How to read minds like a wizard

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Fans of the Harry Potter books will be familiar with the art of Legilimency. Legilimency is an advanced form of wizardry, the supernatural ability to coax thoughts and feelings and memories from another's mind. It's a magical skill encompassing mind reading and lie detection—and it's black magic in the wrong hands. Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, is a master Legilimens, as are the evil Snape and Voldemort. Harry never quite masters the difficult craft.

Many of us Muggles wouldn't mind a touch of telepathy from time to time—though for much more ordinary purposes. Wouldn't it be helpful to know—to *really* know—what your colleagues are thinking about that paper you just presented? Or how about that blind date? Did she find you witty? Attractive? Foolish? Humans are actually very bad at mind reading. Indeed, studies have shown that we do no better than chance when intuiting how much people like us.

Well, it may now be possible to do better than that. We may not have supernatural powers, but we do have untapped cognitive powers that might be harnessed to help us more accurately assess what others think of us. Two psychological scientists have been exploring why we misinterpret others' thoughts so often, and they have been using these insights to construct a tool for ordinary, everyday telepathy.

Tal Eyal of Ben Gurion University in Israel and Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago started with "construal theory." That's just psychological jargon meaning that we perceive different people and things in our world at different levels of detail. Think of two houses; you're standing in the yard right next to one of them, and the other is on a hill a quarter mile away. The distant house is only a vague outline; it's got two stories, a pitched roof, windows and a door. By contrast, you see the house next to you in all its detail, right down to the marigolds in the flower boxes and the chipped green paint on the shutters.

And this is how we construe ourselves and others as well—which is why we have so much trouble reading minds. We see ourselves in all our glorious (or inglorious) detail, so we assume that others do as well. But in fact others see us as off in the distance, drawn only in broad strokes. Eyal and Epley figured that if we can somehow manage to take the long view of ourselves—the view that others routinely take—then we might be able to get a more accurate sense of what others think and feel about us.

Here's how they tested this idea in the laboratory. They had each of a large group of volunteers pose for a photograph, which was displayed on a computer screen. The volunteers were told that someone of the opposite sex would be rating their attractiveness—not unlike a blind date. But some were told that they would be judged later that day, while others were told that the judging wouldn't take place for several months. This was the laboratory equivalent of psychological distance, which the scientists anticipated would determine how people read the minds of their judges.

To find out, those in the beauty contest were asked to write down how they expected the other person to

describe the photograph—and how that person would rate their attractiveness. And other volunteers—the judges—in fact did this, describing the photo and rating the person's looks. And what did they find out? Those who didn't expect to be judged for several months were much more accurate in "mind reading" others' opinions and ratings. That's because imagining themselves as psychologically distant brought them more in sync with the reality of how people see other people. Those who anticipated having their looks judged that very afternoon guessed that their judges would be much pickier and more critical than they were in fact. They expected (wrongly) to be put under a microscope.

It's important to note that the judges' opinions didn't change. People always see others in general and abstract ways. What changed were the opinions ascribed to the judges—the mind reading. The actual descriptions are telling. For example, those who were close (in time and psychologically) expected to be described in immediate and close detail—pony tail, weary eyes—where in fact the judges were quite general in their descriptions—Asian, slender, wears glasses or doesn't. Much like the near and distant houses.

The researchers ran another version of this experiment, but this one focused on general impressions rather than looks. In this study, volunteers talked into a microphone for 2 ½ minutes, describing themselves in great detail—their education and hobbies and family and dreams. They knew that others would be listening to this recording and forming an impression of them, but again the distancing varied: As before, some thought they would be evaluated later in the day, while others thought that would occur months later.

The results were basically the same as before. As reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*, those who had more psychological distance from themselves had a much more realistic sense of how others saw them. They were able to see the "big picture" rather than focusing on trivial flaws and defects that only a microscope can detect. In short, they were better mind readers.

This is not simply putting oneself into someone else's shoes. The scientists emphasize that, and indeed they ran to test to compare construal-based thinking to mere perspective-taking. Perspective-taking didn't match up. That's because being in another's shoes is not a scientific concept; it's not based on any understanding of human cognition. Psychological distancing is. And as these experiments show, it can be a powerful cognitive tool for everyday telepathy. It may not be Legilimency, but it's not bad for mere Muggles.

Excerpts from "We're Only Human" also appear in *The Huffington Post* and *Scientific American Mind*. Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*, will be published by Crown in September.