Blissfully Incompetent: Flawed Self-Assessment

I. General Overview
-we base decisions on impressions of our knowledge, skills, expertise, etc.
-begs the question, "How accurate are our self-assessments?"
-consequences in misjudgments may only result in wasted time (auditions), or danger to self (flying in fog due to inflated self-confidence), or danger to others (errors in diagnosis by doctor)

Research Conclusions: self-assessments are flawed in systematic ways that carry significant implications.

General Reasons:
1. Influences on social behavior are complex and we rarely have all information we need for accurate decisions
2. Even when we have information in hand, we tend to neglect that information, which results to worse assessments

General Errors:
1. We overvalue ourselves
   -how do you compare with your peers on ability? People always say "above average", which is statistically impossible.
2. We don't recognize when we make errors
3. We define competence in a way that places our own performance in best possible light
   -neglect we we do poorly; focus on what we do adequately
   -specific skills of others are undervalued, or not recognized
4. We can't accurately estimate the likelihood of meeting deadlines
   -overestimate how much time we will have for a task, underestimate time needed to do it well, underestimate impact of intervening factors

II. Empirical Evidence on Flaws in self-assessment
-we tend to be too optimistic about talents, expertise, and future prospects

A. Correlations between Perception and Reality
1. ask subjects for self-assessment, then measure objective performance
   -Intelligence self-assessment and IQ & other academic tests
   -Student ratings of academic skills and instructor evaluations
   -beliefs about ability to detect lies and actual performance
   -workplace expectations and actual performance

Health Domain:
-boys confidence in knowledge how to use condoms and actual knowledge
-nurse's confidence in knowledge of basic life-support tasks and actual level of knowledge
-doctors' self-rated knowledge of thyroid disorders and score on test
-surgical resident's view of surgical skills and performance on standardized board exam

2. Meta-Analytic Evidence
-meta-analysis of literature on self-perceptions and objective performance found correlation of .29.
   -athletic domain had higher correlation: feedback is constant, immediate, and objective r = .47
   -managerial competence, r=.04; .17 for interpersonal skills, students in classroom.

3. Self-vs. Peer Assessment
-complete strangers armed with only scant info about an individual can predict that person's skills, abilities, etc as well as person himself.
   -Videotape Studies: person walks into room, sat behind a table, read standard weather report, walked out- all in 90 seconds.
   -participants who viewed tapes rated IQ. Those ratings predicted IQ score on standardized IQ tests as well as target's self-ratings.
   -Questionnaire Studies: college students rated current romantic relationship along five dimensions and the answered 3 quick questions( what hobby or activity do you most enjoy).
   -complete strangers reading answers to 3 questions were as accurate as students in predicting whether relationship would last 6 months

-Peer Ratings
   peer ratings of leadership are better than self-ratings in predictions of naval officers getting promoted
   college students rate longevity of peer's relationships better than their own.

B. Unrealistic Optimism
-we tend to overestimate ourselves
   -hold overinflated views

1. Above Average Effects
   -survey of 1 million HS Seniors, 70% state they had "above average" leadership skills, only 2% felt skills were "below average"
   on Ability to get along with others: 60% rate themselves as top 10%, 25% rating themselves in top 1%
   -college students think they are more likely than peers:
     to live past 80, have a good job
     less likely to acquire drinking problem or have heart attack
   -motorcyclists less likely to have accident than typical rider
   -college professors
     94% say they do above average work
     people say they are more likely than peers to provide accurate self-assessment

2. Overestimation of Likelihood of Desirable Events
   -errors in self-prediction
   -ability to bring about personally desirable events
   -lawyers overestimate ability to win case
   -stock picks confident that stocks will be winners
   -likelihood that future events will be socially desirable
     83% of Cornell students predicted they would buy flowers in charity drive, said 55% of peers would. Actual was 43%.
     90% claim they would vote in election, said 75% of peers would, actual was 69%.
3. Underestimation of Task-Completion Time
-Planning Fallacy
College students take 3 weeks longer to complete thesis than most "realistic" estimate and 1 week longer than worst case scenario.
Students asked to indicate time within which they were 50% certain they would finish project, as well as time when they were 99% certain.
Results: 13% finish by 50% deadline; 45% finish by 99% deadline.

4. Overconfidence in Judgment and Prediction
-overconfidence effect
College students overestimate probability that answers to general knowledge questions are correct. (even when 100% "certain", wrong 20% of time)
CIA analysts overestimate accuracy of predictions of future events.
Doctors diagnose pneumonia with 88% confidence, right only 20%

III. Psychological Mechanisms
Why can't we make accurate self-assessments?

A. Explanations for Above-Average Effect
-people lack crucial information when they compare themselves against others

1. Information Deficits
-ignore valuable information that they should seek out or have

Double Curse of incompetence
-if you don't know anything, you don't know how to assess that

skills needed to recognize competence are extremely close to those needed to produce competent results
College students scoring in bottom 25% of exam walk out thinking they outperformed rest of class.

Debate teams in bottom 25% think they were winning 60% of matches when they were actually winning 22%
Same for lab technicians, medical students

Compared with good students, poor students are less successful at identifying which specific question they got right or wrong.

Physics students with little experience has less accurate intuitions about which physics problems are generally difficult to solve.

PARADOX: training in logic increases skill, but reveals past flaws, causing them to downrate skills as they increase.

Unknown Errors of Omission
-you don't know everything that is possible

Grad students asked to find all methodological difficulties.
-initial evaluation of research methods not correlated with objective performance
-But once, problems pointed out to them, they made more pessimistic ratings of own knowledge.

