

Everyone thinks everyone else has less free will

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Generally, everyone seems to believe they have more free will than everyone else. Credit: aussiegall via flickr

The subject of individual free will -- whether our fates are beyond our control or whether we command our own destinies -- has been hotly argued for centuries. Now scientists have revealed a new wrinkle in the debate: generally, everyone seems to believe they have more free will than everyone else.

Social psychologist Emily Pronin at Princeton University in New Jersey studies the differences between how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others. According to her research, we tend to view our own

judgment as sound but the judgment of others as irrational; recognize the biases in others but not ourselves; and see ourselves as more individualistic and others as more conformist.

Essentially, people judge others based on what they see. But they judge themselves based on what they think and feel, a difference that often leads to misunderstandings, disagreements and conflicts. Understanding the psychological basis of these differences might help relieve some of their [negative consequences](#), Pronin suggested.

When Pronin began wondering about other consequences of this asymmetry, "beliefs in free will struck me as a key place to look, since those beliefs really matter for things like how much responsibility we assign to our own and others' actions," she said. In four experiments, Pronin and graduate student Matthew Kugler investigated how much people believed that their lives and those of their peers were guided by free will, findings they detailed online Dec. 13 in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#).

In the first experiment, the researchers studied the most classic tenet of free will — the notion that one's actions cannot be determined in advance. Fifty college students were asked the rate on a scale of one to seven how predictable they thought certain past and future decisions in their lives and those of their roommates were, such as their choice of major in college or their ultimate career path. On average, the participants viewed their own pasts and futures as less predictable than their roommates by about one point on that scale.

"By the standards of psychological research, this is a large effect," Pronin said.

In the second and third experiments, 28 restaurant workers and 50 students were asked how many choices they thought were available in

their futures and those of peers. The volunteers generally thought they had more pathways open to them, good and bad.

In the last experiment, 58 students created models predicting their own behavior and those of a roommate on a Saturday night or after finishing college that indicated how important personality, history, circumstances, intentions and desires were for outcomes. The volunteers saw their own future actions as most strongly driven by their intentions and desires instead of being predetermined by personality, history, or circumstances. In contrast, they viewed personality as the strongest predictor of their roommates' behavior.

"People have been debating about the existence of free will for ages," Pronin said. "Our research suggests one reason why this debate is so persistent -- people seem to have two views of free will. One view is when they look inwards and are convinced of their own free will; the other view is when they look outwards, at others, and are convinced that those others' actions could have been predicted in advance."

"This work is a terrific advance," said research psychologist Roy Baumeister at Florida State University in Tallahassee, who did not take part in this study. "Most debates about free will take an all-or-nothing form -- either everyone has it all the time, or nobody ever does."

As to why such a difference might have evolved, "when thinking about ourselves, it may be adaptive to believe that we can control what happens to us, and that belief requires thinking that we have free will," Pronin suggested. "When thinking about others, it may be adaptive to recognize the predictability in others' actions so that we can be prepared accordingly."

The scientists are intrigued by the consequences of these differing views on free will, as well as how they might vary across lifespan and different

cultures.

"How does it impact beliefs about personal responsibility and guilt?" Pronin asked. "Are people likely to spend more time kicking themselves about things that went wrong in their past because they think they could have controlled those things, even though they wouldn't think this in the case of others?"

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