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## Overcoming Cognitive Biases: The Key to Reducing Bigotry and Victimization

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**OVERCOMING COGNITIVE BIASES:  
THE KEY TO REDUCING  
BIGOTRY AND VICTIMIZATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*People often act irrationally, and one example of this is bigotry. For instance, the statement that “obese people are all lazy and have no willpower” is not supported by facts but by prejudice. We should aim to eradicate all kinds of bias, which are harmful and rooted in irrationality. It is not enough to focus on one type of discrimination and neglect others. The authors posit that cognitive bias is one possible cause of nonsensical beliefs, including prejudice. People who use logic better understand the foolishness of any form of bias. This paper discusses the main cognitive biases that might lead to bigotry and the ways to overcome them.*

**Keywords:** rational man, cognitive biases, heuristics, bigotry, dualistic thinking, victimization

## **INTRODUCTION**

Human rationality has been a subject of much debate among philosophers, economists, and psychologists for a long time. However, the definition of rationality is not clear-cut. People often rely on their feelings, emotions, and instincts rather than their reasons when acting. The rational man theory, or homo economicus, is a popular economic model that assumes that people are rational and self-interested; that is, they make decisions that will give them the most benefit or satisfaction (maximize their utility). However, the rational man model may be a dead or rapidly dying theory. Kahneman asserts, “Theories can survive for a long time after conclusive evidence falsifies them, and the rational-agent model certainly survived the evidence we have seen, and much other evidence as well.”<sup>1</sup>

Kahneman describes how he was handed an essay written by the Swiss economist Bruno Frey that stated: “The agent of economic theory is rational, selfish, and his tastes do not change.”<sup>2</sup> Kahneman was astonished that economists could believe this given that it was apparent to psychologists that “people are neither fully rational nor completely selfish, and that their tastes are anything but stable. Our two disciplines seemed to be studying different species, which the behavioral economist Richard Thaler later dubbed Econs and Humans.”<sup>3</sup>

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that people are predictably irrational; they use heuristics or rules of thumb to make decisions.<sup>4</sup> Using rules of thumb may help a person make quick decisions but might lead to a systematic bias. There are about 200 known cognitive biases, and the list continues to grow.<sup>5</sup>

Why do people use heuristics to make decisions? Benson summarizes the four problems cognitive biases address: (1) we are drowning in information overload and use these “cognitive shortcuts” to make decisions, (2) we try to construct meaning out of bits and pieces of information that we are aware of, (3) we need to act fast when time and money are limited, and (4) to be efficient, our brains need to remember what we believe are the most important and useful pieces of information; it is impossible to recall everything.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Heick places the 180+ biases into a graphic consisting of four categories: Too Much Information, Not Enough Meaning, Need to Act Fast, and What Should We Remember?<sup>7</sup> According to Benson, these are the downsides of cognitive biases:

*We don't see everything. Some of the information we filter out is actually useful and important.*

*Our search for meaning can conjure illusions. We sometimes imagine details that were filled in by our assumptions, and construct meaning and stories that aren't really there.*

*Quick decisions can be seriously flawed. Some of the quick reactions and decisions we jump to are unfair, self-serving, and counter-productive.*

*Our memory reinforces errors. Some of the stuff we remember for later just makes all of the above systems more biased, and more damaging to our thought processes.<sup>8</sup>*

One of the problems of using heuristics to make decisions is that it may result in bigotry and prejudice. Bigotry is intolerance or prejudice toward people who are different from oneself in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, neurodiversity, religion, gender, looks, weight, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. It also includes being intolerant of someone with different opinions or beliefs.

What causes people to discriminate against others based on their race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, social class, sexual orientation, religion, appearance, weight, disability, neurodiversity, speech, or intelligence? Focusing only on one kind of discrimination and ignoring the rest can damage an organization. The purpose of this research is to show that all forms of prejudice are harmful and should be tackled at their roots, with the goal of eliminating them all.

This paper is an extension of the research “Teaching Diversity Correctly: Either Everyone Counts or Nobody Counts”<sup>9</sup>. It focuses on several significant cognitive biases that can cause or contribute to prejudice and bigotry and also

suggests ways to overcome them and improve decision-making. There is a need to review and discuss the literature on cognitive biases to understand how people make decisions (additional cognitive biases that distort judgment are discussed in Friedman<sup>10</sup>). In addition, this paper intends to show how bigotry can be influenced by various cognitive biases that affect how we judge, perceive, relate, and interact with others. It may be impossible to eliminate bigotry without removing underlying cognitive biases, many of which are unconscious.

## **I. DUALISTIC THINKING**

Some cognitive biases encourage discrimination and prejudice; one of the worst is dualistic thinking, which produces an “us vs. them” approach to life. Dualistic thinking, also known as black-and-white, binary, or polarized thinking, is a general tendency to see things as good or bad, right or wrong, and us or them, without room for compromise and seeing shades of gray. This all-or-nothing cognitive approach leads to poor decision-making and creates polarized groups (think of today’s Democrats and Republicans). It interferes with one’s ability to be an innovator, which requires one to be open-minded.

