

'Floating duck syndrome' can trick people into working hard while failing to achieve their goals

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When people present themselves as being effortlessly high-achieving or "perfect," this phenomenon can deceive onlookers into believing success

is more easily achieved than it actually is—and lead them to underinvest effort towards their goals and to spread themselves too thinly as a result.

[New research](#) in *Evolutionary Human Sciences* analyzed "floating duck syndrome," a term coined at Stanford University, which refers to the pressure on individuals to advertise their successes but hide the effort put in to achieve them; like a duck gliding effortlessly along the surface of the water. At the University of Pennsylvania, where the research was conducted, this social phenomenon is also known as "Penn Face."

The researchers developed a [mathematical model](#) of how social learning—learning from observing and imitating—functions in the presence of visibility biases—such as people who appear effortlessly perfect. Specifically, using students choosing activities as a [case study](#), they modeled a world wherein individuals try to make optimal decisions about how much effort to put into their work but have [incomplete information](#) about the difficulty of the world and how much effort it takes to succeed in a given activity.

The researchers found that as a result of the biased information, individuals in the model mistakenly expected greater rewards for their effort than those they received. These findings are highly relevant in today's modern world, given overcommitment in work and education settings is well documented and is frequently associated with adverse outcomes such as depression and anxiety.

Erol Akçay of the University of Pennsylvania said, "We found that not revealing the actual amount of effort results in social learning dynamics that lead others to underestimate the difficulty of the world. This in turn leads individuals both to invest too much total effort and spread this effort over too many activities, reducing the [success rate](#) from each activity and creating effort-reward imbalances.

"These findings matter. Modern life constantly calls upon us to decide how to divide our time and energy between different domains of life, including school, work, family, and leisure. How we allocate our time and energy between these domains, how many different activities we pursue in each domain, and what the resulting rewards are, have profound effects on our mental and physical health.

"Floating duck syndrome is often exacerbated by [social media platforms](#) and institutional public relations, which make successes more visible but not necessarily failures or the effort spent to achieve success.

"Misunderstanding how much effort their peers invest to succeed causes individuals to invest too much total effort, while at the same time dividing it between too many different activities. Our research found that this can indeed lead to a higher number of successes, but at the cost of reducing overall utility as well as a mismatch between expected and realized rewards."

The researchers identified that even if individuals sometimes achieve more success in absolute numbers following increased overall effort, their success rate—meaning their number of successes per total effort—goes down, because they invest in too many activities.

These findings provide a new hypothesis for understanding the root cause of overcommitment and burnout on university campuses, and in workplaces, and within the home, and suggest new points of intervention to address the problem by helping individuals make better decisions about how to invest their effort.

When failure is a solution

The researchers also evaluated potential solutions to the overcommitment and burnout problems sparked by floating duck

syndrome. Short-term solutions like making assignments or qualifications easier to achieve won't work, according to the researchers.

Counteracting the underreporting of effort in [social learning](#) dynamics is the type of root cause change that is required. For example, sharing "shadow CVs" more widely—meaning CVs that include not just successfully completed degrees, activities, and awards, but also failed activities, awards, unsuccessful applications, and the like—would be helpful.

More broadly, fostering a culture of openness around effort, success, and failure is essential if individuals are to apply themselves in ways that are truly informed, and therefore enable them to flourish.

More information: Erol Akçay et al, The floating duck syndrome: biased social learning leads to effort-reward imbalances, *Evolutionary Human Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/ehs.2024.20](https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2024.20)

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