



Self-Knowledge of Personality: Do People Know Themselves?

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Abstract

The intuition that we have privileged and unrestricted access to ourselves – that we inevitably know who we are, how we feel, what we do, and what we think – is very compelling. Here, we review three types of evidence about the accuracy of self-perceptions of personality and conclude that the glass is neither full nor empty. First, studies comparing self-perceptions of personality to objective criteria suggest that self-perceptions are at least tethered to reality – people are not completely clueless about how they behave, but they are also far from perfect. Second, studies examining how well people's self-perceptions agree with others' perceptions of them suggest that people's self-views are not completely out of synch with how they are seen by those who know them best, but they are also far from identical. Third, studies examining whether people know the impressions they make on others suggest that people do have some glimmer of insight into the fact that others see them differently than they see themselves but there is still a great deal people do not know about how others see them. The findings from all three approaches point to the conclusion that self-knowledge exists but leaves something to be desired. The status of people's self-knowledge about their own personality has vast implications both for our conception of ourselves as rational agents and for the methods of psychological inquiry.

At times I fancy, Socrates, that anybody can know himself; at other times the task appears to be very difficult. – *Alcibiades*¹

How clearly can we see ourselves? Are we our own best experts? The intuition that we have privileged and unrestricted access to ourselves – that we inevitably know who we are, how we feel, what we do, and what we think – is very compelling. After all, who knows better what it's like to be you than you do? Certainly, our perceptions of our own personality are vivid, but how accurate are they? Do we know, better than anybody else, what we are like?

The question of whether we know ourselves better than anybody else knows us has been a prominent theme in mainstream culture, including in music ('I'll be your mirror/Reflect what you are/In case you don't know'; Velvet Underground, 1996), literature ('I know you, buddy boy, know you better than you know your own self'; *Nobody's Fool*, Richard Russo, 1994, p. 488), and film ('No, I don't think you're paranoid. I think you're the opposite of a paranoid. I think you walk around with the insane delusion that people like you. '; *Deconstructing Harry*, Woody Allen, 1996). This preoccupation with self-knowledge (or lack thereof) is not new, indeed it has been around as long as history itself. Starting with the Oracle at Delphi, self-knowledge has been a documented interest of philosophers, including such exalted thinkers as Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Nietzsche. Self-knowledge has also been a major theme in popular books, including the Dalai Lama's *How to See Yourself as You Really Are* (2006). Finally, self-knowledge themes are still prominent in the scholarly writings of contemporary philosophers (e.g., Doris,

forthcoming; Haybron, 2008; Mele, 2001; Schwitzgebel, 2008; Shoemaker, 1996; Tiberius, 2008). Despite millennia of concerted attention, however, the question remains: How well do people know themselves?

To psychologists this question is, at heart, an empirical one. Indeed, Freud saw as a major aim of psychological research 'to prove that the ego is not master in its own house', and with not a little megalomania of his own, described this as the 'third and most wounding blow' to human megalomania, after Copernicus's discovery that our planet is not at the center of the universe and Darwin's discovery that our species is descended from other animals (1966; p. 353). Since then, many psychologists have shared Freud's skepticism about people's capacity for self-knowledge. For example, behaviorists have been notoriously dismissive of people's capacity for self-insight, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) famously asserted that people are 'telling more than they can know' about themselves, and the literature on positive illusions and self-enhancement paints people as blissfully ignorant about their own personality traits (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

So, has psychology shown that people do not know themselves? Not exactly. To judge from our methods, the field of social and personality psychology still has plenty of faith in self-perceptions. As Swann and Pelham point out, 'if we are to question the self-reports of participants, much, if not most, of results of research on the self becomes suspect'. (Swann & Pelham, 2002; p. 228). Indeed, the vast majority of all social and personality research relies on self-reports (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004; Vazire, 2006) and thus would be called into question if we were to conclude that people lack self-insight. As one of us was once admonished by the ubiquitous Reviewer A, 'the best criterion for a target's personality is his or her self-ratings [...] Otherwise, the whole enterprise of personality assessment seriously needs to re-think itself' (personal communication, 2003).

