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Belonging

*The Science of Creating Connection
and Bridging Divides*

Geoffrey L. Cohen


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I Can See It on Your Face (or Can I?)

How to Read Others
with Empathy

IN AN AMUSING COLUMN BY DAVE BARRY, A COUPLE, ROGER and Elaine, have had a lovely dinner and are driving home, with Roger at the wheel. As Elaine silently reflects on their relationship, she says, "Do you realize that, as of tonight, we've been seeing each other for exactly six months?"

Roger says nothing in return, and her mind is off and running: "I wonder if it bothers him that I said that. Maybe he's been feeling confined by our relationship; maybe he thinks I'm trying to push him into some kind of obligation that he doesn't want, or isn't sure of."

Meanwhile Roger is thinking, "So that means it was . . . let's see . . . February when we started going out, which was right after I had the car at the dealer's, which means . . . lemme check the odometer . . . Whoa! I am way overdue for an oil change here."

Their mental musings proceed on wildly divergent courses:

Elaine: "He's upset. I can see it on his face. Maybe I'm reading this completely wrong. Maybe he wants more from our relationship, more intimacy, more commitment; maybe he has sensed—even before I sensed it—that I was feeling some reservations. Yes, I bet that's it."

Roger: "And I'm gonna have them look at the transmission again. I don't care what those morons say, it's still not shifting right."

Elaine proceeds to convince herself that Roger is angry with her because she's unsure he's truly the knight in shining armor she's looking for, while Roger muses about what he'll say to the car mechanic. Suddenly, Elaine breaks out in tears. He is totally confused about what has upset her.

Finally, Elaine says, "It's just that . . . It's that I . . . I need some time." Startled out of his reverie, Roger realizes he has to be careful with what he says now. Dave Barry writes,

There is a 15-second pause while Roger, thinking as fast as he can, tries to come up with a safe response. Finally, he comes up with one that he thinks might work.

"Yes," he says.

His remark makes no sense, but he thinks it will come across as supportive, which it does. Elaine is elated that he has been so understanding. But later that night, with each in their separate homes, she tosses and turns in bed, worried that she might have put a stake in their relationship. As for Roger, he senses something important unfolded but decides he'll never be able to figure out what, so he turns on the TV and happily munches on some chips.

While the scenario is amusing in Barry's telling, the sad truth is that relationships are often undermined by such misreading, whether romantic connections or those with family members, friends, colleagues, and strangers we encounter in daily life.

In many situations, we attribute opinions and emotions to people that distance us from them, fueling conflict. We tend to have far more confidence in our ability to read people's behavior, facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice than we should. And far too often, because we think we've got a good read on others, we don't ask about

their thoughts and feelings, which might lead to important discoveries that would help build connection.

Consider the case of a relative, say, an aunt, who supports a political candidate you find morally repugnant. You may be watching TV with her, and an ad for the candidate comes on in which the candidate voices some remarks you find offensive. The aunt lets out a little grunt. You might interpret that grunt as an expression of bemused support. But if you asked her whether or not that's true, you might learn that she grunted out of frustration with the candidate and that she also finds the remarks offensive. (Or perhaps she had some indigestion and didn't even notice the ad.) If you asked her why she still supports the candidate, she might explain that she wishes he would stop making such comments but that she is more concerned about a problem that he promises to address, which you might also be concerned about. That could become an opening for thoughtful discussion, which might strengthen bonds by fostering mutual understanding. Unfortunately, rather than checking whether our mind reading is on target, we tend to keep our interpretations to ourselves and build up a fiction in our mind that replaces the actual flesh-and-blood person by our side. Gulls of misunderstanding drive people apart.

Many research studies have shown how far off our interpretive reads of others can be. I was involved in one while I was in graduate school that opened my eyes. My mentor at the time, Claude Steele, sent me to the University of Michigan to explore why black and white students tended to sit apart from one another in the dining halls, as was true at many colleges and still is. Steele instructed me to interview students to get their perspectives. Many black students explained that they chose to sit together for reasons similar to one expressed by one interviewee: "We spend the whole day interacting with white folks. And after a while you just get *tired*." When I probed further, asking if that was because their white peers were being racist, they generally answered that while that might sometimes be the case, what was more at play was that they didn't know what the white students were thinking of them, so they felt

they had to keep their guard up. They said this was exhausting. Meanwhile, the white students tended to say the black students just didn't want to sit with them and they were trying to respect that preference.

