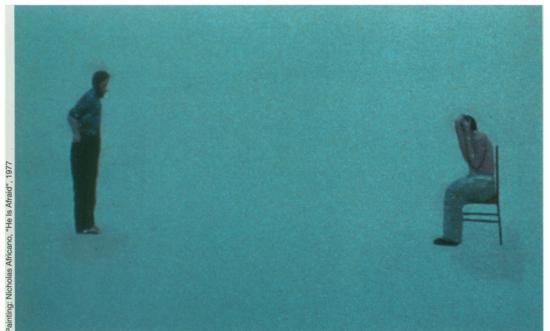# Charge of the 'Right' Brigade

The ability to know oneself and others gets a scientific lift

By BRUCE BOWER

Painting: Nicholas Africano, "He Is Afraid", 1977

I n 1973, college student David Funder pondered a future as a research psychologist while campus radios blasted out The Who's latest rock anthem, "Can You See the Real Me?" Soon thereafter, Funder became a psychology graduate student at Stanford University, where his instructors championed a highly influential experimental approach that dismissed the British rockers' musical question with the blunt response: "Probably not."

The research tradition emerged 20 years before Funder entered graduate school and remains a dominant presence in social and personality psychology. It emphasizes the power of our beliefs and expectations to shape our judgments of others. Thus, its proponents argue, social situations often act as error magnets, attracting biases and deficiencies in thinking that unwittingly warp our views of everyone from old friends to new acquaintances.

Error research, as it is sometimes called, rarely strays from the experimental laboratory. This allows its practitioners to control critical parts of the social landscape, such as a volunteer's perception of an experimental confederate as outgoing or conscientious. Investigations of this sort have yielded an array of judgmental errors that have entered our cultural vocabulary — for instance, self-fulfilling prophecies and stereotypes.

But Funder, now a psychologist at the University of California, Riverside, and a growing number of like-minded scientists challenge the methods and findings of error research. Instead, they examine the degree to which people in social groups reach a consensus in their appraisals of others' personalities, as well as the factors that boost the accuracy of judgments about oneself, one's compatriots, and even total strangers.

In this perspective, stereotypes and other decision-making tendencies that commonly bear a psychological "seal of disapproval" may often work quite well in our daily encounters with others.

For example, psychologists have often studied how stereotypes based on skin color and sex fuel prejudice. But the ability of stereotypes based on grooming, facial expressions, and other readily observable features to illuminate underlying person-ality traits has been underestimated and understudied, Funder argues.

"We're pretty good at judgments of ourselves and others, as a general rule, but we could do a lot better," he says. "Psychologists need to look at what people can actually do in real social situations, instead of wallowing in their errors that deviate from a predetermined standard of perfection."

U ntil the mid-1950s, psychologists showed great interest in studying how people make accurate personality judgments. At that point, the difficulty of statistically controlling for various extraneous influences on agreement about an individual's personality — such as the possibility that similar people become friends and attribute their own traits to one another — helped put an abrupt halt to so-called accuracy research.

Psychologists then decided to design laboratory situations that elicited a variety of erroneous judgments that might occur in real life (SN: 1/29/94, p.72). But this rich repository of research says nothing about the frequency of such judgment blunders on a daily basis or in different social contexts, Funder asserts. This criticism also applies to a trove of experiments probing the fallibility of memory, he adds (SN: 9/18/93, p.184).

The renewed interest in accuracy research, represented by the work of Funder and others, provides insights into several facets of personality appraisal:

Judging yourself. The ability to accurately size up one's personality and one's esteem in the eyes of others is crucial to developing good mental health, according to data presented in August at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA) in Los Angeles.

The findings contradict a popular theory that psychological adjustment feeds off mildly positive illusions about one's personal qualities, mastery of situations, and prospects for the future.

Three researchers — C. Randall Colvin of Northeastern University in Boston, Jack Block of the University of California, Berkeley, and Funder — analyzed self-descriptions of 51 men and 50 women taking part in a long-term study of psychological development. The researchers then compared these descriptions to personality profiles provided by friends, as well as by clinicians who dealt with the volunteers over several days.

Colvin's group rated participants as "self-enhancing" if they rated themselves significantly more favorably than did their friends and the clinicians — who generally displayed substantial agreement in their assessments of the same people.

Self-enhancers at age 18 showed signs of poor emotional adjustment at age 23, in the judgment of clinicians who had not seen them previously. Men in this group were described as guileful, deceitful, distrustful of others, and emotionally brittle; their female counterparts seemed preoccupied with viewing themselves as physically attractive and expressed a thin-skinned, defensive attitude toward others.

Moreover, men and women who self-enhanced at age 23 had already been rated as self-enhancers by independent clinical observers 5 years earlier.

In contrast, volunteers who exhibited minimal self-enhancement received largely positive ratings at both ages 18 and 23 from friends and clinicians.

