Students’ Flawed Self-Assessment: Implications for education, health, and eventually the workplace

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Abstract

Students make many decisions based on assessments of their ability, potential, and character. However, a growing body of psychological research suggests that such assessments are often flawed in systematic and significant ways. People hold beliefs about their skill that relate only modestly with actual performance, particularly in social and intellectual domains. People also overestimate themselves—thinking of themselves as special among their peers and mispredicting the odds that they will engage in socially desirable actions (e.g., voting, giving to charity). In this review, we discuss psychological mechanisms that lead to flawed self-assessment and describe some of their implications for health, education, and the workplace. In education, we describe how difficult it is for readers to assess their understanding of educational materials, how some practices may lead to overconfidence rather than competence in learning, but also discuss how accurate self-assessment can be enhanced by peer assessment and social comparison information. With regards to health, we discuss circumstances that lead to unrealistic optimism about future health risks, faulty theories of illness that prevent those at risk from taking healthy actions, and incorrect intuitions about emotion that prompt people to mispredict how they will respond to affect-laden situations. In the workplace, we discuss why feedback systems are difficult because they must provide information that often contradicts people’s self-assessments, how organizations can establish “cognitive repairs” that ameliorate the effects of overconfidence, particularly in undertaking new projects, and how supervisors can avoid making confident yet mistaken decisions that harm their businesses.