

The Nearest Thing to Mind Reading

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Instead of focusing on personal Web sites and blogs, UA psychology researchers used stream of consciousness writings in their research to determine a more accurate measure of individual personality traits.

Stream of consciousness, a century-old literary device, is helping University of Arizona researchers get to the core of individual personality.

Typically, researchers have focused on more public spaces and forms of self-expression to determine personality – e-mail messages, Web sites, blogs, office spaces, handshakes, face-to-face interactions, fashion choices and the way people loops G's and dot I's in their signatures.

But UA assistant psychology professor Matthias R. Mehl and Shannon E. Holleran, a doctoral degree candidate in psychology, wanted to delve into the difficult-to-measure, private nuances of personality. So they set out on a study using stream of consciousness writing.

They found that reading private thoughts manifest in a writing surge resulted in the ability to make “surprisingly accurate” measures of a person's personality traits.

Their findings are published in the June issue of *Journal of Research in Personality* in an article titled, “Let Me Read Your Mind: Personality Judgments Based on a Person's Natural Stream of Thought.”

Mehl said “the general sense is that just by looking at someone's picture

or Web site or by reading somebody's blog, you can get a very good sense of what that person is like.”

That may not be entirely true.

“A person can put up a good face and avoid disclosing different types of information,” he added. “You would think depressed people party less, talk less, laugh less and interact less. But the students who reported having the most depressive symptoms did those things as much as anyone else.”

Mehl and Holleran were interested in understanding how individuals can better understand others and also how the individual perceives the self, so they set out to get as close to mind reading as possible.

Personality, Without the Filters

The two, seeking out “natural expression of personality” without the influence of filters, placed nearly 100 undergraduate students in private cubicles and encouraged them to type for 20 minutes tracking their thoughts. They also urged their subjects not to concern themselves with grammar or accuracy and to type whatever came to mind while also paying close attention to their feelings and sensations while typing.

Most people wrote about school, downtime, recent experiences and their plans for the day.

Mehl and Holleran then had nine “naïve judges” – individuals who were not privy to the initial phase of the research project – read over the texts and evaluate the writings based on the “Big Five” dimensions: emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness and extroversion.

The researchers uncovered a few things: Stream of consciousness writing

often speaks more loudly about private personality traits than do public forms of expression and those who read personal narratives written by other people can most often come up with an accurate judgment of that person's character.

The research also revealed that it was easy to pick up on specific traits, such as low self-esteem, the tendency to worry, evidence of anxiety and depression, or even neuroticism.

Those are the type of personality traits not easily detected based on how people arrange their blankets and pillows or how many sticky notes a person keeps plastered on a computer screen.

“Anxiety and depression are traits that tend to be more hidden when we first meet people,” said Holleran, also a UA graduate researcher who has done quite a bit of research on how people form first impressions.

Holleran, a personality and social psychologist, said the research could help determine ways to improve relationships and also aid family members and peers in being better at detecting symptoms of depression in those nearest them.

Mehl had already co-authored a paper with a Washington University colleague detailing strong data showing that “people generally think they have privileged knowledge about themselves but, in fact, their friends and peers can predict their daily behavior just as well as they themselves can – in some cases even better.”

He also co-authored a paper with University of Texas at Austin professors exploring how personality becomes apparent in varying environments and situations depending on location, mood and other variables.

Turns out that the readers "were not just accurate for private things and how anxious and worried they are, but were also quite accurate across the board," Mehl said about the most recent study, adding that it was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and National Science Foundation.

"They had a good sense of how hard working, conscientious, how agreeable or how nice a person was," he said. "We were surprised."

Where Responsibility Comes In

Mel and Holleran's research could have applications for employers, law enforcement agencies, courts and others, but Mehl said that a certain amount of discretion is necessary.

Part of the concern is intent.

The difference between personal narratives and Web blogs or social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook is that people willingly offer up personal information to their sites on the Internet.

Stream of consciousness writing may not show up on a public space, just as a person's private traits may not be revealed in a public setting.

"We used to have a role separation where you had your personal self at home and your professional self at work," Mehl said, adding that given the age of the Internet and technology, that's not always the case.

"An interesting question is to what extent should this kind of information be accessible? You have a potential risk when people reveal more about themselves than they intended," he said. "I do think people need to be aware of what type of information they convey. That is important."

Source: University of Arizona

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