This type of dualistic thinking is known in the mental health field as “splitting,” which is a “defense mechanism in which people unconsciously frame ideas, individuals, or groups in all-or-nothing or either-or terms (e.g., all-powerful vs. 100% powerless).”<sup>11</sup> It is often seen in people who have borderline personality disorders.<sup>12</sup> Splitting is a severe problem when dealing with people with different opinions or interacting with those from other races or religions. It is emotionally dysregulating, fostering behavioral issues like aggression and leading to psychic pain and mental illness. It also makes it difficult for people to have constructive dialogue and work against our shared ideals as a society, like love, peace, justice,

and unity.<sup>13</sup> Haidt is also concerned that America's political parties have become more Manichean and see the world as a battle between pure good and pure evil and compromise as a sin<sup>14</sup>.

## II. STEREOTYPING BIAS

Stereotyping is a mental shortcut people use when making decisions about strangers. When stereotyping, we may have certain expectations about a group's attributes, characteristics, and qualities (e.g., Asians, obese people, autistic people, women, Blacks, Jews, trans, homosexuals, Hispanics, and Muslims); these are overgeneralizations. Benson notes that people prefer generalizations over specifics because the latter takes up more space in the brain; it is easier to remember a simplified overview. Some stereotypes may have validity.<sup>15</sup> One might make certain assumptions about a person who identifies as a liberal Democrat or conservative Republican. However, many stereotypes are incorrect and are based on inaccurate beliefs about certain groups. In any case, there is a great deal of variability among individuals that comprise a group. One should be very careful with the use of terms such as "All \_\_\_ are ..."

In particular, there is something quite insidious about humor that stereotypes certain groups, such as blondes, lawyers, Polish people, Jews, Rednecks, and Blacks. Only a fool believes that all blondes are unintelligent. Society and the media have frequently discussed stereotypes concerning Asian women. These stereotypes often portray Asian women as either submissive, which may contribute to the concept of "yellow fever" among white men, or as strong and assertive, leading to the label of "tiger mom." Pauwels believes that racial stereotype humor can sometimes act as a social justice tool to mock racism but might sometimes encourage bigotry.<sup>16</sup>

One type of stereotypical joke that caused much harm was the Jewish American Princess (“JAP”) joke. [Some examples: Q: How does a Jewish American Princess get exercise? A: “Waitress!” (waving one’s arm frantically). Q: Did you hear about the new Jewish porno movie? A: It’s called “Debbie Does Nothing.” Q: Why do JAPs like circumcised men? A: They like anything with 20% off.] These jokes may have started with Jewish comics (e.g., Joan Rivers), but non-Jews felt it was also acceptable for them. Some believe that it increased intermarriage.<sup>17</sup>

These antisemitic and misogynistic jokes resulted in verbal assaults and public shaming on various campuses throughout the United States during the 1980s. There were signs on college campuses warning, “No JAPS.” Colleges were filled with graffiti, such as “Have you slapped a JAP today?” and “JAPS are people too; they just don’t act like it.” The JAP joke was based on the ethnic stereotype that Jewish women are materialistic, shallow, manipulative, self-centered, and sexless.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to study the JAP joke phenomenon since this is an excellent example of how jokes can have many negative consequences. One could say that JAP jokes did as much—or even more—harm than jokes told by antisemites to tarnish the image of Jews.

### **III. BASE RATE FALLACY**

The base rate fallacy is a cognitive bias that occurs when people focus too much on the specific, specialized details of a situation (the individuating information that is distinct) and disregard the overall, general frequency or probability of something occurring (the base rate). In a nutshell, the overall probability is overlooked in favor of the specific probability. The specific probability might focus on a particular case or a small sample. This can lead to people making inaccurate judgments or



decisions. The base rate fallacy is one of six examples of the problem of representativeness or similarity examined by Tversky and Kahneman.<sup>19</sup>

The following experiment is discussed in Kahneman: Subjects were told the following about Tom W., a graduate student:

*Tom W. is of high intelligence, although lacking in true creativity. He has a need for order and clarity and for neat and tidy systems in which every detail finds its appropriate place. His writing is rather dull and mechanical, occasionally enlivened by somewhat corny puns and flashes of imagination of the sci-fi type. He has a strong drive for competence. He seems to have little feel and little sympathy for other people, and does not enjoy interacting with others. Self-centered, he nonetheless has a deep moral sense.*<sup>20</sup>

The above description led people to ignore prior probabilities regarding the relative size of majors in different disciplines. Subjects asked to rank nine fields of specialization indicated that Tom W. was most likely majoring in computer science and engineering. Essentially, the similarity to a stereotype of a group trumps the actual size of the group (the prior probability).

