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ABSTRACT

Trait adjectives which people use to describe themselves will have features both unique to the individual and shared with or common to many people. To examine the uniqueness of descriptors of one's self, and how unique descriptors might be organized in memory, subjects (N=40) made self-descriptiveness and other-descriptiveness ratings for the same set of 120 trait adjectives representing three levels of likability. Uniquely descriptive items took longer for self-descriptiveness decisions than for items that were descriptive of both self and other. Although unique features may be generated as descriptive of one's self, it appears they are accessed more slowly. This result is more consistent with a view that sees trait distinctiveness as computed rather than prestored. In terms of endorsement, uniquely descriptive items showed minimal likability effects, whereas likable items were predominantly seen as descriptive of both self and other and unlikable items were rejected as mutually nondescriptive. Recall differences among the subtypes of items were not pronounced overall, though there was some variation by likability level. (Author/WAS)

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Abstract

Subjects made self-descriptiveness and other-descriptiveness ratings for the same set of 120 trait adjectives representing three levels of likability. Uniquely descriptive items took longer for self-descriptiveness decisions than for items that were descriptive of both self and other. Although unique features may be generated as descriptive of one's self, it appears they are accessed more slowly. This result is more consistent with a view that sees trait distinctiveness as computed rather than prestored. In terms of endorsement, uniquely descriptive items showed minimal likability effects, whereas likable items were predominantly seen as descriptive of both self and other and unlikable items were rejected as mutually nondescriptive. Recall differences among the subtypes of items were not pronounced overall, though there was some variation by likability level.

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DISTINGUISHING ME FROM THEE

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The study I'm going to report today examined the uniqueness of descriptors of one's self, and how unique descriptors might be organized in memory relative to less distinctive features. As many authors have observed (e.g., Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), we spend a great deal of our lives trying to establish individual identities, though -- judging from the standard of living achieved by various fashion designers -- relatively few of us are completely successful!

For various reasons, some trait adjectives may not distinguish one person from another very well. At one extreme, for example, some characteristics may be so desirable or benign that we attribute them to others as freely as to ourselves (e.g., decent, friendly, honorable, witty), or perhaps the corresponding adjectives are so generally descriptive that they apply to a large number of people (e.g., American, masculine, right-handed, Protestant). At the other extreme, some characteristics may be so dastardly that we hesitate to attribute them to anyone (e.g., evil, incestuous, lascivious, rapacious, ruthless, wanton), or perhaps in actuarial terms we just rarely encounter anyone whom we would label with a particular adjective (e.g., acrobatic, dainty, messianic, weird). Of course, many factors will determine just which terms are distinctive, including reference group, and perhaps even verbal facility, not just base rate.

Assuming that we would thus find both unique and shared features in our self concept, the question arises as to their relative importance and accessibility. In one relevant study, McGuire and Padawer-Singer (1976) had subjects generate self descriptions. They found that the features mentioned tended to be those that set the subject apart from other people, not those aspects that were most common. Of course, this doesn't mean shared features are not a part of our self concept, but unique features seemed especially relevant in the course of unpaced spontaneous descriptions. However, order in an unpaced description could reflect processes other than speed of access to a single specific aspect of the self concept. For one thing, unpaced descriptions maximize the "editing" of responses, allowing the unique features to dominate output whether they are actually accessed first or not.

Still, it is intuitively appealing that unique traits might be accessed rapidly, and Figure 1 shows two simple models consistent with this notion. Model A in Figure 1 represents a scheme where traits are organized within the self concept by distinctiveness, so that a top-down search process would provide rapid affirmative decisions for distinctive, nonshared traits. Slower affirmations would occur for shared features, because these characteristics are accessed only after the most definitive traits have been reviewed. Model B shows a different arrangement, where each feature has stored with it a "tag" denoting some degree of distinctiveness. In this case, if the feature tag exceeds some high criterion, a rapid affirmative response results, whereas a slower affirmative response results for less distinctive

shared features, with negative responses being slowest of all.

Insert Figure 1 about here

As sensible as these two models might seem, the data we will present don't fit either one, nor any conceptualization that makes the same basic prediction, namely that unique features are accessed faster than shared. Instead, some process like that shown in Model C seems more likely, and it is in general consistent with McGuire and Padawer-Singer's interpretation that we determine the most salient features of our selves by a process of comparison to the context of the decision. For example, being an American in Paris is much more salient than being an American in Peoria -- not to mention more fun! Therefore, in contrast to Models A and E, comparative models such as Model C would predict that access would be faster for shared traits, with the determination of unique traits requiring more time. Self descriptions (viz. McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976) might still contain predominantly distinctive features, given an unpaced task, but such traits are available only after a process that consumes some time. In Model C, trait uniqueness is computed, so to speak, rather than prestored as in Models A and B.