A separate study by Colvin and his coworkers compared self-ratings of 70 male and 70 female college students to descriptions of each offered by two friends. Those who self-enhanced displayed abrasive behaviors in a videotaped "debate" with another student. Based on a coin flip, the two debaters took opposing sides in a discussion of capital punishment.

Self-enhancers proved most likely to interrupt, speak quickly, express hostility, and act irritably. They elicited the most negative reactions from debate partners.

Over time, friends and peers tend to pull away emotionally from those who self-enhance, and this may reinforce the latter's loneliness and unrealistic regard for themselves, the researchers theorize.

"To break this sad cycle, an individual must achieve more accurate self-perceptions, with acknowledgment, acceptance, and humor regarding one's inevitable and human frailties," Colvin's team maintains.

A similar study directed by Lee Jussim of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., suggests that one's accurate self-per-

ceptions take precedence over attempts to put only a positive light on evaluations offered by others. In this experiment, college students received either positive or negative feedback about their performance on an anagram test. Volunteers felt better about themselves after getting good reviews and worse about themselves after an unkind critique.

However, those citing high self-esteem accepted more responsibility for their positive feedback than negative feedback and viewed the positive feedback as more accurate. Students with low self-esteem took far more responsibility for harsh feedback and considered it the most telling.

The findings support Jussim's theory of a three-step process of dealing with personal evaluations. Initially, a person's reactions to feedback reflect a temporary, emotionally charged assessment of whether the information proves flattering. Upon further reflection, the same individual considers whether the feedback corresponds to personal attributes that he or she knows to be true. Finally, if the feedback gets tagged as accurate — no matter how distasteful — and the recipient accepts responsibility for it, self-concept undergoes alterations.

Jussim's findings will appear in an upcoming JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY.

In contrast, Shelley E. Taylor of the University of California, Los Angeles, emphasizes the enduring value that positive illusions have for mental health. Taylor coauthored the 1988 article that first proposed the theory of positive illusions.

Results from her latest study, which has been submitted for publication, suggest that people set aside their positive illusions and rely on more accurate personal appraisals when attempting to determine the best ways to resolve personal problems. Positive illusions rebound dramatically when the same folks implement the

solutions they've chosen, Taylor contends.

In other words, formulating effective plans requires an unvarnished review of personal strengths and weaknesses. But the effort to carry out those plans gets a Dale Carnegie-type motivational boost from mild exaggerations of one's qualifications for the job and likelihood of success, the UCLA psychologist argues.

In this study, Taylor and colleague Peter M. Gollwitzer of the University of Konstanz in Germany defined positive illusions as a volunteer's reported anticipation that his or her future would be freer of a list of 20 misfortunes than the futures of people like them. Misfortunes varied in the degree to which they could be controlled. These included the death of a close partner and contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

"My theory implies that there are often mildly positive inflations from otherwise accurate self-appraisals," Taylor says.

Judging others. Much debate surrounds the extent to which people agree in their personality ratings of the same friends or acquaintances. A statistical analysis of 32 such studies, described in the September PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN by David A. Kenny of the University of Connecticut in Storrs and his colleagues, finds particularly high levels of agreement among people in a group who rate the amount of extroversion characteristic of one of their compatriots.

People who have never met a person before show almost as much agreement about that person's extroversion and conscientiousness in experimental situations as do friends of the person, Kenny's team reports.

Considerable disagreement surfaces in such situations for other personality traits, however, such as overall emotional health and an openness to new experiences. Each observer's unique perspective on an individual's behavior contributes to this discord, Kenny and his coworkers argue.

Funder suspects that many of the studies reviewed by Kenny's team have overlooked the amount of consensus people attain in social judgments. A study he described at the APA meeting indicates that a person's friends, parents, and even strangers who watched him or her in a short videotape offer similar, surprisingly on-target predictions about that individual's daily behavior. However, acquaintances show more consensus regarding the individual's personality traits (and more agreement with that person's self-assessment) than do strangers.

Funder's project recruited 184 college students and more than 400 of their college friends, hometown friends, and parents, as well as people whom they had never met. Students rated themselves on a wide variety of personality features; the

other participants rated their own personalities and those of the student they knew or observed on videotape.

Videotapes, each lasting 5 minutes, presented the 184 college students interacting with other people in several experimental situations. In addition, students filled out diaries recording their behavior over 8 consecutive days.

Friends did not gravitate to one another based just on similar personalities, Funder found. Participants received similar ratings from friends who had either important personality differences with them or were largely alike in personality, Funder says. Strangers often discerned a student's reliance on easily observed social behaviors, he notes; acquaintances better identified underlying personality features, particularly if they had known a student for years as opposed to a few months.

