

Why the unskilled are unaware: Further explorations of (absent) self-insight among the incompetent ☆

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Abstract

People are typically overly optimistic when evaluating the quality of their performance on social and intellectual tasks. In particular, poor performers grossly overestimate their performances because their incompetence deprives them of the skills needed to recognize their deficits. Five studies demonstrated that poor performers lack insight into their shortcomings even in real world settings and when given incentives to be accurate. An additional meta-analysis showed that it was lack of insight into their own errors (and not mistaken assessments of their peers) that led to overly optimistic estimates among poor performers. Along the way, these studies ruled out recent alternative accounts that have been proposed to explain why poor performers hold such positive impressions of their performance. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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One of the painful things about our time is that those who feel certainty are stupid, and those with any imagination and understanding are filled with doubt and indecision

Bertrand Russell (1951)

As Bertrand Russell noted, those most confident in their level of expertise and skill are not necessarily those who should be. Surveys of the psychological literature

suggest that perception of skill is often only modestly correlated with actual level of performance, a pattern found not only in the laboratory but also in the classroom, health clinic, and the workplace (for reviews, see Dunning, 2005; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003; Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988; Mabe & West, 1982).

Surveys of the literature also suggest that people hold positive beliefs about their competence to a logically impossible degree (for reviews, see Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, 2005; Dunning et al., 2004). In one common example of this tendency, several research studies have shown that the average person, when asked, typically claims that he or she is “above average”, (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Weinstein, 1980) which is, of course, statistically impossible. These biased self-evaluations are seen in important real world settings as well as the laboratory.

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In a survey of engineers at one company, for example, 42% thought their work ranked in the top 5% among their peers (Zenger, 1992), a fact that could easily impede their motivation to improve. Elderly people tend to believe they are “above average” drivers (Marottoli & Richardson, 1998), a perception that that is, in reality, associated with being labeled an unsafe driver (Freund, Colgrove, Burke, & McLeod, 2005). Even academics are not immune. A survey of college professors revealed that 94% thought they do “above average” work—a figure that defies mathematical plausibility (Cross, 1977).

(Absent) Self-insight among the incompetent

Why are people typically so convinced that they are more capable than they, in fact, are? In recent years, an active and emerging literature has grown to explain errors in self-assessment. One strategy for understanding the sources of error in self-assessment is to identify those individuals who make the most mistaken self-judgments. By examining how these error-prone individuals differ from their more accurate peers, one can identify sources of error in general.

Adopting this approach, Kruger and Dunning (1999) suggested that, across many intellectual and social domains, it is the poorest performers who hold the least accurate assessments of their skill and performances, grossly overestimating how well their performances stack up against those of their peers. For example, students performing in the bottom 25% among their peers on tests of grammar, logical reasoning, and humor tended to think that they are performing above the 60th percentile (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Further, this pattern has been conceptually replicated among undergraduates completing a classroom exam (Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003), medical students assessing their interviewing skills (Hodges, Regehr, & Martin, 2001) clerks evaluating their performance (Edwards, Kellner, Sistrun, & Magyari, 2003), and medical laboratory technicians evaluating their on-the-job expertise (Haun, Zeringue, Leach, & Foley, 2000).

Kruger and Dunning (1999) argued that this gross overconfidence occurs because those who lack skill simply are not in a position to accurately recognize the magnitude of their deficits. Their incompetence produces a double curse. First, their lack of skill, by definition, makes it difficult to produce correct responses and, thus, they make many mistakes. Second, this very same lack of skill also deprives them of success at the metacognitive task of *recognizing* when a particular decision is a correct or an incorrect one. For example, to produce a grammatically correct sentence, one must know something about the rules of grammar. But one must also have an adequate knowledge of the rules of grammar in order to *recognize* when a sentence is

grammatically correct, whether written by one’s self or by another person. Thus, those who lack grammatical expertise are not in a position to accurately judge the quality of their attempts or the attempts of other people. In addition, because people tend to choose the responses they think are most reasonable, people with deficits are likely to believe they are doing quite well even when they are, in reality, doing quite poorly (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Consistent with this argument, poor performers are significantly worse at distinguishing between correct and incorrect responses than are their more competent peers (for a review, see Dunning, 2005). This is true when judging their own responses (e.g., Chi, Glaser, & Rees, 1982; Keren, 1987; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Maki, Jonas, & Kallod, 1994; Shaughnessy, 1979; Sinkavich, 1995) as well as responses provided by others (Carney & Harrigan, 2003; Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

To be sure, the incompetent are not alone in their difficulty with accurate self-assessment. These same studies suggest that top performers consistently *underestimate* how superior or distinctive their performances are relative to their peers. In Kruger and Dunning (1999) studies, the top 25% tended to think that their skills lay in the 70th–75th percentile, although their performances fell roughly in the 87th percentile. Kruger and Dunning suggested that this underestimation stems from a different source—because top performers find the tests they confront to be easy, they mistakenly assume that their peers find the tests to be equally easy. As such, their own performances seem unexceptional. Supporting this proposal, Kruger and Dunning found that exposing top performers to how their peers performed on the same task caused them to recognize, in part, just how exceptional their performances were relative to their peers (see Hodges et al., 2001, for similar findings).

Goals of the present research

The primary aim of this manuscript is to advance an understanding of why the incompetent, in particular, tend to lack self-insight. Although a growing body of evidence has provided support for the claim that incompetence hinders self-insight (e.g., Dunning et al., 2003; Haun et al., 2000; Hodges et al., 2001), this analysis has been subject to criticism. These critiques argue that the self-assessment errors observed by Kruger and Dunning can be largely reduced to statistical or methodological artifacts rather than to an absence of metacognitive competence among poor performers. Through the present research, we sought to examine whether Kruger and Dunning’s (1999) analysis or these competing alternatives better explains overestimation among the bottom performers and underestimation among top performers.

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