Which is the correct view? Are people hopelessly deluded about themselves, or can we trust people's self-perceptions of their personality to be an accurate reflection of what they are like? In this review, we examine the evidence for one particular type of self-knowledge: people's knowledge of their own personality. Clearly, this is only one of several types of self-knowledge (Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Dunn, 2004); we could also ask whether people are aware of their reasons or motives (Thrash, Elliot, & Schultheiss, 2007), mental states (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006), or emotions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). For a broader review of self-knowledge, we recommend Wilson's (2009) excellent paper. Here, we focus our attention on self-knowledge of personality.

What is Self-Knowledge?

Before reviewing the literature, it is important to define what we mean by self-knowledge of one's personality. There are many reasonable definitions, but a choice has to be made to identify the boundaries of our review. For the purpose of this review, we define self-knowledge of personality as accurate self-perceptions about how one typically thinks, feels, and behaves, and awareness of how those patterns are interpreted by others. This definition places a great deal of emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of personality (e.g., one's reputation), partly because these are the easiest to assess (though see Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000 and Vazire, 2010), but mainly because much of personality is inherently interpersonal, and these characteristics are likely the most important to know about ourselves.

This definition also places much more emphasis on accuracy than on lack of bias. While self-knowledge of personality surely entails both, the two have traditionally been

examined separately, with the bias literature focusing on demonstrating the existence of biases, and the accuracy literature estimating the magnitude of self-knowledge. Because this review attempts to evaluate the outcome (how much self-knowledge do people have?) rather than the process (how objective are people when they look inward?), we include only studies that quantify people's degree of self-knowledge, and thus do not include the bias literature in our review.² Nevertheless, it is important to note that the social cognition literature has conclusively shown that self-perceptions are influenced by a panoply of biases. In study after study, people overestimate their abilities (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Kruger & Dunning, 1999) and rate themselves more favorably than they rate others (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003).

Not only are self-perception biases common, they seem to be quite automatic and effortless (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Taxing people's self-control results in more positive self-descriptions (Paulhus, Graf, & Van Selst, 1989; Paulhus & Levitt, 1987; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005) and accurate self-description is associated with more activity in brain regions associated with effortful control than is self-enhancement (Beer & Hughes, 2010). Clearly, self-perceptions are infused with motivated cognitive processes (though of course there are important individual differences; e.g., Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Robins & Beer, 2001; Robins & John, 1997).

What is the net effect of these biases on the accuracy of people's self-perceptions of their personality? How much accuracy is left at the end of these motivated processes? The accuracy literature, reviewed below, attempts to address this question. The answer has vast implications both for our conception of ourselves as rational agents and for the methods of psychological inquiry.

How Can Self-Knowledge be Studied Empirically?

Given the amount of attention self-knowledge has received in mainstream culture and across academic disciplines, it is striking that there is not more empirical work on the topic. This is especially true in the domain of personality, and the reason for this is simple: the study of self-knowledge of personality presents a particularly thorny case of the criterion problem. The criterion problem is the question of how we should assess accuracy – what should the criterion be? When applied to perceptions of one's *own* personality, the question becomes, how do we know if someone's perception of her own personality is accurate?

When researchers want to evaluate the accuracy of other-judgments of personality, the typical solution to the criterion problem is to use the targets' self-perceptions as the criterion. If the judges' impressions are similar to how the targets describe themselves, they are probably pretty close to the truth. Of course when the self *is* the judge – that is, when we are evaluating the accuracy of self-perceptions – self-perceptions cannot be used as the criterion. What's worse, it is almost impossible to find an alternative criterion because a good criterion is one that is clearly more accurate than the judgment it is compared to. Thus, if self-perceptions are assumed to be more accurate than any other measure of personality, this leads to the conclusion that there is no criterion for evaluating the accuracy of self-perceptions.

Luckily, some have not been discouraged by this problem and have found creative solutions. Here, we review three of the most common approaches researchers have taken

to evaluate the accuracy of self-perceptions of personality. First, and perhaps most obviously, self-perceptions can be compared to objective criteria (e.g., behavior, outcomes). For example, if Shaun says he is shy and reserved, does he actually talk to few people and spend a lot of time alone? The extent to which self-perceptions match objective behaviors and outcomes provides some evidence for their accuracy.

