



# Faulty Self-Assessment: Why Evaluating One's Own Competence Is an Intrinsically Difficult Task

Travis J. Carter\* and David Dunning  
Cornell University

---

## Abstract

People's perception of their competence often diverges from their true level of competence. We argue that people have such erroneous view of their competence because self-evaluation is an intrinsically difficult task. People live in an *information environment* that does not contain all the data they need for accurate self-evaluation. The information environment is insufficient in two ways. First, when making self-judgments, people lack crucial categories of information necessary to reach accurate evaluations. Second, although people receive feedback over time that could correct faulty self-assessments, this feedback is often biased, difficult to recognize, or otherwise flawed. Because of the difficulty in making inferences based on such limited and misleading data, it is unreasonable to expect that people will prove accurate in judgments of their skills.

---

Know yourself. Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful.

– Ann Landers, American advice columnist, 1918–2002

Ann Landers comes from a long line of philosophers, psychologists, social commentators, and advice columnists who have exhorted people to gain an accurate vision of themselves. The rewards for doing so are obvious. To the extent that people know their strengths, they can make profitable decisions about how to spend their time and apply their efforts, such as choosing the best career in which to spend their lives. Furthermore, to the extent that people know their weaknesses, they can avoid situations that might lead to costly mistakes. Better yet, they can work on those shortcomings to rid themselves of them.

However, although the exhortation to 'know oneself' has a long and venerable history, recent investigations in behavioral science paint a vexing and troubling portrait about people's success at self-insight. Such research increasingly shows that people are not very good at assessing their competence and character accurately. They often hold self-perceptions that wander a

good deal away from the reality of themselves (for recent reviews, see Dunning, 2005; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004).

For example, correlational studies show that the perceptions people hold of their competence is typically related to their actual performance, at best, to only a modest degree (Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988; Mabe & West, 1982). Often, the relationship between perception and reality of self is quite weak or even evaporates completely. For example, what consumers think they know about their purchases correlates only moderately with what they really know (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000). How public health workers rate their understanding of plans to respond to a community-wide disaster (such as a bioterrorist attack) correlates only 0.34 with their actual level of understanding (Kerby, Brand, Johnson, & Ghouri, 2005). Medical students' evaluations of their communication skills, as they complete their training, bear little relationship to how their supervisors and their patients rate them, although supervisors and patients tend to agree with each other's evaluations substantially (Millis et al., 2002).

Beyond this, people also tend to be overconfident in their skill and expertise, providing rosy judgments of self that are not or cannot be true. For example, people on average tend to say they are more invulnerable to disease than the average person – although it is impossible for the average person to be 'above average' in invulnerability (Larwood, 1978). People also overpredict the occurrence of positive, and underpredict the occurrence of negative, events in their lives (Weinstein, 1980). Lawyers, for example, overestimate the likelihood that they will win the case they are currently working on (Loftus & Wagenaar, 1988). Software developers chronically underestimate the amount of time that it will take to write a new piece of software (Cusumano & Selby, 1995), an example of a general tendency to underestimate how much time projects will take to complete (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994).

In summary, the extant psychological literature suggests that people have some, albeit only a meager, amount of self-insight. This is not to say that self-knowledge is nonexistent, or that people are necessarily less accurate in self-judgments than other judgments, although that is sometimes the case (Dunning, 2005). Rather, because of the importance of accurately assessing one's strengths and weaknesses, and the lifetime of opportunities people have to learn about oneself, it is nonetheless impressive that self-judgments often lie closer to worthless than they do to perfection. Reviews elsewhere have dealt with the degree to which people make erroneous self-evaluations, the costs (and benefits) of those flawed evaluations, and the exceptions under which people pretty much get themselves right (see, for example, Dunning, 2005; Dunning et al., 2004).

Our goal in this essay is to focus on one critical dimension of the task to judge one's self accurately, one that we believe has not received sufficient attention in the psychological literature. We argue that the task of self-assessment is an intrinsically difficult if not impossible one – and that it is

thus unreasonable to expect more than a meager amount of accuracy in self-judgments. In particular, we wish to argue that the *information environment* in which people provide self-evaluations is too impoverished to allow them to make accurate self-evaluations. By information environment, we mean the data people have available to them as they strive toward some sort of honest evaluation. We argue that people frequently do not have all the data they need to determine their true level of competence.

