

Editorial

Blissfully Incompetent

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The greatest of faults, I should say, is to be conscious of none.
—Thomas Carlyle (1838)

Most of us have been approached at a party by that one person in the room we least want to meet and been greeted with, “Hey, this is your lucky day!” We have taught students who argue vociferously for higher grades when the ones they received are already decidedly generous. We have sat numbly through interminable faculty meetings at which administrators natter on, though claiming to be good listeners. At long last—thanks to David Dunning, Chip Heath, and Jerry M. Suls—we know we are not alone in our suffering: The world is rife with people whose flawed self-assessments create a burden shouldered by everyone except, seemingly, themselves.

The authors’ integrative review on flawed self-assessment is a much-needed piece, sure to make us triple-check our student ratings and annual-evaluation feedback letters. Clearly, people do hold some views about themselves that prove to be accurate, but they also hold others that are frequently—and systematically—in error. In this review, we learn about the omnipresence of this phenomenon and its dire consequences. We learn about people’s tendency to overvalue themselves—as that jerk at the party never fails to demonstrate. The authors discuss numerous psychological processes that account for this self-inflation. For one thing, people have trouble recognizing their own incompetence, a finding that Dunning has replicated across multiple contexts (e.g., among doctors, college students, and laboratory technicians). These studies have creatively illustrated the omnipresence of this “blinders on” reality of life. In fact, the data are becoming so compelling that truly none of us can claim exemption.

The broad literature reviewed in this monograph shows also that people often do not recognize when they make errors. The social environment in general and the current litigation-happy atmosphere in business, medical settings, and even our schools, in particular, conspire to feed people’s selective blindness. Terrorized by the potential consequences of legitimate critical evaluation, supervisors and teachers raise the average rating to a “very good” or “well above average.” The recipients of these inflated ratings (inflated relative to statistical possibility, anyway) enjoy so much of a rosy glow following evaluation of their performance that meaningful possibilities for improvement are never explored.

People also define competence in a way that places their own performance in the best possible light. For tasks with multiple components, people neglect what they do poorly, focusing instead on what they do adequately or well. They pay little attention to what portion of overall potential proficiency they display. As a friend in community theater who had more gumption than talent once told me, “I deserve the lead in the play! I look much better in the costume than the woman they chose.” The specific skills of others are undervalued, and sometimes not even recognized, as every dramatic or vocal coach can attest.

Appropos of so much of our work in the academic publishing arena, the authors discuss a much-dreaded concept: deadlines. Publishers and editors of all stripes will groan when they read the research findings, which add empirical suasion to the rock-solid observation that people cannot accurately estimate the likelihood of meeting deadlines of all types. (As if we needed a reminder of this fact.) The discussion of deadlines (as well as of other poorly predicted task attempts) reveals that people fail to assign adequate weight to other commitments when focusing on their likelihood of meeting a specific one. People also fail to attend to past experiences with factors that impede their progress. How frustrating this is for the people who manage repeat deadline offenders. The problem seems farcical when put in terms of a description of someone else, but nearly all of us are guilty of such sins. We overestimate how much time we will have for a particular project, we underestimate the time required to do it well, we underestimate the impact of intervening factors (illnesses, family issues, and personal matters, to name a few), we forget to factor in the importance of our mood if the process is a creative one, and as a net result, we are late.

The authors describe and provide a general categorization for the phenomenon of flawed self-assessment, and they document extensively its implications in three important real-world domains. This brings me to a critical next step in the process: assessing and enhancing people’s ability to understand and manage themselves. What more proof do we require before setting out to try to improve people’s ability to conduct accurate self-assessments? The breadth of the phenomenon suggests that it is robust and resistant to intervention. But intervention is not impossible—and clearly, even if we reach only a portion of the glib self-evaluators and raise their self-awareness, we are making a contribution to solving the problem. The question is how we can do this.

Go to the “Management” section of any bookstore and you will find authors getting rich as a result of people’s willingness to buy books that improve their ability to self-evaluate. But precisely who is buying the books? Sadly, the best guess is that most of the people who buy them are the ones who least need them—the ones who recognize the areas of their own incompetence. Those who are incompetent but do not know it are thumbing periodicals in “Travel and Leisure.” My take is that the self-selection method (i.e., hoping the people who need it will read the books that could help them) is not the most optimal strategy. We need a targeted intervention.

My colleagues and I have tried many approaches to reach the less competent and raise their self-awareness and ultimately their performance. We offer our interventions to whole classes of students or whole groups of middle managers, for example,

accepting that we may be improving things more for the better performers than for the worse ones. But we do accomplish meaningful improvement for some of the introspectively challenged members of the group. We have found that the ability to “know thyself” can be assessed, trained, and improved, resulting in worthwhile increases in performance. As Dunning, Heath, and Suls report, the evidence suggests that poor self-knowledge does not have to equal destiny. This may well be the key take-home message of this monograph and its greatest contribution to future research.

REFERENCE

Carlyle, T. (1888). *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes & Brother.