Other evidence indicates that people who exhibit signs of mental health and hold a realistic self-concept present more easily "judgable" personalities than defensive, self-enhancing individuals, the Riverside psychologist adds. Someone whose words and deeds rarely correspond probably jams the personality radar of most social observers, he argues.

Empathy: Lost and found. Dating couples often infer each other's thoughts and feelings pretty well, contends William Ickes of the University of Texas at Arlington. But in some situations, he says, one partner misreads the other badly in what may represent an unconscious attempt to maintain the relationship. Ickes dubs these empathic flubs "motivated inaccuracy."

"The conventional wisdom that it's always good to understand each other may not be true," Ickes asserts.

His investigation, the results of which have been submitted for publication, examined the empathic ability of 82 dating couples at a university. Partners took turns viewing and rating aloud pictures of opposite-sex individuals described by an experimenter as currently available dating partners at the same university. Men and women in half the couples saw pictures of physically attractive potential dates; the remaining couples rated pictures of relatively unattractive date seekers.

Participants then viewed videotapes of these sessions by themselves in separate cubicles. They stopped the video at points where they remembered having thoughts or feelings and wrote down those recollections. Each volunteer then viewed the same session again and tried to identify their partner's thoughts and feelings at points already described by that person.

Substantial empathic accuracy occurred in the 20 couples who, on questionnaires, had expressed low levels of both dependency on one another and insecurity about their relationship. In

these cases, on-target empathy reached its zenith when partners evaluated physically unattractive students.

Empathic accuracy plummeted to its lowest level in the 13 couples who cited marked dependency and insecurity and then rated attractive dating prospects. In fact, these couples demonstrated less empathy than pairs of opposite-sex strangers and male friends evaluated in prior studies by Ickes and his colleagues.

A sudden empathic meltdown may serve as a psychological defense mechanism that shelves or minimizes conscious awareness of threats to an ongoing relationship, Ickes proposes.

Independent observers, who watched the tapes and read a copy of participants' self-reported thoughts and feelings noted that dependent, insecure couples displayed no greater tendency to mask their reactions than did the other couples.

Empathically adept couples "had no clue" that they read each other's minds so well, he adds. However, members of long-term marriages may gradually become aware of their partner's empathic cues, according to the Texas psychologist.

Ickes describes a further elaboration of his empathy measure in the December 1993 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY. In that study, three women individually discussed their real-life problems with a professional therapist. Immediately after each session, the women listed their thoughts and feelings at specific points in the encounter. Then, 80 college students watched videos of the sessions and attempted to guess each woman's thoughts and feelings at those same moments.

Students generally empathized more accurately with what therapy clients thought and felt toward the end of sessions, apparently capitalizing on earlier observations of the women. When offered immediate feedback about the accuracy of their inferences, students experienced rapid increases in empathic accuracy. Moreover, some participants demonstrated a much keener insight into the therapy clients' thoughts and feelings than others.

This technique can be modified to rate psychotherapists and people applying to graduate psychology programs for their empathic ability, a crucial element of success in psychotherapy, Ickes maintains.

"Some therapists I've heard from are very threatened by this possibility," he remarks.

Differing perspectives also erect barriers between those investigators who emphasize the precision of social judgment and those who stress its pitfalls.

"Accuracy research is moving in the right direction," asserts Daniel T. Gilbert of the University of Texas at Austin. "But David Funder's reading of the last 20 years of social psychology research is

hysterical, not historical. We haven't had an 'error' epidemic."

One focus of Gilbert's research is "correspondence bias," the tendency to ignore the influence of a particular situation on a person's behavior and to jump to conclusions about that individual's personality based solely on his or her actions. Laboratory experiments that trigger this judgmental tactic frequently elicit distorted appraisals of other people (SN: 3/28/92, p.200).

In the November PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN, Gilbert and Texas colleague Patrick S. Malone point out that, since a person's dispositions often help mold the situations he or she seeks out, the correspondence bias may sometimes result in accurate personality judgments. For instance, conservative, frugal people probably do gravitate to the banking profession rather

than become that way as a result of having their personalities shaped by the social atmosphere of their chosen career.

For much of human evolution, individuals operated in well-defined social roles that may have rendered the correspondence bias largely accurate, Gilbert and Malone suggest. In modern societies, inferences about other people's personalities that ignore situational forces may more often go awry. Still, the prevalence of such mistakes remains unknown, they say.

To make matters trickier, evolution has promoted a great deal of error in some types of social judgments, argues David M. Buss of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Consider the cross-cultural tendency of men to assume that women who smile at them are expressing a sexual interest in them. This optimism usually proves ill-founded, but the reproductive payoff for being right is so great that men have evolved a tendency to infer sexual interest from women's smiles, Buss contends.

"Psychologists have often looked at social decisions out of their natural contexts and then vastly overstated errors in judgment," he asserts. "But that doesn't mean that judgments are always accurate." ☐