When George H. W. Bush ran against Michael Dukakis for president, the infamous Willie Horton advertising campaign was used to distort the reality of furlough programs for prisoners. All 50 states, including California, where Ronald Reagan was governor, had these programs. The advertisement—

considered among the top 10 campaigns ever—stated that Dukakis:

*[A]llowed first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was Willie Horton, who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times. Despite a life sentence, Horton received 10 weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnapped a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend. Weekend prison passes—Dukakis on crime.<sup>21</sup>*

This ad had a huge adverse impact on criminal justice reform by focusing people's attention on one case and ignoring the base-rate information. The truth was that furlough programs had been around for a long time, and the Horton case was an exception.

Donald Trump used a similar approach when running for president and made the following horrible statement regarding illegal Mexican immigrants:

*When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best, they're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists and some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards and they're telling us what we're getting.<sup>22</sup>*

It should be noted that *representativeness/similarity* is a general, shared term that describes the various errors individuals make when judging probabilities. Tversky and Kahneman<sup>23</sup> identified six situations where representativeness/similarity

caused fallacious reasoning: (1) insensitivity to the prior probability of outcomes, (2) insensitivity to sample size, (3) misconceptions of chance, (4) insensitivity to predictability, (5) the illusion of validity, and (6) misconceptions of regression (to the mean). The conjunction fallacy discussed infra is also an example of this problem.

#### IV. CONJUNCTION FALLACY

According to probability theory, the probability of a conjunction, the joint probability of A and B [ $P(A \text{ and } B)$ ], cannot exceed the likelihood of either of its two individual constituents,  $P(A)$  or  $P(B)$ . In other words,  $P(A \text{ and } B) \leq P(A)$  and  $P(A \text{ and } B) \leq P(B)$ . For example, the probability of being a man with red hair is less than or equal to the likelihood of being a man; the probability of being a man with red hair is less than or equal to the chance of having red hair.

Despite this, people will make this mistake with the so-called “Linda Problem.” This study was discussed in Kahneman<sup>24</sup> but was initially published by Tversky and Kahneman.<sup>25</sup>

*Linda is 31 years old, single, outspoken, and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social injustice, and also participated in antinuclear demonstrations. Which one of these is more probable?*

*(a) Linda is a bank teller.*

*(b) Linda is an insurance salesperson.*

*(c) Linda is a bank teller and is active in*

*the feminist movement.*<sup>26</sup>

Logically, as noted above, option (c) cannot be more likely than option (a), but Kahneman<sup>27</sup> found that about 85% of respondents claimed that it was. Even advanced graduate students who had taken several statistics courses made this mistake. Tversky and Kahneman posit that most people get this wrong because they use a heuristic called representativeness. Representativeness (or similarity) refers to the tendency of people to judge the likelihood of an event occurring by finding something similar and then assuming (often incorrectly) that the probabilities of the two events must be similar. Option (c) appears to be more representative and better resembles Linda's behavior. People do not think of a bank teller as a political activist. This example further highlights how representativeness/similarity may be misapplied in judging people.

## **V. IMPLICIT (UNCONSCIOUS) BIAS**

Stereotypes are deliberate and conscious forms of bias. Implicit biases are unconscious, unintentional, and automatic judgments that are not based on facts but on prejudice, mental associations, and speculation. These hidden, involuntary associations can lead people to behave in discriminatory ways without realizing them. One way to reduce this type of bias is to bring it to people's attention. Thus, people might unconsciously discriminate against obese people, erroneously believing they are lazy, unproductive, stupid, have no willpower, and are unhealthy. As awareness of weight bias and its adverse consequences grows, some organizations are taking steps to prevent it in their workplaces. In May 2023, New York City enacted a law prohibiting discrimination based on weight and height, along with other protected categories, such as age, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation. Several states are

considering legislation to make it unlawful to discriminate based on weight and height.<sup>28</sup>

## **VI. REPRESENTATIVENESS HEURISTIC**

This cognitive bias is a mental shortcut that we use when estimating probabilities. As noted above, the base rate fallacy is a special case of the representativeness heuristic. We make decisions regarding the likelihood of a particular event based on calculating how similar it is to an existing belief, stereotype, or mental prototype. The problem with this heuristic is that it may result in disregarding important information and thus making a poor decision. For example, one researcher found that decisions made by jurors could be affected by the wearing of eyeglasses, which increases the intelligence ratings of defendants and decreases guilty verdicts. The authors also found several interaction effects between the defendant's race and the wearing of eyeglasses.<sup>29</sup> Facial tattoos can probably also influence how we perceive someone.

