

Why Are Some People Always Late? And Other Human Puzzles

July 25, 2011

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By Alfie Kohn

*I often find myself unable to let go of questions that don't seem to give most people any pause at all. For example, **why do we cry at weddings?** The more I think about this, the less certain I am about the answer – or, rather, the answers, because there are probably many different reasons, depending on the crier's relationship to the bride or groom, the crier's own marital status (by which I mean not only whether he or she is married but how happy that marriage is), whether the crier is someone who tends to weep purely for joy or thinks frequently about death and loss.*

*Another day may find me musing about **gossip** and whether it's just a harmless way to kill time and bond with friends or coworkers – or, like racist jokes, something that decent people should refuse to participate in. As is often the case, it's hard to decide solely on the basis of observable behaviors (in this case, what's being said about the absent party); we need to consider people's motives for saying it as well.*

*Or, while sitting in traffic (or standing in the shower), I may be busy constructing a taxonomy of different forms of **loneliness**: The aching separation from a particular other is not to be confused with the undifferentiated emptiness of being alone (which lacks the felt*

absence of a specific someone). Similarly, the sensation of being far away from other people is quite different from being surrounded by others and yet connected to no one.

Today, however, you've caught me thinking about a new question: why some people never seem to be on time. Surely you know such people, perhaps quite well. Indeed, if you can overcome a rising bubble of defensiveness, you may admit that you are one of those people. Everyone is late now and then, of course, but I'm talking about folks who habitually show up after an event has started or after the hour that was designated for meeting someone. These people never manage to leave the house until after the time they're supposed to have arrived at their destination.

I realize there are cultural differences in expectations – in some places, it's a major faux pas to ring the doorbell at the time a dinner party is nominally scheduled to begin – but let's put that aside. (Let's also ignore the fact that most people apparently believe their own geographical region or ethnic group is unique for its casual attitude toward punctuality. At my lectures, someone invariably explains the near-empty auditorium fifteen minutes before the announced starting time by saying, "Oh, you know. It's _____ time" – the variable adjective being a reference to where we're located or whatever category of people is expected to attend the event. I wish I had videotaped each of these utterances so they could be spliced together into one endless, hilarious testament to parochialism.) Anyway, forget about group differences. The question is why some individuals are almost always later than they're supposed to be.

To say these people are "inconsiderate" is probably accurate, at least as a description of their behavior, but that's not an explanation. My best guess is that chronic lateness can be explained in one of two general ways. The first is some personality feature that would be interesting to a psychoanalyst, something juicy and diagnosable that suggests the phenomenon serves some psychological purpose, even if unconsciously.

To wit: Maybe tardy arrivers enjoy the attention they get from making an entrance and breathlessly describing to the assembled group whatever detained them on this occasion (which elicits sympathetic smiles and nods – at least from people who don't know that something or other always seems to detain them.) Or maybe they feel guilty for other reasons so that lateness gives them a chance to apologize and seek forgiveness. Or maybe such people are simply indifferent to the effects of making others wait for them, a symptom of a more general egocentricity; they're caught up in their own needs and preferences and fail to take the perspective of others – a prerequisite, perhaps, to making an effort to be on time.

But these possibilities, like any number of others, may not apply to folks whose chronic tardiness typically inconveniences themselves as much as it does their friends and colleagues. It's hard to argue that you're "getting something out of" your pattern of showing up late if the main effect is to make you miss flights or get shut out of events you really wanted to attend. In this case, it may make more sense to appeal to a second kind of explanation – namely, a deficit of the sort that's sometimes described in terms of executive functioning.

Try turning the question around: How do other people usually get where they need to go on time? What steps do they take to avoid being late? First, they check the clock every so often, particularly when they know there's a deadline approaching. They estimate how much time they'll need to get wherever they're going and thus what time they'll need to leave where they are. They pause to figure out how long it will take to finish what they're currently doing and get ready for whatever is coming next. And then they adjust their behavior accordingly, saying to themselves something like, "I was planning to do x but I don't think I'll have time. It isn't crucial that I do that right now, so I'll put it off until later" or "I think I can keep doing this, but I'll have to step up the pace given that there's only half an hour before I have to leave." And then they check the clock more often as the departure time approaches, altering their behavior as necessary.

I suspect that those who chronically show up late don't do these things. Perhaps they have a tendency to lose themselves in whatever they're currently doing and don't discover what time it is until it's too late.

Or perhaps it's a kind of inertia: They have an idea of what time it is but they just don't stop what they're doing in light of what the clock is telling them. (Is it that they won't stop or can't stop? It's hard to know whether this is a conscious choice and thus whether they're truly responsible.) They lack the self-discipline, for lack of a better term, to pull themselves away from an activity they're enjoying or that they feel compelled to finish. They are frequent travelers on the path of least resistance, the result being that they end up late to where they need to go.

Undoubtedly there are other explanations that I've overlooked – perhaps whole categories of explanations. But whatever this tentative framework is worth, the next step would be to figure out which account best fits a given individual. My hypothesis is that it would help to look for broader patterns in his or her life. The person who's late by virtue of indifference to its impact on others will probably seem self-centered in other respects, too. The person who genuinely feels bad about making people wait (again and again and again) but just can't summon the self-control to be on time probably has trouble getting his or her act together in other ways as well – say, around saving money or saying no to junk food.

*In the meantime, there are other questions clamoring for my attention. For example, have you ever stopped to consider how well you can predict someone's personality and style of thinking just by knowing **what he or she finds funny?**...*

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