Backward Beliefs

Misperceptions of Group Racial and Gender Differences in America

Alex Kurian
Laidlaw Scholar | Center for Behavioral Institutional Design

Supervisor: Nikos Nikiforakis
Mentor: Alexandros Agiostratitis

Beliefs follow one racial ranking. Measured behavior often does not.

Comparing beliefs with evidence across four traits: **performance, competitiveness, overconfidence and earnings**.

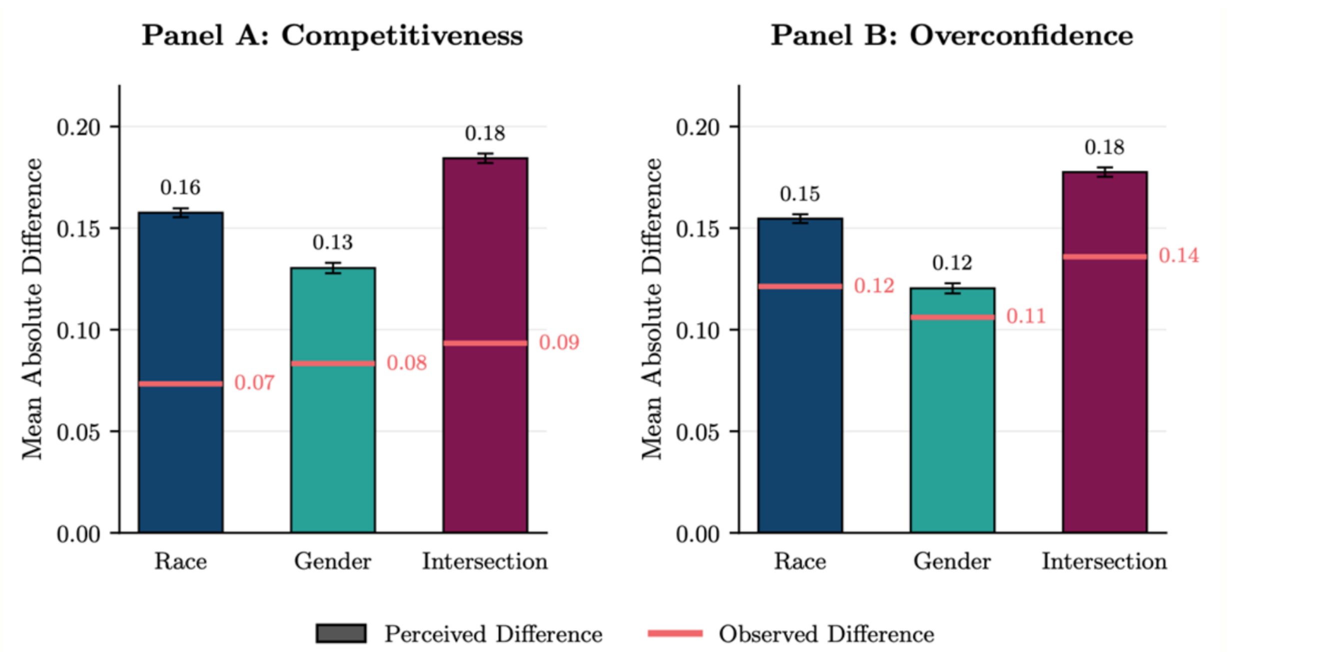
01 The study

3,672 US adults predicted outcomes for White, Black and Hispanic men and women. Accurate predictions earned rewards.

Predictions were compared with **measured behavior** in lab tasks and real-world earnings data.

Participants were aged 25–65, with equal numbers from each of the six groups and education matched to Census distributions.