## **VII. IN-GROUP BIAS**

In-group bias refers to the tendency to favor members of one's own group over those of other groups. This bias can manifest in different ways, such as giving more resources, praise, or opportunities to in-group members or discriminating against out-group members based on their political, religious, ethnic, or national affiliations.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the nature of the group, we tend to like our in-group members and dislike out-group members.<sup>31</sup> People tend to empathize more with those who share their values and beliefs, thus showing more positive attitudes and behaviors toward them. This bias can lead to problems such as nepotism, favoritism, or tribalism.

Moreover, in-group bias can result in an “us vs. them” mentality. This can cause us to associate only with people who are similar to us and distance ourselves from those who are different. However, taking it to its extreme, in-group bias can have serious consequences, resulting in discrimination, xenophobia, and racism. Furthermore, in-group bias can also have more serious consequences. In-group bias suggests that the group membership of both the witness and the perpetrator of a crime can have a significant impact on witness testimony. The potential effect of in-group/out-group membership should be considered when witness testimonies are evaluated in court proceedings.<sup>32</sup>

### **VIII. OUT-GROUP HOMOGENEITY EFFECT**

Out-group homogeneity bias is the tendency to view members of other groups (out-groups) as more alike and undifferentiated than members of our own in-group. This bias can cause problems because it makes us more likely to overlook the diversity and uniqueness of people from different groups. We may then judge or stereotype them based on relatively few characteristics and develop racism, xenophobia, sexism, or other forms of prejudice. One might think that having extensive contact with another group should reduce or eliminate this bias, but this is not necessarily the case. Even groups that have widespread contact with each other, for example, men and women, will still be guilty of this bias and say that “all men are alike” or “all women are the same.”<sup>33</sup>

### **IX. CONFIRMATION AND SELECTIVE PERCEPTION BIAS**

Confirmation bias and selective perception are related concepts that overlap somewhat but are each distinct. With selective perception, people tend to allow their expectations or

preexisting beliefs to influence how they perceive the world. Thus, information that contradicts existing beliefs will tend to be overlooked or forgotten; information in agreement with their expectations will be noticed and retained (selective retention). Confirmation bias and selective perception make it very difficult for people to consider other points of view.

Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to seek, interpret, and embrace information that confirms our existing views and beliefs while ignoring or rejecting information that contradicts or challenges them. We easily spot flaws in the arguments of those who disagree with us, but we are blind to errors in our own reasoning. We are more likely to accept or exaggerate evidence that supports or validates our opinions; we become prisoners of our beliefs. Individuals are much less likely to seek out information that challenges their viewpoints than to listen to other perspectives. Confirmation bias can lead to inflexibility, rigidity, and an inability to modify one's beliefs even when presented with new information. It also reinforces negative attitudes and bigotry toward various groups because one selectively finds information that supports preexisting stereotypes.

Kahneman speaks of “adversarial collaboration,” which means bringing together two researchers who disagree and having them conduct an experiment jointly.<sup>34</sup> This is a way to reduce the confirmation bias that arises when a researcher consciously or unconsciously designs an experiment in such a way as to provide support for a particular position.<sup>35</sup>

Given the vast amount of research available to scholars, it is not difficult for a researcher to cherry-pick the literature and only reference studies that support a particular opinion (confirmation bias) and exclude others.<sup>36</sup> Even if individual studies are done correctly, this does not guarantee that a

researcher writing a state-of-the-art review paper will write an accurate, undistorted synthesis of the literature. Indeed, Celia Mulrow demonstrated that many review articles were biased.<sup>37</sup>

## **X. CONSERVATISM BIAS**

People tend to favor a prior view even when presented with new information or evidence; that is, there is a tendency to overweigh and stick to old information and a reluctance to accept something new. Conservatism bias is related to status quo bias. Azzopardi<sup>38</sup> makes this distinction: “The status quo bias is emotional and causes people to hold on to how things are. The conservatism bias is cognitive and causes people to hold on to their previous opinions and idea frames even though facts have changed.” This bias makes people resist change and affects decision-making in areas including business and politics.

Conservatism bias may help explain why HR professionals are reluctant to consider candidates with different backgrounds and qualifications; this has hurt minorities. Requiring unnecessary college degrees has significantly impacted millions of workers, especially Blacks and Latinos (about two-thirds of American workers do not have college degrees). Several nonprofit organizations, including OneTen, Rework America Business Network, Opportunity@Work, National Skills Coalition, and Skillful, convince companies to change their policy and drop screening by college degree and instead adopt skills-based hiring. This is a crucial way to increase diversity in the workplace.<sup>39</sup>

## **XI. CONGRUENCE BIAS**

Congruence bias is similar to confirmation bias. It is a tendency to test a given hypothesis (usually our own beliefs) rather than to consider alternative theories that might actually



produce better results. In effect, someone guilty of congruency bias tries to prove that they are right. This is why alternative hypotheses are not considered. From the quotes below, it is clear that Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, understood the importance of being aware of the potential existence of several alternative hypotheses rather than starting with one. After the facts are collected, a detective or researcher selects the theory that does the best job of fitting the facts.

