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Current Directions in Psychological Science 2011 20: 104

DOI: 10.1177/0963721411402478

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Others Sometimes Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves

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Current Directions in Psychological Science
20(2) 104-108
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DOI: 10.1177/0963721411402478
http://cdps.sagepub.com



Abstract

Most people believe that they know themselves better than anyone else knows them. However, a complete picture of what a person is like requires both the person's own perspective and the perspective of others who know him or her well. People's perceptions of their own personalities, while largely accurate, contain important omissions. Some of these blind spots are likely due to a simple lack of information, whereas others are due to motivated distortions in our self-perceptions. Perhaps for these reasons, others can perceive some aspects of personality better than the self can. This is especially true for traits that are very desirable or undesirable, when motivational factors are most likely to distort self-perceptions. Therefore, much can be learned about a person's personality from how he or she is seen by others. Future research should examine how people can tap into others' knowledge to improve self-knowledge.

Keywords

self-knowledge, accuracy, peer reports, personality, meta-perception, self-insight

"Do we understand each other?" Gracie wants to know. . . .
"Better than we understand ourselves," I tell her.
—*Straight Man*, Richard Russo, p. 106

Who knows you best? Most of us have the powerful intuition that we know ourselves better than others know us (Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001). Indeed, there are several good reasons to think that we are the best judge of ourselves: We have privileged knowledge about our own histories, our thoughts and feelings, and our private behaviors. Yet, we all know people who seem to be deluded about themselves—which raises the uncomfortable possibility that we, too, might be so deluded.

When it comes to our own personalities, there is increasing evidence that our blind spots are substantial. Moreover, others can sometimes see things about our personalities that we cannot. The aim of this paper is to review the latest evidence concerning the accuracy of self- and other-perceptions of personality and show that a complete picture of what a person is like requires both the person's own perspective and the perspective of others who know him or her well. This conclusion has implications for researchers and practitioners who rely on self-reports and for people who want to get to know others—or themselves.

self-knowledge. Why do we sometimes misperceive our own personality? Some blind spots may be due to a simple lack of information. We have all experienced the supervisor who, unbeknownst to him, has a persistent frown when listening intently and, as a result, is a lot more intimidating than he realizes. A simple dose of feedback could bring his self-perception in line with his behavior (or even better, bring his behavior in line with his self-perception). Blind spots can also be due to having too much information—we have access to so many of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that we often have a hard time mentally aggregating this evidence and noticing patterns (Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). For example, most of us can probably think of many times when we have acted friendly or unfriendly, making it difficult to know how friendly we are in general. In other words, it is difficult for us to see the forest for the trees.

In many cases, however, blind spots are not so innocent—they are the result of motivated cognitive processes. One motive that has a strong influence on self-perception is the motive to maintain and enhance our self-worth (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). There is a great deal of research documenting

How Could We Not Know?

The first step in establishing that others know things about our personality that we do not is to show that there are gaps in our

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the lengths people will go to in order to maintain a positive view of themselves, leading to flawed self-assessment (Dunning, 2005). While our desire to protect our sense of self-worth influences our self-perception, it is not clear that these biases are always in the positive direction. Indeed, there are important individual differences in self-enhancement (Paulhus, 1998) and some people seek to confirm their overly negative self-views (Swann, 1997). What is beyond doubt is that self-perception is not simply an objective, neutral process. Motivated cognition influences and distorts self-perception in a multitude of ways that help to create and maintain blind spots in self-knowledge. As a result, we cannot judge our own personality as dispassionately as we might a stranger's.

One vivid example of blind spots in self-knowledge comes from research on the discrepancies between people's explicit and implicit perceptions of their own personality. Implicit personality is typically measured by tapping into people's automatic associations between themselves and specific traits or behaviors. The logic behind these measures is that people form automatic or implicit associations (e.g., between the concepts "me" and "assertive") based on their previous patterns of behavior. Thus, the traits that people automatically associate with themselves in implicit tests may predict behavior above and beyond the traits they consciously endorse in explicit measures of personality. Indeed, this is exactly what has been found. In one study, people's implicit self-views of their personality predicted their behavior even after controlling for what could be predicted from their explicit self-views (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2009). This pattern was strongest for extraversion and neuroticism, traits that are non-evaluative and that people are typically willing to report honestly, which suggests that people have implicit knowledge about their pattern of behaviors that they cannot report on explicitly.

Are these implicit blind spots merely an efficient way to process information—it may be easier to form implicit associations than to constantly update our explicit self-views—or are they the result of motivated cognition? If processing self-knowledge implicitly were merely a matter of efficiency, we should be able to increase the congruence between our explicit and implicit self-views simply by focusing our attention on the behavioral manifestations of our implicit personality. Contrary to this prediction, participants who watched themselves on video did not bring their explicit self-views more in line with their implicit personality, despite the fact that strangers who watched the same videos were able to detect the implicit aspects of the targets' personalities (Hofmann, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2009). Thus, it seems that our motives sometimes lead us to ignore aspects of our personality that others can detect. As a result, our conscious self-perceptions provide a valuable but incomplete perspective on our personality.