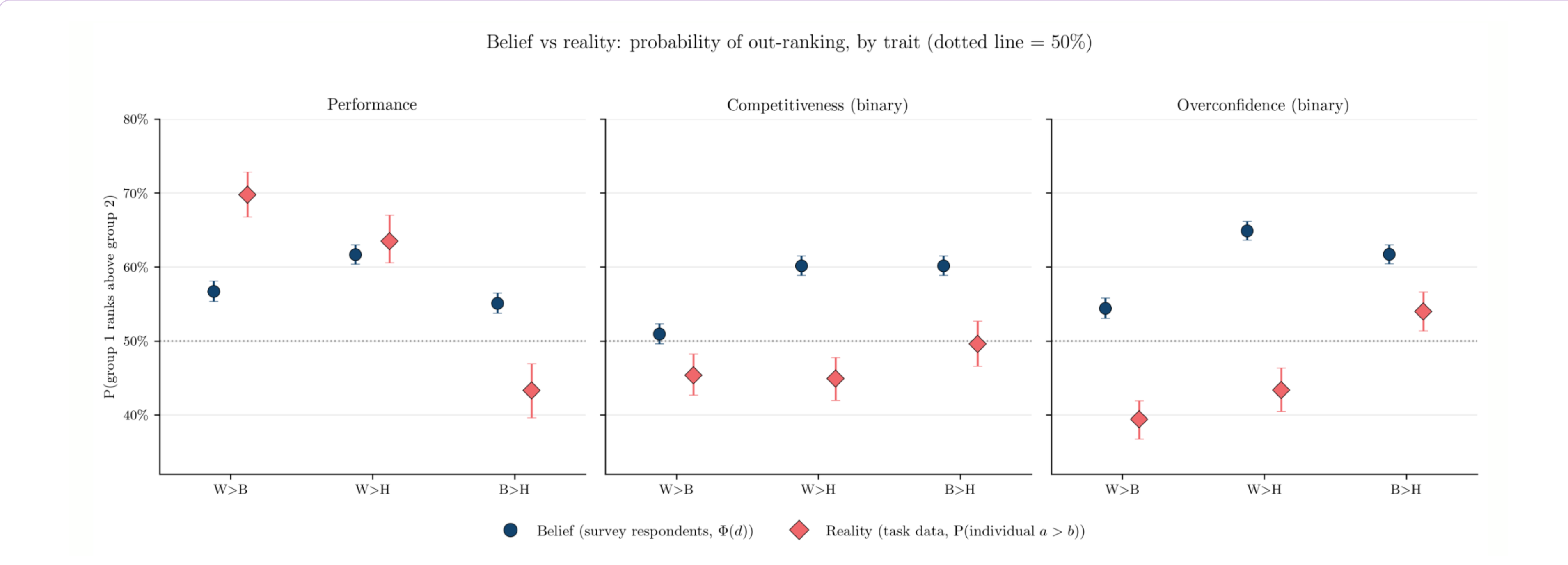
Lab tasks measured numerical performance, willingness to compete and overestimation of one's own rank.



Gaps are exaggerated. Perceived differences in competitiveness and overconfidence exceed measured differences. This holds across race, gender and their intersection.

02 What the study finds

One ranking, four traits. Respondents generally rank White above Black above Hispanic. Measured outcomes do not follow one consistent hierarchy.



Errors can reverse the truth. For competitiveness and overconfidence, the racial ranking runs in the opposite direction to the task data. Stereotypes do more than exaggerate real differences.

Unequal wage offers. In the employer task, Black and Hispanic profiles received lower offers. A White premium remained even after accounting for all four perceived traits.

+0.90

Approx. correlation across traits: beliefs

−0.33

Approx. correlation across traits: measured outcomes

03 Patterns and explanations

Race and gender differ.
Misperceptions are larger across race than gender. Beliefs about gender differences in competitiveness and overconfidence generally point in the correct direction, even when the gaps are exaggerated.

A shared hierarchy, with own-group lift.
White, Black and Hispanic respondents broadly share the ranking, but rate their own racial group more favorably. This pattern appears across all four traits and remains after accounting for demographic differences.

Possible explanations from the literature

Status and halo effects. Economic success may create a general impression of competence. This can spill over into judgments of competitiveness and confidence, even when those traits do not follow the earnings hierarchy.

Attribute substitution. People may replace a difficult question about a specific trait with "How successful is this group?" This could produce the same ranking across distinct traits.

Justifying inequality. If economic outcomes are seen as deserved, higher earnings may be taken as evidence of greater ability. Structural barriers can then be overlooked.

Identity and information. Favorable own-group beliefs may protect a positive social identity. Greater familiarity could also improve knowledge. Own-group lifting alone cannot distinguish these explanations.

Unequal contact. Differences in everyday contact across racial and gender groups could help explain differences in accuracy. Limited contact may leave more room for stereotypes.

These are candidate explanations. The comparison alone does not establish which mechanism causes the patterns.

Fairer decisions begin with checking our assumptions.

Inaccurate group beliefs can shape hiring, pay and promotion. The findings highlight the value of evaluating individuals using direct evidence of their skills. Future research could test whether correcting these beliefs changes wage offers and reduces unequal treatment.

Contact: Alex Kurian | ak10848@nyu.edu

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