The following three quotes from Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories describe how research should be done:

*It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts (A Scandal in Bohemia).*

*One should always look for a possible alternative and provide against it. It is the first rule of criminal investigation (Adventure of Black Peter).*

*When you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth (Sign of the Four).<sup>40</sup>*

Some researchers are convinced that marijuana is a gateway drug leading to addiction to harder drugs, such as heroin. Indeed, there is evidence that a large percentage of addicts did start with marijuana when they were adolescents. However, there is an alternative hypothesis suggested by the National Institute on Drug Abuse:

*An alternative to the gateway-drug hypothesis is that people who are more*

*vulnerable to drug-taking are simply more likely to start with readily available substances such as marijuana, tobacco, or alcohol, and their subsequent social interactions with others who use drugs increases their chances of trying other drugs. Further research is needed to explore this question.*<sup>41</sup>

## **XII. MOTIVATED REASONING**

Motivated reasoning is related to confirmation bias. Marcus defines motivated reasoning as “our tendency to accept what we wish to believe (what we are motivated to believe) with much less scrutiny than what we don’t want to believe.”<sup>42</sup> Marcus makes the following distinction between motivated reasoning and confirmation bias: “Whereas confirmation bias is an automatic tendency to notice data that fit with our beliefs, motivated reasoning is the complementary tendency to scrutinize ideas more carefully if we don’t like them than if we do.”<sup>43</sup> Needless to say, people’s reluctance to scrutinize and analyze contrary ideas makes it difficult for them to change their beliefs. This may contribute to status quo bias.

## **XIII. AVAILABILITY BIAS**

Availability bias refers to the overestimation of risks that are readily available in memory. How easily things come to mind is a heuristic that makes people overestimate the importance of certain kinds of information. If something is difficult to remember, one will assume it is less likely to occur. Availability bias means there is a tendency to overestimate the risks of accidents that are easy to recall. Why are people more worried about being killed with a gun than about drowning in a

pool? Or, why do we think more people die of homicides than suicides?

According to Thaler and Sunstein people “assess the likelihood of risks by asking how readily examples come to mind.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, familiar risks (e.g., those reported in the media) are more frightening to people than unfamiliar ones. Thousands die yearly from injuries resulting from falling in the shower, yet people are more worried about being killed by terrorists. The danger of being hurt by texting while driving (or even walking) is sizable. According to Thaler and Sunstein “easily remembered events may inflate people’s probability judgments.”<sup>45</sup> It works both ways, and events we cannot readily bring to mind will be assumed to have lower probabilities of occurring. Of course, a marketer can make risks familiar by showing them in advertisements.

Availability bias can affect bias by letting us overestimate the likelihood of adverse events, such as terrorism, violent crime, and financial crimes in certain out-groups. The more exposed the public is to media reports about crimes involving a particular group, the more people will believe that these groups are dangerous—and much more than they actually are.

#### **XIV. CERTAINTY BIAS**

Certainty bias is cognitive bias that makes us overestimate the accuracy of our beliefs, judgments, and opinions. People resist new information that challenges or contradicts their preexisting ideas, attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs. This is because people stick to their views, even when there is a preponderance of evidence indicating that they are wrong. Consider the amount of scientific evidence that the planet is experiencing climate change and that vaccines do not

cause autism. Millions of people still cannot accept that they are wrong.

Overconfidence bias is a type of certainty bias. However, certainty bias focuses on our beliefs; overconfidence bias focuses on our knowledge and talents. People tend to overestimate their abilities and are overconfident. Kolbert highlights, “People believe that they know way more than they actually do.”<sup>46</sup> Slovic and Fernbach also speak of the “knowledge illusion”<sup>47</sup>; we simply do not understand how little we actually know. With certain kinds of questions, answers that people feel that their response is 99% certain to be correct turn out to be incorrect 40% of the time.<sup>48</sup>

Overconfidence bias is an even more considerable problem with experts. Several books have been written about expert predictions, which usually turn out to be wrong. Experts do only slightly better than random chance. Kahneman cites research conducted by Tetlock<sup>49</sup> that demonstrates how poorly experts who make a living “commenting or offering advice on political and economic trends”<sup>50</sup> actually perform. They do not do better than monkeys throwing darts on a board displaying the various possible outcomes.<sup>51</sup>

## **XV. BACKFIRE EFFECT**

One would think that people would change their beliefs and opinions when presented with facts that contradict them. The truth, however, is that what often happens when people’s beliefs—especially those firmly held—are challenged by contradictory evidence, these incorrect beliefs get even more robust. It is a type of confirmation bias that results in people favoring information consistent with their ideas and rejecting views that challenge them. It is very challenging to change people’s beliefs with facts. Certainty and misinformation are

convincing and compelling, making it difficult for facts to change people's minds. Evidence shows that facts do not correct misinformation but make it more persistent and potent.<sup>52</sup>

