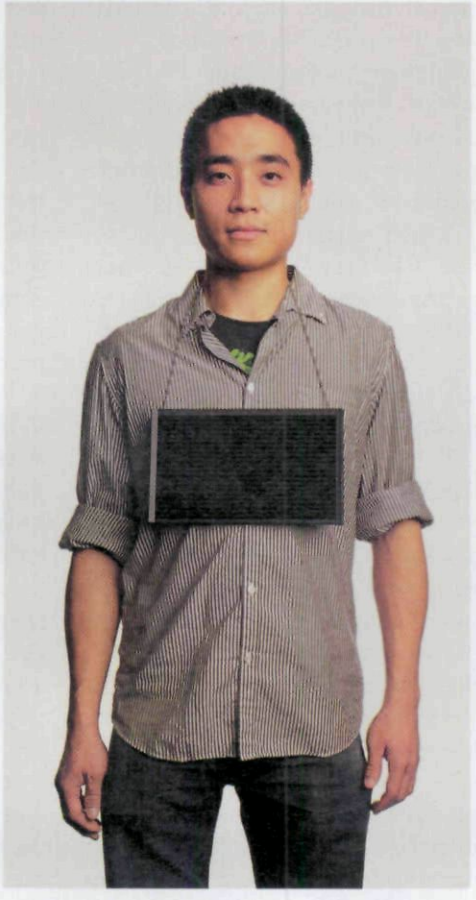
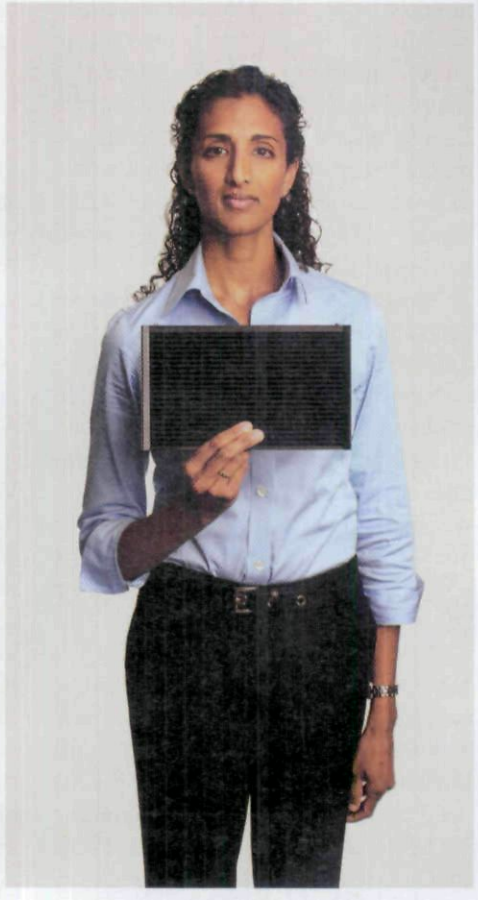
MIXED SIGNALS

You likely see yourself very differently from the way others see you. A little self-awareness can prevent a lot of misunderstanding.

BY SAM GOSLING | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARJEAN LEVINE





"I WILL BE THERE AT 2 P.M. SHARP," Kirsten assures me as we set up our next research meeting. I make note of it in my calendar—but I put it down as 3 P.M. It's not that Kirsten is trying to fool me; she's just deluded about her time-management skills. After a long history of meetings to which she shows up an hour late, I've realized I have to make allowances for her self-blinding optimism. I don't have unique insight—any of her friends would make the same prediction. In the domain of punctuality, others know Kirsten better than she knows herself.

The difference between how you see yourself and how others see you is not just a matter of egocentrism. Like Kirsten, we all have blind spots. We change our self-conception when we see ourselves through others' eyes. Part of the discrepancy arises because the outsider's perspective affords information you yourself miss—like the fact that it looks like you're scowling when you're listening, or that you talk over other people.

How well we understand ourselves has a profound impact on our ability to navigate the social realm. In some areas, we know ourselves better than others do. But in other areas, we're so biased by our need to see ourselves in a good light that we become strangers to ourselves. By soliciting feedback from other people, we can learn more about ourselves and how we're coming off. Only by understanding how we're seen can we make sure we're sending the right signals. To be understood by others, in other words, the first step is understanding ourselves.