What struck me was that neither group of students understood what the other was thinking. Nobody that I spoke to had even asked someone from the other group about the topic.

My interviews also revealed that both black and white students felt very uncertain about where they belonged—a classic manifestation of the belonging uncertainty Greg Walton and I later documented—when walking alone with a tray into a dining hall looking for somewhere to sit. Students could tolerate wandering alone like a lost sheep for about only five seconds at most, and then they would quickly choose a table where they felt confident the others welcomed them. Both groups sought the comfort of familiar faces, but neither expressed an appreciation that their anxieties were shared. For black students, this belonging uncertainty was compounded by being in the minority on a predominantly white campus.

Years later, I was delighted to read research by social psychologists Nicole Shelton and Jennifer Richeson that echoed what I had observed and heard in these students' comments. The researchers asked black and white college students a set of questions, the answers to which revealed that both groups had a strong interest in making more cross-race friends but both groups also believed that the students from the other race were generally less interested in doing so than they in fact were. Shelton and Richeson probed further and learned that both racial groups held back from trying to build cross-race friendships largely due to fear of rejection. Meanwhile, both groups thought the other was relatively unconcerned about rejection.

As this research illustrates, our overreliance on our interpretations of others' thoughts and feelings stems not only from our overconfidence in our mind-reading skills but from the frequent feeling that our insecurities are unique to us. We become anxious about openly discussing uncomfortable issues with others: We can't imagine how

we could broach the subject. What's helpful in overcoming this barrier is the knowledge that these anxieties are normal and surmountable.

Tim Wilson and his colleagues developed a wise intervention that gave people this knowledge. They had white first-year college students watch a video of a white and a black student at their school who discussed how they had become friends in spite of initial awkwardness between them. Then the participants wrote about a time when they had thought they couldn't become friends with someone but later discovered they had been wrong. Over the next week, these students made more friends with minority students at their school than did students in a control group, as gauged by the racial makeup of new Facebook friends.

We also often misread others by failing to take account of the situation they're in. Once, I was with a group of passengers waiting to board a plane. A young man walked up to the kiosk where a line of us stood as an announcement was being broadcast. I could tell that he was simply trying to hear the announcement better, but an elderly woman in line mistakenly thought he was trying to cut ahead. "There's a line," she commented in an annoyed voice, and he responded testily, "Get off my back, lady." Now she felt disrespected. She said something offensive back, and after a few more back-and-forths, with each one dialing up their rage, the confrontation ended with the woman snarling, "You're a very rude young man."

Neither considered how the situation was affecting the other's behavior. If they had, they might have avoided the argument and even bonded over their common predicament.

Amplifying the problem are our culturally conditioned assumptions about how to interpret certain "signals" sent by others, such as facial expressions and body language. People's appearance, the way they dress, how loudly or softly they speak, and so many other bodily and voice expressions supposedly tell us what sort of person they are, and we tend to make extremely rapid judgments of others based on these cues.

Just how rapid was illuminated by a study conducted by Princeton

cognitive psychologist Alexander Todorov and his team. They presented people with static pictures of faces and asked them to judge how trustworthy each person was. The participants watched the photos of faces flash up one at a time, each for a second, as they lay in a functional magnetic resonance imaging scanner that monitored their brain activity. Within the first five hundred milliseconds of exposure to a face, the participants' amygdala activated, indicating emotional reaction. For faces with expressions that people associated with a lack of trustworthiness, the amygdala was more highly activated, as happens in the threat response. Todorov also found that the stronger the consensus about whether a face looked untrustworthy, the stronger each individual's amygdala response generally was to that face. This finding suggests that when we go with our gut, we're really going with the crowd. We're conforming to social expectations of how we should read people.

