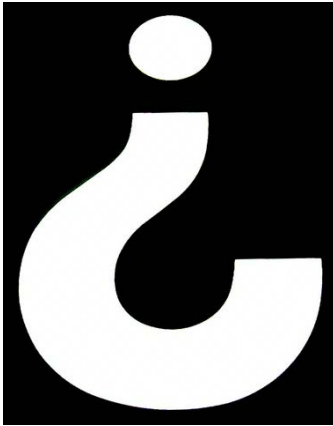




You and I May Not Know We're Incompetent

May 6, 2014



She was completely paralyzed on her left side.

And yet if you asked her if she could move her left arm, she would say that she could.

Even more interesting, if you pointed to her left arm and asked her whose arm it was, she would tell you it belonged to her mother.

If you then asked her, well where was her mother, she'd say her mother was hiding under the table.

The above is a vivid example of anosognosia (uh-no-sog-NOH-zee-uh; from the Greek *agnosia*, lack of knowledge, and *nosos*, disease), or being unaware of one's disability or incapacity. In anosognosia, the person confabulates, i.e. fills in the gaps of her awareness with a reality she believes to be true. She's not lying or trying to deceive. She truly believes what she's saying.

The example is provided by the eminent neuroscientist [V.S. Ramachandran](#), who has studied, written, and presented about anosognosia, including at the popular [TED](#) talks (where he discusses the case of a patient who recognizes his mother, but is convinced it's an impostor pretending to be his mother). His work and those by other researchers present a fascinating exploration of the human condition.

And yet, it is also a very humbling one too.

For although I may know that the left arm attached to my left shoulder is, indeed, mine and not my mother's, might I too be certain about aspects of myself, but instead be wrong and completely oblivious to it?

Anosognosia was first coined by [Joseph Babinski](#), a late 19th/early 20th century



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neurologist, in 1914 when he observed that patients who suffered a significant stroke on the right side of their brain leading to paralysis on the left side of their body (like the woman above whose arm didn't belong to her) would at times be entirely unaware of their paralysis, and amazingly assert they were fully functional.

A similar condition has been noted by psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. Their seminal [paper](#) published in 1999 explains it all: "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments". Ouch.

Their research was inspired by the case of McArthur Wheeler, who in 1995 robbed two Pittsburg banks with his face covered in lemon juice. Why the lemon juice? Well, Wheeler knew that lemon juice could be used as a type of "invisible ink". Write with it on paper, let it dry, and it's "invisible". Heat the paper over an open flame, and what's written in lemon juice then appears. Wheeler took that knowledge, and concluded that the lemon juice would make his face invisible.

Called the Dunning-Kruger effect, this situation occurs when the unskilled or incompetent fail to realize they are unskilled or incompetent, and instead assess their performance at exaggerated levels. In Dunning and Kruger's original study, participants placing in the 12th percentile on a test estimated their own performance to be in the 62nd.

Interestingly, Dunning himself has [described](#) the Dunning-Kruger effect as "the anosognosia of everyday life".

Lest we think these distortions in thinking are relevant in only special cases of brain trauma or the seriously self-deluded, we need only Google "[illusory superiority](#)" or the "[overconfidence effect](#)" to realize we ourselves are not immune.

Studies have repeatedly shown that we all suffer from various cognitive distortions. Ramachandran has described how when people are asked about their IQ, 95% state they're IQ is above average. And similar results have been found when we self-assess (i.e., over-rate) [our attractiveness](#). It may not be too far off the mark to say, as one article noted, that [everyone thinks they're above average](#).

So we may not need a right hemisphere stroke in order to be self-delusional. We may



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just need simply to be; not knowing that we don't know seems to be an integral part of what it means to be human.

And if we go so far as to think we're free from this state of ignorant self-delusion, by thinking so, don't we in fact make the case for what we're denying?

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What workplace examples of anosognosia of everyday life have you observed? Post your [comments](#) on our Ideas page on our [website](#).

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As always, thanks for reading.

Best regards,

David Harper, Managing Principal



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