In the sections that follow, we will discuss what types of information people are missing as they strive to reach accurate judgments of self. In two different sections that follow, we argue that the information environment is insufficient in many ways. In the first section, we focus on people at the moment they are asked to provide some assessment of their competence. At that moment, we argue that people, left to their own devices, are often missing crucial types of data necessary to arrive at an accurate judgment. In the second section, we describe how the outside world fails to inform people of their strengths and weaknesses. People may not come to accurate self-views if they were just left to themselves, but if external agents – such as, for example, friends, bosses, and teachers – provided them with feedback about their competence, they might come to better know their good and bad points. We argue, however, that feedback from the outside world tends to be misleading, murky, and often missing. As a consequence, the faulty views that people hold about themselves tend not to be corrected. Let us consider each of these issues in turn.

### **Deficits in the Information Environment**

Suppose that the reader was looking over a short article on, say, the accuracy of self-judgment, but that someone burst into the room to hand him or her a pop quiz on scientific reasoning. Being a good sport, the reader completes the quiz, and then calculates how good a job he or she did. The reader can come up with an estimate, but in a sense the reader, left to his or her own devices, does not have all the information necessary to really know whether he or she has posted a top score or a lousy one. Consider, as people confront tasks, all the types of information they are lacking as they judge their performances.

#### *Errors of omission*

When performing some task, people know the solutions they have come up with to address that task. Doctors, for example, know which diagnoses they test for. Lawyers know which arguments they have crafted to win a case. However, knowing this is often not sufficient to provide an accurate assessment of performance. Consider, for example, the plight of Larry Donner (played by Billy Crystal), from the classic 1980s movie *Throw Mamma from the Train*, as he struggles to describe a night in the American South.

The night was hot, wait no, the night, the night was humid. The night was humid, no wait, hot, hot. The night was hot. The night was hot and wet, wet and hot. The night was wet and hot, hot and wet, wet and hot; that's humid. The night was humid. (Brezner & DeVito, 1987)

These are all fine solutions to his task, until his acquaintance's mother leans over and suggests, 'The night ... was sultry' (Brezner & DeVito, 1987).

In a sense, people can often be Larry Donners, left with whatever solutions they have generated – but unaware of the solutions that could have been generated but were not. For the doctor, there might be symptoms or diagnoses that were not considered. For the lawyer, there might be relevant legal precedent of which she is unaware.

We would argue that these missed solutions, or rather *errors of omission*, are important pieces of data for self-evaluation. The doctor should know about all of the relevant diagnoses. The lawyer should be aware of all arguments supporting both sides of the case. These pieces of information, however, are ones that people are not aware of by definition. As a consequence, their self-judgments suffer in terms of accuracy.

Recent research demonstrates that people are not aware of their errors of omission. Caputo and Dunning (2005) asked participants to find as many words as possible in a Boggle puzzle, and then to assess their ability. Participants based their self-assessments almost entirely on the number of words they found, but not on number they missed, although they considered their misses quite relevant. Furthermore, participants' guesses of the number of omission errors they had made were uncorrelated with their actual number of words missed. Other studies by Caputo and Dunning found a similar lack of awareness concerning omission errors. For example, graduate students asked to critique psychological studies showed little awareness of the range and number of methodological errors they had failed to spot.

The reader may object, asking how could we ever expect people to know about their errors of omission – but that would be our point. This is an aspect of the information environment that is hidden from view. As a consequence, people cannot be expected to provide completely accurate self-evaluations when such an important type of information is, by definition, not available to them.

Further data show that the fault lies with the information environment and not with people. Specifically, when participants in the research of Caputo and Dunning (2005) learned of their errors of omission, they took them into account. In fact, in subsequent self-judgments, they gave just as much weight to their omission errors as they did to the number of solutions they had found – and their subsequent self-assessments became much more accurate as a result. This finding suggests that although hidden or missing information is detrimental to accurate self-insight, people can appropriately use that information when it is provided to them.

*Incompetence and knowing the rules of judgment*

There is another way in which people fail to have available all the information they need to provide accurate self-judgments – and this deficit in information may hit hardest those most in need of revising their self-views. Often, to judge one's own or another person's choices, one needs to know the proper way in which a choice should be made. For example, suppose one were asked to judge whether another person's conclusion is logically sound. To provide an accurate judgment, one would have to have a pretty good grasp of the rules of logic. But what about those who fail to have such a grasp? Can they adequately judge?

