism. The first column in Table 2 shows that judges were significantly greater than chance at detecting neuroticism. Table 2 also shows that accuracy for neuroticism was achieved at 5 s (although statistically significant, the magnitude of the mean accuracy correlation was very small) and longer exposures. Planned contrasts revealed no differences between the different slice lengths on accuracy (all $p > .52$) and no significant linear trend.

To examine the effects of slice location on neuroticism, a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was no main effect of slice location, $F(2, 303) = .29$, $p > .74$ (Table 4). Table 5 (the 4 rows associated with neuroticism) suggests that slice location did not affect accuracy at any slice lengths.

Extraversion. The first column in Table 2 shows that judges were significantly better than chance at detecting extraversion. In addition, Table 2 shows that statistically significant accuracy for extraversion was achieved at all slice lengths. Planned contrasts revealed that 5 s was less accurate than all other slice lengths (all $p < .001$), and there were no other differences (all $p >$ .21). There was a linear effect of slice length on accuracy for extraversion (Table 2).

To examine the effects of slice location on extraversion, a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was a main effect of slice location on accuracy, $F(2, 294) = 12.64$, $p < .001$. Accuracy was lower when it was based on the first or third min (Table 4). Table 5 (the 4 rows associated with extraversion) suggests that slice location affected accuracy at 5 s and 20 s but not at 45 and 60 s exposures.

Openness. Table 2, column 1, shows that judges were significantly greater than chance at detecting openness. Table 2 also shows that accuracy for openness was achieved at all slice lengths. Planned contrasts revealed no differences in accuracy as a function of slice length (all *p*s > .22). There was no linear effect of slice length on accuracy for openness (Table 2).

To examine the effects of slice location on openness, a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used, revealing a main effect of slice location, $F(2, 294) = 3.03$, $p < .05$. Accuracy was lower in the first as compared to the third and fifth min (the latter two were not different; Table 4). Table 5 (the 4 rows associated with openness) suggests that slice location affected accuracy the most at 5 and 45 s but not at 20 and 45 s.

Agreeableness. Column 1 in Table 2 shows that judges were significantly better than chance at detecting agreeableness. Table 2 shows that significant accuracy was not achieved until 20-s exposures, and did not reach a magnitude above .15 until 60-s exposures. Planned contrasts revealed that 5 s was less accurate than 60 s ($p < .08$). No other differences were statistically significant (all $p > .18$). The linear effect of slice length on accuracy for agreeableness was marginally significant (Table 2).

To examine the effects of slice location on agreeableness, a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was no main effect of slice location, $F(2, 294) = .74$, $p > .47$ (Table 4). Table 5 (the 4 rows associated with agreeableness) suggests that slice location did not affect accuracy except for slightly at 20-s exposures.

Conscientiousness. Column 1 in Table 2 reveals that judges were significantly better than chance at detecting conscientiousness. In addition, Table 2 shows that accuracy for conscientiousness was better than chance at all slice lengths. Planned contrasts revealed that 5 s was not different from any other lengths (all *p*s > .11). The linear effect of slice length on accuracy was statistically significant (Table 2).

To examine the effects of slice location on agreeableness, a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was no main effect of slice location, $F(2, 317) = 5.27$, $p < .01$ (Table 4). Table 5 (the 4 rows associated with conscientiousness) suggests that slice location affected accuracy the most at 45-s and 60-s exposures.

Accuracy in the Cognitive Domain

Accuracy for judging intelligence was significantly greater than zero overall (Column 1 of Table 2). Table 2 also shows that accuracy for intelligence was achieved at all slice lengths from 5 s to 5 min. Post hoc tests revealed that none of the slice lengths was different from any other ($p > .97$), and there was no linear effect of slice length (Table 2).

To examine effects of slice location on intelligence a 4 (slice length) x 3 (slice location) between-participants ANOVA was used. There was a main effect of slice location, $F(2, 281) = 8.79$, $p < .001$, such that accuracy based on the first min was lower than accuracy based on the third or fifth min (third and fifth were not different; Table 4). Table 5 (the 4 rows associated with intelligence) suggests that slice location did not affect accuracy except for at 60 s exposures.

