Do expert drivers have a reduced illusion of superiority?

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Abstract

It is well established that people tend to rate themselves as better than average across many domains. To maintain these illusions, it is suggested that people distort feedback about their own and others' performance. This study examined expert/novice differences in self-ratings when people compared themselves with others of the same level of expertise and background as themselves. Given that a key expert characteristic is increased self-monitoring, we predicted that experts in a domain may have a reduced illusion of superiority because they are more aware of their actual ability. We compared expert police drivers with novice police drivers and found that this prediction was not supported. Expert police drivers rated themselves as superior to equally qualified drivers, to the same degree as novices, *Cohen's d* = .03 ns. Despite their extensive additional training and experience, experts still appear to be as susceptible to illusions of superiority as everyone else.
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1. Introduction

People tend to judge their own ability as being superior to others. This belief has been described as illusory because, at the group level, the majority of people cannot be better than the majority of people (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980). This effect has been demonstrated in a wide range of domains and using a variety of methods.

A number of mechanisms have been put forward to explain this self-enhancement bias. Taylor and Brown (1988) argued that self-enhancement biases are beneficial for mental health and that individuals engage in a variety of tacit strategies in order to maintain their biases. For example, people have been found to view strengths and abilities at which they excel as unique and abilities at which they are weak to be common (for example, Campbell, 1986; Suls & Wan, 1987). That is, in a desire to view themselves in a positive light, people distort incoming information about their own and others' ability in order to maintain their belief that they are better than average (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Not everyone who rates themselves as better than average is necessarily labouring under an illusion. People who are considered experts in a domain are likely to be better than the average performer in that domain. Expert/novice differences have been studied extensively in a range of domains and Glaser and Chi (1988) identified a number of key characteristics of expert performance, one of which was superior self-monitoring. Glaser and Chi (1988) cited evidence that expert physics problem-solvers could predict more accurately how difficult they would find a problem and also appeared to be more aware of when they had made an error. For example, Larkin (1983) found that expert physics problem-solvers often abandoned unworkable solution attempts before carrying out the mathematical calculations. This characteristic may have implications for the illusory beliefs of experts. While experts may correctly rate themselves as being better than the average performer in their domain, the majority are still unlikely to be better than someone of the same level of expertise as themselves. This raises the possibility that experts may be subject to illusions of superiority when comparing themselves with other equally expert individuals. However, given that experts are characterised by strong self-monitoring (Glaser & Chi, 1988), it is possible that illusions of superiority will be reduced or absent as experts may be less likely to distort information about their own and others' performance. In contrast, average performers may hold an illusion of superiority over their peers because one aspect of their lack of expertise is that their self-monitoring is inaccurate and they are less likely to be aware of when they have made an error. Kruger and Dunning (1999) studied participants' self-ratings of their own ability at judging humour and completing logic and grammar problems. They found that those who performed worse at each task tended to have very high self-enhancement biases while those who performed the best tended not to exhibit a self-enhancement bias. This is consistent with the prediction that more highly skilled individuals also have more accurate self-monitoring.

Driving skill is one of the domains in which beliefs of personal superiority over others have been reported (Finn & Bragg, 1986; Groeger & Brown, 1989; Mathews & Moran, 1986; Svenson, 1981). McKenna, Stanier, and Lewis (1991) asked drivers to compare themselves to the average driver on 20 different driving skills. Respondents rated themselves as better than average on all 20 skills. Grayson (1998) found that, in a sample of more than 1000 motorists, 80% considered themselves to have better than average driving ability. Dalziel and Job (1997) found a self-