Kruger and Dunning (1999; see also Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003; Ehrlinger, Johnson, Dunning, Kruger, & Banner, forthcoming; Haun, Zeringue, Leach, & Foley, 2000) suggested that people who do not have such expertise cannot judge accurately – either themselves or another person. Specifically, Kruger and Dunning argued, with data, that people who suffer from a deficit of expertise or knowledge in many intellectual or social domains fall prey to a dual curse. First, their deficits lead them to make many mistakes, perform worse than other people, and, in a word, suffer from incompetence. But, second, those exact same deficits mean that they cannot *judge* competence either. Because they choose what they think are the best responses to situations, they think they are doing just fine when, in fact, their responses are fraught with error. Indeed, if they had the expertise necessary to recognize their mistakes, they would not have made them in the first place.

Consider, once again, the domain of logic. If people do not know the rules of logic, they are likely to make mistaken inferences and not know it. For example, knowing that A is 'necessary' for B implies that if B is present, one can safely infer that A is also present. However, one cannot further conclude from necessity the converse, that A's presence also implies B – although many unskilled in the ways of logic make this mistake. The problems for people making this mistake go beyond just committing it. As part of the second half of the double curse of incompetence, they will be confident in their incorrect conclusion and think anyone actually reaching the right conclusion is wrong. People who know logic would be unlikely to make such a mistake, but beyond that, will know they are right, and will correctly spot when another student is making a mistake.

In short, one aspect of the information environment necessary to adequately judge oneself is competence in the skill being judged. To the extent that people lack that competence, their deficits leave them less able to judge the quality of their performances. Their incompetence acts as a sword that slices away an important category of knowledge needed to judge self and others accurately. In fact, suffering under such deficits, it is hardly reasonable to assume that they would be able to spot their own incompetence whatsoever. By contrast, those who are competent live in

a richer and more accurate information environment. Thus, competence both creates and is created by the information environment, and a lack of competence is a blow to self-insight from both directions.

*The ill-defined nature of a right answer*

Another common problem in the information environment is the fact that the criteria people should use to judge a performance are ambiguous, open to disagreement, or just flat out unknowable. Many tasks are *ill defined*, in that there is no clear and unambiguous rule one should use to compute a correct answer, nor a clear yardstick to judge whether an answer is correct. Composing the next big hit in popular music is such an ill-defined task, in that there is no obvious algorithm to use to write such a song. Leading a group is another ill-defined task. Different people possess very different leadership styles, and some work better in some situations than in others (Fiedler, Chemers, & Mahar, 1976). There exists no one clear, rigidly defined way to lead a group. Intelligence, too, is an ill-defined quality. Does intelligence mean finishing math problems quickly or does it mean negotiating a compromise between two warring factions? People differ in their responses to this question (Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991). These types of tasks stand in contrast to well-defined tasks, where the procedure to produce – and thus to judge – whether an answer is correct is easily determined. Such well-defined tasks would include, for example, computing the circumference of a circle, or converting miles to kilometers. Small calculators can be fed the clear-cut decision rules used to determine correct answers on these well-defined tasks, but no calculator, to our knowledge, has been successfully built to write the Great American novel or to provide adequate therapy to a person suffering from mental illness.

The ill-defined nature of many tasks appears to lie behind biases in people's judgments of self. When excellence along a trait is ambiguous or can be defined many different ways, people tend to think of themselves as rather good to an unrealistic degree. When success at a trait is more clearly defined, people provide more realistic judgments (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Felson, 1981). For instance, Dunning et al. (1989) asked participants to rate themselves on ambiguous traits (such as *sensitive* and *neurotic*), as well as unambiguous ones (such as *mathematical* and *gossipy*). The ambiguous traits could be defined in many different ways (*sensitive* can mean loving animals, or being very attuned to a spouse's moods), whereas the unambiguous traits were fairly constrained in their interpretation (being *mathematical* typically involves getting very high grades in math classes). Participants showed a strong tendency to self-enhance when the trait was ambiguous, ratings themselves as 'above average' on positive and 'below average' on negative ones, but revealed very little self-enhancement on unambiguous traits where the criteria of judgment were rather clear-cut.