Second, self-perceptions can be compared to the perceptions of others who know the person well. If Martha says she is funny, do her friends and family also describe her as funny? This approach rests on the assumption that those with whom we spend a lot of time have important insights about our personality, and if our self-perceptions consistently disagree with the perceptions of those who know us well, this casts serious doubt on their accuracy.

Third, we can ask whether people know how they are seen by others. According to this view, one aspect of self-knowledge is knowing one's reputation. As personality researchers have argued quite persuasively, if personality is what you do everyday, and your reputation is based almost entirely on what you do, there is no better summary of your day-to-day behavior than your reputation (Hofstee, 1994; Hogan, 1998). Furthermore, an important aspect of personality is the reactions you elicit from others, which will have many important consequences in life. Thus, knowing what others think of you is fundamental to knowing your personality.

Each of these approaches has its strengths and limitations. The first approach, comparing self-views to objective criteria, is often considered the gold standard for evaluating the accuracy of self-perceptions. However, obtaining objective measures of behavior is much trickier than it appears to be and often becomes very burdensome (for a discussion, see Vazire, Gosling, Dickey, & Schapiro, 2007). For example, to obtain a criterion measure for a single personality trait, we must first decide which behaviors are associated with that trait. Then, behavior needs to be recorded and coded by multiple observers (because the criterion measure cannot rely on self-reports) and a large amount of behavior must be observed to make sure that we are not capturing an atypical moment. Consequently, researchers often take shortcuts or simply avoid this approach altogether, which means that studies that compare self-perceptions to robust, objective measures of behavior are rare and often have serious limitations. However, as we will see, several studies have overcome these obstacles and consequently provided us with strong tests of self-knowledge.

The two other approaches – comparing self-perceptions to well-acquainted others' perceptions, and asking whether people know their reputations – are much more straightforward to carry out and therefore much more popular. The first approach is simply a matter of identifying informants who know the target person well and then comparing the target's self-perception to these informants' perceptions. The second approach involves asking the targets about their perceptions of the impressions they make on others ('meta-perceptions'; Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966) and comparing these perceptions to others' actual impressions of the targets (the accuracy of meta-perceptions is called 'meta-accuracy').

The major limitation of these two approaches is that they will likely be less convincing to both self-knowledge enthusiasts and skeptics. Those who want to cling to the view that self-perceptions are immaculate will probably not be swayed by evidence that self-perceptions are inconsistent with others' perceptions. They will claim that Richard may not see himself as others see him, and he may not even be aware of how others see him, but he may still be right about himself. Conversely, evidence that people's self-perceptions *do* match others' impressions and that they *are* aware of the impressions they make

on others is unlikely to sway those who are committed to the view that people do not know themselves; the skeptic can always claim that *everyone* is mistaken. Committed skeptics and true believers aside, we expect that most people will agree that having self-perceptions that are consistent with how close others view us and being aware of the impressions we make on others are important indicators of self-knowledge. These sources of evidence are especially important in light of the difficulties associated with the objective criterion approach described above.

Are Self-Perceptions Consistent with Objective Measures?

Do people's perceptions of their own personality match their actual behavior? This question is of great interest to personality researchers, who want to know whether the trait they are studying can be assessed with self-reports. Thus, a number of studies have examined whether self-reports of a particular trait predict theoretically related behaviors (e.g., Asendorpf, Banse, & Mücke, 2002; Levesque & Kenny, 1993; South, Oltmanns, & Turkheimer, 2003; Thrash et al., 2007; Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). A full understanding of self-knowledge, however, would be best achieved by examining the correspondence between self-perceptions and behavior across a broad range of traits.