Todorov found that his participants, when making their own judgments of the trustworthiness of the faces, by and large went with their gut. Once a snap judgment appears in our consciousness, it can be surprisingly sticky. Why? Because we don't realize how much our perceptions are authored by our own mind and mistakenly think that thoughts and impressions that pop into our mind say more about what's "out there" in reality. Indeed, we interpret the very speed and ease with which they pop into our minds as an indication of their validity, a bias that the cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky called the "availability heuristic": That which is mentally available, that which comes readily to mind, is deemed more likely.

These snap judgments lead to overemphasis of qualities of people's appearance and behavior that may be poor indicators. Take the case of evaluating political candidates. Todorov and his colleagues showed static black-and-white head shots of two candidates from opposing parties who were running for U.S. Senate in a number of different states, first making sure the participants didn't recognize the candidates. Flashing photos of them for one second, the researchers asked the participants to quickly say which face they thought looked most

competent. The candidate who was judged more competent looking won the election 68 percent of the time. That's not perfect accuracy, especially when you consider that just by chance, participants' guesses would match the winning candidate 50 percent of the time. But the results suggest that about 36 percent of candidates' electoral fate hinges on the sparse information gleaned in the first second of exposure to a still shot of their face, without any information about their platform or politics, or even exposure to their voice and bodily movement.

Unless we believe that a candidate's appearance is a reliable indication of his or her ability, this finding should be disturbing, as it suggests that our evaluations of candidates may be much more superficial and swayed by cultural biases about appearance than we would like to think. In related research by Nalini Ambady, students' evaluations of how competent, confident, and warm their teachers were after the end of a school semester were strongly correlated with snap judgments that observers made about the teachers on the basis of two seconds of *soundless* video of them teaching. In fact, these snap judgments predicted roughly 50 percent of the variance in teachers' end-of-semester student evaluations.

We might congratulate ourselves on our amazing insight in making such snap judgments, given that our later judgments conform so well to ones made with so little evidence. But another takeaway is that, to a significant degree, our judgments of others are formed before we have any substantive information on which to base them. We may like to think that people are like books to be read, but when we try to read them, we often don't get past the first sentence—maybe not even past the cover. As we saw in earlier chapters, our snap judgments don't just prophesy the future but create it. We act on our shared biases, which sentences others to the fate we think they are destined for.

Our snap judgments can clearly have troubling costs for some people's sense of belonging, as well as unfortunate larger social costs. Do we really want to be writing off politicians based on how they look, whether they have, say, gleaming white teeth and a chiseled jaw? Do we want to exclude those whose appearance and presentation of them-

selves, whether through body language or speech, don't conform well to the societal interpretations of what's "normal"?

A good friend of mine, Martin, was an epileptic, and to prevent seizures he had to take a medication that slowed his speech. When he was given a chance, Martin shined. For all his adult life, he volunteered as an emergency medical technician at a fire station in his hometown, where he was beloved. But Martin had trouble finding and keeping jobs, and one reason was that he didn't interview well. He didn't articulate answers concisely. In fact, sometimes he talked so slowly that it was hard to follow him. He finally landed a stable position when one of my other friends gave him a job at his company. "I hired him, and I'd do it again," he says to this day.

Martin was one of many people whose promise fails to come across in the thin slice of an interview. I suspect Martin also had trouble getting into romantic relationships for similar reasons, reflecting a bias we have in our society against those who seem just a bit "off." Martin lived alone. So during one epileptic seizure when he ended up face down on his bed, there was no one there to turn him over, and he suffocated.

Our judgments of others' character and state of mind sometimes say more about our own than about anyone else's. Misreadings are more common when we feel stressed, insecure, or threatened. Research by Sarah Wert at Yale University showed that when pairs of friends wrote about a time they had felt excluded, they subsequently gossiped more harshly about a third person they both knew. People restore the feeling that they belong, Wert suggests, by establishing who doesn't. Research by David Dunning and his colleagues finds that when people's self-esteem is threatened, they become more rigid in enforcing their own self-serving standards for success, believing that success in various arenas of life is less likely for those who are dissimilar to them. We put others down in part to feel better about ourselves. The simple act of centering yourself, by processing difficult emotions and by reflecting on important personal values, can prevent such misreadings.

