HOW TO ANALYZE, UNDERSTAND, AND PREDICT PEOPLE'S EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS, INTENTIONS, AND BEHAVIORS

READ PEOPLE LIKE A BOOK

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Introduction

Have you ever met someone who seemed to just have a natural gift for getting other people? They appear to be blessed with an instinctive understanding of how other people tick and why they behave as they do, to such an extent that they can often predict what they'll say or feel.

These are the people who know how to talk so that others really hear them, or the people who can quickly detect when someone is lying or trying to manipulate them. Sometimes, such a person may perceive someone else's emotions and understand their motivations to a degree that even exceeds that person's insight into themselves.

It can seem like a superpower. How do they do it?

The truth is that this ability is not really anything mystical, but a skill like any other that can actually be learned and mastered. While some might call it emotional intelligence or simple social awareness, others may see it as more akin to what a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist may do when they conduct an intake interview with a new patient. On the other hand, you may see this skill as something that a seasoned FBI agent, private detective, or police officer may develop with experience.

In this book, we're going to be looking closely at all the ways we can develop these skills in ourselves, without needing a psychology

degree or any experience as a trained CIA interrogator.

Reading and analyzing people is no doubt a valuable skill to have. We encounter and interact with other people constantly and need to cooperate with them if we hope to have successful, harmonious lives. When we know how to quickly and accurately analyze someone's character, behavior, and unspoken intentions, we can communicate more effectively and, to put it bluntly, get what we want.

We can adjust the way we communicate to make sure we're really reaching our intended audience; we can spot when we are being deceived or influenced. We can also more easily comprehend even those people who are very different from us, and who work from very different values. Whether you're trying to learn a little more about a person you've just met by snooping in their social media history, or interviewing a new employee, or trying to understand whether the mechanic is telling the truth about your car, reading people well is a priceless skill to have.

It's crazy when you really think about it: every person you ever meet is essentially a mystery to you. How can we really know what is going on inside their minds? What they're thinking, feeling, planning? How can we ever really understand what their behavior means, why they are motivated as they are, and even how they see and understand

Another person's world is like a black box to us. All we have to go on are things outside of that black box—the words they say, their facial expressions and body language, their actions, our past

history with them, their physical appearance, the tone and quality of their voice, and so on.

Before we go much further in our book, it's worth acknowledging this undeniable fact—human beings are complex, living, changing organisms whose inner experience is essentially closed off inside of them. Though some might make claims otherwise, nobody can really state with any certainty that they know who somebody is completely.

That said, we can certainly become better at reading the observable signs. "Theory of mind" is the term we use to describe the ability to think about other people's cognitive and emotional realities. It's the (perfectly human) desire to make a model about someone else's thoughts, feelings, and actions. And like any model, it's a simplification of the depth and complexity of the real person in front of us. Like any model, it has limitations and doesn't always perfectly explain reality.

Our goal in learning to fine-tune our capacity to analyze people is to make best guesses.

What we learn to do is gather as much high-quality data about a person as we can, and analyze it intelligently. If we can input these small pieces of data into a robust and accurate model of human nature (or more than one model) the output we can obtain is a deeper understanding of the person. In the same way as an engineer can look at a complicated machine and infer its operation and intended function, we can learn to look at living, breathing human beings and analyze them to better understand the what, why, and how of their behavior.

In the chapters that follow, we'll be looking at many different models—these are not competing theories, but rather different ways of looking at a human being. When used all together, we gain a fresh understanding of the people around us.

What we do with this understanding is up to us. We could use it to foster a richer and more compassionate attitude to those we care about. We could take our knowledge and apply it in the workspace or anywhere we need to cooperate and collaborate with a wide variety of different individuals. We can use it to become better parents or better romantic partners. We can use it to improve our small talk, to spot liars or those with an agenda, or to reconcile effectively with people during conflicts.

The moment we encounter someone new for the very first time is the moment we most need to have well-honed powers of perception and analysis. Even the least emotionally and socially intelligent people can learn something about other people if they engage with them long enough. But what we're focused on in this book is primarily those skills that can allow you to gather genuinely useful information about near-strangers, preferably after just a single conversation.

We'll dig a little deeper into mastering the art of a snap decision that is actually accurate, how to make appraisals of people's personalities and values from their speech, their behavior, and even their personal possessions, how to read body language, and even how to detect a lie as it's happening.

Another caveat before we dive in: analyzing and reading people is about much, much more than simply having hunches or knee-jerk

emotional reactions about them. Though instinct and gut feeling may play a role, we are focused here on methods and models that have sound theoretical evidence and seek to go beyond simple bias or prejudice. After all, we actually want our analyses to be accurate if they're to be any use to us!

When we analyze others, we take a methodical, logical approach. What are the origins or causes of what we see in front of us, i.e., what is the historical element?

What are the psychological, social, and physiological mechanisms that sustain the behavior you're witnessing?

What is the outcome or effect of this phenomenon in front of you? In other words, how does what you're seeing play out in the rest of the environment?