This tendency to self-enhance is almost never corrected by the information environment. Instead, the information environment often gives people wide latitude to diverge in the criteria they use to judge themselves and other people. It does not constrain people to use a consensus set of criteria, and as a consequence people are free to select the criteria that allow them to judge themselves in a flattering way. If people used the same criteria instead, their judgments of self – and others – would be in more realistic and more in agreement (Dunning et al., 1989; Hayes & Dunning, 1997), but often the information environment is not that directive.

### **Deficits in Feedback**

Above, we have argued that people are not in an information environment that compels correct conclusions about the self. However, the description we gave of self-judgment did carry one important but unspoken assumption. We assumed that the individual was not in a position to receive feedback from others, but was only able to gain self-insight based on a self-appraisal of his or her performance. Perhaps if people have only their own resources they will be stranded in an information environment hostile to accurate impressions of self. But what about the world people actually live in? In many circumstances, people do receive feedback from others, and they do get to stick around to see the outcomes of their choices and judgments. One could argue that over time people gain the information they need to achieve accurate impressions of self. Incompetence in some domains can be remedied only by direct feedback, since poor performers typically cannot even recognize when they are failing (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). That is, as people choose and as they act, they receive feedback about the wisdom of their choices. They pass or fail exams. They win praise or suffer insults. They get that promotion or get passed over. They win money at the poker table or they crash out.

To be sure, people do receive feedback as they live their lives, but if one looks at the types of feedback people get – or, fail to get – one often sees that the feedback people receive tends to be, once again, insufficient to guide them toward accurate impressions of self. Consider the following problems associated with feedback.

#### *Probabilistic feedback*

Whenever there is a probabilistic element to an outcome, there is always the possibility that even if one makes the objectively best choice, the outcome will nonetheless be undesirable. For example, imagine that one was given the choice between two options. One could take a 50% chance of winning \$20 (Bet A), or an 80% chance of winning \$10 (Bet B). In this case, the expected value of Bet A (\$10) is higher than the expected value of Bet B (\$8); therefore, the objectively best bet, according

to an economist, is Bet A. However, half of the time, this objectively correct choice will yield \$0. Similarly, a professional poker player can play a hand perfectly by the numbers, and still lose to a lucky amateur on the last card. A good baseball manager can take out the pitcher with a 0.164 average for a pinch hitter with a 0.380 average, but that pinch hitter will still sulk back to the dugout without a hit 62% of the time. Does the negative outcome mean that one made a poor choice, or that the decision was right, but merely unlucky?

When feedback is probabilistic – and it often is in life – the outcome can be inconsistent with the quality of the choice people made (Baron & Hershey, 1988; Hershey & Baron, 1992). Correct choices can lead to disastrous outcomes (ask any professional card player), just as lousy choices can inadvertently lead to success (ask any golfer whose poorly aimed shot ricochets off a tree and onto the green). In these situations, it is very difficult to accurately evaluate one's choice based only on the outcome, and that can lead to inaccurate inferences about the quality of our performance or judgment. In the real world, the information environment does not typically provide discrete probabilities so as to calculate the expected utility, making it even more difficult to draw any conclusions about one's choices or skills.

### *Ambiguous feedback*

Sometimes the information provided by the environment can be difficult to interpret, in that it is not clearly a success or failure. For example, if Sam asks Hazel out for dinner on Friday and she says that she has plans that night, what lesson should Sam learn? Is Hazel refusing because she cannot stand Sam or because she is honestly busy with family obligations that night?

At other times it may not be the outcome or feedback that is ambiguous, but rather the reasons behind it. If Sam is unambiguously rejected when asking Hazel out on a date, the reason for that rejection could still be ambiguous, obscuring the lesson to be learned from the rejection, if any. It could be that he had food in his teeth when he asked, that the particular ensemble he chose for the occasion was in poor taste, or even that Hazel is currently recovering from a previous relationship and simply is not interested in dating anyone, or believes that Sam is just too good for her.