Another source of mischief is our skewed interpretations of the reasons someone else might be anxious, that all-too-common emotion

of modern social life. I frequent a local wine bar where the bartenders are renowned for their ability to create an atmosphere of belonging, much like in the old TV show *Cheers*. The senior bartender, Blake, has an uncanny ability to make everyone feel at ease and at home in spite of the range in clientele and the periodic arguments over counter space. When people are anxious in any arena, as they may be because of fears that they don't fit in, they leak that anxiety and are vulnerable to misinterpretation.

I experienced exactly this in one disastrous social encounter at the bar. I was introduced by a friend to a woman he knew, Beth. She told me she owned a chain of beauty salons, and I told her I was a professor. Then I added that I found the hair-dressing profession interesting, which is true. As a social psychologist, I am fascinated by how people's hair is so tied to their identity. But Beth frowned and looked angry, and I could see that she had taken offense at my comment, maybe thinking I was being patronizing and snarky rather than sincere. I panicked. My heart began to pound. I started to sweat. Stuttering, I tried to explain, but my halting speech must have made me seem even more guilty of an insult. Our mutual friend noticed something was up and came over. As he listened in on what I was saying, I thought I saw him roll his eyes. Uncertain about how I was being seen, I was suddenly acutely sensitive to their every nonverbal cue, which derailed my train of thought before it could even start, making me all the more inarticulate. I felt as if I were slipping into a quicksand of judgment. The more I struggled, the further I sank. I started adding a question mark to every statement, as if to say, "Is that okay?" I avoided eye contact; their laser-like gazes made me more stressed.

My remediation efforts were to no avail. Beth started to cry. She even asked Blake to kick me out. Our mutual friend consoled her, not before murmuring in my ear, "Geoff, I'm very disappointed with you." I was baffled and offended to have been seen as someone so offensive. Clearly, I hadn't explained my genuine interest well. Perhaps, also, in jumping to the topic of hairdressing, I had inadvertently belittled her role as an entrepreneur. But clearly, too, Beth had misread me. She

had read my anxiety as a further “tell.” If only she could have read my mind, she would have known that my “tells” were really signs that I wanted the interaction to go well and was upset that it wasn’t. Perhaps Beth, as a woman whose businesses were located in the male-dominated Silicon Valley, had dealt with one too many arrogant men in the past, which led her to suspect the same attitude from me.

We tend to read others’ anxiety as a sign that they are put off by us. That may be true, but just as often they may be worried that we don’t like or respect *them*. Consider cross-race encounters. White people sometimes give off hard-to-control nonverbal signals of discomfort and anxiety in these encounters, such as avoiding eye contact, blinking frequently, and speaking haltingly. The ambiguity is that while prejudice can lead to this nonverbal “leakage,” so can the fear of being seen as prejudiced. In other words, people’s anxious “tells” can actually be signs that they want the encounter to go well—and they fear that it’s not. All of us are vulnerable to being misread in this way. We sometimes enter a hall of mirrors in our interpersonal interactions, getting caught up in what we think other people think we think—which wreaks all kinds of havoc.

The many foibles in our attempts to read others’ hearts and minds call out for us to make the effort to discover what people are thinking and feeling rather than assuming we know. But how? The blazingly simple answer is to ask them.



ONCE ATTENDED a wedding at which I met an elderly Chinese woman named Emma. When I told her I was a psychologist, she opened up to me to ask for advice about how to connect better with her granddaughter, who lived in Beijing. They had always been close and had talked every week on Skype. But as her granddaughter entered her teenage years, she seemed to be slipping away from her and from her parents. She was drinking alcohol and going to parties far too much, and her schoolwork was suffering. Their once lively conversations over Skype had become punctuated by awkward silences. Emma

didn’t know how to read her granddaughter, she told me. Why was she behaving this way? I suggested that she just ask her granddaughter for her perspective; for example, ask what was going on in her life or how she was feeling. These questions could perhaps give her a window into her granddaughter’s life.

Emma was visibly taken aback at the simplicity of my suggestion. She thought about it for a few seconds in silence, and then we parted company. But at the end of the party she rushed up to me and said excitedly, “The question is the window!”