The predictions seem fairly clear then, and the data we collected were intended to provide some initial information about the organization of features as a function of distinctiveness. In the interest of time, we will have to focus on just the one question: are unique-trait decisions made faster than shared-trait decisions? The

methodology is simple, so I will describe it only briefly. I will be happy to provide further details to anyone who wants them.

Method

Forty subjects rated 120 trait adjectives selected from three likability levels in the Anderson (1968) norms: 40 likable items, 40 unlikable, and 40 "neutral" items, all from the high meaningfulness subset in the norms. A subject first rated all 120 items for self-descriptiveness and then for descriptiveness of their "best friend," or vice versa. Responses were indicated on an 8-point scale, on the basis of a rapid first impression. The two rating phases were followed by an unannounced recall test for the 120 items.

In addition, the Self Consciousness Questionnaire (Buss, 1980) was also administered. It had been expected that high self-aware subjects might be especially aware of their unique traits, and access them faster than less self-aware subjects, particularly under the prestored assumption. However, this seemed not to be the case, so these data won't be considered further.

Results and Discussion

Items were tabulated on the basis of their descriptiveness of each target person. (For purposes of analysis, items rated 1-4 were considered nondescriptive, with 5-8 being descriptive.) This results in four subtypes of items, shown as column headings in Table 1. Some items were judged descriptive of BOTH targets, some descriptive of SELF ONLY, some OTHER ONLY, while the remainder were descriptive of NEITHER target. Three aspects of the data are shown in Table 1: how many items were classified or endorsed into each of the

four categories, how rapidly decisions were made for each subtype of item, and the incidental recall of items of each type. Let me quickly summarize the high points of the results.

Insert Table 1 about here

The way subjects classified the items is shown in the top section of Table 1. Perhaps the most pertinent result in terms of item endorsement was a significant Self by Other by Likability triple interaction (F (1,78) = 34.82). Most adjectives were considered descriptive of neither or both targets (see the fourth row of Table 1, labeled "All"). This would be expected, assuming we share many traits with our best friend. While these mutually descriptive items show pronounced likability gradients (first and fourth column in Table 1), neither of the unique descriptors show such likability effects (second and third column in Table 1).

Going to the next section of the table, in the data of greatest interest, analysis of the latencies for self descriptiveness decisions revealed a significant Self by Other interaction (F (1,39) = 7.11). As Table 1 shows (in line 8, labeled "All"), decision speed was faster for shared descriptors (Ms = 3297 and 3395 msec, for Both and Neither, respectively) than for unique descriptors (Ms = 3486 and 3622 msec, for Self-Only and Other-Only, respectively). In the individual comparison of greatest interest, the Self-Only items (3486 msec) and Both items (3297 msec) were significantly different (Tukey test).

Thus, it appears that rapid self-reference decisions are made

only for items that are generally descriptive, and that decisions about unique features require more time. As I said earlier, when editing output in an unpaced test (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976), unique items might still occur first and more often as the most definitive descriptors, but the self-reference descision per-se seems slower for unique items. On this basis, it appears that Models A and B and others of that class can be rejected, and that something like Model C serves as a better description of the organization of features in the self concept.

The probability of recall data indicated a marginally significant triple interaction of Self by Other by Likability (F (2,78) = 5.57, p < .07). Neutral items were not recalled very well at all, likable items tended to be recalled better when not self-descriptive, and unlikable items were recalled best for commonly descriptive items. The interpretation of this interaction is unclear, and likely risky in view of the marginal level of significance.

In closing, it appears that self-referent decisions involving distinctive traits take more time than is the case for shared traits. We have also observed this in some similar experiments that I don't have time to cover here. This suggests that distinctiveness information is not prestored in our self concept, unless one argues that we search through less distinctive features first, as in a bottom-up search in Model A. While not proving Model C specifically, the data are at least consistent with Model C, and in accord with a comparative process as outlined by people such as McGuire and Padawer-Singer.

