#38 Professional regulation and the Dunning-Kruger effect

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Posted on LinkedIn September 21, 2017

The classic Dunning-Kruger effect

The Dunning–Kruger effect was named after the authors of a highly influential 1999 paper entitled *Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one’s own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments*. The gist of the effect is that over a number of different tasks individuals of low ability will tend to grossly overestimate their competence and to a lesser extent that individuals of high ability will tend to underestimate their competence. In fact, the less the level of competence the greater the overestimation of ability. Not surprisingly, the effect attracted broad attention including stories in the *New York Times* and *Forbes*.

A few years after this seminal article, Dunning *et al.* summarized the literature as follows:

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“Research from numerous corners of psychological inquiry suggests that self-assessments of skill and character are often flawed in substantive and systematic ways. ... In general, people’s self-views hold only a tenuous to modest relationship with their actual behavior and performance. ... People overrate themselves... [People] overestimate the likelihood that they will engage in desirable behaviors and achieve favorable outcomes, [people] furnish overly optimistic estimates of when they will complete future projects, and [people] reach judgments with too much confidence.”

The self-assessment literature is quite relevant to professional regulation especially self-regulation. The whole concept of self-regulation is predicated on certain assumptions about professionals. Dunning and Kruger argued that that the effect was due to a lack of metacognitive skills. Metacognition is cognition about cognition, metacognitive skills include the accurate perception of one competence, the awareness of the limits of one’s competence, and self-regulation (in the other meaning of self-regulation).

In the context of professional regulation, self-regulation refers to the situation where the regulation of a profession is delegated to a regulatory body which is comprised of members of the profession. In psychology, self-regulation refers to the ability to monitor and control our own behaviour, emotions, or thoughts, and to the ability to alter behaviour, emotions, and thoughts in accordance with the demands of the situation. Psychological self-regulation includes the ability to inhibit immediate responses, the ability to resist interference from irrelevant stimulation, and the ability to persist on relevant tasks even when the tasks are not enjoyable. It can be seen that it is these metacognitive skills that distinguish professional work from other kinds of work. To be competent, professionals must possess strong metacognitive skills.

Professional self-regulation is premised on the idea that professionals possess a high level of metacognitive skills including psychological self-regulation—how else could they be expected to set aside their own self-interest and regulate their profession in the public interest?

We could assume that professionals, because of the selection and training they have undergone, have at least better than average metacognitive skills. But is this a justifiable assumption? A more realistic assumption would seem to be that even if the average professional has a higher level of metacognitive skills than the average non-professional, all levels of metacognitive skill are represented amongst the ranks of professionals. This means that, as professional regulatory bodies, we must assume that there is a non-negligible proportion of our members that have weak metacognitive skills.

This leads to an interesting paradox. Those professionals who are most adamant about the fact that they do not need to be regulated are quite possibly those professionals who are in most need of regulation. Those members whose practice is most likely to pose risks to the public are those same members who are least likely to be aware that this is the case.

The Dunning-Kruger effect also has implications for action and communication. For one, we must think of professionalism as comprised of not only values or attitudes but meta-cognitive skill as well.
Professional regulatory bodies cannot rely entirely on self-assessments. For instance, the effectiveness of having a rule of professional conduct which states that members must limit their practice to areas where they are competent is not that effective if members cannot accurately self-assess their competence. Professional regulatory bodies should do what they can to strengthen the metacognitive skills of the members they regulate.

Unfortunately, the Dunning-Kruger effect also suggests that some professionals under regulation, especially those with poor metacognitive skills, will be the most difficult to reach precisely because they do not see the need for regulation, at least not as far as they are concerned. For instance, many professionals do not see the need for mandatory continuing professional development because they believe that their current practice is more than sufficient to keep their knowledge and skills up to date. The Dunning-Kruger effect would suggest otherwise.