I wish I could have taken all the credit for my advice, but it had actually come from three other social psychologists—Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley—who had in 2018 published a paper entitled “Perspective Mistaking: Accurately Understanding the Mind of Another Requires Getting Perspective, Not Taking Perspective.”

The researchers had conducted a series of studies showing that when it comes to judging another person’s emotions and views, trying to “imagine their perspective” doesn’t work as well as we think. In fact, there was a tendency across all the studies for accuracy to suffer when people tried to imagine the perspective of the other. Epley, in his fascinating book *Mindwise*, even reports the same effect for romantic couples. Trying to imagine the perspective of other people can make us less perceptive. Epley suggests, because we often end up imagining *ourselves* as the other person, even though the other person might be in a different situation and have different tastes from our own.

Instead of trying to imagine another person’s perspective, Epley suggests that we *ask* for it, what he calls “perspective-getting.”

He and his colleagues showed that when people were told to ask questions to try to get to know another person and their interests, attitudes, and hobbies, the degree to which their predictions matched what the other person reported about themselves soared. This was true for married couples as well. Rather than try to imagine how much your spouse would like to spend a weekend camping, ask them about it. This seems so obvious as to be almost silly. But, interestingly, Epley and his colleagues show that people don’t fully appreciate the empathic gains

they get by simply asking good questions and, just as important, listening to the answers.

Many years ago, Epley recounts, the military was trying to foretell the effect on officers of repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that banned gay men and lesbians from openly serving in the military. A survey of retired military officers revealed that the majority predicted, based on their experience, that the repeal would decrease the officers' morale. The Pentagon also simply asked current soldiers how they thought they would react. The overwhelming majority said it would have either no effect or a positive effect. Many had met gay officers and didn't have a problem with it. Who was right? A study of the actual consequences of the eventual repeal gave the answer: the soldiers.

Another example of perspective-getting comes from Catherine Thomas and her colleagues who studied the best way to present financial aid to the poor in Nairobi. As we saw earlier, they found that empowering presentations, which emphasized "helping your community grow," generated more interest in learning about business than did the standard "helping the poor to meet their needs" presentation. But the researchers also found that when another sample of participants from the same locale was asked to guess how people from their community would respond to the various presentations, on average they guessed right. If you're trying to figure out the best way to support people, one way is to simply ask them.

In fact, a long-standing methodology of social science is predicated on the value of perspective-getting: the qualitative interview, which at its best is a candid and authentic conversation with someone else about their story as they see it. It can serve as a powerful corrective to stereotypical assumptions we might otherwise make. The Jamaican American author and activist June Jordan, critical of white researchers and artists who try to imagine the situation of being black in America rather than listen to the people who live it, wrote an essay, the title of which distilled her frustration: "On Listening: A Good Way to Hear."

Kathryn Edin has used the qualitative interview to understand with touching nuance the experience of poverty. Her work resoundingly

debunks many of the stereotypes of working-class men of all ethnic groups. Many of her interviewees were entrepreneurial, acquiring multiple skills to "hedge their bets" and fulfill a need for autonomy and self-expression, training to work as barbers, diesel mechanics, tattoo artists, DJs, or some mix. Several worked grueling hours "off the books." Very few had significant leisure time. Many of her interviewees also rejected the tough, macho norms of the previous generation of fathers. They all embraced their role as fathers and wanted both to provide financially and to be available emotionally. One respondent said that being a father "taught [him] pure love." Many men reported being emotionally devastated as a result of being separated from their children. "It's destroyed me," one said. Edin also observed that many unmarried men "feel degraded as men and devalued as dads" as a direct result of social policies, as when they get "slapped with a child support order without any process in place that ensures them parenting time." Edin's perspective-getting has led her to conclude, "After decades of research on the poor, we've found that a common theme is the desire for basic human dignity and respect."

