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Science Says You Can Tell in 5 Minutes if Someone Isn't Nearly as Smart as They Think: the

'Cynical Genius Illusion'

Story by Jeff Haden 2016-2-19

While skeptical, cynical people seem intelligent, science says they're not.

A guy I know is the ultimate devil's advocate. Have an idea? He instantly has reasons it won't work. Have a belief? He instantly has reasons it's unfounded. Enjoy something? He instantly critiques it to within an inch of its life. He's quick. He's sharp. He's insightful.

He's extremely intelligent.

Or not.

According to a study of over 200,000 people published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (aptly titled "The Cynical Genius Illusion"), while conventional wisdom holds that cynical people — people who tend to be doubtful that something is worthwhile or will happen — are smarter, wiser, and "cognitively superior," they actually tend to do worse on cognitive ability tests and academic competency tests.

Turns out the opposite is true: The more cynical you are, the less intellectually competent you're likely to be. People who have poor reasoning skills are more likely to assume the worst in human nature. More likely to assume that people are selfish and untrustworthy. Are more likely to see conspiracies where there are none, to reflexively assume belief is unfounded, to believe that almost nothing could actually be what it appears to be.

As the researchers write:

Our results revealed that laypeople tend to endorse the "cynical genius" belief — that is, believed that cynical individuals would do better on a variety of cognitive tasks and cognitive ability tests than their less cynical counterparts.

(In fact), cynical individuals are likely to do worse rather than better on cognitive tasks, cognitive abilities and competencies tests, and tend to be less educated than less cynical individuals.

Why? For one thing, as Adam Grant points out in this podcast episode with Matthew McConaughey, assuming the worst in others is a form of protection. Guarding yourself against the worst in others — whether people, or organizations, or beliefs, or anything — keeps you safe.

For another, taking a cynical position is easy. It's a lot simpler, and a lot less risky, to say why something won't work. It's a lot easier to judge than understand, much less embrace.

Plus, statements like, "Trust me, the risk outweighs the rewards," appear to carry the weight of experience. Saying, "You know, that might be worth trying"? Since experience — or implied knowledge — can't play a part, a statement like that sounds more like a guess.

And then there's this: A [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#) study shows we tend to pay more attention and give much greater weight to negative experiences. As brain scans reveal, negative events are quickly stored in your long-term memory, but research shows you need to actively think about positive events for 12 seconds or more in order for them to be transferred to long-term memory.

In short, it's easy to be cynical, to latch on to the negatives instead of considering potential positives, both because it's safer and because we're built that way.

All of which is a problem.

Take deciding whether to invest in new businesses or initiatives; a [study published in Management Science](#) shows that people are more swayed by negative views than positive ones. While evaluators lower their scores by more points after seeing scores more critical than their own, they don't raise them after seeing more favorable scores.

Negative clearly seemed smarter than positive, which leads to protecting against failure — instead of seeking to maximize success.

The next time someone immediately shoots down an idea, don't assume they're smart.

More important, the next time an idea sounds interesting to you, don't immediately assume you're wrong.

Or less intelligent.

As [Jeff Bezos says](#), "The smartest people are constantly revising their understanding, reconsidering a problem they thought they'd already solved. They're open to new points of view, new information, new ideas, contradictions, and challenges to their own way of thinking."

And are smart enough to realize that never trying something new means never experiencing, enjoying, or achieving anything new.

Which is a pretty sucky way to live.