Fortunately, for our purposes, a few studies have compared self-perceptions to objective, non-self-report measures of behavior across a broad range of traits (Table 1). Most researchers tackling this challenge have done so by obtaining extensive laboratory-based measures of behavior and correlating self-ratings with specific behaviors extracted from these tasks. For example, one study compared people's self-ratings on the big five personality traits to composite behavioral indicators of each trait (Back et al., 2009). Their results show an average correlation between self-perceptions and laboratory behavior of .34, solidly in between the near-zero correlation skeptics might expect and the near-perfect

Table 1 Validity of self-perceptions for predicting behaviors and outcomes

Study	Domain of Personality	Average Self-Accuracy
Laboratory Studies		
Back et al. (2009)	Big Five	.34
Kolar et al. (1996)	CAQ (100 items) ^a	.28
Spain et al. (2000) ^b	Extraversion, Neuroticism	.22
Vazire (2010)	Extraversion, Neuroticism, Intellect	.21
Moskowitz (1990)	Friendliness, Dominance	.14
Naturalistic Studies		
Mehl et al. (2006)	Big Five	.27 ^c
Vazire and Mehl (2008)	Behaviors ^d	.26
Average		.25

A list of some of studies evaluating the accuracy of self-ratings across multiple traits (not exhaustive). Big Five = Big Five personality factors. CAQ = California Adult Q-Set.

^aThe CAQ includes 100 items and is not usually scored along dimensions. These 100 items are meant to capture a broad range of personality traits.

^bSpain et al. used a combination of laboratory and naturalistic methods, but the naturalistic methods used self-reports and so those results are not included here.

^cMehl et al. did not make a priori predictions about which behaviors would be related to each of the Big Five personality factors, thus this average reflects the average of only the significant correlations and is likely inflated because of capitalizing on chance.

^dTwenty behaviors were assessed (e.g., laughing, watching TV).

correlation true believers would have liked to see. Other studies found somewhat weaker correlations (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996; Moskowitz, 1990; Spain et al., 2000; Vazire, 2010), perhaps because the behavioral measures in these other studies were composed of fewer acts, and thus were probably less reliable.³ Together, these studies suggest that self-perceptions are moderately related to how a person will act in a laboratory setting.

Of course, laboratory settings constrain behavior quite a bit. Laboratory settings are ideal for creating unusual or extreme conditions, but some very common interpersonal situations are difficult or impossible to recreate in the laboratory, such as an intimate conversation with a close friend. Furthermore, laboratory settings necessarily eliminate any opportunity for people to choose situations. Thus, self-views may do a better job of predicting repeated real-world behavior than individual acts in the laboratory. Perhaps, the most extensive naturalistic study of self-accuracy is Mehl, Gosling, and Pennebaker's (2006) examination of the relationship between self-reported personality and naturalistic, everyday behavior across the big five personality traits. Using the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR; Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001), a device participants wear for several days that captures auditory recordings of their daily lives, the researchers explored the behavioral and linguistic correlates of each trait. The findings revealed that most traits had numerous behavioral or linguistic correlates, and these were often theoretically meaningful (e.g., introverts spend more time alone than extraverts and disagreeable people swear more than their agreeable counterparts). These findings show that people's perceptions of their own personalities are at least partly corroborated by their behavior in their everyday lives. Among the significant correlations, the average effect-size was moderate (mean $r = .27$), suggesting that self-views do reflect, to some extent, how people behave in their everyday lives.

Perhaps, people's perceptions of their *personality* are not perfectly accurate, but their perceptions of their *behavior* might be right on. Vazire and Mehl (2008) examined this possibility by comparing people's perceptions of their own typical behavior to their actual behavior in their everyday lives. In this study, the predictor and criterion were perfectly matched – that is, people were asked to rate exactly those behaviors that were then measured using the EAR. The results show that accuracy varied greatly across behaviors. For some behaviors (e.g., watching TV, listening to music), people's self-perceptions correlated very strongly with their actual behavior. For other behaviors (e.g., attending class, spending time alone), accuracy was essentially zero. Overall, the average level of self-accuracy was .26.

So far, the results suggest that people's perceptions of their own personality are at least tethered to reality – people are not completely clueless about how they behave. Furthermore, behaviors like those measured in these studies are fickle things – acts that are influenced by a variety of factors beyond the actor's personality. Thus, we should not expect even very accurate personality measures to successfully predict such narrow acts. Indeed, the fact that these behaviors were at all in line with people's broad descriptions of what they are typically like is very strong evidence that people have some self-knowledge about personality.

