

Non-fiction

Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want by Nicholas Epley

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Just before the 2008 Presidential election, while withdrawing money from an ATM, Ashley Todd was robbed at knifepoint and horribly assaulted. As the young Republican campaign volunteer told police, her assailants were four six-foot tall black men who had taken her money and then, to make their point, they had carved a “B” on her face with a knife. They were branding her with a “B” for Barack.

The story was widely reported but right from the beginning the police doubted her account. The “B”, you see, was carved backwards. It was written from Todd’s own perspective. And the reason for this is that she had carved it herself.

Nicholas Epley, Professor of Behavioural Science at the University of Chicago, thinks we are not very good at understanding ourselves or other people. We think we know ourselves and can read the minds of others, that we know what we are thinking and that others can work it out too. And all these suppositions are wrong.

The truth, as Ashley Todd demonstrated, is that we look at the world from our own angle, from the place we stand. We are, as Epley puts it, the centre of our own universe. And this prevents us from seeing things as others see them. He recalls the joke in which one man shouts to a man standing on the opposite side of a river:

“Hey, how do I get to the other side?” And his interlocutor responds: “You are on the other side.”

When the company Clorox acquired the rights to Hidden Valley Ranch Dressing they spent a decade trying to make the original recipe so that it did not need to be refrigerated. Everything they attempted seemed to the lab team to taste worse than the original. Eventually they gave up and sent an inferior version to market. To their surprise it was a great hit. It hadn't occurred to them that almost nobody else had tried the original. From the consumers' perspective, radically different from the company's, the dressing tasted better than anything on the market.

As well as seeing things from our own perspective, we also have an inflated view of our own importance. Say you slipped on the icy pavement. You might stand up, look around with a slightly embarrassed face and feel you have made a fool of yourself. The truth? Not that many people noticed.

Researchers conducted an experiment in which a group of undergraduates were asked to walk around campus wearing T-shirts with a large picture of Barry Manilow on them. When asked how many of their contemporaries had noticed the garment, the students guessed that 50 per cent had. The correct number was 23 per cent. The spotlight shines more brightly on us in our heads than it does in reality.

All of this wouldn't be as great a problem — we could adjust for it mentally — if we weren't so blind to it. We think we are good at reading minds, and seeing the perspective of others, particularly of those close to us. If we tap out a tune with our fingers on a table, we think others can recognise it fairly easily. That is because the tune is obvious to us as we can hear it in our heads. And we imagine the person listening can hear the same tune. Naturally, they cannot.

An experiment in which volunteers watched videos of people either lying or telling the truth about being HIV positive, revealed that people were fairly confident they had guessed correctly about whether they were being told the truth. They thought they had got

it right 70 per cent of the time. In fact they did hardly better than chance alone, guessing correctly 52 per cent of the time. Epley grants that it is true that we are better at understanding those close to us, but not vastly better and certainly not as well as we think. This failing means that even when we try to consider another's perspective we fail. Indeed because we are so bad at working out what it is like to be in another's shoes, Epley's experiments show that "perspective taking consistently decreased accuracy" when detecting someone else's emotional state. Perhaps even more surprising is that we aren't very good even at knowing ourselves. For instance we are poor at knowing how hard we are going to work at a task or at knowing our own prejudices. Since Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point* and *Freakonomics* there has been a vast output of books on behavioural science. Many have been quite poor — formulaic books supporting obvious conclusions at unnecessary length.

Mindwise stands out from the crowd. It is surprising, intelligent and convincing. It continues to make worthwhile points in every chapter (after about chapter two most books of this kind are repeating themselves) and the author tells you things you don't know without straining for effect. You emerge from reading it understanding both yourself and others better, which is not a bad dividend from reading fewer than 200 pages.

You will not become Derren Brown, able to reach into the recesses of your boss's mind. Instead Epley helps you live with your limitations. Buying your partner a birthday present? Don't try and put yourself in their shoes, it will never work. Instead, the author suggests modestly, try asking them what they'd like.

***Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want* by Nicholas Epley, Allen Lane, 272pp, £16.99. To buy this book for £13.99, visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 0845 2712134**