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IDEAS | ESSAY

You're Not as Smart as You Think: Perils and Benefits of Overconfidence

New research shows that most people think they're smarter than average; how gender and education play a role.

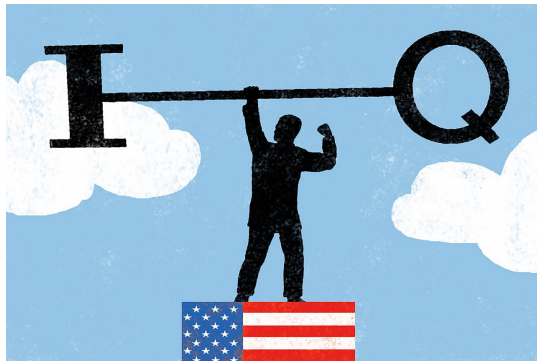


ILLUSTRATION: GWENDA KACZOR

By Patrick Heck and Christopher Chabris

July 20, 2018 11:30 a.m. ET

It is widely known—or at least widely believed—that people are overconfident in their own abilities. Psychological research has consistently found, in fact, that people have too high a self-assessment when it comes to traits that they see as important or socially desirable. We tend to think we are funnier, better leaders, better at driving and even more attractive than we really are. But what do people think about one of the most desirable and important traits a person can have: intelligence?

The claim that “most people think they are smarter than average” is a cliché of popular psychology, but the scientific evidence for it is surprisingly thin. Most research in this area has been conducted using small samples of individuals or only with high school or college students. The most recent study that polled a representative sample of American adults on the topic was published way back in 1965.

Do people today think they are smarter than average? We set out to get an answer. Working with our colleague Daniel Simons, we conducted two surveys: one using traditional telephone-polling methods, the other using internet research volunteers. Altogether we asked a combined representative sample of 2,821 Americans whether they agreed or disagreed with the simple statement “I am more intelligent than the average person.” Our results were published this month in the journal PLOS One.

We found that 65% agreed that they are more intelligent than average. There was little difference between the telephone and internet samples. Only 23% of those surveyed disagreed that they were above average, and the remaining 12% reported that they didn’t know or were

unsure. Not only was our sample of Americans overconfident in their intelligence, they also had little doubt about where they stand in relation to others.

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We found that more than 50% of every subgroup of people—young and old, white and nonwhite, male and female—agreed that they are smarter than average. Perhaps unsurprisingly, more men exhibited overconfidence (71% said they were smarter than average) than women (only 59% agreed).

In our study, confidence increased with education: 73% of people with a graduate degree agreed that they are smarter than average, compared with 71% of college graduates, 62% of people with "some college" experience and just 52% of people who never attended college.

These are not unrealistic self-assessments. People who complete more formal schooling tend to be more intelligent than those who don't. After all, those who are less intelligent are less likely to get advanced degrees, and receiving more education actually increases people's intelligence.

Who did our participants think about when they compared themselves to "the average person?" The word "average" has several mathematical definitions. It can refer to the mean (here, the result of adding up everyone's "intelligence" and dividing by the total number of people), the median (the "intelligence" value right at the middle, where exactly half of people score higher and half score lower) or the mode (the most common value). IQ tests are designed so that the mean, median and mode are essentially the same, so there's no way that two-thirds of people can be above average.

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The simplest and most plausible conclusion from our study is that most people really do think they are pretty smart. Does this mean they are irrational about their own intelligence? Not necessarily. Overconfidence

has definite downsides: It is linked to unjustified risk-taking and bad investing decisions, and while arrogance may impress at first, it gets old quickly.

But expressing confidence also can bestow benefits, even if that confidence is sometimes undeserved. Confident people are seen as being more competent and higher in social status than humble people. A belief that one is truly capable of managing a sprawling corporation, saving lives in an emergency room or leading troops in battle could be a vital element of decisive, charismatic leadership.

The most reliable way to convince other people you are brilliant probably starts with sincerely believing it yourself. Our study shows that many people think they are smarter than they really are, but they may not be stupid to think so.

—Mr. Heck is a social psychologist, and Mr. Chabris is a cognitive psychologist, both at Geisinger Health System in Pennsylvania.

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