There Is No Perfect Point of View

HOW DO YOU CUT through the fog and learn to see yourself—and others—clearly? Different perspectives provide different information on the self. To bring some order to all the things that can be known about you, it helps to divide them into four categories.

First, there are "bright spots"—things known by both you and others, like the fact that you're politically conservative or talkative. Studies show that traits like extroversion, talkativeness, and dominance are easily observable both to the self and to others. If everyone thinks you're a chatterbox, you probably are.

Second are "dark spots"—things known by neither you nor others. These could include deep unconscious motives that drive your behaviors, like the fact that your relentless ambition is driven by the need to prove wrong your parents' assumption that you'd never amount to much.

Third are "personal spots"—things known only by you, like your tendency to get anxious in crowds or your contempt for your coworkers. And finally, there are "blind spots"—things known only by others, which can include such factors as your level of hostility and defensiveness, your attractiveness, and your intelligence.

The most interesting are the latter two—personal spots and blind spots—since they involve discrepancies between how we see ourselves and how others see us.

Why You're Less Transparent Than You Think

WE'RE NOT ENTIRELY deluded about ourselves. We have pretty unrestricted access, for instance, to what we like and believe; if you think you're in favor of tighter regulation for car emissions or that Bon Iver is your favorite band right now, who am I to argue? Even if you don't know the mysterious unconscious motives underlying what you like and do, you're still the best source of information about your attitudes, beliefs, and preferences.

We often think others are aware of our anxiety or our darkest feelings, but research shows they're actually poor judges of our emotions, intentions, and thoughts. Thomas Gilovich, a psychologist at Cornell, has found that numerous obstacles and psychological biases stand in the way of knowing how you're seen by others. We overestimate the extent to which our internal states are detectable to others—a bias known as the "illusion of transparency." We also overestimate the extent to which our behavior and appearance are noticed and evaluated by others—a bias known as the "spotlight effect."

We're good at judging our own self-esteem, optimism and pessimism, and anything to do with how we feel. So for instance, others may think you're very calm when in fact you're so anxious in large groups that your palms sweat and your heart rate soars.

Personal spots exist because others know how you behave, but they don't know your intentions or feelings, explains Simine Vazire, director of the Personality and Self-Knowledge Lab at Washington University. "If you're quiet at a party, people don't know if it's because you're arrogant and you think you're better than everyone else or because you're shy and don't know how to talk to people," she says. "But *you* know, because you know your thoughts and feelings. So things like anxiety, optimism and pessimism, your tendency to daydream, and your general level of happiness—what's going on inside of you, rather than things you do—those are things other people have a hard time knowing."

Why Your Intelligence and Attractiveness Elude You

THERE ARE A lot of reasons to think you'd be the best judge of you. After all, you've known you longer than anyone else (except, perhaps, your parents). You've spent more time with you than anyone else. You see yourself in all kinds of situations, from solitary reflective moments in your home to dazzling parties surrounded by friends and strangers.

But you're also very biased; you have a vested interest in seeing yourself as decent and competent, and not evil or inept. When it comes to traits that mat-

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PT spoke to ten people about how they come across to others. Some felt well understood, some didn't. Here's what they had to say.

ALEX LEE, 47
hospital administrator

People who don't know me that well say I'm aloof. I'm quiet, withdrawn, I focus on doing my own thing. I've got a lot to do. People at work don't know I'm a single mom with two kids at home. They say, "You're like the duck with the feet paddling underneath really fast. You look so cool, calm, and collected, but you're really scurrying everywhere."

DOUCOURE M. RAHEIM,49
jewelry designer

People say I am very respectful. For me it's natural. I am from Mali, West Africa. I've been here 19 years. I make and sell jewelry. It stands out. My attitude in my clothes is to be very approachable. I don't like to seem untouchable. When we approach each other, we can know each other for who we are instead of judging from a distance.

ter to our self-esteem, we tend to have positive delusions—meaning on these dimensions, others see us more accurately than we see ourselves.

