ABSTRACT: How people’s confidence in the advice that they give is influenced by other people’s advice was experimentally examined in this study. In a pencil and paper study, 80 participants gave written advice to a friend about the truthfulness of 16 general knowledge statements. A high/low financial reward was supposedly at stake for a friend who received the advice. Participants saw the statement of general knowledge and also the advice that another person gave about the knowledge statement and their level of certainty in their advice (high/low confidence). This resulted in 8 statements, such as “This is definitely true: Professor Jane Harte” which were used twice, once when the statement was judged to be true and once when it was judged to be false. The written advice that participants then gave was scored by two raters for the level of confidence/certainty it conveyed, from 1 (low) to 7 (high). The average score across the raters was the DV entered into a five-way ANOVA. Status interacted with speaker confidence when there was a low reward, but not when there were high-stakes rewards involved. With low rewards, advisor confidence was unimportant when the speaker was of low status, but it significantly influenced how confident the participant felt when the advisor had high status. A high confidence, high status speaker resulted in the participants expressing more doubt in their own advice in the low reward condition. Speaker confidence and speaker gender interacted slightly differently according to reward level but, most noticeably, the advice participants gave had the highest certainty after hearing advice from highly confident female advisors.

INTRODUCTION: During each day we both give advice and receive it. How does the advice we hear influence the advice that we give? An advisor’s level of confidence influences people’s perceptions of their knowledge and accuracy (Price & Stone, 2004). People assume that an advisor who is more confident, makes more correct judgements and is more knowledgeable. The advisor’s strength of belief in their advice is communicated via confidence cues in the language that they use (Wesson, 2005). Sniezek and Van Swol (2001) found that people were more likely to take advice when it was expressed with high rather than low confidence. Other factors, such as the gender of the advisor influence how confident people feel when accepting advice and how likely they are to be persuaded by it (Pulford, 2002). Sniezek and Van Swol examined trust, confidence and advice taking in judge-advisor relationships, finding that high confidence from the advisor caused a positive impact in the trust that the judges had for the advisor. How people’s confidence in their own advice is influenced by other people’s advice was experimentally examined in this study.

METHOD: Participants The sample consisted of 80 members of the general public and undergraduate students, 40 women and 40 men, with a mean age of 31.78 years.

Design and Procedure Participants were shown 16 statements with written advice from another person. The participants were asked to advise the friend about the validity of the statements by writing their own advice for them. A mixed-factorial experimental design was used to investigate the effects of certainty of the advisor, status of the advisor, gender of the advisor, and level of reward, on the confidence of the advice given by the participant and their agreement or disagreement with the other advisor. Half the participants, in the high-reward conditions, were told that the friend that they were advising was playing to win £100,000, while the rest of the participants, in the low-reward conditions, were given the same information but told that their friend was playing for £100.

RESULTS: A 2x2x2x2 mixed ANOVA was conducted with within-subjects on the first three independent variables (advisor status, advisor confidence and advisor gender) and between subjects on the last two independent variables (reward level and participant’s gender). The dependent variable was the mean rating of how confident the participant’s advisor was.

The participants hearing from a highly confident advisor (M = 3.59) were significantly more confident when giving their own advice than those hearing from a low confidence advisor (M = 3.40), F(1, 73) = 4.03, p = .048. Figure 1 shows that the other advisor’s status only combined with their level of confidence to influence the participants’ confidence in their advice. When there was a low reward on offer, F(1, 36) = 6.33, p = .017, and not when there was a high reward, F(1, 36) = 0.19, p = .68. In the low reward condition the high status, low confidence advisor (M = 3.24, SD = 1.04) causes participant’s confidence when giving advice to fall well below the level they feel when listening to the other advisors. This suggests that when the high status advisor appears not to know the answer then it is acceptable for the participant also to be uncertain about the truth of the advice given.

Advisor confidence, advisor gender and level of financial reward offered also significantly interacted, F(1, 73) = 7.62, p = .007, effect size $r^2 = .10$. Figure 2 shows that there is a stronger interaction when offered a high reward, F(1,7) = 28.43, p = .001, than when offered a low reward, F(1,36) = 4.90, p = .033. When there are high rewards offered the gender of the other advisor has a significant influence on the confidence of the participants’ advice. When giving advice after hearing from low confidence males (M = 3.69, SD = 1.08) participants were significantly more confident themselves compared to when they had heard the same advice from low confidence females (M = 3.08, SD = 1.91), t(38) = -4.49, p = .001, d = 0.57. The females also expressed less confidence in their own high confidence and the stakes were high, the female advisor made participants have the most confidence in their own advice (M = 3.92, SD = 1.23), whereas the male advisor speaking with high confidence made participants feel more doubtful of their own advice (M = 3.19, SD = 1.26), t(38) = 3.72, p < .001, d = 0.59.

DISCUSSION: The confidence of the other advisor seemed to rub off on the participant, with participants being less confident when the other advisor had low confidence and more confident when the other advisor was more confident.

The gender of the other advisor, their status, and the level of reward at stake for the person being advised, all had some influence on the participants’ level of certainty in their own advice. It appears that people modulate their advice to appear more or less confident dependent on the situation. It seems likely that people judge the accuracy of the other advisor’s advice using that advisor’s confidence as a cue, and then use this information to inform their own judgements and level of certainty. The level of truth in the validity of the other advisor’s confidence is influenced not only by the confidence with which they speak but also by the other factors examined in this research, and other factors may also be influential.

REFERENCES: