



PSYCHOLOGY

Feeling Unsure of Yourself? Spend Time with a Hubristic Teammate

Confidence levels are often consistent within groups and populations: Contrast the humility and self-deprecation widespread among !Kung hunter-gatherers, for example, with the “culture of arrogance” that led the Enron corporation to bankruptcy (and many of its executives to jail). A research team wondered why overconfidence in particular manifests in social clusters. One reason, documented in six experiments, is that it appears to be contagious.

In the first experiment, 104 undergraduate students were randomly partnered up after individually completing a computer task and rating their confidence in their performance. Each pair collaborated on an extension of the task, after which participants revised their assessment of their individual performance. The researchers found that working with partners who were

overconfident (their self-assessments were not borne out by their actual scores) caused subjects to become more overconfident themselves. Subsequent experiments showed that the effect persisted over time and across varying tasks; it also occurred across indirect social ties and when subjects knew their partner’s confidence was unjustified. There was an exception: When expressed by members of an out-group (subjects attending the University of Illinois were told that their partner was from football archrival Ohio State), overconfidence did not spread.

“Future work should explore the practical implications of the social transmission of over- and under-confidence,” the researchers write. “Strategies and principles for designing the structure of organizations, building effective teams, and selecting and cultivating aspiring leaders and decision makers ought to consider the potentially profound and extensive social influence of an initially small pool of overconfident individuals.”



ABOUT THE RESEARCH “*The Social Transmission of Overconfidence*,” by Joey T. Cheng et al. (Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, forthcoming)

TALENT

A Vote for Generalists

It’s a perennial question: Should companies seek workers with broad knowledge or deep expertise for their R&D efforts? A recent study finds that diversified researchers explore and integrate new information from outside their domains of expertise more successfully than their narrowly focused peers do.

The authors examined use of the technology underlying the gaming accessory Microsoft Kinect. Released in 2010, Kinect broke ground with its ability to track whole-body motion—a capability with relevance to fields including artificial intelligence, cinematography, health care, and more. To determine the researchers who best capitalized on that capability, the authors studied 14 years’ worth of academic papers in electrical and electronics engineering, using keywords to identify researchers with no prior experience in motion sensing and to measure their levels of research diversity as reflected in their pre-Kinect publications. Then, searching for the keyword “Kinect,” they determined which ones drew on the new technology in the four years after Kinect’s release.