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Book Review

Applied Evolutionary Psychology at its Best

A review of Amy Alkon, *I See Rude People: One Woman's Battle to Beat Some Manners into Impolite Society*. McGraw-Hill: New York, 2010, 224 pp., US\$16.95, ISBN 978-0-07-160021-7 (paperback).

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If you are reading this, chances are you know Amy Alkon. If you are a regular reader of *Evolutionary Psychology*, then you are probably a regular attendee of the annual meetings of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES) as well. Think of all the people you saw and met during the last HBES conference you attended. The first person you think of, with the bright flowing red hair, is Amy Alkon.

Alkon is an award-winning nationally syndicated advice columnist and long-time blogger, with her popular blog Advice Goddess (<http://www.advicegoddess.com>). She is also extremely knowledgeable about the latest research in evolutionary psychology and related fields, and regularly attends HBES and other scientific conferences.

I See Rude People is a seamless mixture of two types of stories. On the one hand, the book details her hilarious personal take on the rude, obnoxious, inconsiderate people who ruin the day for her and everyone else (people who have loud private conversations on cell phones in public places; parents who let their children run wild and cause nuisance to everyone around; telemarketers who call at all hours; liberal and progressive cyberbullies) and how she deals with such rude people in her everyday life. Then weaved with them are real-life detective stories in which Alkon tracks down individual criminals who victimized her (a thief who stole her car; a toothless black woman who stole her money via identity theft; an elderly driver who hit and damaged her car in a supermarket parking lot).

Elmore Leonard, who provides a glowing endorsement of the book on the front cover, recommends the “Pink Rambler” chapter, in which Alkon tracks down a car thief who stole her 1960 Pink Nash Rambler (yes, she located one thief who stole her car out of 17 million people in the entire Los Angeles metropolitan area *all by herself without any help from the police*). But I personally like the Bank of America chapter better. I won't spoil the fun by revealing the details of Alkon's detective work, but here's the bottom line: *do not bank with Bank of America!* Your money, and your personal details, are not safe there.

Alkon uses Dunbar's (1993) “150 rule” and the Savanna Principle (Miller and Kanazawa, 2007) to explain the rampant rudeness in modern society. Humans have spent most of their

evolutionary history in a small group of 150 or so genetically related individuals, where everybody knew everybody else in the group and spent their entire lives together. In such a group, because of the infinitely repeated social exchange, informal social control and “the shadow of the future” (Axelrod, 1984) sufficed to keep everyone in line within the group, whereas enemies outside of the group could be raided, exploited, raped or killed with impunity. We now live in large metropolises with millions of total strangers, but our brain still assumes that we live in the ancestral environment, where we are only accountable to informal social control of our genetic kin. Since few kin are around us these days, we feel unconstrained and behave badly. I think Alkon is on to something here.

A large portion of Alkon’s anger is directed toward those who have loud private conversations on cell phones in public places, and this is a common complaint of many. I have always thought that this was a strange complaint, because it seemed to me that there was a very simple technological solution. If cell phones came with much more sensitive microphones, then people wouldn’t have to shout into them and would even be forced to whisper lest they damage the hearing of the person on the other end of the line. If people could speak quieter on cell phones, then it would be no different from other face-to-face conversations that we routinely overhear in restaurants, coffee shops and other public places.

Alkon explains why this technical solution will not work for a couple of reasons. First, Monk, Fellas, and Ley’s (2004) experiment suggests that cell phone conversations are annoying partly because they are one-sided. Monk et al.’s subjects find overhearing face-to-face conversations where one side of the conversation is inaudible equally annoying as overhearing cell phone conversations. It appears that our theory of mind module is always and automatically on and compels us to pay attention to others’ conversations to figure out their mental states. When one side of the conversation is inaudible, whether in cell phone or face-to-face conversations, our theory of mind module has to work harder to fill in the missing elements, hence the greater distraction. If this hypothesis is correct, then one implication is that we find overhearing conversations in foreign languages more annoying than overhearing comparable conversations in our own language. I wonder if this prediction has been tested.

Second, unlike conventional (landline) telephones, cell phones lack what is known as “sidetone.” On conventional telephones, your own voice, spoken into the mouthpiece, is fed back to the earpiece, so that you can hear your own voice and how loud it is. In contrast, on cell phones, you cannot hear your own voice, and thus you are unaware of your own volume. The original designers of cell phones decided to eliminate sidetone to make it easier for cell phone users to speak in environments with ambient noises without being drowned by them. But this unique feature of cell phones now contributes to cell phone users speaking unnecessarily louder than conventional phone users.

Alkon has an amazing ability to laugh at herself, borne of her sheer confidence in herself. She is also refreshingly politically incorrect. When was the last time you encountered passages like these?

Of course, in recent years, air travel has become like flying *below* Greyhound – in the baggage compartment under the bus. There are those who still find coach seats adequately roomy; mainly small-boned children under eight, and armless, legless midgets. Better hope you have one of the latter seated next to you, and not some 300-pound man who wordlessly annexes half of your seat like he’s Germany and you’re Poland (p. 11).

I drove around for hours, warning dazed dog-walkers to keep an eye out for stolen cotton candy on wheels. My search fruitless, I decided to head home, but first dropped in at the Hollywood police station. Being a girl, I find in-person visits in such situations to be quite helpful. (“Hi, I have big breasts, will you help me find my car?”) (p. 40)

Alkon also has a remarkable ability and skill to force rude people who inconvenience her to *pay* her for their crimes. She reprimanded a woman who interrupted Alkon with her loud cell phone conversation in a café for 30 seconds, who then agreed to pay her a dollar for the trouble (at the hourly rate of \$120). After Alkon located the man who hit her car in a supermarket parking lot, he was prosecuted and convicted with two years’ probation and a fine of \$717 plus restitution. She successfully billed telemarketing companies that called her and interrupted her dinner, and received money as compensation, sometimes taking them to the small claims court. She located a liberal cyberbully who left an anonymous comment on her blog, asking her if she was a tranny, called him up at his office at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and made him apologize. She located another cyberbully who anonymously signed her up for a large number of internet mailing lists and made him pay \$50 in cash for the trouble.

Yes, she locates anonymous commentators on her blog and calls them up at their homes and offices. How does she do it? *Read the book!* The message is clear. Don’t. Fuck. With. Amy. Alkon. If you do, you will be sorry, and you will pay for it. But Alkon is far from mean and vengeful; in fact, she’s a tremendously warm and compassionate human being. The book ends with a story of how she and her friends collaborated and pooled resources to help a homeless artist she first spotted in a Starbucks launch his artistic career. As a result of their help, the artist, Gary Musselman, is now a fledgling artist; you can see a sample of his artwork here (<http://musselmanart.typepad.com/>).

I See Rude People is the funniest book I’ve read since Dave Barry’s *Big Trouble*, which coincidentally is also endorsed by Elmore Leonard. Alkon is simply hilarious beyond words. The book also serves a very important purpose of reaching civilian readers who would never read *Evolutionary Psychology* and scientific papers and books on evolutionary psychology (as Alkon has) and spreading the important lessons of evolutionary psychology that apply to their everyday life. Alkon is a fantastic ambassador for our discipline. I strongly recommend *I See Rude People* to everyone, evolutionary psychologist or otherwise.

References

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