Uncertain Lessons from Feedback

Il-defined Nature of Competence
-hard to define what it takes to be competent

In math, easy to define competence- one right answer from well-delineated algorithms
but other domains tricky- symphony, writing fiction, etc.

How do you define intelligence?
-large vocab
-facility at math
-knowledge of fine wines

People take ill-defined problem and selectively use it to their advantage

person good at math says it is important, downplays other skills

Summary: people tend to believe themselves to be above average on traits that are ill-defined, not on more specific ones.

EX: more sophisticated, idealistic not more neat or punctual

2. Information Neglect
-people misjudge themselves because they prefer to see how they compare with others rather than objective standards

Exclusive focus on the self with neglect of others

We don't really compare ourselves with others, we just think of ourselves.

-how well do you ride a bike? Most people say quite well, without thinking that others may have no problems either

-ask about juggling. People say worse than average.

College Students prefer to compete against other college students in trivia contest on Adam Sandler, not on 18th century French Painting, forgetting that other students would do as well as them.

Wild cards in poker deck- leads to increased betting because people think they will get them, forgetting others.

Controllability and Privacy of Traits
-people think of themselves as superior when thinking about traits that are seen as within their control (self-discipline, driving, diet choices) but not external (pesticides, etc.)

People think they possess more traits that are internal (self-conscious) but not externally seen: Example, feel emotions more than peers, more inhibited than peers, more likely to be embarrassed (note can lead not just to self-enhancement, but unfavorable self-assessment.

PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE: neglect of private lives of others

-ex: rural community where church dogma discouraged alcohol and card-playing, which were publicly condemned by almost everyone.

Private interviews showed that individual members didn't hold those views.

-perpetuates status quo because "even if no one believes, everyone believes that everyone else believes"
B. Explanations for Overly Optimistic Prediction of Events
- Considering any future action or outcome, we tend to pick the most optimistic and are confident in its occurrence

Two basic biases:
predictions tend to be too optimistic
confidence in prediction is too high

1. Information Deficits

Unknown situational Details
- We fail to take into account that details of future situations are often un-knowable or unpredictable
Ex: predict how likely you are to vote
depends on: personal qualities (interest in campaign, etc) but also situational factors hard to predict (sickness, etc)

People tend to think that they can predict future events. But if you ask them to think about alternative ways situations may play out, they tend to hedge future predictions.

Imperfect Understanding of Emotion, Visceral Drives, and Their Consequences
- People have difficulty in predicting how they will respond to situations with emotional components
- Leads to predictions that are overly optimistic
Ex: dieting person approached after full meal is asked to predict whether, one week later at 4pm, will prefer healthy snack like apple or candy bar. Picks apple, yet one week later eats candy bar.

Social Situations: people fail to appreciate power of fear, anxiety, and embarrassment to shape future behavior.

"Superfreak" experiment: if I paid you $5, would you dance in front of class?
30% say yes, but only 8% volunteer when opportunity comes up.
Subjects were first emotionally aroused, and asked, predictions were more accurate.

Explains discrepancy between predicted behavior and actual behavior
Problems with "Affective Forecasting"

People tend to predict they will respond very negatively to events like being denied tenure, becoming paralyzed, not getting a job, etc. Yet, we get over it faster than we predict.
- We underestimate how quickly we adapt to emotional events.
- We tend to minimize impact of negative events, by discounting, finding silver linings, finding distractions, etc.

2. Information Neglect

Neglect of Alternative Scenarios
We tend to dwell on positive and fail to take into account worst case scenarios.
People report as "most realistic" scenarios that tend to reflect "best case"
Can be changed if people asked to write down "worst case"

Neglect of Concrete Details
- We tend to base predictions about future events on abstract features of situation and minimize concrete details.
Example: which assignment would you prefer to do: topic of romantic love (articles written in foreign language) or sewer plant treatment (articles written in native language)? Students pick first topic, focusing on abstract topic, ignoring concrete details.

Neglect of Background Circumstances
Focalism: basing predictions on factors conceptually related to behavior, but ignoring common background circumstances.
Ex: How long will it take to finish Christmas shopping? We predict based on number of gifts we need to buy, but don't include factors unrelated to shopping (weather, parties, etc).
College students asked to predict how much mood would be influenced if team lost big game. After game, emotions recorded. Subjects overestimated effect, unless they were asked first to "defocus" (asked to consider all other mundane activities in which they were likely to engage).

Neglect of Lessons of Experience
Planning Fallacy
- We are too optimistic despite a lifetime of experience
- Take an "inside view" rather than "outside", focus on abilities, dismiss data.
Example: predict whether you will lose 20 pounds you want.
Inside view: yes, "will power", etc.
Outside view: tally past successes and failure
Ex: work while on vacation
Predictions can be improved by forcing people to think of past experience.

Academics asked how long it would take to revise curriculum. Most pessimistic estimate was 30 months. When asked about past experience, one said it had taken 7 years in previous attempt. Took 8 years.

REAL WORLD DOMAINS:

IV. Education

A). Educational Methods That Undermine Accurate Self-Assessment

Goal is to give students skill and knowledge that they can remember (retention) and call upon outside the classroom (transfer).

1. Massed vs. Distributed Learning

Acquiring
Massed: training in on or few sessions
leads to rapid acquisition and highest levels of proficiency at end of lesson
but, also leads to quick memory decay

Example: Driver-training courses don't produce safer drivers. May result in more accidents and injury than those who learn more informally.

Why? self-confidence is over-inflated.

Retention
-distributed or spaced: sessions divided over several occasions
-variation
-withhold feedback and modeling

2. Reading Comprehension
-people bad at assessing comprehension of reading materials