Without knowing the specific reason why he received the rejection, Sam will be left to his best guess as to how to keep it from happening again. This sort of guesswork puts everyone at a disadvantage. First, inferring the cause of a single instance is likely to be a spurious inference indeed. These inferences are likely to be based on cultural conventions and prior beliefs, which can be inaccurate (Wilson, 2002) or biased (Dunning, 2005; Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003).

Also, the task of consciously detecting covariation – that is, the relationship between action and outcome – is a difficult one, given people’s limitations (Alloy & Tabachnik, 1984; Crocker, 1981). Thus, even if poor Sam has had enough rejections for a clear pattern to emerge, he is still likely to make errors in noticing the pattern. Integrating multifaceted information from a number of sources into an accurate portrayal of cause and effect is no trivial matter, and although this is indeed a human failing, it is nonetheless another example of the environment presenting information in a fashion difficult for humans to process. As such, people can hardly be blamed for making errors when trying to put cause and effect together.

### *Biased feedback*

One would be hard-pressed to find someone who actually enjoys delivering bad news, with the possible exception of *American Idol*’s Simon Cowell, who appears to be a cultural phenomenon simply because he is unconcerned about puncturing the egos of the hopeful singers in front of him. In fact, to prevent the bearer of bad news from being the object of the recipient’s wrath, the Greeks and Romans had a law protecting messengers from harm while delivering their news. To avoid more modern versions of this occupational hazard, people tend to go out of their way to avoid delivering negative feedback, often disguising bad feedback as good (Tesser & Rosen, 1975).

For example, imagine that Anne is attending the first performance of her nephew’s new rock band, only to find her ears forever scarred by the experience. The band plays their instruments adequately enough, but the songs manage to blend clichés in new, but unwanted and excruciating ways. However, Anne is faced with an unfortunate predicament. What does she tell her nephew after the show? As the cool aunt, her duty is clear: she must be supportive of her nephew’s new enterprise, but she also does not want to tell an outright lie. Thus, Anne is likely to resort to half-truths. To spare her nephew’s ego, she might focus on the positive aspects of the show (‘Wow, your band is really loud!’), or use a cleverly ambiguous phrase (‘That was really something!’). As a result, her poor nephew will take away the mistaken impression that his band’s performance garnered praise, rather than feedback that might shape the band into a unit that really deserves praise. That is, the feedback people give is often biased by the desire to spare a person’s feelings, a parent’s love, or even just to avoid an awkward moment (DePaulo & Bell, 1996).

### *Missing feedback*

Unfortunately, feedback is often present but hidden discreetly from view (Dunning, 2005), coming in the form of nonoccurrences, what fails to

happen rather than what does. For example, positive feedback is often withheld when people are performing well. If someone is performing well, it may seem unnecessary to give feedback – they appear to know what they are doing, and do not need improvement. If someone does not know that they are succeeding, however, this lack of reinforcement could cause them to make a change for the worse.

Hidden feedback can be even more of a problem for negative behaviors. As is often the case, Dave Barry said it best:

I argue very well. Ask any of my remaining friends. I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this, and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don't even invite me.

Everyone knows at least one person whose dreadful behavior has ostracized him from an otherwise welcoming social circle – but who never seems to get the hint. Perhaps he talks too loud, or maybe he makes awkward and inappropriate comments, but the general consensus is that people are more relaxed when he is not around. In these cases, people handle this individual's bad habits not by correcting that behavior but rather finding ways to avoid the person displaying it.

However, consider the perspective of this poor outcast. Because he clearly lacks the social skills to realize what constitutes appropriate behavior – and without receiving explicit feedback about his negative behaviors, he may never know that anything is amiss. He is unlikely to be invited to dinner parties, but because these noninvitations are deliberately kept secret to spare his feelings, he will never know how many dinner party invitations his behavior has cost him (Dunning, 2005). Nonoccurrences of this type may not be noticed, and thus he is left with a mistaken belief that his social skills are just fine and that his social life is all that it can be.

In short, one issue with feedback is that it often comes in the form of a *nonoccurrence*. As diagnostic as these nonoccurrences can be, this missing information may be especially unlikely to be used in self-judgments because it is difficult to identify. This difficulty arises, in part, because of biases people have in their information search strategies. First, when trying to uncover a relationship between two items (say, the number of off-color jokes one tells and the number of dinner party invitations one receives), people tend to look primarily at evidence that confirms, rather than disconfirms, their hypotheses (for a review, see Klayman & Ha, 1987), and people's hypotheses are likely to be biased by their desires (Kunda, 1990). Because people are motivated to see themselves in a positive light, they are likely to entertain the hypothesis (and seek evidence thusly) about how their actions led to favorable outcomes. That person with the penchant for off-color jokes is likely to seek evidence that such jokes are enchanting rather than obnoxious.