That's not to say people are always accurate when they share their perspectives. Research by Daniel Gilbert, Timothy Wilson, and their colleagues shows that we are subject to many biases and blind spots when it comes to reading ourselves, including a tendency to be self-serving and to overlook shameful or discomfiting aspects of our feelings and thoughts. Rather than delving into this large body of research—for excellent treatments, see Gilbert's book *Stumbling on Happiness* and Wilson's book *Strangers to Ourselves*—I want to simply highlight two points. First, people can be oblivious to the real reasons they hold the thoughts and feelings they do. So it may be best to begin the perspective-getting process by asking them to describe their perspective rather than explain why they have it. Explaining *what* we consciously think and feel is a far less speculative and error-prone enterprise. Second, we can help people give their perspective with greater accuracy by avoiding questions that simply confirm our own beliefs about them. Asking a political conservative "Why do you find

liberals so threatening?" is likely to be counterproductive. Such questions tend to put the other person on the defensive and to elicit information that confirms our beliefs. But if we have an open mind when questioning people and inquire in a genuine way about how they're thinking and feeling, they're likely to surprise us with information that allows us to see them as distinctive individuals rather than through stereotypes. Asking a political conservative "What do you think about a higher minimum wage?" might inspire a more thoughtful and illuminating discussion.

Asking others to share their perspective not only leads to much more accuracy of understanding between people but creates a bonding force, which engenders still deeper and richer readings of one another. The power of questions to create appreciation and warmth between people was demonstrated in remarkable research by the social psychologist Art Aron and his wife, the clinical psychologist Elaine Aron. They were interested in how bonds of intimacy might be created between people who were strangers to one another. Through much research, they created what they called the "fast friends procedure."

Two strangers are paired up, and they ask one another a series of thirty-six questions, which were honed over time by the Arons. The questions begin with "Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?" Next is "Would you like to be famous? In what way?" Third is "Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?" And fourth is "What would constitute a 'perfect' day for you?" The questions become increasingly intimate: for example, "How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?" and "If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?" Sharing vulnerabilities in a safe environment fosters connection. This procedure consistently produces feelings of closeness, overwhelming the impact of disagreement on various issues of personal taste that we expect to matter. It has even led to at least one marriage proposal.

Research by social psychologists Elizabeth Page-Gould and Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton showed that the fast friends procedure can be used as an intervention to improve social belonging. They brought Latino and white college students together and had them ask one another the questions either with a person of the same ethnicity or with a person of the other ethnicity. They found that the experience of doing the activity with a person of another ethnicity was especially powerful in helping Latino students who were worried about being rejected because of their ethnicity. Afterward these students reported feeling more satisfied with their experience at the university and being more likely to encourage a friend to attend, relative to Latino students who had completed the same activity with a person of their ethnicity. There was even some evidence in a later study that this procedure reduced cortisol reactivity—a biological signature of social evaluative threat—among both Latino and white students when they interacted across racial lines. Moreover, among participants who had relatively more negative views of the other ethnic group, making a friend across ethnic lines prompted them to initiate more cross-race conversations in their day-to-day lives outside of school. A single friendship can make a big difference, not only bonding people to each other but bonding them to their mutual worlds. For that matter, Eminem, Khatirine Graham, and many other successful people who "made it" in a world where they were an outsider report having had one "insider" friend who served as a bridge between worlds.

Why is asking people questions about themselves such a potent agent in forming bonds? One reason is that it is affirming of others, making them feel that they are interesting and that their interlocutor in particular finds them worthy of close attention. Another reason is simply that we get to know each other better, building more authentic relationships and learning how to provide more individualized support.

Tutoring students can harness the power of perspective-getting to great effect. A good tutor is the most effective educational intervention,

with only a single session producing remarkable gains in learning even among alienated and underperforming students.

Social psychologist Mark Lepper conducted brilliant research on what makes some tutors much more effective than others. Setting up his laboratory as a mini-classroom, with video cameras to record tutoring sessions, he and his collaborator Maria Woolverton recruited tutors and a number of ten-year-old students who were all struggling in math. Then they watched and taped sessions both with tutors who got average results and with ones who got superior results.

What distinguished the superior tutors? For one thing, rather than getting right to the business of instruction, they asked the students questions about their hobbies and interests. As with the Arons' thirty-six questions, these questions were affirming for the students, making them feel they were being seen as a whole person, not just "a kid with math problems." Affirmed of their value as interesting individuals, the students felt more comfortable challenging themselves. Asking these questions also helped the tutors to understand what motivated individual students.