Further evidence comes from studies showing that self-ratings of personality predict long-term, objective outcomes (e.g., Fiedler, Oltmanns, & Turkheimer, 2004). Two recent reviews (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007) demonstrate that personality ratings predict important life outcomes such as criminality, divorce, and mortality. The correlations between personality and life outcomes in Roberts et al.'s review reached .23 for occupational success, .18 for divorce, and .09 for mortality. In many cases, the outcomes that are predicted are theoretically

and meaningfully related to the traits (e.g., constraint predicts occupational attainment). Thus, because it is safe to assume that the vast majority of the studies on which these reviews are based measured personality using self-reports (Vazire, 2006), the findings provide some evidence for the validity of people's self-perceptions of their personality.

How should we interpret these results? The variability in the findings points to the possibility that self-knowledge varies across domains of personality. Indeed, Vazire (2010) recently suggested that there are predictable patterns in self-knowledge such that people know most about their internal traits (e.g., anxiety) and least about highly evaluative traits (e.g., intelligence). Taken as whole, are these findings evidence for or against self-knowledge? Both. We believe that the consistent, significant relationship between self-views and objective behaviors or outcomes dispels any myth that people lack self-knowledge entirely. However, the fact that the effects are not stronger leaves open the possibility that people possess only a kernel of self-awareness. Thus, these findings refute the most extreme self-knowledge skeptics and also pose a threat to those who believe self-knowledge is immaculate.

Do Self-Perceptions Converge with Others' Perceptions?

How close are people's self-perceptions to their friends' and families' perceptions of them? Several meta-analyses have summarized the empirical evidence, and the correlations are in the .40–.60 range. Table 2 lists these meta-analyses as well as several other studies examining self-other agreement not included in the meta-analyses. The single studies were selected because they are thorough studies that reliably estimate the level of agreement between self-ratings and ratings by well-acquainted others on a range of personality traits or behaviors. In a typical study, participants rate their own personality and then nominate several people who know them well to provide informant ratings. The informants give their impressions of the target participants without discussing their ratings with the target, and the researchers guarantee all parties that their ratings will be kept confidential (c.f. McCrae & Stone, 1998).

The results are relatively consistent across domains of personality (e.g., big five traits, personality disorders, and behaviors). Interestingly, self-perceptions seem to be more in line with spouses' ratings than with ratings by friends or roommates. This is consistent with the well-established finding that self-other agreement increases with the other's level of acquaintance (Biesanz, West, & Millevoi, 2007; Colvin & Funder, 1991; Funder & Colvin, 1988; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006; Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009; Paunonen, 1989; Slatcher & Vazire, 2009; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

These studies show that people's self-views are not completely out of synch with how they are seen by those who know them best. People who see themselves as particularly agreeable (or conscientious, etc.) also tend to be seen as highly agreeable (or conscientious, etc.). This provides further evidence that self-perceptions of personality have at least a kernel of truth. On the other hand, these studies also show that people's self-views are far from identical to their reputations among those who know them best. There are people out there who see themselves as extraordinarily agreeable, but whose views of themselves are not shared by their families or friends. There are also likely people who see themselves as much more disagreeable than anybody else thinks they are. In other words, the fact that these correlations are still very far from perfect suggests there are plenty of fascinating cases of self-deception out there. The findings from this approach once again point us to the conclusion that self-knowledge exists but leaves something to be desired.

Table 2 Self-other agreement (r)

Study	Domain of Personality	Informant Type	Self-Other Agreement
Meta-analyses			
Connolly et al. (2007)	Big Five	All acquaintance levels	.55
Kenny (1994)	Big Five	Close others	.49
Klonsky et al. (2002)	Personality disorders	All acquaintance levels	.39
Single Studies			
McCrae and Stone (1998)	Big Five	Spouses	.57
Furr et al. (2007)	Big Five	Close others	.56
Branje et al. (2003)	Big Five	Family members	.55
Watson and Humrhouse (2006)	Big Five	Spouses	.53
Watson et al. (2000)	Big Five	Friends, dating partners, spouses	.48
Ready et al. (2000)	Big Five	Close others	.47
Vazire and Gosling (2004)	Big Five	Close others	.47
Vazire and Mehl (2008)	Behaviors	Close others	.46
Biesanz et al. (1998)	Extraversion & Conscientiousness	Close others	.45
Kurtz and Sherker (2003)	Big Five	Roommates	.43
Malloy et al. (1997)	Big Five	Coworkers, friends, family	.37
Vazire (2010)	Extraversion, Neuroticism, Intellect	Friends	.35
Bernieri et al. (1994)	Big Five	Roommates	.34
Hayes and Dunning (1997)	Various items	Roommates	.34
Funder et al. (1995)	Big Five	Parents, hometown friends, college friends	.34
Biesanz and West (2004)	Big Five	Peers and parents	.31
Oltmanns et al. (2002)	Personality disorders	Dorm floormates	.30
Ozer and Buss (1991)	Behaviors	Spouses	.28
Funder and Colvin (1988)	CAQ	Close others	.27
Asendorpf and Ostendorf (1998)	Big Five	Close others	.23
Clifton et al. (2004)	Personality disorders	Basic training flight group	.15
Average of single studies			.40

