Cognitive Bias

LEAP Online

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Introduction

> "When your mind is full of assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs, it has no penetration, it just repeats past impressions."
>
> Sadhguru

Imagine this. For your latest assignment, you have been asked to work as part of a group to deliver a presentation. During discussions, your ideas are dismissed, although you strongly believe that your approach will be the most effective. In end, you decide to go along with the others in the group.

In this instance, what might a consequence be if your ideas are dismissed?

- The other students are likely to overlook potentially innovative solutions
- The other students will fail to consider diverse perspectives
- All of the above

If you though 'All of the above', then well done! In this scenario, the other students failed to listen to your perspective. Instead, they decided to proceed with the presentation in a way that supports their preconception. This type of cognitive bias is known as Bandwagon effect.

Bandwagon effect is the tendency to do (or believe) things because many other people do the same. This is often related to group work.

What can we learn from this scenario?

The Bandwagon effect is one of many cognitive biases that influence judgment. The effect can impair our ability to make rational decisions. In this tutorial, you'll learn what cognitive biases are and why we have them. You'll explore common cognitive biases, along with tips to detect and combat them.

Cognitive Bias

What is cognitive bias?

Cognitive biases are systematic errors in thinking. They're perceptual distortions and predispositions that impair our ability to think critically, analyse information, and form rational conclusions.

Why do we have cognitive bias?

Lightening your brain's cognitive load.

Every second, your brain processes an overwhelming amount of information. In an attempt to sort this information quickly and efficiently, the brain looks for mental shortcuts. Cognitive biases, then, are shortcuts to simplify complex decisions and lighten your mental load.

4 causes of cognitive bias

Let's expand on this idea. According to the Cognitive Bias Codex designed by John Manoogian III and Buster Benson, there are at least 180 cognitive biases your brain develops as a response to four main problems:

- **Too much information.** With limited time and attention, your brain uses bias to filter information quickly and focus on details that it thinks are most useful or pertinent to a situation.
- **Too much to remember.** Our memory is likewise limited. We only have so much storage capacity, so the brain cherry-picks what to remember versus forget.
- **Not enough meaning.** The world is complex and chaotic, yet the brain relies on order and meaning to make sense of it and survive. This can cause us to draw connections and see patterns when there aren't any. Or, we might fill information gaps with assumptions.
- **Need to act fast.** Our hunter-gatherer ancestors needed to assess dangers and act quickly to hunt, escape predators, and survive. While modern problems rarely involve life or death, we still rely on bias to help us predict the future, make decisions, and move forward despite uncertainty.

> **In short, we all exhibit cognitive bias**. It's your brain's automatic coping mechanism for filtering information and making sense of the world. Still, cognitive bias becomes problematic when it leads to poor judgment, irrational decisions, and harmful prejudice or stereotypes that discriminate against a group of people.

Tips for Detecting and Combating Cognitive Bias

Recognising cognitive bias is the first step to overcoming it. Besides learning about common types of bias, how else might you increase awareness? See below to reveal three final tips for bias detection and reduction.

Identify high-risk situations

First, identify situations with an increased risk of cognitive bias. Make an effort to predict which cognitive biases are likely to influence your judgment or thinking. For example:

- Group decisions may pose a higher risk for the bandwagon effect.
- Perhaps you can identify a past situation in which bias influenced you.

This exercise brings potential biases to your attention, making it easier to avoid, detect, or challenge them.

Watch for warning signs

Watch for the following warning signs that bias may be interfering with decisions.

- Only seeking evidence, or perspectives that confirm your opinions
- Blaming other people and external factors for your mistakes or problems, while attributing other people's mistakes to personal flaws or shortcomings
- Always going along with what other people want, think, or say
- Avoiding change, confrontation, disagreement, or alternative views

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- Minimising or overlooking limitations, constraints, and weaknesses
- Ignoring information that doesn't serve your interests or opinions

Examine and challenge your reasoning

Finally, examine and challenge your reasoning with the following prompts:

- What factors are influencing your decision?
- Are you paying attention or giving weight to some factors over others? Why?
- What factors or information haven't you considered in this decision?
- What are some counter-arguments or alternative perspectives?

> "Human beings are poor examiners, subject to superstition, bias, prejudice, and a profound tendency to see what they want to see rather than what's really there."
> M. Scott Peck

Summary

Cognitive biases are mental shortcuts our brains take in an attempt to process information quickly resulting in errors or distortions in memory, attention, and thinking. Left unchecked, cognitive biases can result in inaccurate judgments and irrational decisions.

Although these biases are often unconscious and automatic, we can mitigate their impact. Educating ourselves and increasing awareness is the first step to detecting bias. From there, you can combat bias by examining the factors influencing your decisions and challenging yourself to think critically.

Be curious. Asking questions and investigating our thinking can help combat cognitive bias. Take time to explore other perspectives, information, or approaches.