Research examines the social benefits of getting into someone else's head

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Do you often wonder what the person next to you is thinking?

You might be high in mind-reading motivation (MRM), a newly coined term for the practice of observing and interpreting bits of social information, like whether the person next to you is rhythmically drumming his fingers because he's anxious or if someone is preoccupied because she's gazing off into the distance.

MRM is the tendency to engage with the mental states and perspectives of others. But it's much more than just a means of passing idle time. Being high in MRM leads to many social benefits, including better teamwork, according to Melanie Green, an associate professor in the University at Buffalo Department of Communication and corresponding author of the groundbreaking new study published in the journal *Motivation and Emotion*.

"We're not talking about the psychic phenomenon or anything like that, but simply using cues from other people's behavior, their non-verbal signals, to try to figure out what they're thinking," says Green.

MRM is an entirely new construct - developed by Green and her coauthors Jordan M. Carpenter at the University of Pennsylvania and Tanya Vacharkulksemsuk at Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley - which also has implications for advertising and relationships.

Individuals high in MRM enjoy speculating on others' thoughts based on the potentially hundreds of social cues they might receive. Those low in MRM dislike or have no interest in doing so. MRM is about the motivation to engage with other minds, and is distinct from the ability to accurately interpret others' cues.

"We didn't measure ability directly in our study of teamwork, but the research suggests that just the motivation to understand others, and presumably the behaviors that go along with that motivation, appear to lead to benefits," says Green.

In addition to facilitating cooperation and better teamwork, people high in MRM also consider people in great detail and have a nuanced understanding of those around them.

"Those high in MRM seem to develop richer psychological portraits of those around them," says Green. "It's the difference between saying 'this person strives for success, but is afraid of achieving it' as opposed to 'this person is a great cook.'"

The relevance of those portraits also appears to have implications for advertising and the salience of certain messages.

"High MRM people are more drawn to and pay more attention to messages with an identifiable source - a spokesperson or an ad focusing on company values - that is, someone whose perspective they can try to understand." says Green. "On the other hand, low MRM people seem to pay more attention to ads that are more impersonal, like those that just discuss the product - a message that does not appear to come from a particular person or group."

Although there is no previous research in MRM, there is a long history of studies on perspective taking. But much of that research has focused

on situations where perspective taking, in a sense, is required.

"Think about seeing some kind of trouble and trying to figure out what's wrong," she says. "Or noticing your partner is upset and you try to figure out what they're thinking."

Green and her colleagues thought there might be a difference in how much people enjoy or were motivated to speculate on people's thoughts in situations where there was no situational need or institutional pressure. It could be as simple as a bus passenger considering the thoughts of those across the aisle.

"This hadn't been previously considered from the standpoint of individual differences," says Green.

"That's where this research is something new."

Provided by University at Buffalo