

You Probably Made a Better First Impression Than You Think

September 10, 2018



After we have conversations with new people, our conversation partners like us and enjoy our company more than we think, according to [findings](#) published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

In our social lives, we're constantly engaged in what researchers call "meta-perception," or trying to figure out how other people see us. Do people think we're boring or interesting, selfish or altruistic, attractive or not?

"Our research suggests that accurately estimating how much a new conversation partner likes us—even though this a fundamental part of social life and something we have ample practice with—is a much more difficult task than we imagine," explain first authors Erica Boothby, a postdoctoral researcher at Cornell University, and Gus Cooney, a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard University.

"We call this a 'liking gap,' and it can hinder our ability to develop new relationships," study coauthor Margaret S. Clark, the John M. Musser Professor of Psychology at Yale University, [told Yale News](#).

Boothby, Cooney, Clark, and Gillian M. Sandstrom, Professor of Psychology at the University of Essex, examined various aspects of the liking gap in a [series of five studies](#).

In one study, the researchers paired participants who had not met before and tasked them with having a 5-minute conversation featuring typical icebreaker questions (e.g., Where are you from? What are your hobbies?). At the end of the conversation, the participants answered questions that gauged how much they liked their conversation partner and how much they thought their conversation partner liked them.

On average, the ratings showed that participants liked their partner more than they thought their partner liked them. Since it can't logically be the case that both people in a conversation like their partner more than their partner likes them, this disparity in average ratings suggests that participants tended to make an estimation error. Indeed, analyses of video recordings suggested that participants were not accounting for their partner's behavioral signals indicating interest and enjoyment.

In a separate study, participants reflected on the conversations they'd just had — according to their ratings, they believed that the salient moments that shaped their partner's thoughts about them were more negative than the moments that shaped their own thoughts about their partner.

“They seem to be too wrapped up in their own worries about what they should say or did say to see signals of others' liking for them, which observers of the conversations see right away,” Clark noted.

Additional studies showed that the liking gap emerged regardless of whether people had longer conversations or had conversations in real-world settings. And a study of actual college roommates showed that the liking gap was far from fleeting, enduring over several months.

The phenomenon is interesting because it stands in contrast with the well-established finding that we generally view ourselves more positively than we do others, whether we're thinking about our driving skills, our intelligence, or our chance of experiencing negative outcomes like illness or divorce.

“The liking gap works very differently. When it comes to social interaction and conversation, people are often hesitant, uncertain about the impression they're leaving on others, and overly critical of their own performance,” say Boothby and Cooney. “In light of people's vast optimism in other domains, people's pessimism about their conversations is surprising.”

The researchers hypothesize that this difference may come down to the context in which we make these self-assessments. When there is another person involved, such as a conversation partner, we may be more cautious and self-critical than in situations when we are rating our own qualities with no other source of input.

“We're self-protectively pessimistic and do not want to assume the other likes us before we find out if that's really true,” Clark said.

This self-monitoring may prevent us from pursuing relationships with others who truly do like us.

“As we ease into new neighborhood, build new friendships, or try to impress new colleagues, we need to know what other people think of us,” Boothby and Cooney explain. “Any systematic errors we make

might have a big impact on our personal and professional lives.”

This work was supported by the Templeton Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council (United Kingdom).

All [data](#) have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework. The complete [Open Practices Disclosure](#) for this article is available online. This article has received the [badge](#) for Open Data.