There is no question that it is considerably more challenging to change people's opinions who are misinformed rather than simply uninformed. This is why teaching people to be critical thinkers is essential. Critical thinking aims to solve a problem honestly and not be unreceptive to new approaches and different opinions. Knowing how to resolve conflicts has become a valuable skill, and it often requires the ability to help people see the truth. The following are some rules for changing opinions:

*Provide people with a narrative that replaces the gap left by false information; Focus on the facts you want to highlight, rather than the myths; Make sure that the information you want people to take away is simple and brief; Consider your audience and the beliefs they are likely to hold; and strengthen your message through repetition.*<sup>53</sup>

## **XVI. BIAS BLIND SPOT**

People tend to have a bias blind spot, meaning they are likelier to rate themselves as less susceptible to biases (including cognitive biases) than others. We can also detect biases in others more than in ourselves.<sup>54</sup> Thus, a bias blind spot can result in superiority, hypocrisy, and a double standard concerning people who disagree with us. According to one researcher:

*People seem to have no idea how biased they are. Whether a good decision-maker or a bad*

*one, everyone thinks that they are less biased than their peers ...This susceptibility to the bias blind spot appears to be pervasive, and is unrelated to people's intelligence, self-esteem, and actual ability to make unbiased judgments and decisions.* <sup>55</sup>

Thus, physicians believe that gifts from pharmaceutical companies are likely to unconsciously bias decisions made by other doctors. These gifts, however, will not prejudice their own medical decisions. Amazingly, only one person out of 661 stated that they were more biased than the average individual. <sup>56</sup>

## **XVII. SELF-SERVING BIAS**

Self-serving bias is a cognitive bias that involves attributing one's successes to internal, personal characteristics (internal attributions) and blaming one's failures on outside forces or environmental factors beyond one's control (external attributions). It is a type of attributional bias, enabling people to see themselves positively. <sup>57</sup> In other words, we take personal credit when we succeed (e.g., getting an A+ in a course), but if something does not work out (e.g., getting a D in a course), we tend to deny responsibility and blame outside factors, such as a poor teacher or an unfair test. One thing self-serving bias accomplishes is improving one's self-esteem and strengthening the ego. However, it makes it difficult for people to desire to improve if they believe all failures are due to outside forces. This bias might be the source of the racist belief that white European people are superior to Africans and Asians.

## **XVIII. BANDWAGON EFFECT BIAS**

This bias refers to the tendency of people to adopt a specific behavior, belief, attitude, or style if a large number of people have also accepted it. <sup>58</sup> It is a type of groupthink. People

tend to conform with others out of a desire to fit in with the crowd and gain approval from others. The fact that a large number of people believe something does not make it true. Bandwagon serves as a mental shortcut, or heuristic, allowing for decisions to be made quickly. It is much faster and easier to adopt others' opinions, especially if those beliefs are popular and consistently reoccurring.

The bandwagon effect may have an impact on how people vote. People want to vote for winners and may vote for someone perceived (polls may affect this) as being far ahead in polls. In the 20th century, bandwagons were commonplace in political campaigns, and "jump on the bandwagon" has become a derogatory term used to describe the social phenomenon of wanting to be part of the majority, even when it means going against one's principles or beliefs.<sup>59</sup>

## **XIX. OMISSION BIAS**

Omission bias is the tendency to judge commissions—active, harmful actions that hurt others—as being worse and more immoral than otherwise equivalent omissions (e.g., allowing others to die). We think it is worse to directly and actively harm others than to cause harm passively by not doing something, even when the same number of people are hurt. The famous "Runaway Trolley" case is reminiscent of this bias. Approximately 90% of subjects are willing to pull a lever that diverts the runaway trolley and kills one person but saves the lives of five people. On the other hand, very few people would be willing to throw a fat man off a bridge to stop the runaway trolley and save five people (known as "Would you kill the fat man?"). The math is the same in both cases: one person dies to save five.<sup>60</sup>

Omission bias is an issue when it comes to implicit bias. One might not accept responsibility for implicit bias because it

is not done intentionally or unconsciously. However, Van Loon<sup>61</sup> posits that people may be held responsible for their implicit bias if they fail to take steps to reduce its impact on their actions. Implicit biases can cause serious harm. Van Loon gives an example of how healthcare outcomes can be affected by implicit racial bias. Childbirth complications are more likely to be fatal for black women than for white women. This may result from several factors, including implicit bias among healthcare providers. They tend to pay more attention to the pain complaints of white women and ignore the pain of black women.

## **XX. FALSE CONSENSUS EFFECT**

People tend to overestimate how much others share their attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, preferences, and opinions. We tend to think that others think the same way we do.