Gender Effects

Over all constructs, females' mean accuracy across all judged variables was higher (*M r* = .26) than males' (*M r* = .22), $F(1, 325) = 7.11$, $p < .01$; effect size $r = .15$. At the individual construct level, one-way ANOVAs revealed that females achieved significantly or marginally significantly higher accuracy (*M r*s = .35, .20, and .25) than males (*M r*s = .28, .12, and .18) on negative affect, $F(1, 325) = 3.26$, $p < .08$, openness $F(1, 325) = 4.24$, $p < .04$, and intelligence, $F(1, 312) = 3.33$, $p < .07$ (respectively). Gender did not interact with slice length (all $p > .32$) or location (all $p > .40$).

Discussion

Our empirical results demonstrate that the achievement of accurate first impressions depends upon the judgment being made, and the quantity and quality of information on which the judgment is based. Under varying judgment circumstances, first impressions either can be remarkably right or dead wrong.

Sometimes "Slice Thickness" Matters

We predicted that exposure time and accuracy would be positively related, which is consistent with two models of trait accuracy (Funder, 2001; Kenny, 1994) and previous research on judgments of personality based on excerpts longer than 5 min (Blackman & Funder, 1998). Consistent with these predictions, there was a positive relationship between exposure time and accuracy for the aggregated set of variables. However, slice length (i.e., exposure time) mattered most for three variables: positive affect, extraversion, and agreeableness. For each of these three variables, accuracy at 5s was significantly lower than accuracy at longer exposures. There was a significant linear effect of slice length on accuracy for extraversion and agreeableness. These results seem to suggest that more information yields more accuracy particularly for constructs related to positive affect and social approach.

In contrast, increased exposure time was unrelated to accuracy when judging negative affect, neuroticism, openness, and intelligence—accuracy was no different at 5 s than at 300 s. Judgments of conscientiousness exhibited a linear increase in accuracy with greater slice length, but the difference between 5 and 300s was not statistically significant. Overall, it might be argued that these 5 variables fall into the two categories of negative affect or threat, and intelligence or competence. Quick and accurate judgments of these behavioral categories may be both life-saving and life-promoting.

Sometimes "Slice Location" Matters

The current study, as far as we know, is the first to empirically examine the influence of slice location on accuracy. Judges observed targets in an unstructured "get acquainted" interaction and it was found, consistent with our predictions, that slices from the middle and end of the behavioral stream produced the greatest accuracy for 6 of 8 variables (the exceptions were neuroticism and agreeableness). Overall, accuracy was highest for slices extracted from the third minute of the 5 min interaction. Considerable accuracy was also observed for slices extracted from the fifth min, whereas accuracy for the first min was much lower. The middle min may be the most informative as participants pass through the nervous phase of initial introductions, begin to learn something about each other's characteristics, but have not yet entered the awkward period of having nothing left to discuss. These results support Funder's (2001) claim that qualitative differences in information can influence the accuracy of judges' ratings. This finding is more prescriptive than theoretical; however, it suggests that slice location ought to be considered in future research on first impressions. It remains an open question whether slices positioned later in the behavioral stream will consistently produce greater accuracy.

Accuracy Differs According to Judged Construct

Because the thin slice literature is marked by studies that are not always directly comparable, we thought it was important to investigate in one study first impression accuracy for emotions, personality traits, and intelligence. Furthermore, the stimuli presented to judges for evaluation were all derived from the same set of dyadic get acquainted interactions so that accuracy estimates could be compared across constructs. As it turned out, there was considerable variability in the judgment accuracy of our set of constructs (e.g., Funder & Colvin, 1988). Thin-slice judgments for extraversion exhibited the greatest accuracy, followed by negative affect, conscientiousness, IQ, neuroticism, positive affect, openness, and agreeableness (for which accuracy was significantly lower than all other variables).

