

Incompetent people don't seem to know they're incompetent

■ Study finds a high degree of cluelessness among low achievers.

By Erica Goode
New York Times

There are many incompetent people in the world. Dr. David A. Dunning is haunted by the fear he might be one of them.

Dunning, a professor of psychology at Cornell, worries about this because, according to his research, most incompetent people do not know that they are incompetent.

On the contrary. People who do things badly, Dunning has found in studies conducted with a graduate student, Justin Kruger, are usually supremely confident of their abilities — more confident, in fact, than people who do things well.

"I began to think that there were probably lots of things that I was bad at and I didn't know it," Dunning said.

One reason that the ignorant also tend to be the blissfully self-assured, the researchers believe, is that the skills required for competence often are the same skills necessary to recognize competence.

The incompetent, therefore, suffer doubly, they suggested in a paper appearing in the December issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make un-

fortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it," wrote Kruger, now an assistant professor at the University of Illinois, and Dunning.

This deficiency in "self-monitoring skills," the researchers said, helps explain the tendency of people with a lousy sense of humor to persist in telling jokes that are not funny, or of day traders to repeatedly jump into the market — and repeatedly lose out.

Some college students, Dunning said, show a similar blindness: after doing badly on a test, they spend hours in his office, explaining why the answers he suggests for the test questions are wrong.

In a series of studies, Kruger and Dunning tested their theory of incompetence. They found that subjects who scored in the lowest quartile on tests of logic, English grammar and humor were also the most likely to "grossly overestimate" how well they had performed.

In all three tests, subjects' ratings of their ability were positively linked to their actual scores. But the lowest-ranked participants showed much greater distortions in their self-estimates.

Asked to evaluate their performance on the test of logical reasoning, for example, subjects who scored only in the 12th percentile guessed that they had scored in the 62nd percentile, and deemed their overall skill at logical reasoning to be at the 68th percentile.

Similarly, subjects who scored at the 10th percentile on the grammar test ranked themselves at the 67th percentile in the ability to "identify grammatically correct standard English," and estimated their test scores to be at the 61st percentile.

On the humor test, in which participants were asked to rate jokes according to their funniness (subjects' ratings were matched against those of an "expert" panel of professional comedians), low-scoring subjects were also more apt to have an inflated perception of their skill. But because humor is idiosyncratically defined, the researchers said, the results were less conclusive.

Unlike their unskilled counterparts, the most able subjects in the study, Kruger and Dunning found, were likely to underestimate their own competence. When high scoring subjects were asked to "grade" the grammar tests of their peers, however, they quickly revised their evaluations of their own performance. In contrast, the self-assessments of those who scored badly themselves were unaffected by the experience of grading others; some subjects even further inflated their estimates of their own abilities.

"Incompetent individuals were less able to recognize competence in others," the researchers concluded.

The findings, the psychologists said, support Thomas Jefferson's assertion that "he who knows best knows how little he knows."

Carlos Santana receives his American Music Award for best album from presenter Melissa Etheridge on Monday.

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Careless drivers go to confession

■ In a phone poll, they "They aren't necessarily activi- something from the floor or be-