Ross et al.<sup>62</sup> invented the term false consensus effect to describe participants' tendency to "see one's own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, or inappropriate." The false consensus effect tends to be stronger in certain situations. If we consider something really important or feel confident in our point of view, we are most likely to assume that more people agree with us.<sup>63</sup>

If we are very concerned about the environment, for example, we will probably be more likely to overestimate the number of people who are also very concerned about environmental issues.

## **XXI. MOTIVATED BLINDNESS**

Motivated blindness provides a psychological reason why many people engage in unethical behavior. It refers to individuals' psychological tendency to overlook unethical behaviors when it is in their interest to remain ignorant. Once



people have a vested interest in something, they can no longer be objective. This is why conflicts of interest are such a problem; it is almost impossible to behave ethically when a conflict of interest exists. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel demonstrate how motivated blindness caused many ethical failures, including the Great Recession of 2008.

*It's well documented that people see what they want to see and easily miss contradictory information when it's in their interest to remain ignorant—a psychological phenomenon known as motivated blindness. This bias applies dramatically with respect to unethical behavior.*<sup>64</sup>

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel stated, “Most of us dramatically underestimate the degree to which our behavior is affected by incentives and other situational factors.”<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, we overestimate how others will be influenced by incentives (e.g., paying people to donate blood).

## **XXII. INTERPRETATION BIAS, MEMORY BIAS, JUST-WORLD BIAS**

Interpretation bias is a type of “cognitive bias in which ambiguous situations are appraised as negative or threatening.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, those with a victim mentality might mistakenly assume that a boss who is unhappy with the quality of their work is a sexist or bigot when it is a valid criticism.

Memory biases are cognitive biases that involve the tendency to remember past events in a way that matches one’s current feelings, thoughts, or beliefs. They can occur with positive or negative stimuli.<sup>67</sup> For example, someone who feels like a victim might only remember the times others from a

different group harmed them and ignore the times they were helped or supported by them.

Just-world cognitive bias is a heuristic used to make sense of the world. It is the belief that the world is fair and that people generally get what they deserve. This bias can cause individuals to blame victims for their own misfortune or attribute success or failure to a character trait rather than bad luck or external factors. A common prejudice against homeless people is that they are responsible for their plight because of their lack of work ethic or substance abuse. People might see the high unemployment of minorities as being due to personal characteristics rather than discrimination. One of the most promising ways to beat victim blaming is to put yourself into the other person's shoes and actively try to imagine how they must have experienced the situation.<sup>68</sup>

### **XXIII. SPOTLIGHT EFFECT**

The spotlight effect is a cognitive bias that describes the tendency that makes individuals overestimate the degree to which they are observed and noticed by others. If people believe they are in the spotlight and are being watched more than they actually are, they become more self-conscious and worried about their behavior and appearance.<sup>69</sup> The spotlight effect can lead to the illusion of transparency and can make people more self-conscious, which increases their social anxiety. People who experience the spotlight effect feel uncomfortable in public. Moreover, it can cause people to make decisions based on the incorrect assumption that they are being constantly sized up by other people. However, the reality is that others often do not notice or care about things that we are highly conscious of ourselves.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, awareness of this bias can help one be more accurate in evaluating social situations.

#### **XXIV. FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR**

The fundamental attribution error refers to the tendency of a person observing another person's behavior to attribute it to internal factors or personality and to underestimate the effect of situational causes (i.e., external influences). In other words, we believe others do what they do because of their internal disposition. Thus, if you see someone fighting with another person, you will probably attribute it to the fact that the person has a violent temper (an internal characteristic) rather than something situational. Of course, it is quite possible that she is the victim of a mugging attempt and is trying to defend herself. Sherman provides the following example of the fundamental attribution error:

*A classic example is the person who doesn't return your call. You could go the usual route and think, "He is an inconsiderate slob and my parents were right years ago when they said I should have dropped him as a friend." But the fundamental attribution error would remind you that there might very well be other reasons why this person hasn't called you back. Maybe he is going through major issues in his life. Maybe he is traveling for work. Maybe he honestly forgot.<sup>71</sup>*

#### **XXV. MORAL LICENSING**

Moral licensing is a cognitive bias that allows people to act unethically or immorally without feeling that they are contradicting their ethical values or compromising their self-image of being a moral individual. It makes people feel morally justified in engaging in bad behavior (e.g., cheating on taxes) after doing something good before (e.g., donating to charity). After all, the good deeds done in the past make them feel morally

superior and entitled to behave unethically because they have proven that they are righteous from the previous act.