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TABLE 1

Number Rated by Mutuality of Self- and Other-Descriptiveness, Latency of Self-Reference Decision, and Probability of Recall

	Self-Other Descriptiveness Types			
	Both	Self Only	Other Only	Neither
Number of each type				
Likable	31.2	5.5	3.2	1.4
Neutral	12.0	8.3	5.3	14.5
Unlikable	3.1	5.5	4.5	26.8
All	46.3	18.0	13.0	42.6
Latency (msec)				
Likable	3009	3316	3376	3510
Neutral	3575	3644	3922	3577
Unlikable	3307	3486	3530	3132
All	3297	3486	3622	3395
Probability of recall				
Likable	.26	.28	.31	.34
Neutral	.18	.16	.20	.16
Unlikable	.32	.19	.23	.23
All	.25	.21	.25	.23

Note: Both refers to a word rated as descriptive of self and other, Self-Only refers to a word rated as descriptive of self but not descriptive of other, Other-Only refers to a word that was not self-descriptive but was other-descriptive, and Neither refers to a word descriptive of neither self nor other.

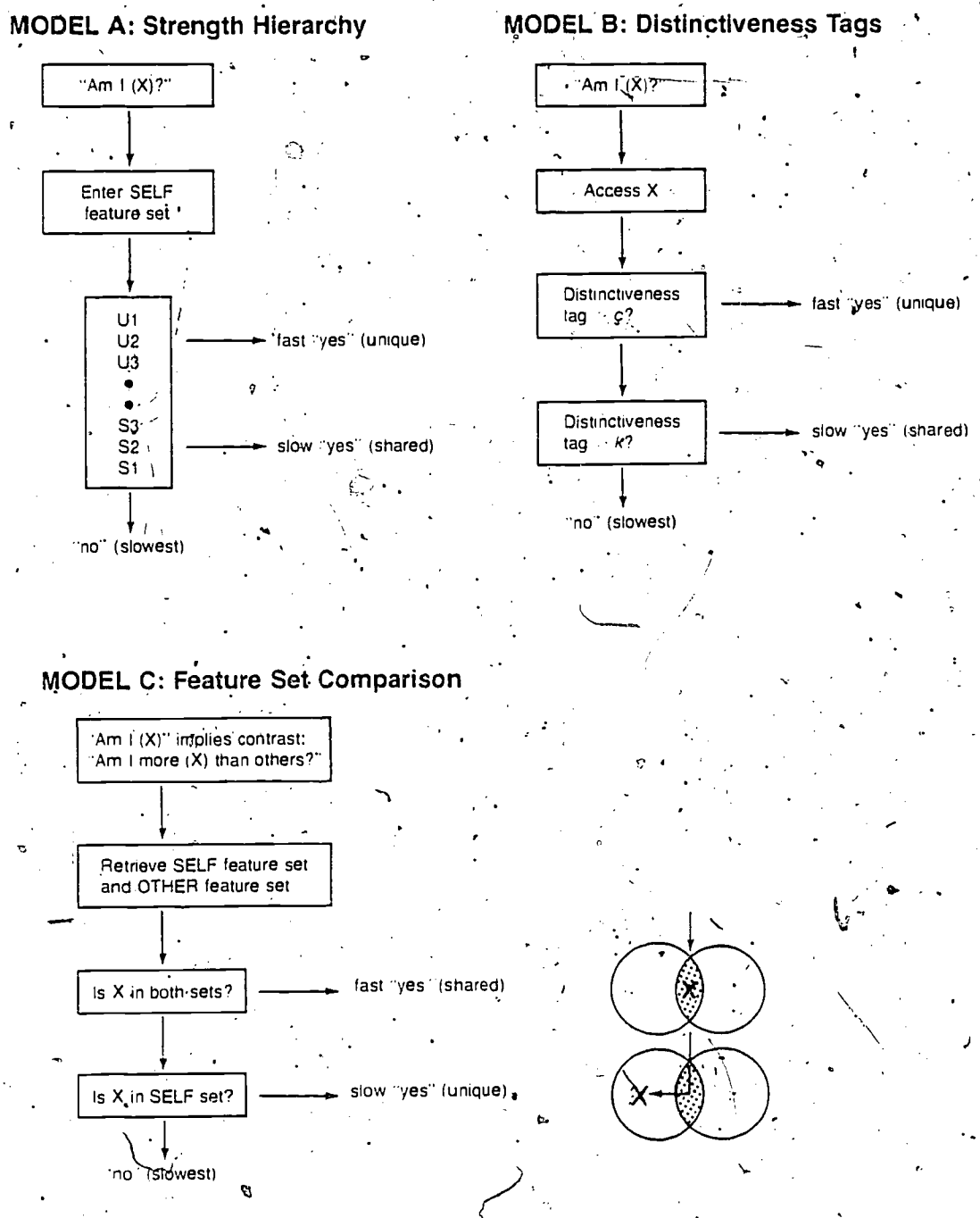

Figure 1. Three theoretical conceptions about the relative speed of a self-descriptiveness decision about a trait (X) that is either shared with other people or which more uniquely describes us.