

## ARE WE ALL LESS RISKY AND MORE SKILLFUL THAN OUR FELLOW DRIVERS? \*

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In this study subjects were asked about their competence as drivers in relation to a group of drivers. The results showed that a majority of subjects regarded themselves as more skillful and less risky than the average driver in each group respectively. This result was compared with similar recent findings in other fields. Finally, the consequences for planning and risk taking of seeing oneself as more competent than others were discussed briefly.

Do people engaged in a risky activity where skill plays some role, have an unbiased view of their own skill and risk taking? More specifically, do they have a correct conception of their own skill and risk taking behavior, *e.g.*, in comparison to others?

One of the most common and best known risky activity in modern society is that of driving a car. Therefore, some observations of drivers' notions of their own driving skills and risk taking behavior will be presented in this paper. The observations will then be used as a start for a brief discussion of the importance of an actor's self image on his risk taking behavior and his readiness to find information about risk and safety applicable to himself.

For a long time it has been asserted (*cf.* Näätänen and Summala 1975) that most drivers tend to believe that they are better drivers than the average driver. This assertion was based on studies made several decades ago and poorly documented in reports now virtually impossible

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to obtain (but for a summary see Näätänen and Summala 1975). In these studies subjects were asked to judge how safely they drove in comparison with the average driver, vaguely defined as drivers in general. Typically, the results showed that around 70–80% of the subjects were reported to put themselves in the safer half of the distribution.

The following experiment was performed in order to try to replicate the earlier findings but in a situation where the subjects were asked to compare themselves with a more well-defined population of drivers whose characteristics were, at least partly, known to the subjects. Such comparisons should reduce possible effects of group stereotypes (*e.g.*, “California drivers are better drivers”) which could explain part of the earlier results.

## The experiment

### *Subjects*

A total of 161 *Ss* participated in the experiment. Of these 81 were American students who responded to an advertisement in the University of Oregon student paper and had a driver’s licence. The median age of the US *Ss* was 22 years. Forty-one of them judged their *skill* in driving and 40 judged how *safe* they were as drivers. In Sweden, *Ss* were recruited among psychology students at the University of Stockholm having a driver’s licence. Eighty students with a median age of 33 years participated. Driving skill was judged by 45 and safety by 35 of the Swedish students.

### *Method*

In the US group the questions were given in written form to the *Ss* as one of several tasks to judge in a session involving a variety of other judgment tasks.

The Swedish *Ss* were also given the questions in written form but did not have any more task to fulfill in the session. To illustrate, the question concerning safety was formulated as follows:

We would like to know about what you think about how safely you drive an automobile. All drivers are not equally safe drivers. We want you to compare your own skill to the skills of the other people in this experiment. By definition, there is a least safe and a most safe driver in this room. We want you to indicate your own estimated position in this experimental group (and not, *e.g.*, Eugene, Oregon or in the U.S.) (or (and not *e.g.*, people in Stockholm or in Sweden)). Of course, this is a difficult question because you do not know all the people gathered here today, much less how safely they drive. But please make the most accurate estimate you can.

Table 1  
 Distribution of percent of estimates over degree of safe and skillful driving in relation to other drivers. Higher percentiles represent less risky and more skillful driving.

		Estimated position in sample (percentiles)									
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	81-90	91-100
<i>Safety</i>											
US sample		2.5	0.0	5.0	0.0	5.0	2.5	2.5	22.5	37.5	22.5
Swedish sample		0.0	5.7	0.0	14.3	2.9	11.4	14.3	28.6	17.1	5.7
<i>Skill</i>											
US sample		0.0	2.4	2.4	2.4	0.0	12.2	22.0	12.2	26.8	19.5
Swedish sample		2.2	6.7	2.2	4.4	15.5	17.7	11.1	24.4	13.3	2.2

The question about driving skill was given in the same way as the question about safety with minor changes in wording to fit the task. The responses were given on a percentile scale by marking one of 10 successive 10 percent intervals.

### Results

The distributions of the judgments are shown in table 1 for the two groups and the two questions respectively. The table shows that most of the *Ss* in the group viewed themselves as safer and more skillful drivers than the rest of the group.

The medians for the distributions of safety judgments in table 1 fall in the interval 81–90% for the US group and between 71 and 80% for the Swedish group. This indicates that half of the *Ss* believe themselves to be among the safest 20 (US) or 30 (Sweden) percent of the drivers in the two groups respectively. In the US group 88% and in the Swedish group 77% believed themselves to be safer than the median driver.

The medians for the distributions of skill judgments fall in the interval 61–70% for the US group and between 51–60% for the Swedish group. Of the US sample 46.3% regard themselves among the most skillful 20%. The corresponding number in the Swedish group was only 15.5%. In the US sample 93% believed themselves to be more skillful drivers than the median driver and 69% of the Swedish drivers shared this belief in relation to their comparison group.

In summary, there was a strong tendency to believe oneself as safer and more skillful than the average driver. In addition, there seemed to be a stronger tendency to believe oneself as safer than and more skillful than the average person.

### Discussion

Very clearly, the present results illustrate a strong tendency among the subjects to believe themselves to be more skillful and less risky than the others in the groups. These results may reflect purely cognitive mechanisms or may be mainly a result of lacking information about the others in the group which may lead a majority of the people to regard themselves as “better”. For example, the results may be explained by cognitive mechanisms, such as, low memory availability of negative events (e.g., accidents or near accidents) in the experimental situation (*cf.* Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Svenson 1978). But there is also evidence pointing at greater generality of the findings (*cf.* Slovic *et al.* 1978). For instance, Preston and Harris (1965) compared 50 drivers whose driving involved them in accidents (serious enough to require hospitalization) with 50 drivers without accident histories but matched in relevant variables. When asked about how skillful drivers they were, the two groups

gave almost identical means indicating that the average driver, irrespective of accident record, judged himself to be more skillful than the average on the nine point scale. According to police records 34 of the drivers in the accident group were responsible for the accidents. The accident group had a higher frequency of previous traffic violations. This seems to indicate that we have difficulties in learning from experience (*cf.* Brehmer 1980).

Traffic safety campaigns with general road safety propaganda seem to have short-lived effects, if any (*cf.* Wilde 1972) which is quite understandable if we believe ourselves safer than most others. Why should we pay much attention to information directed towards drivers in general if we are safer and more skillful than they are?

Similar findings indicating prevailing views of oneself as generally more favorable than others have been reported also in other areas such as ethics (Baumhart 1968), success in sales management (Larwood and Whittaker 1977), attribution of responsibility (Miller and Ross 1975; Regan *et al.* 1975; Ross and Sicoly 1979). By way of example, Larwood and Whittaker (1977) found that management students and corporate presidents held a self-serving bias of their own competence which lead to overly optimistic and risky planning for the future. Thus, believing oneself as more skillful than others may lead to greater risk taking which is positively reinforced for those who "win the game" and are successful (*e.g.*, stay on top positions in business or administration). The same reasoning also applies to the successful risky driver but here the gain of success tends to be less and the cost in suffering and money for failures (accidents) seems to be intolerably great.

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