

Why Are People So Annoying?

January 29, 2015

It's human nature to want other people to think well of us. And indeed we are often called upon to put our best foot forward—highlighting our accomplishments and character traits in job interviews and on first dates. So we get a lot of practice in effective self-presentation.

Then why are so many people annoying?

The simple answer is that, despite all our natural inclination and practice, much of our self-presentation backfires. And it backfires because we too often misunderstand the tradeoff between self-promotion—blowing our own horn—and humility. The fact is that modesty, or even self-effacement, can be more effective than bragging in creating a good first impression. Most of us know this from being on the receiving end, yet we still err on the side of self-aggrandizement.

But why do we get it wrong so much of the time? Here's where some new research may be illuminating. Psychological scientist Irene Scopelliti of City University London and her colleagues believe that this common but harmful behavior is really a failure of emotional perspective taking. Emotional perspective taking requires predicting how somebody else will respond to your situation—putting yourself in their shoes and adjusting for what you see.

But bridging this so-called “empathy gap” is very difficult, and we often fail at it. We assume that others share in our emotions, and thus underestimate the real difference between our emotions and the emotions of others. So we talk openly about our achievements and successes—we brag—because we genuinely believe that others share our joy and pride in those accomplishments. When they don't—and they often don't—our self-presentation fails. We are annoying.

At least that's the hypothesis that Scopelliti and her colleagues decided to test in a few experiments. They wanted to see if self-promoters overestimate others' positive reactions to them, and underestimate the negative. To test this, they asked a group of subjects to describe in detail an occasion when they bragged to someone about something. They were then asked to describe the emotions they had felt, and the emotions they believed the recipient had felt. Other subjects did the opposite, describing a time when someone had bragged to them. The scientists expected that self-promoters would be more likely than recipients to experience positive emotions, and that they would erroneously project those positive emotions on to the recipient.

And that's just what they found. Self-promoters were more likely to report positive emotions, and much more likely to believe that recipients also felt positive emotions, when in fact they had not. Similarly, self-promoters were less likely to report negative emotions, and less likely to project negative emotions on to the recipient—when in fact that's what the recipients felt. In other words, self-promoters' judgments were egocentric. They were unable to fully adjust their perspective and imagine someone else being annoyed with their bragging.

The scientists wanted to double-check these results and investigate the empathy gap in a different way. So they again had subjects take the part of either the self-promoter or the recipient. They then asked the self-promoters to estimate the recipients' experience of these discrete emotions: happiness, pride, jealousy, annoyance, anger, upset, and inferiority. The recipients rated themselves on these same emotions. The scientists then compared the two groups' judgments, with some interesting results: First, self-promoters overestimated the extent to which recipients would feel happy for them and proud of them. And they way underestimated the extent to which others would find them annoying.

The scientists ran a final experiment to see if all this miscalibration has consequences. Specifically, they wanted to see if people who are trying to make a good impression tend to brag excessively, deluded by the belief that their self-promotion will work. And they did, as described in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. When their goal—manipulated in the lab—was to be liked and judged as successful, subjects did engage in more self-promotion, but their efforts backfired. Indeed, the more they engaged in self-promotion, the less the others liked them—and the more they dismissed them as braggarts.

So self-promotion can be much more annoying than we think it is. But it may backfire for another reason as well. Others may also assume that braggarts aren't holding anything back, so there is nothing positive left to discover. If, by contrast, someone is modest in self-presentation, and hints of good things dribble out, then others may assume that there is much—qualities, skills, character traits—that remain unrevealed.

Follow Wray Herbert's reporting on psychological science in The Huffington Post and on Twitter at @wrayherbert.