

AN IMPORTANT DECISION CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE

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BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'Mindwise' by Nicholas Epley

We are surprisingly terrible at divining what's going on in someone else's mind.

By DANIEL J. LEVITIN

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Socrates said "know thyself." Sun Tzu said "know your enemy." Nietzsche asked: "How can man know himself? He is a dark and hidden thing." If Nietzsche is right, how can we do what Socrates and Sun Tzu advise? How can we possibly know, and trust, one another?

Some of the largest changes we face as a society are cultural—changes to our social world and the way we interact with one another in the digital age. Many of the biggest problems we face—climate change, poverty, unstable regimes—will require careful cooperation among people who don't know one another well and, historically, have not trusted one another. One would think that, as the most recent in a long line of social primates, we Homo sapiens would have all this social stuff worked out by now. After all, our cerebral cortex—the portion of our brains responsible for higher reasoning—is proportionately larger than that of any other primate. But when it comes to understanding even the most basic thoughts or feelings of others, we remain barely more than primitive beings.

Mindwise

By Nicholas Epley

Knopf, 242 pages, \$26.96

Take lying. It would have been evolutionarily advantageous for our ancestors to be able to determine when they were being deceived—natural selection should favor those who possessed exquisitely developed "B.S. detectors." But

natural selection is an arms race pitting the detectors against the deceivers, and the deceivers appear to be winning. As cognitive psychologist and professor of business Nicholas Epley points out in "Mindwise," people's ability to tell if someone is lying is "barely better than chance." And this phenomenon isn't restricted to meaningless experiments in some scientist's laboratory—even people whose job it is to know the difference don't do so well.

During the last decade, for instance, the Transportation Safety Administration embraced the nascent science of reading microexpressions (popularized on the Fox TV series "Lie to Me"). The idea behind this is that most liars aren't good liars—that is, they make mistakes. These mistakes show up in brief, small changes in facial expression that reveal concealed emotions.



A photograph by Robert Capa of a carnival ball in Austria, 1950. Robert Capa/ International Center of Photography / Magnum Photos

The TSA, however, abandoned the method when it turned out to be a bust. How much of a bust? In one experiment, Mr. Epley reports, 697 people were asked to look at photographs and either express their true emotion or conceal it. Only 14 microexpressions were produced—2% of the total—and half of those came from when the person was lying and half from when she or he was telling the truth. The microexpression lying-detection program SPOT (Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques), according to the Government Accountability Office's report to Congress, screened two billion passengers between 2004 and 2008 and didn't produce a single arrest for terrorism, guns, drugs or bombs. That sounds like an enormous waste of time.

Speed dating may also be a waste of time. Mr. Epley notes that speed daters are utterly unable to assess who wants to date them and who doesn't. (So much for Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink.") And Mr. Epley draws attention to the very modern problem of trying to detect a lie—usually in the form of sarcasm—in email, instant messages, Facebook posts and texts. "The same comment about one's 'nice hair,' 'great question' or 'brilliant idea' can be taken as a compliment or an insult, depending on the tone of your voice

or the smirk on your face. None of this subtlety makes it into your in-box." These text-based mediums "communicate the content of what is said but little of the subtle context of how it is said." Enter emoticons, those squiggly things we're supposed to use to provide context and subtlety of tone, but which very quickly end up just being annoying. ;-)

While the consequences of failing to detect a lie in these cases may be minor, sometimes they are quite large. Consider, Mr. Epley says, the differences between Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein. In September 1938, Neville Chamberlain, as well as other leaders around the world, believed Hitler when he said he wouldn't invade Czechoslovakia (turns out he was just buying time to get his invading forces maximally prepared). Some six decades later, President [George W. Bush](#), as well as other leaders around the world, failed to believe Saddam Hussein when he said he had no weapons of mass destruction. (He didn't, though according to the postwar Iraq Survey Group's conclusions, he valued the ambiguity as a deterrent and led even his own army to conclude that he did.)

So much for reading the minds of strangers. Surely we are better at understanding the desires, beliefs and motives of our intimates, family members, spouses and close friends. It doesn't take a psychic to see where I'm going with this: We're not. "We are barely better than chance in assessing how our friends and co-workers feel about us, or even whether they like us," Mr. Epley writes. In study after study, intimately involved couples thought they knew each other twice as well as they did. Couples "were perfectly accurate a little over 4 out of 10 times" when predicting their partners' thoughts. "They believed they were

right, however, 8 out of 10 times. These couples hit a double, but thought they'd hit a home run."

"Mindwise" is good reading for negotiators, the makers of public policy, heck, for anyone who interacts with other people, and that should be all of us. Mr. Epley is a genial, informative host in this tour of some of the most interesting findings in the social psychology of understanding one another, which he calls "mind-reading." His examples are drawn from the headlines as well as the peer-reviewed literature, and he keeps things going at a quick pace without dumbing-down the science. His geniality frays at times, such as when he presents scientific evidence that certain psychological factors, like solitude, cause us to hear voices or believe in a deity. Mr. Epley makes it clear that he thinks anyone who believes in God is making a grave error of reasoning. This is *de rigueur* for scientists, even ones writing for a popular audience, but it betrays just the kind of lack of empathy for others he decries in his book.

If you, like me, think that you would prefer to spend heaps of time alone, Mr. Epley suggests that you don't even know your own mind. He describes research showing that this preference for solitude is a cognitive illusion, that we overestimate how much we enjoy solitude. Commuters were asked about their ideal commute: Would they prefer to talk to the person next to them or sit quietly by themselves? Overwhelmingly, people said that they would rather sit by themselves: The thought of having to make conversation with a seatmate was abhorrent. Commuters were then assigned to either sit alone and "enjoy their solitude" or to talk to the person sitting next to them. Those who talked to their seatmate reported having a significantly more pleasant commute. And the findings weren't due to differences in personality—the results held whether the individuals were outgoing or shy, open or reserved. We don't just lie to others; we lie to (or misunderstand) ourselves.

And although we may be mind-reading primitives, we can use our large cerebral cortices to improve our social skills; there are lessons here for us to learn and apply. For example, one of the biggest hurdles to open communication is fear of reprisal when you've done something you shouldn't. Workers on the [Deepwater Horizon](#) oil rig in the Gulf off of Louisiana knew of safety problems but were afraid of reporting them for fear of being fired. Vulnerable workers at the bottom of the corporate food chain may say "everything's OK" even when they know it isn't because they think that's what their bosses want to hear. It isn't the better part of human nature, but it is human nature to lie and it starts early—6-year-olds will say "I didn't do it" while they're in the middle of doing it.

But it is also human nature to forgive, especially when we're given an explanation. In one study, for instance, people who tried to cut in line were forgiven by others even if their explanation was ridiculous. In a line for a copy machine, "May I cut in? I'm on deadline" was no more effective than "May I cut in? I need to make copies." Even an empty explanation, the mere attempt to elicit forgiveness, functions as social glue.

In another case, when doctors started disclosing their mistakes to patients openly, malpractice lawsuits were cut in half. As Mr. Epley says, the biggest impediment to resolution had been "requiring patients to imagine what their doctors were thinking, or having to sue to find out, rather than just allowing doctors to explain how a mistake happened." When we're confronted with the human element, the doctor's constraints and what she is struggling with, we're more likely to understand and forgive.

Mr. Epley concludes: "If being transparent strengthens the social ties that make life worth living . . . and enables others to forgive our shortcomings, why not do it more often?"

—Mr. Levitin is professor of psychology at McGill University and Dean of Arts & Humanities at the Minerva Schools at KGI. His forthcoming book is "The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload."

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