

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It was more than two centuries ago that Benjamin Franklin observed just how hard it was to know one's self. The data we have reviewed suggest that this difficulty remains in current times. The views people hold of themselves are often flawed. The correlation between those views and their objective behavior is often meager to modest, and people often claim to have valuable skills and desirable attributes to a degree that they do not.

However, we again hasten to add that gaining an accurate impression of the self is an intrinsically difficult task, one for which people often do not have crucial information. Thus, omniscience is a rare or impossible commodity, and one should not expect it of people, nor chide them for their failures to possess it. That said, people could take steps to reach more veridical conclusions about themselves. People should take into account more cautiously what they know and do not know about themselves and so adjust their self-views and predictions accordingly.

It is important to note that researchers have observed mistaken self-judgments not only in laboratory experiments, but also, more important, in real-world settings. Students have a difficult time understanding when they have grasped the true meaning of material they have just read. Surgical residents cannot predict how they will perform on a standardized exam on their skill, even though their peers and supervisors can. Patients act on models of illness that are erroneous and potentially harmful. College students, thinking themselves deviant in their ambivalence about alcohol, drink more than they would prefer to conform to a social norm that does not really exist. Planners of large civic projects envision completion schedules that bear little relation to reality. CEOs make acquisition decisions that the market punishes rather than rewards.

All told, this review suggests that there is striking continuity in the errors that people make when assessing themselves, whether in the laboratory or the real world. The review also suggests continuity in the psychological processes underlying these errors.

Recommendations

This review of the literature suggests many recommendations, some relevant to researchers and some to policymakers and practitioners.

For Researchers

Focusing on Consequences. In this review, we have concentrated on the types of errors people make in their self-judgments and the psychological processes that are responsible for those errors. Along the way, we have enumerated some of the consequences of these errors, but our discussion of this topic has not been as extensive or systematic. In large part, this is because behavioral scientists know a good deal about the types of errors people make

and the psychology that produces them, but much less about the sequelae of those errors.

To be sure, the literature is not bereft of discussion about consequences. Studies have provided a laundry list of circumstances in which self-judgment errors, particularly overconfidence, are either helpful or harmful. For example, undue optimism appears to be helpful when people encounter the most stressful of psychological circumstances. Women facing breast cancer display the most psychological adjustment when they exhibit unrealistic levels of optimism (Taylor, Lichtman, & Wood, 1984). Similarly, people recovering from civil war or the death of a loved one tend to do better when they overrate themselves (Bonnano, Field, Kovacevic, & Kaltman, 2002). However, in less extreme circumstances, overconfidence appears not to be so beneficial. People who overrate themselves tend to be seen as arrogant, hostile, and maladjusted in the eyes of others (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Paulhus, 1998). Overconfident people persist in working on insolvable problems longer than people not so confident (Feather, 1968); overconfident business owners persist in outmoded strategies when economic conditions change (Audia, Locke, & Smith, 2000). Poor-performing business managers who overrate themselves are the ones most likely to be derailed in their careers (Shipper & Dillard, 2000).

Much future work could profitably focus more on the consequences of mistaken self-assessments, to provide a more comprehensive and systematic account of when mistaken judgment is likely to produce its greatest costs, as well as when it might provide valuable benefits. Such work would have to examine carefully the impact of different types of self-judgment errors, the magnitude of those errors, and the settings in which those errors take place (for a more extensive discussion, see Dunning, 2005).

Creating a Unified Research Focus. In addition, the continuity of the patterning of self-judgment errors in different domains suggests that the fallibility of self-evaluation is a ubiquitous issue that arises across disparate human endeavors. However, it appears that up to now, researchers have been largely content to study the accuracy of self-judgment within the confines of their own specific specialty, not realizing that other researchers in other specialties have found similar patterns of self-evaluation strengths and weaknesses. For example, some research on CEO hubris does not cite the extensive literature on the psychology of overconfidence. The psychology literature on whether overconfidence is merely a laboratory epiphenomenon could benefit from a consideration of the evidence that similar errors are encountered in deadly serious real-life circumstances in the medical field. The medical literature does not cite organizational research about when people are most likely to be overconfident (e.g., perhaps like CEOs, doctors are especially prone to misguided confidence when they confront the new).

This continuity suggests that researchers across a number of disciplines and subdisciplines need to make the accuracy of self-judgment an explicit, identified topic of empirical research and to

interact with one another, or at least track each other's work. Historically, this type of interdisciplinary cross talk has been somewhat unusual, but with the advent of electronic databases, the ability of medical researchers, for example, to reference the most recent findings in the organizational or educational literatures has been made much easier. By making such references, researchers in one subdiscipline may be able to find out what precious information other disciplines have uncovered about when people are likely to be right or wrong in their self-appraisals, what psychological mechanisms produce those patterns of accuracy or error, and what interventions might bring self-perception into a closer alignment with reality.

For Policymakers and Practitioners

For policymakers and real-world practitioners, the implication of this review is that the accuracy of self-evaluation should not be assumed. For example, in business settings, one should not assume that employees have achieved the level of expertise that they claim. Instead, one should take pains to provide independent tests of competence (such as the opinions of other people). We have enumerated a number of flaws typical of self-evaluation, and practitioners should be wary of how these types of flaws might be relevant to their own work.

For example, consider the area of medical education. Many medical schools emphasize to their students that they should independently develop the initiative, habits, and expertise necessary to educate themselves about the types of situations and challenges they will face in the classroom, the medical-school clinic, and, ultimately, in their own offices after beginning their practice (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991). Obviously, such self-directed learning requires the ability to recognize the areas where further work is most needed—where one's shortcomings are the most severe and in need of remediation. This review, however, suggests that one cannot simply assume that individuals, left to their own devices, will be able to spot their own shortcomings. Therefore, it might be prudent to provide some sort of intervention (e.g., peer review, standard tests) that gives students—and practitioners after they have left formal training—feedback about their strengths and weaknesses.

Some common themes run through the literature on improving the accuracy of self-judgment. One theme that emerges from our review is that the road to self-accuracy may involve information from or about other people (see Dunning, 2005, for an extended discussion). For example, in educational settings, benchmarking has been shown to improve self-evaluation accuracy, as has peer assessment. In the business world, having an independent and active board of directors has been shown to prevent CEOs from making the kind of mistakes that grow out of hubris. Another theme, coming from the organizational literature, is that cognitive repairs can be applied to the kinds of self-judgments that are often made with error, thus sparing individuals and their organizations the costs associated with faulty self-assessment.

Unfinished Portraits

In any event, this review of the literature has prompted us to believe that for both researcher and practitioner, there is much exciting work to be done on the psychology of faulty self-assessment. We feel that the psychological literature has painted only a few brushstrokes toward a portrait of the person as self-evaluator—and there is much more painting to be done to complete that portrait. But, perhaps more important, there is also much work to be done about another portrait well worth painting. That second portrait is one that depicts what an individual looks like when he or she has achieved an accurate impression of his or her talents, capacities, and character. How one retouches the first portrait to create the second is an issue that requires much more theoretical and empirical work.

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