the Most Contagious and Dangerous Attitude is OverConfident Arrogance

What psychological bias would a Nobel Laureate eliminate with a magic wand?

If you were given a magic wand, which psychological bias would you eliminate from humanity?

Would it be people’s preferential treatment toward their in-group? Maybe people’s willingness to justify their own immoral actions? Maybe it would be your partner’s consistent underestimation of how long it takes to get ready?

If you were to ask one of psychology’s most esteemed researchers, though, his answer might surprise you. Daniel Kahneman would use the magic wand to eliminate people’s overconfidence.

But why does this Nobel Laurate perceive overconfidence as such an issue? What exactly constitutes overconfidence? And how does it manifest in society today?

Attitude Confidence

Attitude confidence (also referred to as attitude certainty) describes the degree to which a person believes their opinion or belief is valid. For example,
two people might both have positive attitudes toward a political party, but one person might be more confident or certain in that positivity.

Even within people, though, they vary in the degree to which they hold confidence in their opinions. For example, you might be very certain about your negativity toward black coffee but less certain about your negativity toward black tea.

Importantly, the more certain you are about an opinion, the more likely you are to act on it, making attitude confidence one of the most studied attributes in all of attitude research.

More recently, though, research has shown that people are not only more or less confident about specific attitudes but also more or less confident across their attitudes. That means, no matter what the topic is, some people are just more certain in the attitudes they endorse.

In one study, a team of researchers examined thousands of responses to people's confidence across a variety of topics—college football, paper plates, affirmative action, The Pope, sunbathing, etc. Those who reported being more confident in their attitudes were more likely to report intentions to engage in relevant behaviors (e.g., go to a football game, eat off paper plates, etc.).

But even more impressively, those high in dispositional confidence were more likely to act on all their attitudes, even those not assessed in the initial confidence measurements!

But confidence, on its own, isn’t a terrible thing. For example, if you weren’t confident in your ability to drive, you would probably never sit behind the wheel. The problem, then, is when people become overconfident in their attitudes and beliefs.

Attitude Overconfidence

A long history of research shows that humans are prone to exaggerating their abilities and knowledge, which researchers have categorized into three types of “overconfidence:”

1. A belief that you performed significantly better than you actually did
2. Extreme faith that your beliefs/opinions are accurate
3. The belief that you are significantly superior to others

Most of the research in social psychology has focused on this third form of overconfidence due to its impact on consequential decisions. This kind of overconfidence has contributed to large and far-reaching problems, from world wars to financial crises to environmental destruction.

Indeed, even the father of capitalism, Adam Smith, regarded overconfidence as an “ancient evil.” And most troublingly, recent research reveals that this cognitive bias can be quite contagious.

In a series of studies, researchers had participants complete a task where they had to guess the weight of a person in a photo. Before seeing the photos, though, the participant was presented with a prior person’s performance at the task. Specifically, they learned how accurate the prior person thought he was at the task as well as how accurate he actually was.

Now, in one condition, the prior person was calibrated (he did as well as he thought he did). In the other condition, the person was overconfident (he did worse than he thought he did).

From this, you might think exposure to the overconfident person would make the participant a bit more cautious about their own self-assessment at the weight-guessing task. But in fact, it had the opposite effect: Those who were exposed to the overconfident individual became more overconfident themselves.

In fact, exposure to the overconfident (vs. calibrated) individual actually made participants anywhere from 15 to 25 percent overconfident in their responses! Moreover, the researchers found that participants’ overconfidence persisted 2 to 5 days later! And that overconfidence spilled over to different tasks in the experiment!

Just reading all of that even made me overconfident in my use of exclamation points!

Calibrating One’s Confidence
Although it’s one thing to wish you could magic-wand-away a human bias like this, unfortunately, such powers do not exist. So, what can we do to address widespread overconfidence?

In addition to overconfidence being transmitted from person to person, it can also emerge from the environments in which we find ourselves. For example, if overconfidence is rewarded (e.g., employees who act overly confident receive additional opportunities), then people will act overconfident to get ahead—which, as we now know, will only serve to infect others with this bias. In fact, this "culture of overconfidence" has been attributed as a large contributor to the eventual collapse of the once 7th-largest corporation in the U.S., Enron.

However, by knowing that overconfidence can be so easily transmitted socially, it emphasizes the dangerous consequences of choosing role models or spotlighting individuals who exhibit these traits. And if you don’t believe me, just look at what happened to the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. Overconfidence can lead people to undertake tasks they have no business doing, disregard viewpoints of actual experts on the topic, and lead to behaviors that elevate their own interests above the community.

So, in thinking about your own attitudes, are there any you might be a bit too overconfident on?

Want to learn more about how to enhance everyday life with the science of psychology? Consider checking out the website, [www.EverydayPsych.com](http://www.EverydayPsych.com), and its most recent post about how to change bad habits (and implement good ones).

References