How Do They Know?

The second step in establishing that others may know things about our personality that we do not is to show that others are adept at detecting personality. As it turns out, many aspects of

personality are remarkably transparent to others, even when we are not intentionally broadcasting them. For example, many traits can be judged accurately from people's physical appearance, their Facebook profiles, or a brief interaction (Kenny & West, 2008). This evidence suggests that our day-to-day behavior is infused with traces of our personality and that others make good use of these cues when inferring our personality (Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006). In addition, we (intentionally and unintentionally) broadcast our personality in our living spaces, music collections, and online habitats (Gosling, 2008). In other words, others have plenty of fodder for detecting our personality, while we see ourselves through the distorted lens of our own motives, biases, wishes, and fears.

Of course, not all others are created equal—the relationship between the judge and the target matters. While too much intimacy can lead to the same biases that distort self-perceptions (e.g., one's self-worth can be threatened as much by the knowledge that one's spouse is incompetent as it is by the thought of one's own incompetence), closeness is usually associated with greater accuracy (see Biesanz, West, & Millevoi, 2007, for a thorough review). Moreover, the better we get along with others, the more accurately they can infer our thoughts and feelings (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Overall, across all types and levels of acquaintance that have been examined, people form remarkably accurate impressions of one another.

These findings show that we are astute judges of each others' personalities, likely due to the importance of interpersonal perception for our social species. As a result, other people—especially those who spend a lot of time around us and who we open up to—almost inevitably become experts on our personality. This conclusion should cast serious doubt on the longstanding assumption among researchers that we necessarily know our own personality better than others know us. It seems likely that, at least for some aspects of personality, others might be in a better position to see us clearly than we are.

Who Knows What?

The goal of this article is not to bring readers to despair of self-perceptions. Rather, the goal is to make the case that others sometimes see aspects of our personality that we are blind to. Perhaps the most important evidence is the body of research that directly compares the accuracy of self- and other-perceptions of personality. Here we focus on studies that measure accuracy using a correlational approach—that is, by comparing judgments by the self and others to a criterion. The available evidence suggests that self- and other-perceptions are roughly equally good at predicting behavior in a laboratory (e.g., behavior in a group discussion; Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996; Vazire, 2010), predicting real-world behavior (e.g., behavior when out with friends; Vazire & Mehl, 2008), and predicting outcomes (e.g., discharge from the military; Fiedler, Oltmanns, & Turkheimer, 2004). However, the overall equality in levels of accuracy obscures a more interesting pattern: Self- and other-ratings of a person's personality do not simply provide redundant information. Instead, they capture different aspects.

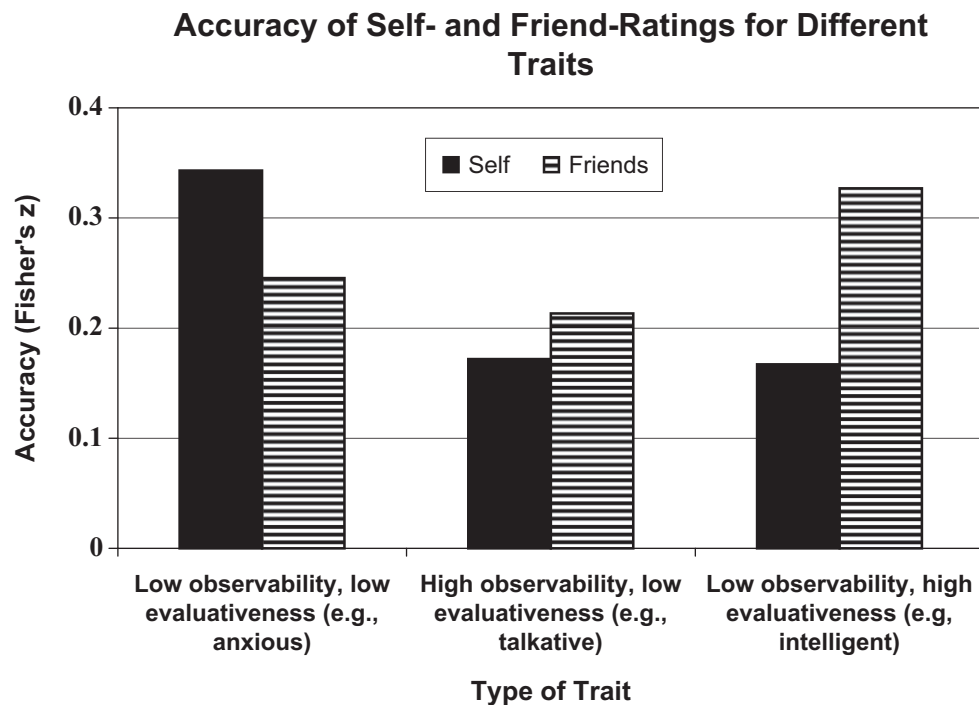


Fig. 1. Average accuracy scores (transformed to Fisher's z-scores for purposes of comparison) for self- and friend-ratings of personality traits that are less observable and less evaluative (left), more observable and less evaluative (middle), and less observable and more evaluative (right). Adapted from Vazire (2010).