"Other men's sins are before our eyes," said the Roman philosopher Seneca. "Our own are behind our backs." You rarely get to participate in gossip sessions about yourself, and you have only limited access to how people react to you and what they say.

"It's difficult to judge your own intelligence or other traits you have a lot invested in," explains Vazire. When people are asked to rank their own intelligence, their ratings don't match their scores on IQ tests. (When researchers ask our friends or others who know us well, on the other hand, they're actually fairly good judges—because they have a less clouded lens.) The same goes for honesty. Such positive delusions about the self are often adaptive, boosting our confidence and helping us recover more quickly from rejection.

By the same token, we're not very aware of how attractive we are—not just because we have an interest in seeing ourselves as beautiful, but also because we only see ourselves through our own eyes. Ditto for body language. "It's just so salient to other people," explains Vazire. "It's a matter of physical perspective—your own body isn't in your visual field. So in addition to the psychological advantage of being more objective, other people also have a physical advantage in detecting your overt behaviors."

If you do know how irritating or attractive you are, it's probably via direct or indirect feedback from others. At work you may find that, despite setting everyone straight on a few issues when you last served on a committee, you haven't been asked to serve on any since then. If the attributes are positive—such as the fact that everyone likes you or that you're very attractive—people are more likely to come straight out and tell you about them. If they're negative, they may forever remain unknown to you.

When Perceptions Clash

EVEN IF YOU think other people are misguided, their perceptions of your character probably do reflect things you do habitually. One striking set of studies recently showed that a spouse's ratings of a person's anxiety, anger, dominance, and solitariness are better than self-ratings at predicting heart disease. The implication: Our spouses are better judges of such traits than we are.

When people are asked how long they think their romantic relationship will last, they're not very good at estimating the right answer. Their friends, it turns out, fare far better. But if you ask people how satisfied they are in a relationship, their ratings accurately predict how long they'll stay together. In many cases, we have the necessary information to understand things as they are—but our blind spots don't allow us to take it into account.

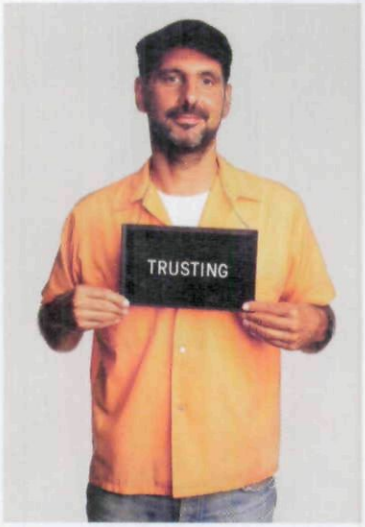
When there's a disagreement between the self and others, it can be because it's a blind spot and you can't see yourself as you really are. But it can also be the sign of a personal spot—an area where you see yourself more accurately than others do. Take Brian Little, a professor who taught a legendary class on personality psychology at Harvard. According to those who saw him lecture, he was eloquent and garrulous, brimming with ebullience and energy. Unsurprisingly, he was widely known by his students as a raging extrovert.

Yet Little disagrees. He insists it's all an act executed in the service of being a good teacher. Should we believe him? Isn't it possible, after all, that extroversion is a blind spot of his?

But if you take a wider perspective and view Professor Little in multiple contexts, his version gathers credence—you learn, for example, that he's much happier engaged in a one-on-one conversation in a quiet corner of a restaurant than he is flitting from person to person at a noisy party. Unlike a true extrovert, who's energized by the social stimulation of teaching a large class, Little is exhausted afterwards—which is why, after many lectures, he locks himself in a bathroom stall to recover from the excessive stimulation. That's why it's important to view people across a diverse range of contexts before jumping to conclusions about what they're like.

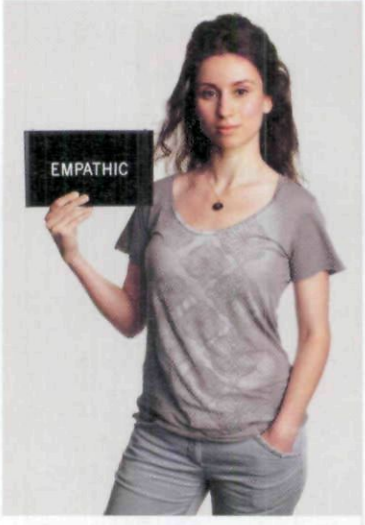
Are You Sending the Wrong Signals?

