Others may know us better than we know ourselves, study finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Since at least the days of Socrates, humans have been advised to "know thyself." And through all the years, many, including many personality and social psychologists, have believed the individual is the best judge of his or her own personality.

Now a psychologist at Washington University in St. Louis has shown that we are not the know-it-alls that we think we are.

Simine Vazire, Ph.D., Washington University assistant professor of psychology, has found that the individual is more accurate in assessing one's own internal, or neurotic traits, such as anxiety, while friends are

better barometers of intellect-related traits, such as intelligence and creativity, and even strangers are equally adept as our friends and ourselves at spotting the extrovert in us all, a psychology domain known as “extroversion.”

“I think that it’s important to really question this knee-jerk reaction that we are our own best experts,” says Vazire. “Personality is not who you think you are, it’s who you are. Some people think by definition that we are the experts on our personality because we get to write the story, but personality is not the story - it’s the reality. So, you do get to write your own story about how you think you are, and what you tell people about yourself, but there still is reality out there, and, guess what? Other people are going to see the reality, regardless of what story you believe.”

Personality, Vazire says, is pervasive in many things that we do - clothing choice, bedroom arrangement, Web site and Facebook profiles, for example. “Everything you touch you leave a mark of your personality,” she says. “You leave traces unintentionally. You give off hints of your personality that you don't even see yourself.”

Vazire’s study is published in the Feb. 2010 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Personality is comprised of the underlying traits that drive behavior, Vazire says. The model she developed is called the self-other knowledge asymmetry (SOKA) model. To test it she called upon 165 volunteers who were given a number of different tasks. To obtain an objective measure of behavior, they took an IQ test; they all participated in a group discussion called a leaderless group discussion to see who emerged as the take-charge individual; and they took a Trier social stress test, in which trained experimenters with faux stern demeanors filmed participants in a narrow, cramped room, as they gave a two-minute public speaking exhibition on the topic of what I like and don’t like

about my body. A sweat-inducer for many. Each participant also graded group members and him or herself on a 40-trait personality rating form.

Her model correctly predicted that self ratings would be more accurate for internal things, such as thoughts and feelings, sadness and anxiety, for example, than the ratings of friends and strangers.

“You probably know pretty well your anxiety level, whereas others might not be in the position to judge that because, after all, you can mask your inner feelings,” Vazire says. “Others, though, are often better than the self in things that deal with overt behavior.”

The self has difficulty in accurately judging itself in areas that are desirable or undesirable, what she calls evaluative traits. Intelligence, attractiveness, creativity are hard for the self to judge objectively because “there is so much at stake, meaning your life is going to be so much different if you are intelligent or not intelligent, attractive or not. Everybody wants to be seen as intelligent and attractive, but these desirable traits we’re not going to judge accurately in ourselves.”

The self is better at judging friends’ intelligence than its own “because it’s not that threatening to us to admit that our friends aren’t brilliant, but it’s more threatening to admit to ourselves that we’re not brilliant.”

Take attractiveness and your mirror. “We look in the mirror all the time, yet that’s not the same as looking at a photo of someone else,” Vazire says. “If we spent as much time looking at photos of others as we do ourselves we’d form a much more confident and clear impression of the other’s attractiveness than we would have of our own. Yet after looking in the mirror for five minutes we’re still left wondering, ‘Am I attractive or not?’ And still have no clue. And it’s not the case that we all assume that we’re beautiful, right?”

For some personality traits, she says we miss the point if we look at thoughts and feelings and ignore the behavior. Bullies, for instance, fit the SOKA model, because their thoughts and feelings tell them they're insecure and want to be liked and admired, which is not a horrible, nasty notion. They cannot see their behavior as nasty and horrible, though, because their thoughts obscure their actions.

Similarly, if you think that you are warm and friendly, and your friends and family say even if you think along those lines, you don't come across that way, you might pay more attention to your behaviors.

"I believe I've presented evidence that should make people think twice," Vazire says. "On average, the people who know you best know you as well as you know yourself, no better, no worse than you. More importantly, there are things that both you know that they don't know, and things that they know that you don't know, and those lead to very interesting experiences and disagreements."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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