How is the behavior you're witnessing triggered by particular events, the behavior of others, or even as a response to you yourself?

In the chapters that follow, we'll look at smart ways to structure your rational, data-driven analysis of the complex and fascinating people who cross your path. You may start to appreciate how this kind of analysis is at the root of so many other competencies. For example, knowing how to read people may improve your capacity for compassion, boost your communication skills, improve your negotiation abilities, help you set better boundaries, and the unexpected side effect: help you understand yourself better.

Why You're Probably Doing it Wrong

Many people believe they're "good with people."

It's very easy to boldly claim that you understand another person's motivations, without ever really stopping to check if you're correct. Confirmation bias, unfortunately, is a more likely explanation—i.e., you remember all those times your assessments were correct and ignore or downplay the times you clearly got it wrong. That, or you simply never ask if you're right in the first place. How many times have you heard, "I used to think so-and-so was such-and-such kind of person, but once I got to know them, I realized I was completely wrong about them"?

The fact is that people are often far less accurate judges of character than they like to believe. If you are reading this book, chances are you know that there are a few things you could probably learn. It never hurts to start a new endeavor on a blank slate. After all, nothing can get in the way of learning truly effective techniques like the conviction that you know everything already and don't need to learn!

So, with that in mind, what are the obstacles to becoming brilliant at reading people?

Firstly, the biggest thing to remember is the effect of Maybe you've seen a listicle online to the effect of "5 Telltale Signs Someone is Lying," and went on to see if you could spot any in real life. The

trouble with this is obvious: is the person looking up and to the left because they're telling a lie, or has their attention simply been caught by something on the roof?

In the same way, a person making an interesting "Freudian slip" in conversation could be telling you a juicy secret about themselves —or they could simply be sleep deprived and literally just made a mistake. Context matters.

In the same vein, we cannot take a single statement, facial expression, behavior, or moment to tell us something definitive about the whole person. Have you not already done something today that, if analyzed alone, would lead to some completely nonsensical conclusions about your character? Analysis can only happen with data—not a single datum—and it can only happen when we are able to see broader trends.

These broader trends also need to be situated in the cultural context that the person you're analyzing comes from. Some signs are universal, whereas others can vary. For example, talking while your hands are in your pockets is looked down upon in most cultures. Eye contact, on the other hand, can be a tricky affair. In America, eye contact is generally encouraged because it is considered a sign of honesty and intelligence. However, in places like Japan, eye contact is discouraged because it's thought to be disrespectful. Similarly, a set of cues may mean one thing in your own culture, and something entirely different in another. It can be slightly difficult to remember these different models of interpretation initially, but as you practice the art, it'll start coming to you naturally.

If a person does the same unusual thing five times in a single short conversation, then that's something to pay attention to. If someone simply claims, "I know that woman. She's an introvert. I saw her reading a book once," you wouldn't exactly call them a master at unraveling the human psyche! So, it's worth remembering another important principle: in our analysis, we look for

Another way that smart people can come to not-so-smart conclusions about others is if they fail to establish a baseline. The guy in front of you may be making lots of eye contact, smiling often, complimenting you, nodding, even touching your arm occasionally. You could conclude that this guy must really like you, until you realize that this is how he is with every person he meets. He in fact is showing you no interest above his normal baseline, so all your observations don't quite lead where they ordinarily would.

Finally, there's something to consider when you're studying other human beings, and it's often a real bind spot: yourself. You might decide that someone is trying to deceive you, but completely fail to take into account your own paranoid and cautious nature, and the fact that you were recently lied to and are not quite over it yet.

This final point may ironically be the real key to unlocking other people—making sure we understand ourselves at a bare minimum before we turn our analytical gaze outward. If you're unaware of how you may be projecting your own needs, fears, assumptions, and biases onto others, your observations and conclusions about

others will not amount to much. In fact, you may have simply discovered a roundabout way of learning about yourself and the cognitive and emotional baggage you're bringing to the table. Let's see some of these principles in action.

Let's say you're interviewing someone your company intends to hire. You have only a short time to determine whether she'd fit in with the rest of the team. You notice that she's talking quite quickly and occasionally stumbling on her words. She's sitting literally on the edge of her seat, hands clasped tightly together. Could she be a very nervous and insecure person? You suspend judgment, knowing that everyone is nervous in interviews (i.e., you respect context).

You notice the candidate mention more than once about how her previous employer was very demanding with time, whereas she prefers to work independently and manage her time herself. You wonder if this means she's poor at taking direction from management, or if she genuinely is a more independent and proactive type. You have no baseline, so you ask her about her university days and what she studied. She tells you about research projects she conducted independently, and how closely she worked with her old supervisor. This tells you that she can work under management . . . if the project is something she cares about.

If you had only focused on her nervousness, you wouldn't have gotten very far. Many recruiters will tell you that speaking ill of a previous employer is hands down a red flag, but in the interview, you look for not single events. You may even consider that she may be acting nervously because you are making her nervous. You