MANY OF US have times when we are misunderstood. People perceive us as cold and unfriendly when we're really just feel-



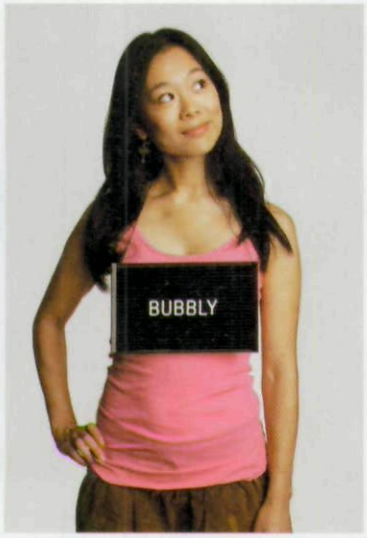
TONY CORSANO, 49
children's musician

I was an attorney. I was paranoid and guarded and always suspecting people. So I switched careers. It was a whole reinvention of myself and my value system. I left my wife, stopped talking to my family, and became a children's singer. Now I'm very transparent, very open about who I am, what I'm doing, and what I want.



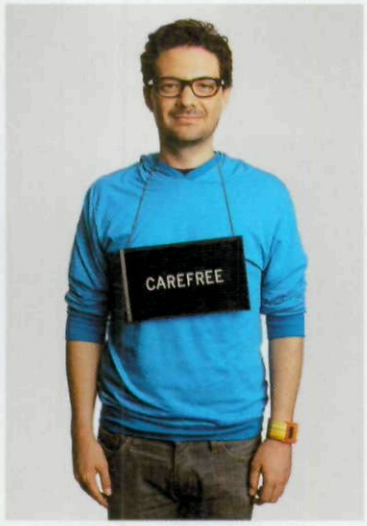
MARIA NENOVA, 28
psychology student

I'm a really emotion-driven person. I'm not saying I'm irrational, but I really value emotions, both negative and positive. I don't run away from things that are scary or negative. I get affected by movies and art, things I read. I get upset easily, but I also get excited really easily. My dad came to visit me from California as a surprise and I was so overcome I just started crying.



YEN PING CHAN, 36
clothing designer

People perceive me as confusing, socially awkward, but sweet and optimistic and happy-go-lucky. I'm actually very, very shy, so I keep my guard up. It takes a while to get to know me because I'm not very confident about myself. It's not a very positive trait. I need time to express myself. At a bar I feel like I have two minutes to make an elevator pitch about myself. So I speak rather fast and get nervous and then I think I come across as a bit of an idiot.



GIOVANNI ESCALERA, 32
producer of the band Sweet Electra

Sometimes I talk too much and only realize it when I see the person's face get sort of tired. On my radio show in Mexico, guests would get so upset because I answered all the questions for them. They'd say, "You invite me on just so you can talk? I barely got to say one word!" As a kid, my brother challenged me. "If you just stay quiet for one meal, we're gonna give you a toy." But I couldn't do it.

ing shy, as flirtatious when we're just trying to be friendly, or as depressed when we're just tired. Being misunderstood is largely a problem of a lack of information—not communicating effectively with the people around you through your words and body language.

For many years, Randall Colvin of Northeastern University has been studying the attributes of people who are easily judged—people others just "get." Colvin found that easily judgeable people tend to be extroverted, warm, consistent, and emotionally stable. These traits are known as "amplifiers" because they increase the expression of other traits. It's easier to judge the creativity of an extrovert than that of an introvert, for example, because the extrovert sends a barrage of thoughts your way, while the introvert might keep them to herself.

Extroversion amplifies other traits because extroverts simply say and do more. The enormous amount of verbal and behavioral information they furnish makes extroverts easier to understand on all aspects of personality, not just their extroversion.

People are also easier to judge if they have a quality called "blirtatiousness," the tendency to respond to others quickly and effusively. It's one of the best amplifiers identified to date—blurters are open books.

