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Psychology: The Dunning-Kruger effect in action by Michael Totten

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The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias which is caused by the inability of particularly poor performers to evaluate their own performance accurately. As a result, those who are incompetent are also unable to recognize their incompetence and thereby improve their own performance. This cognitive bias was first identified and measured by Justin Kruger and David Dunning in 1999.

What causes it?

The Dunning-Kruger effect occurs because people tend to base their assessment of their skill levels partly upon their preconceived ideas of their skill levels. This interferes with the ability to assess skill levels based upon performance.

The Dunning-Kruger effect in drivers

Whenever drivers are asked to evaluate their driving skill and safety relative to other drivers, at least 80% of drivers, and sometimes as high as 93% of drivers, typically rate themselves as above-average drivers. Mathematically, only 50% of drivers could possibly have an above average skill level. If the average is taken as a bell curve range, then only 5% of drivers could objectively assess themselves as above-average drivers.

Unlike most other "Worst Driver" shows, "Canada's Worst Driver" concentrates on teaching horrible drivers to be better drivers. A few of these drivers come to the show convinced that they do not deserve to be on the show. Even when faced with a string of accident citations well above the average, these drivers believe that they have just had some bad luck, and that the real fault lies with other drivers. For these drivers, real education begins by demonstrating their own poor skills to the driver so that they can see it for themselves. Only then can they start to improve.

The Dunning-Kruger effect in home maintenance skills

"Canada's Worst Handyman" is the sister show to "Canada's Worst Driver." Once again, the show highlights exceptionally poor handyman basic skills and tries to help its participants improve these basic skills.

Unlike the participants on the "Worst Driver" series, most of the participants on "Canada's Worst Handyman" do not see their skills as particularly poor, and many of them rate themselves as average or higher. Several participants have even argued with the instructors over the right way to complete a basic task, even when the same participants have frequently injured themselves in the past.

Superstar USA

In 2004, reality show contestants were encouraged to try out for yet another American Idol-style talent show. However, the twist in Superstar USA was that the secret goal of the show was to find the very worst singer who firmly believed him- or herself to be the very best. The series was finally "won" by a young female singer who was completely unable to carry a tune and was equally completely unaware of that fact.

Learn more about this author, Michael Totten.

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