A list of some of the studies examining self-other agreement (not exhaustive). Single studies included here were not included in the meta-analyses listed. Big Five = Big Five personality factors. CAQ = California Adult Q-Set.

Meta-Accuracy: Do People Know How Others See Them?

Given the discrepancy between how people see themselves and how others see them, a natural question to ask is: do people know how others see them? Just because people do not always share others' perceptions of them does not mean they do not appreciate the gap between their self-perception and their reputation. The capacity to know how others see us is called meta-accuracy. Empirically, meta-accuracy reflects the correspondence between people's beliefs about the impressions they make (i.e., meta-perceptions) and others' actual impressions. In practice, meta-accuracy is often decomposed into two indices: generalized and dyadic (or differential) meta-accuracy (Kenny, 1994). Generalized meta-accuracy reflects people's awareness of their reputation – do people know how they are generally seen by others? Dyadic meta-accuracy reflects people's awareness of the impressions they make on specific individuals – do people know who sees them as

especially dependable? While both of these are types of self-knowledge, dyadic meta-accuracy typically requires greater social acuity and in some cases may have greater consequences than generalized meta-accuracy. For example, it may be more important to know *who* thinks you are smart (if you need a letter of recommendation) or attractive (if you are trying to get a date) than to know *that* people think you are smart and attractive.

Table 3 presents a list of studies that have examined meta-accuracy across a range of contexts and acquaintance levels. In a typical study, small groups of people describe how they see their group members' personalities and then guess how each group member sees them. As Table 3 shows, overall, generalized meta-accuracy is moderate and highest in contexts that include well-acquainted others, such as family or friends, than for contexts that include new acquaintances.

Notice, however, that the correspondence between generalized meta-perceptions and others' perceptions is about .40. If this number sounds familiar, this is because this is also the size of the correlation between *self*-perceptions and other-perceptions. In other words, it looks like people might be just as accurate in predicting how others see them if they just reported how they see themselves. In fact, some have argued that meta-perceptions

Table 3 Meta-accuracy

Study	Domain of Personality	Social Context	Meta-Accuracy (r)	
			Gen.	Dyadic
New Acquaintance Studies				
DePaulo et al. (1987)	Competence	One-on-one interactions	–	.35
Kenny and DePaulo (1990)	Competence	One-on-one interview	.22	–.02
Malloy and Janowski (1992)	Leadership, quality of ideas	Group discussion	.73	.10
Oliver (1989)	Dominant, confident, outgoing, imaginative	First-date interactions	.69	.19
Reno and Kenny (1992)	Information conveyed, open, private, trust, likable	One-on-one interactions	.26	.16
Shechtman & Kenny, 1994	Various behaviors	Group job interview	.30	.04
New Acquaintance Mean			.44	.14
Well-Acquainted Studies				
Anderson (1984)	Humorous, intelligent, considerate, defensive	Roommates	.57	.17
Malloy and Albright (1990)	Big Five	Roommates	.59	.10
Levesque (1997)	Big Five, interesting	Roommates	.63	.25
Malloy et al. (1997)	Big Five	Coworkers, friends, family	.45	–
Cook and Douglass (1998)	Assertive, firm, cooperative	Parents	.36	.13
Oltmanns et al. (2005)	Personality disorders	Basic training group	.26	–
Malloy et al. (2004)				
China sample	Big Five	Family, friends	.21	–
Mexico sample	Big Five	Family, friends	.40	–
Carlson and Furr (2009) ^a	Big Five	Parents, hometown friends, college friends	.48	.35
Well-Acquainted Mean			.44	.20
Overall Mean			.44	.17

A list of some of the studies evaluating the accuracy of meta-perceptions across multiple traits (not exhaustive). Gen = Generalized meta-accuracy. Dyadic = Dyadic (or differential) meta-accuracy. Big Five = Big Five personality factors. Personality disorders = assessed with the *Multi-Source Assessment of Personality Pathology* (MAPP).