So if you feel misunderstood, say and do more. Even introverts can train themselves to communicate more through their words—telling people directly what they like and how they feel. But before you can work on making sure you're sending the right signals, you'll need to know how others are perceiving you.

To See Ourselves as Others See Us

EVEN IF YOU'RE clueless about how you're seen, you may occasionally stumble onto a glimpse of how others see you. An overheard conversation or a carelessly forwarded email may allow us, as the 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns put it, "To see oursel's as ithers see us." I had my own moment of self-insight recently, accidentally furnished by a group of friends as I was recounting a story. "Now, I see myself as a pretty sensitive guy," I began—at which point my audience simultaneously did double takes and exchanged stunned looks. Huh. Perhaps I'm not as sensitive as I imagine!

Millions of first impressions are now formed online. So along with Simine Vazire and my student Sam Gaddis, I decided to examine how well people understand the impressions they're making with their Facebook profiles. We found that people know how extroverted they seem, but are clueless about the other impressions they convey. So Danielle knows she's seen as an introvert, but doesn't realize she's also seen as dependable, laid-back, and creative.

Why are we so hopeless at knowing how we come across? Because we not only fail to consider the information used by observers, but we also actively take into account information observers fail to consider, according to John Chambers, a psychologist at the University of Florida.

You may know you're less reckless than you used to be, more talkative than your friends, and less productive than you might wish. But such information about your past, your friends, and your wishes is not easily accessible to others. Even so, when guessing what others think of you, you'll find it almost impossible to disregard all the things you know about yourself to which others don't have access.

How you're seen does matter. Social judgment forms the basis for social interaction itself. Almost every decision others make about you, from promotions to friendships to marriages, is based on how people see you. So even if you never learn what you're really like, learning how others perceive you is a worthwhile goal.

The solution is asking others what they see. The best way to do this is to solicit their opinions directly—though just asking your mom won't cut it. You'll need to get feedback from multiple people—your friends, coworkers, family, and, if you can, your enemies. Offer the cloak of anonymity without which they wouldn't dare share the brutal truth—the Facebook app "Honesty Box," for instance, allows people to send you anonymous notes. You may also want to videotape yourself to get a more objective perspective.

To provide users with systematic feedback on how their personality traits were viewed by multiple others, my collabo-

GRAHAM HALSTEAD, 22
actor

Sometimes people see me as blunt or brusque because I'm very direct about what I want. But people also give me that "You're kind of an idiot, but you're pretty" look. A lot of things probably come easier for me—the more commercial aspects of life, things where people judge you on your appearance. People are much more open, more eager to help me and offer things. But people also think you're a pretty face and assume you've never had to work hard and that you don't work hard.

SEJAL VYAS REDINGTON, 36
physical therapist

I'm not a warm fuzzy emotional person. I come across as bossy because I say what I think and don't pad it with extra fluff. I'm not a crier at movies. One of my friends said she thought I was emotionally detached. I'm not a dweller, a grudge-holder. I can talk about feelings, but I don't go through a box of Kleenex.

rators David Evans and Anthony Carroll and I developed a Facebook application called YouJustGetMe, which helped users understand the signals they were sending with their Facebook profiles. Sure enough, people were surprised by the feedback they got. People were seen as less open-minded and neurotic than they saw themselves—but more dependable, warm, and outgoing.

Getting an outsider's perspective actually provides you new information. In a classic study, Richard Robins of the University of California at Davis and Oliver John of Berkeley examined how people viewed their own contributions to a group discussion task. First, subjects were asked to rate their own performance. Then they watched a video of the discussion. When asked again what they thought of their performance after seeing the video, people downgraded their evaluations of how well they did—bringing their assessments more in line with those of others.

In Akira Kurosawa's epic movie *Rashomon*, four witnesses provide only partially overlapping—and at times contradictory—accounts of the same robbery. In the same way, no single perspective on the self is complete. That's why we need to augment our self-views with the views of others, not only to overcome our personal biases, but also because other people have access to information we miss.

There's a lot to be learned about ourselves and others by seeking multiple perspectives. Even Kirsten could learn something about her punctuality issues by supplementing her own views with information provided by others. All she needs to do is set up a meeting to solicit feedback from them. Oh, wait! **PT**

SAM GOSLING is a psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You*.

