

Study offers insight into why some people overestimate their abilities while others underestimate

July 9 2021, by Michael Brown



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A lack of confidence in our abilities on a given task or activity seems to stem from overestimating the abilities of others, according to a University of Alberta study.

The finding could offer leaders insights into how to counter [self-doubt](#) in the face of a difficult [task](#).

Previous research has shown that for many tasks and activities, the majority of people tend to predict that they will outperform others, especially when tasks are easy. A classic example comes from a 1981 study of U.S. drivers in which 93 percent claimed they were better than average.

On difficult tasks, however, most people tend to predict that others will do better than they will.

In making sense of these seemingly contradictory findings, the study surveyed runners before a timed race about how they expected to do.

The researchers—Gerald Häubl, a marketing professor in the Alberta School of Business and the Ronald K. Banister Chair in Business, and Isabelle Engeler of the University of Navarra in Spain—chose a challenging mountain race, with uphill distances ranging from 10 to 78 kilometres.

Controlling for age, gender and running experience, the researchers found that the runners who wrongly predicted that their finishing times would be better than average—those who were overconfident—were driven mainly by overestimating their own performances.

Meanwhile, runners who predicted they would perform worse than average—those who were underconfident in their abilities—had a solid understanding of their own performance but expected more from their competitors.

"Our work identifies two distinct sources of bias or two different reasons for why people might not be well calibrated: they can be biased in their

[self-assessment](#), and they can be biased in their assessment of others," said Häubl.

As well, the underconfident group was not only quite accurate in predicting their own performance, they also tended to be those who were better than average.

Häubl said underconfidence, which can manifest itself in the workplace as imposter syndrome, is often beneficial, particularly if it motivates people to work harder.

"The problem with underconfidence, however, is that it can prevent people who actually have the potential to excel at something—a particular job or career—from even trying, because they falsely believe there are many others who are better than they are."

Likewise, individuals who overestimate their performance tend to be those who are worse than average.

"This latter result bears parallels with prior research showing that people who are unskilled tend to overestimate their performance," said Häubl.

This overconfidence, he said, can be good or bad, depending on whether it translates into higher or lower motivation and thus a desired outcome.

"Some of humankind's greatest achievements were probably fuelled by some form of overconfidence. But then, so were some of humankind's most spectacular failures," he said.

"In very general terms, well-calibrated confidence, based on an accurate assessment of both one's own and others' abilities, is what people should strive for."

More information: Isabelle Engeler et al, Miscalibration in predicting one's performance: Disentangling misplacement and misestimation., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000301](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000301)

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Study offers insight into why some people overestimate their abilities while others underestimate (2021, July 9) retrieved 25 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-07-insight-people-overestimate-abilities-underestimate.html>

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