We expected, and found, greater accuracy for negative than positive affect, which may reflect the survival value of accurately judging negative affect. We expected accuracy to be higher for extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness than for neuroticism and openness. Our results were consistent with this pattern except that, on average, neuroticism was judged relatively accuracy whereas agreeableness was not. The results replicate those reported by Kenny, Albright, Malloy, and Kashy on accuracy at zero-acquaintance (1994) in which consensus on the Big 5 factors was found to be highest for extraversion and lowest for agreeableness.

Gender Differences

Women's judgments of targets, across all 8 constructs, were significantly more accurate than men's judgments of targets (for related personality results, see Vogt & Colvin, 2003).

Women were significantly or marginally more accurate on openness, intelligence (e.g., Murphy et al., 2003), and negative affect (as frequently found in affect judgment studies). Women and men did not differ in accuracy on neuroticism, extraversion, or positive affect (c.f., Lippa & Dietz, 2000; Ambady et al., 1995).

Caveats When Interpreting the Current Research

It should be noted that our accuracy criteria, although based on multiple methods, multiple raters, or objective tests, varied across constructs. The constructs explored spanned affective, personality, and intelligence domains, and thus required different types of accuracy criteria in which to compare judges' ratings. For example, intelligence is typically measured with an objective IQ measure, and not by self, friend, or parent ratings of intelligence. Thus, the validity of the intelligence criteria may be questioned. Nevertheless, at least one study has demonstrated that observers can evaluate the intelligence of others with considerable validity (Block & Kremen, 1996). Still, it is difficult to know whether the various criteria used in this study were equally valid. Therefore, differences in average levels of accuracy from construct to construct may be due to in part to the differences in criterion measurement.

A strength of the study is that we evaluated accuracy in the emotion, personality, and intelligence domains. However, our sampling of constructs is a relatively small one and the results we reported are likely to reflect this fact. Future research will benefit from studies that evaluate a wide range of constructs in order to develop parameter estimates for the independent variables we and others have begun to study. We considered only a restricted range of exposure lengths (only up to 5 min). It may now be the right time to integrate thin slices and trait accuracy research in which the former tends to make judgments based on 5s to 5 min observations whereas the latter tends to make judgments based on 5 min and longer observations.

Conclusion and Prescription For Future Research on First Impressions

Sixty-s slices provided sufficient behavioral fodder to yield the optimal accuracy-to-slice-length ratio for all judged variables. Increasing exposures to 300 s (the full 5 min) did not significantly increase accuracy from that obtained at one min. However, 60-s slices generally yielded significantly more accuracy than shorter slices. This result is at odds with previous findings in which thicker slices were not related to accuracy (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, 1993). In addition, 60-s slices were the most impervious to slice location. That is, slice location did not generally influence accuracy if the excerpts were 60 s long. Thus, if a researcher's goal is to determine an excerpt length to optimize accuracy, 60 s is the answer. However, if a researcher needs to know which variable to study because his or her question can only be met by investigating a variable under conditions of extremely brief exposure, the answers, in the order of magnitude of accuracy at 5-s exposure, are negative affect, extraversion, conscientiousness, and intelligence.

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Footnotes

[1] Such comparison is made doubly difficult by the fact that different studies report results in incommensurable metrics, for example in terms of mean percentage accuracy versus the correlation between ratings and a criterion. Within studies that use the correlation between ratings and a criterion as the operational definition of accuracy, the magnitude of results can further depend on whether accuracy was calculated per individual perceiver and then averaged across perceivers, or the ratings were averaged across perceivers and then correlated with the criterion (see Hall et al., 2005, for a discussion).

[2] Because accuracy of judging affect and accuracy of judging personality traits are typically scored using different metrics (percent accuracy vs. profile correlation, respectively), even studies that include both may not be able to compare the two (e.g., Realo, Allik, Nõlvak, Valk, Ruus, Schmidt, & Eilola, 2003).

[3] The subset of individuals used in this study are a part of a larger data set that has been used to answer questions unrelated to those asked in the current research (Vogt & Colvin, 2003).