ARE YOU MISUNDERSTOOD?

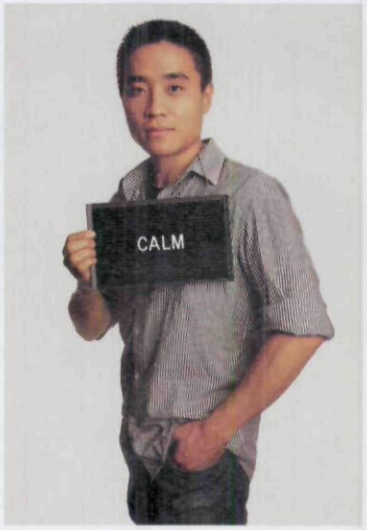
Many of us aren't what we seem. A guide to frequently misunderstood types.

The Shy Extrovert. When someone's shy, we often assume they're introverted. Shyness often does go along with introversion—but not always. Some people who get anxious among strangers actually love being around others—whereas true introverts find people exhausting. Like other shy people, shy introverts are routinely misunderstood as cold, aloof, or stuck-up. They're particularly likely to be judged negatively if they're also attractive, says Bernie Carducci, a psychologist at Indiana University.
The Fix: Directly challenge the mistakes you know people make, saying, "If I seem unfriendly, it's not because I don't like you, it's because I'm shy," or, "I had a great time hanging out with you." If that's too much for you, say it via email.

The Bubbly Introvert. When people come across as vivacious, exuberant, and cheerful, we assume they're extroverts. But some lively people are actually gasping for time to themselves. Having good social skills isn't the same thing as wanting to be around people all the time. "These things go together a lot," says Sanjay Srivastava, a psychologist at the University of Oregon. "But they're not perfect correlations."
The Fix: Like other introverts, bubbly introverts have to be vigilant about guarding their alone time. Try saying, "I'd love to, but I need some downtime. How's Tuesday?"

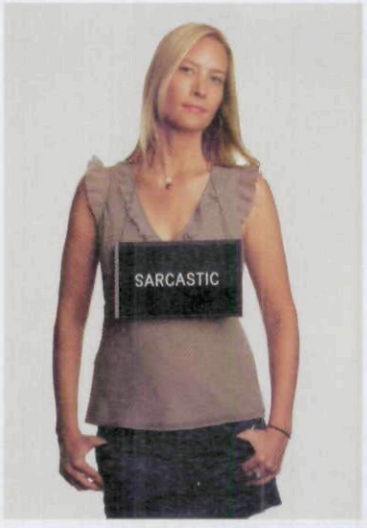
The Accidental Flirt. Some people are so naturally flirtatious that they send the wrong signals, inadvertently communicating "I want to sleep with you" when what they really mean is "I'm friendly."
The Fix: Dial back the touching and eye gaze. If you think your conversation partner is getting the wrong idea, slip in a reference to a significant other.

The Effeminate Heterosexual. Just because a man is skinny, dresses neatly, and has a fey voice doesn't mean he's gay. Many feminine men are completely straight, and some of the most masculine-seeming men are gay.
The Fix: If you're interested in a woman, put out signs of attraction that are hard to mistake—more aggressive body language such as straight-on stance, a mischievous grin, and occasional touching. Say something like, "That reminds me of something funny my ex-girlfriend once said." She'll get it. —*Jay Dixit*



ERIC PAN, 28
jazz pianist

Growing up, I always had a fear of being misunderstood. I worried people thought I was really quiet—and that if I did express myself, they'd think I was full of myself because I was loud and expressive to overcompensate. Then I realized caring about that was an insecurity. I feel happier now realizing I can be myself and that the outside world is going to have its own opinion.



KATRINA RODIES, 33
nurse/writer

If you're a blonde, people expect you to be bubbly and giggly, and since I'm not that way, I seem more aloof than I otherwise would. People talk to me like I'm a dumb blonde, like, "Hellooooo! Miss!" They talk down to me like I'm ditzy, speaking slower, being more inflected. Men don't expect a give and take from me. They expect me to bat my eyelashes and laugh at their jokes.