Second, when looking for relationships between two items, people tend to expect positive, rather than negative, relationships. That is, people tend

to expect that an increase in one item is likely to produce an increase in the other (such as eating more ice cream is expected to expand waistlines). It is more difficult to recognize when a *decrease* in one item leads to an increase in the second. Thus, people might expect a positive relationship between off-color jokes and dinner party invitations (more jokes = more invitations) rather than a negative relationship (fewer jokes = more invitations). In a number of studies, Newman, Wolff, and Hearst (1980) showed that for college students, much like pigeons (Jenkins & Sainsbury, 1969) and children (Sainsbury, 1971), learning a logical rule is much more difficult if that rule depends on an attribute being *absent* rather than present. In one study, it took participants significantly longer to figure out a rule that determined whether a card containing four symbols was 'good' (rather than 'not good') if it *did not* contain a triangle than if it *did* contain a triangle (Newman et al., 1980).

Even if people make a great effort to do a better job dealing with negative or disconfirming evidence, the feedback they receive about their choices can still be incomplete. People receive feedback for the choices they make (e.g., a polite thank you for buying an electric can opener as a birthday gift for a friend), but because they make that choice, by definition they forego receiving feedback about alternative choices they could have made (e.g., an ecstatic shriek for buying two tickets to the opera for their friend). Thus, they are not in a position to know whether they have made the best, or even a good, choice, given all the unknown alternatives.

Often, it is the case that the decisions people make based on those predictions preclude them from finding out whether their choice was the right one. When making some decisions, such as which college to attend or which person to marry, choosing one path precludes taking the other (Cohen & March, 1974; May, 1973). In these cases, the only way to evaluate such a choice would be to directly compare the two experiences. Because time travel is currently impossible, if Jerry chooses to attend Dartmouth, he'll never know if he would have liked Columbia better. One can only assess the outcome of your decision against itself, against the experiences of others, or against one's imaginings of the alternatives. People may come love or hate their decisions, but that doesn't necessarily mean they would have liked any of the alternatives any better (or any worse). As such, any insight gained from the experience may be inadequate to guide future decisions. Yet again, we do not have the data necessary to learn the real lessons of our failures and successes, and future decisions will suffer as a result.

## Concluding Remarks

The final mystery is oneself.

– Oscar Wilde (Irish poet, novelist, dramatist, and critic, 1854–1900)

In this essay, we noted that people are often mysteries to themselves, as Oscar Wilde had it, and then went beyond to explain that it could not be any other way. We have proposed that self-evaluation is an intrinsically difficult if not impossible task, and thus it should not be surprising that people show only meager to modest self-insight in the psychological literature and in the social world people encounter everyday. The information people have at the moment they make an evaluation is often insufficient to guide them to an accurate assessment. Over time, the feedback people receive about themselves contains layers of imperfection, bias, or ambiguity that undermines any accurate view of self.

To be sure, by outlining the reasons why self-evaluation is difficult, we should also note that we have delineated when it might be easy. There are circumstances that lend themselves to accurate self-judgment. If the individual is competent, can receive information about errors of omission, can get clear feedback, and is working on a well-defined task, self-judgment can be very accurate. One should not forget this other side of the coin – and also not forget that to the extent that one can create a world with these circumstances, one's sense of self will lie close to the truth.

In addition, we should note that there is much future work to be done to complete the portrait of individual as self-evaluator. For example, some of the problems we have described for self-assessment (such as ill-defined correct answers, missing information, and incompetence in the domain of judgment) are problems that also arise when people try to judge others. Is self-assessment more difficult – and more fraught with error – than social judgment? Although we believe there is much work to be done on this issue, initial signs suggest that self-assessment is more difficult, in that people at times seem to be better at predicting their peers than they are themselves. People, for example, more accurately predict when their college roommates will experience a romantic break-up than when they themselves will experience a break-up (MacDonald & Ross, 1999; for a review, see Dunning, 2005). In addition, some of the issues we have described (particularly biased or deliberately ambiguous feedback) appear to afflict self-assessment more than they do assessments of others. Future work, however, is necessary to see the extent to which self versus peer prediction is inferior to the other.