Men who publicly identify as feminists and contribute to women's rights causes often face allegations of sexual harassment or sexual abuse. Indeed, this is what happened to celebrities such as Harvey Weinstein and others. They were later exposed as sexual predators. Most likely, they used moral licensing to justify this. Therefore, people can claim to oppose sexist hiring practices in writing but still favor a male applicant for a position and even ignore harassment. Companies with diversity and inclusion programs may believe this is enough to show their morality. This may lead them to justify their discriminatory actions toward their minority employees. Moreover, employees who reluctantly participate in seminars or talks on diversity and inclusion may feel they have done their good deeds and then bully or mistreat coworkers from minority groups.<sup>72</sup>

Marketers use this bias to increase sales. For example, airlines might donate some of their profits to charities, so people will ignore how poorly they treat their employees. In the same way, consumers who make a green purchase may feel morally entitled to indulge in a luxury purchase later, using their eco-friendly choices as an excuse for their lavish, self-indulgent spending.<sup>73</sup>

## **XXVI. NEGATIVITY BIAS**

Negativity bias is a cognitive bias that causes us to pay more attention to negative information and things than to positive ones and dwell on them. This means we are more likely to notice and recall negative experiences, respond more strongly to bad news than good news, and focus more on insults than praise. We are much more likely to relive painful memories than

blissful ones. Negativity makes us recall traumatic experiences better than happy ones and thus makes us less joyful and stressed. People focus more on an event's downsides (e.g., potential losses) than the upsides when deciding what to do.<sup>74</sup> Moore<sup>75</sup> maintains that this bias can affect the impressions we form of colleagues in the workplace. One bad experience with one member of a minority group is more likely to be recalled than numerous positive experiences with the same group.

## **XXVII. VICTIM MENTALITY**

Victim mentality is not actually a cognitive bias but results from several of the abovementioned biases. In particular, the spotlight effect, interpretation bias, memory bias, and fundamental attribution error can enhance victim mentality. Distorting how people perceive and interpret reality makes them more likely to see themselves as victims. Indeed, victimization becomes a core part of their identity and how they see the world.

Kaufman<sup>76</sup> opines that social interactions are full of vagueness. Coworkers and friends might look annoyed, not smile back when you smile at them, or not respond to a text message. These situations do not have to be interpreted negatively. Interestingly, individuals with a strong tendency toward victimhood are less likely to forgive others after an offense and more likely to seek revenge. He underscores that:

*[A] perpetual victimhood mindset leads us to see the world with rose-tinted glasses. With a clear lens, we'd be able to see that not everyone in our out-group is evil, and not everyone in our in-group is a saint. We're all human with the same underlying needs to belong, to be seen, to be heard and to matter.<sup>77</sup>*

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most ancient and persistent forms of hatred is the one directed at the “stranger,” that is, those who are different. This is why the Bible repeatedly emphasizes the importance of treating them fairly and even loving them as ourselves. For instance, it says, “When a stranger dwells among you in your land, do not oppress him. The stranger who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you; you shall love him as yourself ...”<sup>78</sup>

What causes people to discriminate against others based on their race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, social class, sexual orientation, religion, appearance, weight, disability, neurodiversity, speech, or intelligence? How can we stop this behavior? Focusing only on one kind of discrimination and ignoring the rest can cause more harm than good and damage an organization. For example, according to the CDC, 27% of American adults have a disability; almost 42% are obese.<sup>79</sup> It makes no sense to ignore bias against them. All forms of prejudice are harmful and should be eliminated. This is not a small problem.

This paper highlights that cognitive bias is one possible source of irrational beliefs, including prejudice. People who think rationally realize the absurdity of any form of bigotry. Admittedly, other factors result in people holding prejudiced views. Some might have insecurities, fears, uncertainties, or interests that bias their perception of reality. For example, some feel that immigrants will take away their jobs. Evidence suggests that prejudice is more emotional than cognitive.<sup>80</sup> However, some scholars assert that “the key to creating a more just society starts with understanding where biases come from and how to counteract them.”<sup>81</sup>

Cognitive biases are often hard to detect and overcome because they are ingrained in our thinking and influenced by various factors, such as emotions, motivations, social norms, and cultural values. They can distort our thinking and lead to prejudice, but their impact may be reduced or eliminated by following certain steps. These steps are as follows: (1) being aware of our own biases and how they affect our choices—we must contemplate how our past experiences may have influenced our views; (2) seeking different sources of information and perspectives that can enhance and enrich our knowledge and understanding; (3) asking for feedback from others who can challenge and question our beliefs, assumptions, and viewpoints; (4) having respectful and constructive conversations with people who are different from us and learning from their experiences, knowledge, insights, and perspectives; and (5) enhancing our critical thinking and reasoning skills that help us evaluate evidence fairly, objectively, and rationally. Challenge beliefs and assumptions and consider alternative explanations. Using algorithms and tools such as AI to assist in decision-making will help overcome irrational conclusions. We must always be open-minded and ready to change our opinions when presented with new evidence.

Why do we care? It is about creating an organization—business, community, country, and family—where everyone is valued and no one feels disrespected. The motto of the fictional detective Harry Bosch in Michael Connelly’s novels is “Everybody counts or nobody counts.” This should be the guiding principle of every individual and leader.

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