

Why knowing more can feel like you know less

Author: Lee Blake

“The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.”

– William Shakespeare

Do you consider yourself above average in most daily activities? Do you believe your ability to drive, run your finances or monitor your health are pretty damn good (if you do say so yourself)? You’re definitely not alone; most people do. And it’s usually those with the least in the way of ability who are the most likely to overrate their own capabilities and opinions. This cognitive bias, known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, is a well-studied phenomenon in which people show illusory superiority, or are under the illusion that they are better than they actually are, at a given task or domain. This, and the many other known biases, are innate human tendencies that simplify the world around us.

If at this point you’re thinking, ‘but that’s just not me’, you’re getting ahead of yourself! Most of us believe ourselves to be less susceptible to biases than, well, most other people. This is clearly illogical, not to mention an impossibility; 80% of drivers cannot be above average at driving – mathematically speaking – and yet, studies have revealed that they believe themselves to be . This can definitely be a problem, as basing important actions to decisions on fundamentally faulty knowledge can have grave consequences, and recent history has some interesting examples for us.

“Anybody who knows what’s going on clearly doesn’t understand the situation.”

– Anon (once said of the Vietnam war)

What you don’t know can hurt you

Donald Rumsfeld – a name loaded with the potential to divide just about any room, and rightfully so – famously spoke about the concepts of known knowns, known unknowns, unknown knowns and unknown unknowns. He mentioned these in his report explaining why the US had mistakenly linked the Iraqi government with the supply of chemical weapons to terrorist groups. This led to the Iraq invasion to locate weapons that we all now know never existed (not a small whoopsie by any stretch of the imagination). This ‘mistake’, Rumsfeld says, transpired because the US government was operating out of a place of unknown knowns: an area of knowledge wherein we think we know something to be true of a particular subject, but which is actually false. And, as evidenced above, decisions to act based on unknown knowns are often the most disastrous.

“If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq were the “unknown unknowns,” that is, the threats from Saddam whose nature we cannot even suspect, then the Abu Ghraib scandal shows that the main dangers lie in the “unknown knowns” – the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values.” – Slavoj Žižek

When the entire foundation of a decision or action is based on a false assumption, it is usually only direct failure that can reveal the all but apparent inadequacy and force the necessary self-reflection. Whilst the average person might never lead a nation to war on a whim, we might suffer a car accident, bankruptcy, or a stroke. All because we don’t know what it is that we don’t know, and more importantly, we are convinced that we do in fact know that we are decent drivers, financially savvy, or strong and healthy.

Why do we do this and what can we do about it?

There are perhaps two ways out of the trap of unknown knowns. But first, it is useful to understand the cognitive and psychological mechanisms behind it. The benefit of your brain convincing you that you do, in fact, possess above average ability in an activity is that, with this delusionally high self-esteem, you are more likely to attempt, and so doing, succeed at accomplishing a goal than would have been the case were you more aware of your actual abilities. This is most true for

preschool-aged children (exceptionally good at tantrums, but not much else) whose high self-esteem has an adaptational function, contributing to the development of initiative to learn new things.

These benefits are all well and good, but we don't really need to believe that we could join a Formula One team just to build the initiative to get to work every day. Similarly, nor do we need to believe that our opinion in every comments section of a YouTube video or online opinion piece are worthy of editorial pride of place. In fact, it is nigh impossible to learn something new when you firmly believe yourself to know everything.

This gets us to one of many disillusionment exercises: write an essay. Write an essay on a topic which you feel strongly will likely temper the strength of your opinion. More often than not, you won't get past the first paragraph of a topic on which you thought you were well versed without the illusion coming crashing down. For instance: do you think you're a good parent? Write a paragraph about what you think good parenting is. The act of putting something into words forces you to come to grips with it. Your words will quickly reveal the depths of your knowledge and push you to seek answers. Most importantly, however, it will get you asking valuable questions you had perhaps not considered before: does the same parenting style benefit children of all ages? Do boys and girls need the same type of discipline? What are the different ways to evaluate parenting? Etcetera, etcetera. As you begin to realise the depth of the subject matter and the more you subsequently learn, paradoxically, the more likely you are to realise how little you actually know. And that is when you will not only begin to develop a confidence rooted in reality about actual knowledge you've acquired, but there will also be more congruence between the two.

When it comes to everyday activities like your health, driving or your job performance, writing an essay will likely yield poor results in dispelling any mild delusions of grandeur. Here, the problems seem to be more of an inaccurate perception of a population's average performance within a given domain. Being more aware of what is going on around you, and doing a bit of research, would go a long way in bulking up your knowledge of the base rates. Alternatively, turn to technology and (buzzword alert) big data: for example, many smartphones now come standard with health apps that track the number of steps you take in a day as a measure of sedentary lifestyle, and compare this data with a larger comparator population to give you an idea of where you stand – or, more aptly, sit – in the scheme of things.

The world is a complex place, and it would be impossible to thoroughly perceive it for all that it is, let alone concurrently trying to accomplish our daily goals. It is also not enough to simply be aware that the cognitive shortcuts our brains often take are a double-edged sword on which it is easy to get cut. We must actively do the work to balance things out. And so, I ask you to consider when next you feel (suspiciously) strongly that you are right about something – whether about your abilities or even if it's just an inconsequential opinion you have – you reflect more wisely on the likelihood of your claim.