Furthermore, upon reflection, we believe this essay provides an important perspective on the troubling state of self-assessment described in the psychological literature. One should not summarily blame people for their errors in self-judgment. The task they face is often an impossible one. Instead, if one is casting about for someone or something to blame, one should look toward the circumstances surrounding the person making the judgment. People are called upon to make self-judgments in information environments that are simply not up to the task – and it is the insufficiency of these environments that should often be blamed, not the individual. Indeed, there is a sense of irony in judging the individual when the environment

is at fault. By withholding or skewing feedback, we create the impoverished information environment responsible for others' inaccurate judgments.

In a sense, we are suggesting that to blame other people for their judgmental errors would be to commit, to conjure a classic psychological concept, the fundamental attribution error – attributing a person's outcomes to their personality and character when in fact those outcomes were dictated by outside situational forces (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). Such is often the case in self-assessment. Flawed self-assessments are a function of an inadequate information environment, and not necessarily a sign of bias, wishful thinking, or foolishness on the part of the individual. Instead, such flawed assessments are brought about by informational circumstances that surround our own judgments as well as those we catch making mistakes.

Attributing flawed self-assessments to inadequate information environments also provides the potential for hope. If people reach erroneous conclusions about their competence because they do not have all the information they need, then one can see room for intervention. One can, for example, point out to people what information they fail to have – perhaps prompting people to be more cautious in their self-evaluations. Better yet, one can potentially design interventions that bring people the information they lack, so that they can make more accurate self-judgments. Providing these interventions may be a complex process, but doing so may prove to be a task that is well worth the effort, making each of us a little bit less of a mystery to ourselves.

### Short Biography

Travis J. Carter is currently a PhD candidate in Social Psychology at Cornell University. He received his AB in Psychology from the University of Chicago. His research interests span a large range, including social cognition, consumer and political decision-making, and the self and social judgment.

David Dunning is Professor of Psychology at Cornell University. He received his BA from Michigan State University and his PhD from Stanford University, both in Psychology. A past associate editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, he currently serves as executive officer of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. He is an experimental social psychologist specializing in self-judgment, self-deception, behavioral economics, and the psychology of eyewitness testimony. His book *Self-Insight: Roadblocks and Detours on the Path to Knowing Thyself* (Psychology Press, 2005) describes the difficulties and failures of accurate self-judgment.

### Endnotes

\* Correspondence address: Department of Psychology, Uris Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA. Email: [tjc38@cornell.edu](mailto:tjc38@cornell.edu).