[4] For example, judge 1 rated targets 1-10 on four extraversion items. Judge 1's four ratings were then averaged for each target. Then, judge 1's averaged ratings of extraversion for targets 1-10 were correlated with target 1-10's criterion extraversion scores (derived from an average of self, friend, and parent's NEO on the target). This correlation is a profile, or accuracy, correlation indicating how accurate judge 1 is at making assessments of the rated targets' extraversion.

[5] Correlation coefficients are not normally distributed; thus, transforming them into Fisher-z coefficients, which are normally distributed, circumvents a non-normality violation which is an assumption in ANOVA and other statistical tests based on the general linear model.

Table 1

Criteria and Corresponding Ratings for Eight Judged Constructs

Construct	Target information (Criterion measures)	α	Items that targets were judged on	α
Positive affect	Emotive behavioral Q-sort items	.77	Active, alert, attentive, determined, enthusiastic, inspired, interested, proud, strong (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)	.90
Negative affect	Emotive behavioral Q-sort items	.83	Distressed, upset, afraid, jittery, nervous, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)	.89
Neuroticism	NEO-Neuroticism (average of self, friends, and parents)	.87	Nervous, moody, fearful, self-pitying	.79
Extraversion	NEO-Extraversion (average of self, friends, and parents)	.85	Talkative, energetic, outgoing, dominant	.86
Openness	NEO-Openness (average of self, friends, and parents)	.84	Wide interests, intelligent, insightful, curious	.79

Agreeableness	NEO-Agreeableness (average of self, friends, and parents)	.92	Sympathetic, kind, trusting, pleasant	.80
Conscientiousness	NEO-Conscientiousness (average of self, friends, & parents)	.92	Dependable, conscientious, precise, practical	.79
Intelligence	Wonderlic score (performance measure)	N/A	Estimated IQ	N/A

Note: No reliability coefficient for intelligence ratings was computed because there was only one item.

Table 2

Mean Accuracy for Different Constructs and Slice Lengths

	Slice length						Linearity test
	Overall	5 s	20 s	45 s	60 s	300 s	*t*
Positive affect	.20***	.06	.28***	.25***	.20***	.26***	1.49
Negative affect	.32***	.31***	.35***	.31***	.33***	.28***	-.10
Neuroticism	.21***	.14*	.19***	.25***	.22***	.29***	1.40
Extraversion	.42***	.22***	.41***	.46***	.52***	.55***	3.39**
Openness	.17***	.10***	.22***	.20***	.16***	.21**	1.00
Agreeableness	.11***	.04	.09*	.12**	.17***	.21**	1.91^{+}
Conscientiousness	.28***	.21***	.26***	.28***	.34***	.39***	2.38*
Intelligence	.22***	.24***	.20***	.22***	.24***	.21**	.24
Overall (across construct)	.25***	.17***	.25***	.26***	.28***	.31***	2.81*

Note: Mean accuracy values were calculated using Fisher-z transformed accuracy correlations and were transformed back into *r* for presentation. One-sample *t*-tests performed on the Fisher-z transformed accuracy scores were used to test correlations against zero. $^{+}$ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. *N*s in each exposure-length condition (in order according to the table) are: 82, 74, 73, 77, and 24. Linear weights were proportional to the slice length (-81, -61, -41, -26, +214).

Table 3

Significance Values for Paired-Samples Comparisons between Different Constructs

Construct	PA ($M\ r$ = .20)	NA ($M\ r$ = .32)	N ($M\ r$ = .21)	E ($M\ r$ = .42)	O ($M\ r$ = .17)	A ($M\ r$ = .11)	C ($M\ r$ = .28)	IQ ($M\ r$ = .22)
PA		.001	.82	.001	.18	.01	.001	.36
NA			.001	.001	.001	.001	.112	.001
N				.001	.30	.001	.01	.54
E					.001	.001	.001	.001
O						.09	.001	.08
A							.001	.001
C								.01

Note: PA = positive affect, NA = negative affect, N = neuroticism, E = extraversion, O = openness, A = agreeableness, C = conscientiousness, IQ = intelligence quotient.