The questions also created a connection between the tutor and the student, and the tutors didn't confine questions only to this opening phase of the sessions. The superior tutors kept on asking questions, keeping the child a full participant in the process of her own learning. Remarkably, when Lepper and Woolverton coded the transcripts of these sessions, they discovered that 90 percent of the tutor's utterances were questions. Rather than explaining, "You should begin adding with the 1's column, not the 10's column," for example, they would ask, "Where do you begin? With the 1's column or the 10's column?" Listening in on the interactions, you'd almost think the students were educating the tutors. To continue to sniff out the precise gaps in the child's understanding, the superior tutors would say to a student who gave a wrong answer, "Tell me more about why you think that." This would lead the student to realize where their thinking went wrong. I like to think of these wise tutors as sherpas for the students, guiding them to ascend the summit themselves.

Lepper has gone on to apply the insights from his research on expert tutors in work for the United States Navy, training cadets in information technology. This is one of the most popular educational tracks in the Navy, with the skills being critical for handling its massive ships and operating complex interconnected technologies. Lepper became part of a team that created a program called the Digital Tutor, based on his tutoring research, with an interface as much like a wise human tutor as possible. It asks questions rather than lecturing, provides hints to help trainees discover answers on their own, and affirms learners indirectly rather than directly. The results have been stellar, raising the test performance of cadets to the level of seasoned sailors within a month. A later variant of the Digital Tutor was used with unemployed veterans, helping the vast majority to gain employment in information technology jobs at Microsoft, Amazon, and other tech companies.



WE'VE ALL HEARD THAT empathizing with others is a matter of putting ourselves in their shoes. But with people having such different life experiences and perspectives, when we try to do so, we may be off base. We need to find ways to cultivate authentic empathy, a mission that has taken on greater urgency in our increasingly diverse and divided society.

One promising approach, which has garnered little attention, was developed while I was finishing my studies at Stanford by a fellow graduate student named Ronaldo Mendoza. He wanted to determine how we could come to genuinely understand another person's experience, especially when we've taken offense at something they have said or done. Mendoza was hopeful, writing that because no two people are exactly alike, each encounter "is an occasion for the work of empathy," and with each encounter "we are students anew."

An ingenious experiment he conducted provided one powerful strategy for creating empathy. While virtually all the research I've described in this book was published in peer-reviewed journals, this

work of Mendoza's was not. He didn't go into academia, and so, like too much PhD dissertation research, his work sits unused and unrecognized on a bookshelf. But I think it's among the most important studies on empathy ever conducted, and, as we'll see in Chapter 13, later research lent support to his novel approach in promoting empathy across the political divide.

Mendoza recruited pairs of college romantic couples or close friends and had them each come prepared to discuss something the other person had done that bothered them. At the lab, each person shared this grievance with their friend or partner. Then both members of the pair rated how much they felt they understood their counterpart and how much they felt their counterpart understood them.

Next, for one group of these pairs, Mendoza asked each person to "think about the incident that you brought in and then try to put yourself in your partner's shoes." This was a standard empathy induction. They were asked to describe in writing the situation the other was in and how they would "have felt and behaved had they been in that situation." For instance, one young woman singled out as her grievance the fact that her boyfriend had consoled his ex-girlfriend before tending to her when they both went to the hospital after some friends had been in a tragic accident. She tried to put herself in her boyfriend's situation and to imagine how she would have felt and behaved.

For a second group of pairs, Mendoza tested a novel intervention. He asked them instead to think about the incident they had brought up and to describe what they thought their partner "was *feeling* when they did the thing that bothered them." He did not ask them to think about how that situation would have made *them* feel but how it had made *their partner* feel. Then he asked them to recall an *analogous situation* from *their own life* "in which you felt something similar to what you think your partner may have felt." This strategy, Mendoza suggested, was more likely to evoke what we really mean by "to empathize," as the word's Germanic origin, *emföhlen*, meaning literally "to feel oneself into," indicates.

For both groups, each member of the pair took turns sharing their written responses with their partner. In other words, they *gave* their

perspective and *got* their partner's perspective. The two in each pair were then asked to rate again how much they understood their partner and how much they felt their partner understood them.