^aEffect-size *r* was calculated by a *t*-to-*r* transformation.

do not seem to capture much of the difference between how people see themselves and how others see them because people essentially assume that others see them as they see themselves (Campbell & Fehr, 1990; Kenny, 1994; Kenny & West, 2008; Malloy, Albright, Kenny, Agatstein, & Winquist, 1997; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979) – that is, we do not have distinct meta-perceptions. This would indeed undermine our faith in self-knowledge. Not only do we see ourselves differently than others see us, but we fail to appreciate that others do not share our self-views.

There are two lines of research that cast doubt on this harsh conclusion. The first comes from studies examining the relationship between self- and meta-perception (Albright, Forest, & Reiser, 2001; Carlson, Vazire, & Furr, 2009; Oltmanns, Gleason, Klonsky, & Turkheimer, 2005; Wyer, Henninger, & Wolfson, 1975). These studies show that people do not simply assume that others see them as they see themselves. For example, people might form meta-perceptions that differ from self-perceptions when they base their meta-perceptions on observations of their own behavior (particularly when they behave differently than usual) or on self-discrepant feedback (Albright & Malloy, 1999; Albright et al., 2001; Wyer et al., 1975). Only a few studies have directly examined whether meta-perceptions are closer to others' actual impressions than are self-perceptions (Albright et al., 2001; Carlson et al., 2009; Oltmanns et al., 2005). Findings from these studies suggest that people's meta-perceptions are indeed slightly closer to their actual reputation than are their self-perceptions – that is, they are adjusting their personality ratings in the correct direction when they take the perspective of others, albeit very slightly.

The second source of evidence that people have some clue that they are seen differently than they see themselves comes from research on dyadic meta-accuracy. At first glance, it seems that this line of research just brings more bad news for self-knowledge: people do not seem to be very aware of the impression they make on specific others (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Levesque, 1997). However, recent research suggests that an alternative conclusion may be warranted. Most studies assess meta-accuracy in a single social context, meaning that people are asked to guess the unique impression they make on several people who know them from the same context (e.g., several coworkers). It is likely that people who know us from the same context see us quite similarly (in part because we behave similarly around them; Furr & Funder, 2004), and thus it would be hard to distinguish the unique impression we make among people who have roughly the same impression of us. A more interesting question is whether people can accurately detect the unique impression they make on others who actually have different impressions of them. Recent research shows that when people are asked to identify the different impressions they make across social contexts (e.g., with parents vs. friends), dyadic meta-accuracy is positive and strong (Carlson & Furr, 2009).

Thus, we believe the picture for meta-accuracy is not as bleak as is commonly thought. People do have some glimmer of insight into the fact that others see them differently than they see themselves (Carlson, Furr, & Vazire, 2010). However, at this point, it looks like this type of self-awareness is not much more than a glimmer – there is still a great deal people do not know about how others see them. Once again, it seems that both the committed skeptic and the true believer are wrong. People are not completely in the dark about how others see them, but they would be quite shocked if they knew the full truth.

Conclusion

Across all three types of self-knowledge examined here, the latest research suggests that Alcibiades was right: the glass of self-knowledge is half-full... and half-empty. That is,

people's perceptions of their own personality are certainly more accurate than random guesses would be, but they are substantially far from perfect. One difficulty in evaluating this evidence is determining how much is a lot of accuracy. What should the standard of comparison be? One question we can ask is: do people know themselves better than anyone else knows them? The few studies that have compared the accuracy of self-perceptions of personality to the accuracy of friend and family members' perceptions all show that self-perceptions are not more accurate overall (Kolar et al., 1996; Vazire, 2010; Vazire & Mehl, 2008). That is, we do not seem to know our personalities better than do our closest friends and family.