Vazire (2010) recently proposed the self-other knowledge asymmetry (SOKA) model to map out the aspects of personality that are known uniquely to the self or uniquely to others. According to this model, the differences between what we know about ourselves and what others know about us are not random but are driven by differences between the information available to the self and others and motivational biases that differentially affect perceptions of the self and others (Andersen, Glassman, & Gold, 1998).

Specifically, Vazire (2010) proposed that the self has better information than others do for judging internal traits—traits defined primarily by thoughts and feelings, such as being anxious or optimistic—but that others have better information than the self for judging external traits—traits defined primarily by overt behavior, such as being boisterous or charming. In addition, Vazire argued that self-perception on highly evaluative traits (e.g., being rude, being intelligent) is severely distorted by biases. As a result, self-ratings on evaluative traits often do not track our actual standing on those traits (but instead might track individual differences in self-esteem or narcissism). In contrast, when perceiving others on highly evaluative traits, we are able to form impressions that are mostly accurate (assuming we have enough information). This is not to say that others see us more harshly than we see ourselves. In fact, there is evidence that close others may in fact have more positive impressions of us than we do, but that their perceptions are nevertheless more accurate. This can happen if people who have the most positive ratings from their friends also tend to actually have the most positive personalities (even if nobody's

personality is quite as delightful as their friends portray it). In this case, friends' ratings would be overly positive in an absolute sense, but more accurate in their rank order, and thus friends' ratings would be a very good predictor of actual behavior (e.g., those whose friends say they are the most friendly are likely to behave the friendliest).

To test these hypotheses, Vazire (2010) compared self- and friend-ratings of personality to how people behaved in videotaped laboratory exercises and how they performed on intelligence and creativity tests. Consistent with Vazire's first hypothesis, self-ratings of internal, neutral traits (e.g., anxiety, self-esteem) were better than friends' ratings at predicting behavior (Fig. 1). Consistent with her second hypothesis, friends' ratings of evaluative traits (e.g., intelligence, creativity) were better than self-ratings at predicting performance in these domains.

Consistent with the SOKA model, other research has shown that close others are often better than the self at predicting very desirable or undesirable outcomes, such as college GPA, relationship dissolution, and coronary disease. Together, these findings suggest that those who know us well sometimes see things that we do not see in ourselves, particularly when it comes to aspects of our personality that are observable to others and that we care a lot about (and thus cannot see objectively).

What Do We Do Now?

The appropriate conclusion from the empirical literatures seems to be that to know people's personalities, we need to know both how they see themselves and how they are seen

by others who know them well. The fact that self-perception is an important part of personality is not new; the novel finding is that others also know a lot about us that we don't know. How can we tap into others' knowledge to improve our self-knowledge? Direct, honest feedback might be very useful, but it is rare, and probably for good reason. A more realistic strategy is to take the perspective of others when perceiving our own personality (i.e., meta-perception). Research suggests that although we overestimate the degree to which others share our perception of ourselves, we are able to detect the impression we make on others, even when meeting someone for the first time (Carlson, Furr, & Vazire, 2010). We also seem to know how we are seen differently by people who know us in different contexts (e.g., parents vs. friends; Carlson & Furr, 2009). In short, it seems that we have some awareness of how others see us, but we do not always make use of this information when judging our own personality. Thus, we may be able to improve our self-knowledge by placing more weight on our impressions of how others see us—particularly, as Vazire's (2010) research suggests, when it comes to observable, evaluative traits (e.g., funny, charming).

Finally, introspection has historically attracted a great deal of attention as a route to self-knowledge. Unfortunately, recent research shows that many aspects of ourselves are hidden from conscious awareness, limiting the effectiveness of introspection in the pursuit of self-knowledge (Wilson, 2009). Perhaps a more promising avenue for increasing self-knowledge is to reduce the self-protective motives (e.g., defensiveness) that prevent us from seeing ourselves objectively. Recent work suggests that self-affirmation reduces defensive responding and makes us more open to negative information about ourselves (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010). Along the same lines, training in mindfulness meditation (i.e., nonjudgmental attention to one's current experience) improves people's emotion-regulation skills, memory, and attention and can improve their ability to differentiate between their transient emotional experiences and their global dispositions (Williams, 2010). Thus, these techniques may reduce the two major obstacles to self-knowledge: lack of information and motivational biases.

In short, little is known about successful routes to improving self-knowledge. Clearly, much remains to be learned about how we can know ourselves better. What is now evident, however, is that, as a fortune cookie admonishes, "There are lessons to be learned by listening to others."

Acknowledgments

We thank Krystle Disney, John Doris, Sam Gosling, Sanjay Srivastava, and Tim Wilson for their helpful suggestions concerning this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Science in the Public Interest, 5, 69–106. A comprehensive, highly accessible review of the practical implications of biases in self-assessment.

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