

The Business Brain

Why we can't really assess our own skills and performance

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Anyone wondering why President Hosni Mubarak – or any unpopular leader – doesn't face facts and step down immediately might consider another fact, this one backed up by science. It's only human to see our status through rose-coloured glasses. Even if we think we know where we stand – in our work, in our romantic relationships – strong evidence shows that most of the time we're just plain wrong. And we're especially wrong when it comes to fuzzy, hard-to-measure traits such as leadership capacity, people skills, attractiveness and popularity.

"People, quite literally, see themselves as more desirable than they actually are," says Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioural science at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. "When people rate themselves on any dimension that's ambiguous – their managerial skills, their interpersonal skills, their grammar, or their test-taking ability – there's zero correlation between their self-perception and their performance. When the picture is ambiguous, people give themselves the benefit of the doubt."

That might be true for others, you think, but me? I'm brutally honest. Maybe. But have you ever, for example, thought that you're just not photogenic? A study by Professor Epley and Erin Whitchurch, a researcher at the University of Virginia, found that photographs don't capture our inner self-portrait because it's impossible to meet that standard: That picture is enhanced by the inner Photoshop in our brain.

The researchers discovered this nearly universal self-distortion by photographing university students, then altering the digital images in tiny increments. Using the real photograph as the model, they created 10 other photos, five approximating an idealized version of the student's face, and five approximating an unattractive version. When the students returned to the lab several weeks later they were asked to pick out their own face from the 10 other photos in the lineup. The result? Two-thirds of the students selected a photo that was artificially enhanced by 20 per cent. "There isn't a single static image of yourself that exists in your mind," explains Prof. Epley. "People's sense of themselves affects their judgment."

Not only were the students far more likely to recognize a positive distortion of themselves than the real image, but the stronger their implicit self-regard, the more likely they were to pick an artificially enhanced photo. (They were similarly biased when choosing pictures of their friends, though not when faced with matching up the photos of strangers.)

I asked Robert Kurzban, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, why we deceive ourselves this way, given that reality is bound to catch up eventually. The author of a recently published book, *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind*, Prof. Kurzban pointed out that humans have evolved to develop beliefs that are advantageous to us.

"There's an inherent ambiguity in the social world that there isn't in the world of cold reality," he says. "If the guy on the other side of the interview desk doesn't know the absolute truth and you don't know it either, it's in your interest to be strategically wrong." This doesn't count as bluffing if these distortions are unintentional; "We're simply designed to broadcast psychological propaganda about ourselves," he said.

How might we overcome this tendency toward self-enhancing propaganda? Performance reviews come to mind as an occasion where self-assessment and reality collide, especially if managers have the cold, hard facts but try to shield the employee – and themselves – via ambiguous feedback. Prof. Epley says the best performance appraisals are those that are concrete and open, noting: "We can tell when people are flattering others, but not when they're flattering us." You need precision, not self-assessments, he says, adding that focusing on how to achieve future goals is a constructive, humane way to deal with scrutinizing the present.

And if you want to be a better decision maker, keep in mind that you don't know quite as much as you think you do, Prof. Epley advises. To avoid falling prey to the built-in neural airbrush that enhances your view of yourself, a little humility can go a long way.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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