After compiling the data, Mendoza made two discoveries. For the first group, he found that there was no increase in how much the individuals in the pairs rated their own or the other's degree of understanding and, in fact, some people reported feeling *less* understanding of their partner: Why? Because much of the time, when we imagine ourselves in the same situation as another person, we conclude, "I wouldn't have done what they did!" This then makes us less empathic. For instance, the woman whose boyfriend consoled his ex-girlfriend at the hospital wrote, "I would have made sure [my partner] was alright before I comforted or went to a friend." After the intervention, her rating of how much understanding she had for her boyfriend fell from a 6 to a 2 on a 9-point scale. Her boyfriend's rating of how understood he felt dropped from 7 to 2.

The second discovery was that the emotion-based empathic intervention increased mutual understanding. The jump in the ratings provided by the pairs in this group was significantly greater than the change in the ratings provided by the pairs in the first group. Consider the reaction of another woman, whose grievance was that her boyfriend commented "on how attractive some girls looked." He had claimed, she wrote, that he was just "stating it factually," and wasn't making any veiled attempt to put her down. For her exercise, she imaginatively drew on a situation that bore little resemblance factually but great resemblance emotionally:

I think an analogous situation occurred in high school, when I commented that one of my friends' poetry was not strong or effective, and she took it the wrong way. I guess [my] feeling [was] that I was saying something true but my friend didn't want to hear it.

Her rating of how much understanding she had for her boyfriend increased from 7 to 8, but more impressively, his rating of how under-

stood he felt by her increased from 2 to 7. Mendoza reported that there were several powerful moments of connection in the couples in the emotion-based empathy group, with some reporting that they felt the other person finally “got it” with respect to the grievance raised.

We all have a bank of experiences and memories that we can use to enhance our empathy with others, if we are willing. We can treat our memories as touchstones for greater connection rather than heavy rocks of self-recrimination. Thinking of analogous situations in which we’ve felt similarly to someone who has aggrieved us, or responded in a way we object to, helps us to read them better and appreciate the factors in the situation affecting their behavior.



WE CAN’T, AND SHOULDN’T, try to stop getting a good read on others. Positive social interaction and the connections that support belonging depend to some degree on people’s ability to read others well. The operable word here, though, is “well.” Our misreadings too often rewrite situations for the worse.

One of the privileges I have as a social scientist is one we get far too little of in our daily social lives: the opportunity to discover how often I am wrong. The process of designing an experiment forces you to specify a hypothesis and put it to a clear test. The data don’t care what you think. You ask a question, and the analysis of the data, as I see it, is a form of listening. If your theory of what people will do is wrong, you find out. I’ve had many sad Fridays—the day when the data come rolling in—as a result. But in our everyday social lives we rarely get the chance to discover how wrong we are. It’s seldom obvious, and we don’t ask questions to put our ideas to the test. Our mind’s biases not only cause errors but blind us to those errors. My sense is that it’s these cognitive biases, more than any moral failing, that cause much misunderstanding and conflict. By nurturing an awareness of what Emily Pronin calls our “bias blind spot,” we can rise to three challenges:

1. **Humility:** Be on guard for an outsized faith in our judgments and our tendency to assume that our beliefs about others are correct.
2. **Empathy:** Try to appreciate that other people’s anxieties and insecurities shape their behaviors just as much as our anxieties and insecurities shape our own.
3. **Communication:** Ask people for their perspective, because when we don’t, we deprive ourselves of the chance to learn and connect.

To meet these challenges and overcome our biases takes work. But by using the tools of perspective-getting introduced here, and by practicing the techniques of psychological self-care that clear our heads and hearts of preoccupation, we can change the way we read others for the better.

The motto might be, “Don’t just read. Listen.” We will always be spinning theories about the people we meet, but we can step back from them in our minds and prod ourselves to reconsider. We can remind ourselves to try to understand the situation as it’s seen and felt by the other person, regardless of how much we disagree on the surface. And no matter how weird someone else seems to be, we can consider the possibility that we, because of our cultural programming, may be the weird one. With these bits of wisdom and with lots of practice, we can get much better at asking instead of assuming, at reading situations and how they’re affecting people, and at cultivating empathy based on feelings of fellowship.