

The better than average driver

A.C. Linnenbank

July 19, 2010

According to a study by Swenson 93% of the drivers in the US think they are a better than average driver¹. This is often quoted as an example of how easy it is for people to fool themselves or some similar paternalistic point². I think that says more about the people that interpret this result than of the people that participated in this survey.

There are probably as many driver styles as there are drivers. There is for instance the aggressive style, though they would probably describe it as 'sporty'. These drivers have good reflexes and know their car so well that they are able to put their cars in small gaps that open up in a densely packed road and are often at least 15 seconds earlier home than those with a less aggressive style. The other end of the spectrum are those that have a cooperative style. These drivers look around and anticipate what others are going to do, for instance by creating a space if they think somebody else is wanting to change lanes. It is clear that these two styles will lead to different assessment of how good somebody is as a driver. Sporty drivers will consider cooperative drivers as slow, stupid and annoying because they don't create space fast enough for the sporty ones to let them race on uninterrupted. Cooperative drivers will regard the sporty ones as homicidal maniacs. Of course the style of driving is not a linear scale and other style are possible, for instance one that tries to minimize the amount of gas needed for a trip. In conclusion, people will try to drive in a way that they think is a good driving style and judge other by the same standards. We should have been worried if 50% of people would think they are less than average drivers on their own scale of what is good driving. The error people make when they think that this survey is an example of how people can fool themselves is that they assume that there is an objective measurement possible on a linear scale for driving ability.

Let's keep this in mind and see what happens if we force a linear scale. E.g. assume that there are only a finite number of cars and that the government has decided that only the best drivers get a license. First we have to create a committee that can judge drivers capacity. For this a natural first group is that group that knows about cars e.g. because they own a couple and repair them themselves. This is based on the logical assumption that people who know how cars work also know how to drive them well. Presumably they will come up with a test like how fast drivers can negotiate an obstacle course without damage, to test the ability of the drivers. Because that would allow an objective linear scale. So we have as our main ingredients a complex multidimensional concept, a need to make it objective and one dimensional, and a group of knowledgeable men and what comes out is a very reasonable measure that somehow and unplanned is not going to be gender-insensitive. And as long as new members of this committee are recruited from the 'best' drivers, it will stay that way.

This is of course an imaginary scenario and the fact that so many women are going to fail the test is a dead give away that something is wrong. You might even argue that no government is going to do something so simplistic for such a complex problem. On the other hand many people fail to see the fact that driving ability is a multidimensional problem to begin with. If you don't, it may seem logical that it is a fair test. There is an even better argument that this kind of fallacy is common: it works this way in science.

¹Svenson, O. (February 1981). "Are we all less risky and more skillful than our fellow drivers?". *Acta Psychologica* 47 (2): 143148. doi:10.1016/0001-6918(81)90005-6.

²see e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_superiority and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overconfidence_effect