In light of the bias literature mentioned earlier, this result can be interpreted as suggesting that biases and motivated cognition have a pernicious effect on self-knowledge, but do not completely wipe out all accuracy in self-perception. Instead, our privileged access to our own thoughts, feelings, and behavior seems to be counterbalanced by our own unique biases and tendencies to distort our self-perceptions, such that we do not know our own personalities better, overall, than others know us (Vazire, 2010).

What should we do in the face of the conclusion that self-knowledge is far from perfect? This conclusion has both practical and theoretical implications. Practically speaking, an appropriate reaction would be to adjust the amount of faith we put in self-perceptions. As researchers, we should keep in mind that self-perceptions are incredibly useful and contain a great deal of truth but that they sometimes deviate significantly from a person's true personality. Furthermore, studies comparing the accuracy of self- and other-perceptions have repeatedly shown that each perspective provides unique information about a person. Thus, combining personality ratings from multiple perspectives can do wonders for the validity of our measures. As human beings, we should adopt a healthy balance of confidence and skepticism toward people's understanding of their own personality and remember that this applies to ourselves, too.

The theoretical implications are also far-reaching. If the typical person has significant blind spots in their self-knowledge, a number of questions follow. First, where are those blind spots? What aspects of their own personality are people most blind to? Second, why do those blind spots exist? Are people lacking the necessary information to know themselves completely or are the blind spots motivated (and if so, by what motives)? Third, are some people more self-aware than others? Who has more blind spots? Fourth, is self-knowledge adaptive, or are blind spots necessary for mental health? Finally, if self-knowledge is adaptive, how can it be improved? We hope that the recent empirical work on self-knowledge will fuel more research into these age-old questions. In turn, we should all seek to apply the lessons learned from the empirical research to our everyday lives, to remember that, as Richard Russo's character William Henry Devereaux, Jr. tells us in *Straight Man* (1998):

[...] the truth is, we never know for sure about ourselves. Who we'll sleep with if given the opportunity, who we'll betray in the right circumstance, whose faith and love we will reward with our own. [...] Which is why we have spouses and children and parents and colleagues and friends, because someone has to know us better than we know ourselves. We need them to tell us. We need them to say 'I know you, Al. You're not the kind of man who.' (pp. 373–374).

Short Biographies

Simine Vazire's research focuses on personality and self-knowledge. She conducts empirical studies examining such questions as: What aspects of their own personality are people

most accurate about and what aspects are they most blind to? Why aren't people better at knowing themselves? Are other-perceptions sometimes more accurate than self-perceptions? Are people with more self-knowledge happier? How can self-knowledge be improved? She is interested in both the theoretical and methodological implications of her work, and has contributed to the development of new methods that can help address these questions. Her work has been published in a broad range of venues, including *Science*, *American Psychologist*, *Psychological Science*, and *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and has been featured in popular media outlets. She holds a B.A. in psychology from Carleton College and Ph. D. in social/personality psychology from The University of Texas at Austin. She is currently an assistant professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis.

Erika Carlson is a second year graduate student working with Dr. Simine Vazire at Washington University in St. Louis. Her current research examines whether people know the impressions they make (i.e., meta-accuracy), whether people are aware of their level of meta-accuracy, and whether meta-accuracy can be improved. Her research interests also include self-knowledge, personality perception, and close relationships. She holds an M.A. in Experimental Psychology from Wake Forest University and a B.S. in Psychology from the University of Florida.

Endnotes

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¹ From *Alcibiades I*, a dialogue sometimes attributed to Plato. Translated by Jowett (2006; p. 44).

² Other approaches not covered here include the emerging research comparing people's explicit self-views to implicit measures of their personality (e.g., Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2009), and the very rigorous work using idiographic (i.e., individual-centered) analyses (e.g., Vogt & Colvin, 2005).

³ Gosling, John, Craik, and Robins (1998) found stronger correlations between self-ratings and actual behavior, but the self-ratings in this study were collected after the relevant interaction was recorded, and specifically asked participants to report on how they acted during the interaction.

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