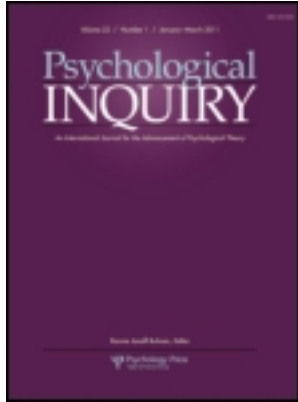


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Organizing Interactions in the Study of Judgmental Accuracy

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Zaki and Ochsner join the long line of commentators urging scientists in cognitive psychology and neuroscience to draw from research in social and personality psychology and vice versa (e.g., Banaji, 2010; Cacioppo & Berntson, 1992; Heatherton, Macrae, & Kelley, 2004). The particular contribution of Zaki and Ochsner is to emphasize the integration of personality/social research on the *accuracy* of social judgments into investigations of cognitive processes illuminated by neuroscience.

Those of us already on the front lines of accuracy research (e.g., Funder, 1980, 1982, 1995; Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006) do not need to be convinced of its utility. However, the authors of the target article appear to believe that some psychologists still need to be convinced that the study of accuracy is important. The purpose of our comment is to support their efforts and to discuss further how the integration they suggest might be organized.

The most interesting part of the target article might be its demonstration of how findings from the study of cognition and neuroscience suggest theoretical insights for personality and social psychology. Using their own work as an illustration (Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008; section 3.1.2), Zaki and Ochsner report that accuracy depends not only on the type of information one receives but also on the particular mental process used to interpret that information. To reach this conclusion, the authors assume that a person's tendency to use a particular mental process (experience sharing) can be tapped by his or her self-report of an individual difference variable (empathy). However, empathy could be associated with any number of different mental processes, attitudes, or patterns of emotional response. For the argument that the authors are making, more direct indicators of mental process would provide stronger support. Still, if their implication is valid, a judge who uses experience sharing to infer a target's current psychological state will be accurate only to the degree to which the target is expressive, or provides information that is emotional in nature. In short, the authors argue, the target information must match up with the judge's process if accuracy is to be achieved.

The Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 1995) organizes four moderators of accuracy and the interactions among those moderators. The interaction identified by Zaki et al. (2008) exemplifies what RAM

refers to as “sensitivity,” the interaction between characteristics of the judge and specific aspects of relevant information (see Funder, 1995, Table 2). Because RAM offers a potentially useful rubric for organizing interactions such as those studied by Zaki et al., we offer a brief summary.

RAM

The RAM focuses on judgments made about traits rather than current thoughts and feelings (the focus of Zaki and Ochsner), but we would suggest the basic processes are similar. RAM begins with the premise that traits are real properties of target persons. It further presumes that people sometimes make judgments about traits and that sometimes the judgments are accurate. For an accurate judgment to be accomplished, four things must happen. First, the target person must emit behaviors that are *relevant* to the trait in question. Second, these behaviors must be *available* to the judge (e.g., emitted in his or her presence). Third, the judge must *detect* and, finally, correctly *utilize* these relevant, available, behavioral cues in order to produce a correct judgment. If one simply substitutes “psychological state” for “trait” in the preceding description, we believe exactly the same sequence applies. Either way, unless relevant information is available to a judge who detects and utilizes it correctly, accurate judgment simply cannot happen.

A central purpose of RAM is to account for the four basic moderators of accuracy identified by decades of research by many investigators. When phrased in terms of the circumstances that make accurate judgment more likely, the moderators are *good target*, *good trait*, *good information*, and *good judge*. Each of these moderators has received empirical investigation. For example, Colvin (1993) painted a picture of a good target as a person with a coherent personality who is psychologically well adjusted. Moreover, some traits are more easily judged than others. “Good traits” are related to behaviors that are visible and readily expressed (Funder & Dobroth, 1987). “Good information” can be thought of in terms of quantity (more information is generally better; Blackman & Funder, 1988) and quality (behavioral observations in unstructured situations yield more accurate judgments of personality than do

Table 1. Interactions among Moderators of Accuracy in Personality Judgment.

Moderator	Judge	Trait	Target	Information
Judge	—	Expertise	Relationship	Sensitivity
Trait	—	—	Palpability	Diagnosticity
Target	—	—	—	Divulgence
Information	—	—	—	—

Note. From "On the Accuracy of Personality Judgment: A Realistic Approach," by Funder (1995, p. 663). Copyright 1995 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

observations in highly structured ones; Letzring et al., 2006).

The remaining moderator has a more checkered past. Zaki and Ochsner relate the history of the search for the "good judge" in the traditional fashion. Although plenty of interesting findings about the good judge can be found in the contemporary literature (see Letzring, 2008), the nature of some of the historically long-standing problems in that area of research illustrate the value of the points raised by the target article. One reason why the search for the good judge has proven so difficult is that properties of the judge, target, trait, and information on which the judgment is based all might interact in the determination of accuracy. This fact presents a daunting and potentially disorganized research agenda.

One way to bring order to the research enterprise is through the use of theory. For example, the individual difference (judge) variable studied by Zaki et al. (2008) was conceptualized as the tendency to utilize a particular cognitive system (experience sharing). This is an excellent start. The identification of stable neurological and cognitive systems specialized for person perception promises to fill a theoretical void by identifying the potential characteristics of the good judge that are the most promising to study.

A portion of the RAM presented by Funder (1995, Table 2), reproduced here as Table 1, can also be useful. The table labels each of the six interactions among the four basic moderators of accuracy (see Funder, 1999, for a detailed treatment of each). One of them is "sensitivity," which, as mentioned, encompasses Zaki et al.'s (2008) assertion that the accuracy of particular judges depends on the type of information that is available. The remaining five interactions also deserve research attention. More generally, this table can organize and suggest future research on moderators of accuracy and their interactions and tie new research to existing findings in the literature of person perception.

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Note

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