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Above Average

There are numerous predictable tendencies or biases in how people think, many of which tend to be self-serving. One of these is the propensity to see oneself as above average on socially desirable characteristics. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the "Lake Wobegon effect," named after Garrison Keillor's fictitious town of Lake Wobegon, where "all the children are above average."

There are many interesting examples of this "above average effect" from a variety of studies. Eighty-five percent of employees considered themselves to be above average in their attendance. Sixty percent of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) judged themselves to be in the top 10% on their ability to get along with others (0% rated themselves as below average). Approximately 90% of business managers and 90% of college professors rated their own performance as superior to their average peers. Perhaps most interesting is that even when informed of these self-serving biases, the majority of people saw themselves as less biased than the average person!

Although some of these data are mathematically possible (using a scale of 1-10, nine scores of 8 and one score of 1 yields an average of 7.3, so that 90% are actually above average), it is well established that judgments of ourselves, along with our judgments of others, tend to be distorted. Does this mean that we simply aren't as smart as we think we are, or at least less objective than we want to believe? Likely so. However, there appears to be a substantial benefit to having these so-called positive illusions or positive cognitive biases. The biases are

associated with greater life satisfaction, quality of life, happiness, and subjective well-being. Self-serving biases contribute to satisfaction with oneself, the variable most strongly related to overall life satisfaction.

While moderately high levels of self-serving biases are associated with well-being, extremes are a problem for mental health. Excessive self-serving biases are evident in narcissistic personality disorder and may be present in delusional thinking. Conversely, persons who have low self-esteem or are experiencing depression are less likely to exhibit self-serving biases in their thinking.

Therefore, go ahead and be a child of Lake Wobegon and think of yourself as above average. (Recognize, however, that you have minimal control over this automatic tendency... even though you probably assume that you have more control over it than the average person!) Believing that you are above average appears to be good for your health.

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