## References

- Alba, J. W., & Hutchinson, J. W. (2000). Knowledge calibration: What consumers know and what they think they know. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **27**, 123–156.
- Alloy, L. B., & Tabachnik, N. (1984). Assessment of covariation by humans and animals: The joint influence of prior expectations and current situational information. *Psychological Review*, **91**, 112–149.
- Baron, J., & Hershey, J. C. (1988). Heuristics and biases in diagnostic reasoning: I. Priors, error costs, and test accuracy. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, **41**, 259–279.
- Brezner, L. (Producer), & DeVito, D. (Director). (1987). *Throw Momma from the Train* [Motion picture]. Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures.
- Buehler, R., Griffin, D., & Ross, M. (1994). Exploring the 'planning fallacy': Why people underestimate their task completion times. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **67**, 366–381.
- Caputo, D., & Dunning, D. (2005). What you don't know: The role played by errors of omission in imperfect self-assessments. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **41**, 488–505.
- Cohen, M. D., & March, J. G. (1974). *Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Crocker, J. (1981). Judgment of covariation by social perceivers. *Psychological Bulletin*, **90**, 272–292.
- Cusumano, M. A., & Selby, R. W. (1995). *Microsoft Secrets*. New York: Free Press.
- DePaulo, B. M., & Bell, K. L. (1996). Truth and investment: Lies are told to those who care. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **71**, 703–716.
- Dunning, D. (2005). *Self-Insight: Roadblocks and Detours on the Path to Knowing Thyself*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Dunning, D., Heath, C., & Suls, J. M. (2004). Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, **5**, 69–106.
- Dunning, D., Johnson, K., Ehrlinger, J., & Kruger, J. (2003). Why people fail to recognize their own incompetence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, **12**, 83–86.
- Dunning, D., Meyerowitz, J. A., & Holzberg, A. D. (1989). Ambiguity and self-evaluation: The role of idiosyncratic trait definitions in self-serving assessments of ability. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **57**, 1082–1090.
- Dunning, D., Perie, M., & Story, A. L. (1991). Self-serving prototypes of social categories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **61**, 957–968.
- Ehrlinger, J., & Dunning, D. (2003). How chronic self-views influence (and potentially mislead) estimates of performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **84**, 5–17.
- Ehrlinger, J., Johnson, K., Dunning, D., Kruger, J., & Banner, M. (forthcoming). Why the unskilled are unaware? Further explorations of (lack of) self-insight among the incompetent. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.
- Falchikov, N., & Boud, D. (1989). Student self-assessment in higher education: A meta-analysis. *Review of Education Research*, **59**, 395–430.
- Felson, R. (1981). Ambiguity and bias in the self-concept. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, **44**, 64–69.
- Fiedler, F.E., Chemers, M.M., & Mahar, L. (1976). *Improving Leadership Effectiveness: The Leader Match Concept*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Harris, M. M., & Schaubroeck, J. (1988). A meta-analysis of self-supervisor, self-peer, and peer-supervisor ratings. *Personnel Psychology*, **41**, 43–62.
- Haun, D. E., Zeringue, A., Leach, A., & Foley, A. (2000). Assessing the competence of specimen-processing personnel. *Laboratory Medicine*, **31**, 633–637.
- Hayes, A. F., & Dunning, D. (1997). Construal processes and trait ambiguity: Implications for self-peer agreement in personality judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **72**, 664–677.
- Hershey, J. C., & Baron, J. (1992). Judgment by outcomes: When is it justified? *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, **53**, 89–93.
- Jenkins, H. M., & Sainsbury, R. S. (1969). The development of stimulus control through differential reinforcement. In N. J. Mackintosh & W. K. Honig (Eds.), *Fundamental Issues in Associative Learning* (pp. 123–167). Halifax, NS: Dalhousie University Press.
- Kerby, D. S., Brand, M. W., Johnson, D. L., & Ghouri, F. S. (2005). Self-assessment in the measurement of public health workforce preparedness for bioterrorism or other public health disasters. *Public Health Reports*, **120**, 186–191.

- Klayman, J., & Ha, Y. W. (1987). Confirmation, discontinuation, and information in hypothesis testing. *Psychological Review*, **94**, 211–228.
- Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **77**, 1121–1134.
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, **108**, 480–498.
- Larwood, L. (1978). Swine flu: A field study of self-serving biases. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **8**, 283–289.
- Loftus, E. F., & Wagenaar, W. A. (1988). Lawyers' predictions of success. *Jurimetrics Journal*, **29**, 437–453.
- Mabe, P. A., & West, S. G. (1982). Validity of self-evaluation of ability: A review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **67**, 280–296.
- MacDonald, T. K., & Ross, M. (1999). Assessing the accuracy of predictions about dating relationships: How and why do lovers' predictions differ from those made by observers? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **25**, 1417–1429.
- May, E. R. (1973). *'Lessons' of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Millis S. R., Jain, S. S., Eyles, M., Tulsy, D., Nadler, S. F., Foye, P. M., et al. (2002). Assessing physician's interpersonal skills: Do patients and physicians see eye-to-eye? *American Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, **81**, 946–951.
- Newman, J., Wolff, W. T., & Hearst, E. (1980). The feature-positive effect in adult human subjects. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, **6**, 630–650.
- Nisbett, R. E., & Ross, L. (1980). *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 10, pp. 173–240). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Sainsbury, R. (1971). The 'feature positive effect' and simultaneous discrimination learning. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, **11**, 347–356.
- Tesser, A., & Rosen, S. (1975). The reluctance to transmit bad news. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 8, pp. 193–232). New York: Academic Press.
- Weinstein, N. D. (1980). Unrealistic optimism about future life events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **39**, 806–820.
- Wilson, T. D. (2002). *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.