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## Judgmental self-doubt: beliefs about one's judgmental prowess

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### Abstract

This article describes the development of the Judgmental Self-Doubt Scale (JSDS), an individual difference measure of generalized mistrust of one's judgment. Study 1 undertook the construction of the scale and demonstrated its high internal consistency. Studies 2 and 3 showed that greater judgmental self-doubt was associated, in anticipated ways, with a wide variety of personal dispositions. In Study 4, judgmental self-doubt was consistently associated with confidence in specific judgments concerning moral dilemmas, risk assessment, controversial societal issues, and societal parameters. In Study 5, the differential confidence of high and low self-doubters was greater following a task that required a difficult decision than it was following one that required an easy decision. The authors discuss ways in which doubt about one's judgment, as assessed by the JSDS, is implicated in judgment-related behaviors and, more generally, in personality functioning. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Self-doubt; Personality; Judgment; Confidence

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There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision (*William James, The Principles of Psychology, 1890*).

Our use of any measuring instrument implies some degree of trust in its reliability. The degree of such trust influences the specific purposes for which we regard the instrument appropriate and the kinds of actions we take on the basis of the values it yields. In much the same way, our use of the judgments of another person implies some degree of trust in his or her dependability, and the degree of such trust governs the extent to which we allow the person's judgments to influence our

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behavior and inform our plans. Since the judgments we are most intimately, consistently, and frequently aware of are our own, the faith we have in our judgmental prowess can be expected to have pervasive and important effects on our decisions and actions.

This paper describes the development and initial validation of the Judgmental Self-Doubt Scale (JSDS), a self-report instrument designed to assess the extent to which a person believes that he or she is deficient in the ability to make accurate judgments or correct decisions. As envisioned here, highly self-doubting persons frequently experience themselves in jeopardy of being undermined by their poor judgment. They approach important decisions as trials in which they are likely to find themselves wanting or to be found wanting by others. Such individuals are likely to perceive decision making as an onerous activity. Prior to an important decision, they are inclined to be distraught as they vacillate between incompatible alternatives. Having made a decision, they are likely to agonize about its adequacy or correctness. In general, their approach to important decisions reflects an underlying uncertainty about what they believe or about what they think they should believe. As central a role as we deem it to play in one's psychological functioning, doubt about one's judgment should be substantially associated with one's overall self-esteem, one's chronic level of anxiety, and one's proneness to dejection. In the following paragraphs, we outline the rationale for these and other anticipated correlates of skepticism about one's own judgment.

Sound judgment is, almost by definition, requisite to effective performance in every activity that requires the weighing of alternatives. Our regard for our physicians, electricians, attorneys, psychotherapists and others to whom we turn for advice and assistance hinges largely on our evaluation of their judgment. The regard we have for our colleagues and friends is also tied to their ability to exercise "good sense." It would be surprising if our self-regard were not also closely tied to the esteem in which we hold our own judgmental abilities. Moreover, people who mistrust their judgment should frequently find themselves asking or allowing others to make decisions for them, thereby generating evidence in support of their belief that others are more capable than they are. In "going along" with others, they deprive themselves of the satisfaction and esteem derived from setting and carrying out one's own personal agendas. To the extent that their behavior reflects their indecisiveness, people who are dubious about the quality of their judgment are likely to be preempted and taken advantage of, to the detriment of a favorable self-conception. Prone to hesitancy and vacillation, self-doubters should, in fact, be less efficient and accomplish less than their more confident fellows, validating their disparaging self-evaluation still further.

In addition to its consequences for self-esteem, the trust we have in our judgment would also be expected to bear upon our vulnerability to anxious feelings. People skeptical of their judgmental abilities, anticipating that their weak judgment stands ready to betray them, should, on that account, show a generalized apprehensiveness. Such apprehensiveness ought to be particularly pronounced in situations where guidelines or precedents for action are either vague or non-existent, and where the outcomes of decision-based actions are important. Inclined to ruminate about the soundness of their judgments, highly self-doubting people should be disposed toward heightened anxiety following, as well as prior to, decisions they have made. Given the frequency with which we are required to exercise our judgment, people who have an unfavorable view of their own judgmental prowess might be expected to experience more or less chronic anxiety.

Unsure that the decisions they will make or have already made are those that they should make or should have made, highly self-doubting people can be expected to sense themselves as rela-

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