

Confidence is key to gauging impressions we make

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Researchers Simine Vazire (left) and Erika Carlson of Washington University in St. Louis find that people should trust their gut when gauging what sort of first impression they've made. Credit: WUSTL Photo

The gift of "seeing ourselves as others see us" is particularly beneficial when we judge how we've made a first impression -- in a job interview, during a sales pitch or on a first date.

Yet, many come away from these situations with at best a vague notion of how that first impression was perceived or at worst no clue at all.

Now, [psychologists](#) at Washington University in St. Louis and Wake Forest University have tested people in first impression settings in the laboratory and have found that [confidence](#) makes all the difference in knowing whether you've hit a homerun or struck out.

Erika N. Carlson, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology

in Arts & Sciences; her advisor Simine Vazire, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology; and Wake Forest University's R. Michael Furr, Ph.D., engaged some 280 students in opposite-sex pairings from both universities in five-minute conversation after which impressions (your rating of your partner's personality traits) and metaperceptions (your rating of how you think your partner rated your personality traits) were recorded on 60 personality items (such as nice, funny, outgoing), which were rated on a scale from 1 to 7.

There was a twist to their study. The researchers asked a confidence question: How confident are you in your estimation of how your partner sees your personality?

"In the past, researchers hadn't asked whether you know when you're accurate in first impressions, nor your degree of confidence," Carlson says.

"We found that people who were poor at making good meta-impressions were less confident than people who made accurate ones. So, after making a first impression, if you're confident in your judgment, you're likely to be right."

The research was recently published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

At the crux of knowing you've made a good impression is something called calibration, or "being confident when you're right and uncertain when you're wrong," says Vazire. "Not well-calibrated people are confident when they're wrong and uncertain when they're right."

The confidence and accuracy questions in our study shed light on participants' calibration."

She likens accurate calibration to a sort of internal gauge.

"You think, 'This is the impression I think I made.' And the internal gauge tells you to go ahead with that impression, you're probably right," she says. "Or, gather more information, you might be wrong. So, well-calibrated people have a good internal gauge."

The goal of their research is to enable people to trust the confidence of their first impressions and pursue the next step, Carlson says.

When you have misjudged the way others see you, the result is often a bad decision, says Carlson. "You might have thought that the date you went on went well and she liked you, but it went wrong in the date's eyes and she doesn't like you. Your next move could be embarrassing and painful," she says.

We're sometimes wrong about the impressions we've made, Vazire says.

"We might think that obviously the other person could tell that I hated them, or that I obviously liked them, or obviously my brilliance came across, but we've all been wrong, so it's important in any number of social settings when to actually doubt how you've come across," she says.

Future metaperception research will explore videotaped first impression interactions from calibration studies to determine which factors affect calibration, like verbal or non-verbal clues, which might reveal who formed accurate metaperceptions and who didn't, who was wellcalibrated and who wasn't, and perhaps more importantly, why people understood the impressions they made. Such clues could be in overt behaviors like talking rates, smiles, how close the participants sat to each other, or more subjective things like the intimacy of the conversation.

Carlson says there is some preliminary evidence that when one person is more accurate in metaperceptions, their partner also is, suggesting that there might be something unique to relationships that influences whether we can pick up on the impression we've made.

With the exception of someone like Michael Scott (the totally clueless boss in the TV sitcom "The Office"), people have a surprising level of self-knowledge in judging their first impressions, says Carlson.

"For the most part, people understand when they're right and when they're wrong," she says. "If you want to know if you've made the right impression, trust your gut."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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