



WHY ARE WE SO POOR AT SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Inability To Accurately Assess Oneself

"90% of the world's woe comes from people not knowing themselves, their abilities, their frailties, and even their real virtues. Most of us go almost all the way through life as complete strangers to ourselves".

Sydney J Harris, American Journalist 1917 – 1986

A recent review of several studies reveals a not very strong relationship between self-perceptions of one's own personal competencies and characteristics, and the perceptions of one's own competencies and characteristics by other people. The research suggests, on average, a correlation around 0.29. For example, medical students' impressions of their communication skills show little relationship with impressions held by patients or supervisors although the impressions of patients and supervisors correlate rather highly. College room mate ratings better predict which college romances survive than do self-impressions of the romance. Peer ratings amongst junior doctors strongly predict who will do well on a surgical skills exam but self ratings do not. Peer ratings of leadership ability in naval officers proves to be a more accurate indicator of promotion than self-ratings.

Self Over-Confidence

Self-assessments are not just inaccurate they tend to be flawed in a positive direction in that most of us have immodest and unrealistic views of ourselves. People over-predict the likelihood they will perform generous, ethical acts. People over-estimate the likelihood that they will buy a flower for a charity, they over-estimate their ability to maintain a successful romantic relationship, and they over-estimate their preparedness to cooperate with another person when money is at risk. People over-estimate how quickly they can get tasks done. Psychologists have even coined the phrase 'planning fallacy' in recognition that nearly all planning estimates are inaccurate and over optimistic.

People also over-rate their competence and character relative to other people. On average, people think of themselves as anything but average, and the average person claims to be more disciplined, more idealistic, socially skilled, good at leadership and healthier than the average person. There are many surveys which show that people consistently think that they excel against their contemporaries. Also, ironically, people also claim to be better than most other people at producing unbiased and realistic self-assessments!