Table 4

Mean Accuracy at Different Slice Locations

Construct	Slice location		
	First min	Third min	Fifth min
Positive affect	$.11_{a}$	$.21_{ab}$	$.26_{b}$
Negative affect	$.24_{a}$	$.31_{a}$	$.42_{b}$
Neuroticism	$.19_{a}$	$.18_{a}$	$.22_{a}$
Extraversion	$.29_{a}$	$.51_{b}$	$.41_{c}$
Openness	$.16_{ac}$	$.23_{ab}$	$.12_{c}$
Agreeableness	$.08_{a}$	$.12_{a}$	$.12_{a}$
Conscientiousness	$.20_{a}$	$.28_{ab}$	$.34_{b}$
Intelligence	$.11_{a}$	$.30_{b}$	$.26_{b}$

Note: Note: Mean accuracy values were calculated using Fisher-z transformed accuracy correlations and were transformed back into *r* for presentation. Within a row, accuracy values sharing subscripts are not significantly different whereas values with different subscripts are ($p < .05$).

Table 5

Mean Accuracy for Combinations of Slice Length and Slice Locations

	Slice location				
Construct	Slice length	First min	Third min	Fifth min	One-way ANOVA
Positive affect	5 s	-.12	.12	.16	$F(2, 79) = 4.85, p < .01$
	20 s	.26	.16	.38	$F(2, 71) = 2.72, p < .08$
	45 s	.16	.21	.33	$F(2, 70) = 2.50, p < .09$
	60 s	.13	.37	.13	$F(2, 74) = 4.97, p < .01$
Negative affect	5 s	.11	.37	.43	$F(2, 79) = 5.95, p < .01$
	20 s	.22	.38	.45	$F(2, 71) = 4.44, p < .02$
	45 s	.27	.25	.37	$F(2, 70) = .95, p > .39$
	60 s	.34	.21	.41	$F(2, 74) = 2.12, p > .12$
Neuroticism	5 s	.07	.11	.22	$F(2, 79) = .70, p > .49$
	20 s	.25	.18	.15	$F(2, 71) = .46, p > .63$
	45 s	.16	.25	.32	$F(2, 70) = .65, p > .52$
	60 s	.27	.18	.20	$F(2, 74) = .28, p > .75$
Extraversion	5 s	.02	.42	.19	$F(2, 79) = 9.67, p < .001$
	20 s	.15	.54	.51	$F(2, 71) = 10.65, p < .001$
	45 s	.44	.53	.41	$F(2, 70) = 1.17, p > .31$
	60 s	.50	.55	.51	$F(2, 74) = .29, p > .75$
Openness	5 s	.21	.10	.00	$F(2, 79) = 4.34, p < .02$
	20 s	.12	.29	.25	$F(2, 71) = 1.54, p > .22$

	45 s	.09	.36	.14	$F(2, 70) = 3.37, p < .04$
	60 s	.21	.17	.08	$F(2, 74) = 1.01, p > .36$
Agreeableness	5 s	-.03	.04	.10	$F(2, 79) = 1.00, p > .37$
	20 s	.21	.04	.03	$F(2, 71) = 2.86, p < .07$
	45 s	.01	.17	.17	$F(2, 70) = 1.78, p > .17$
	60 s	.11	.27	.17	$F(2, 74) = 1.45, p > .24$
Conscientiousness	5 s	.12	.18	.32	$F(2, 79) = 2.36, p > .10$
	20 s	.28	.22	.28	$F(2, 71) = .21, p > .81$
	45 s	.14	.29	.38	$F(2, 70) = 3.48, p < .04$
	60 s	.23	.43	.39	$F(2, 74) = 2.69, p < .08$
Intelligence	5 s	.10	.34	.26	$F(2, 73) = 3.93, p < .03$
	20 s	.11	.16	.32	$F(2, 70) = 2.89, p < .07$
	45 s	.09	.34	.20	$F(2, 65) = 2.15, p > .12$
	60 s	.12	.36	.26	$F(2, 73) = 3.44, p < .04$