

# The Real Reason We Believe What We Believe

## *Most of us are biased in a variety of ways*

 By Karl Albrecht

**W**hat is a bias?

It's an "ABCDE"—an Assumption, Belief, Conclusion, Decision, or Emotion that distorts our perceptions and narrows our options for responding to experience.

One of the highest espoused values in most cultures, particularly Anglo-Western cultures, is being "objective"—unbiased, logical, and sensible. Most of us are conditioned from early childhood to think of ourselves as seeking the "right" answers at the many decision points we encounter. Moment by moment, day by day, we want to believe that we are analyzing situations skillfully and basing our opinions and behavior on the correct conclusions.

Reality—to say nothing of research—routinely contradicts that belief.

Wikipedia lists more than 75 named biases that psychologists find interesting enough to study. One of the most pervasive of these is simple confirmation bias (a.k.a. selective perception bias). This is our tendency to pay closer attention to evidence and arguments that support our own firmly held conclusions, and to simply discount contradictory evidence. This could partially explain the tendency of large numbers of people to hold fast to their attachments to one political party or another. Once we decide, we don't like to re-decide. Some cognitive researchers claim that the brain has to consume extra energy in the process of changing or rearranging beliefs, and that simple neurological laziness—the tendency to conserve glucose and oxygen—predisposes the brain to keep the configurations it already has.

The pervasive media culture, and its social media component, provides endless opportunities for bias, as people accept beliefs, impressions, and reports that are completely erroneous. Partisan political journalism in particular is rife with distortions, tortured facts, selective evidence, and downright lies. But once a fraudulent "factoid" is passed on from one diatribe to another, it can acquire the status of unquestioned truth. We might think of this "big lie" or "repetition" bias as relatively innocent, because none of us can reasonably expect to verify the accuracy or plausibility of every political proposition we encounter. Media manipulators capitalize on that assumption every day.

Consider "net-crud," the term given to contrived photographs or stories circulating on the Internet which have been deliberately manufactured or doctored so as to mislead readers into believing they're evidence of remarkable discoveries or events. Claims attributed to "ex-CIA agents," "retired FBI agents," or "ex-NASA engineers" are offered as attempts to legitimize the fabrications. So many people have been raised with a moral injunction against lying that they automatically assume that a remarkable story or claim must be true. It's just too difficult for them to consider that some people willingly lie. And there are more:

- Cognitive researchers also identify a backfire bias, the tendency of some people—particularly those with cult-like beliefs—to actually strengthen their erroneous beliefs or convictions in the face of overwhelming disconfirmation: "I don't care what anybody says, UFOs (or ghosts, or Bigfoot, etc.) are real."
- **The "Lake Wobegon" bias**—named for the famous Prairie

Home Companion line that "all the children" in the town "are above average"—leads many parents to over-estimate the talents of their kids: "She could do a lot better in school if she'd just work harder."

- There's a "**knew-it-all-the-time**" bias, the tendency to look back on complicated events or situations after they've been resolved and believe that one understood them better than was actually the case. "I knew this was bound to happen."
- **Affinity bias** is the common tendency to believe, or agree with, the ideas of people you like or admire, and to discount or disagree with those you dislike.
- **Reactance bias** is the tendency to do the opposite of what someone advises you or wants you to do because of your aversion to a loss of autonomy, i.e. concern about being pushed around, controlled, or coerced.
- How about **bias bias**? This is the tendency to believe that other people are more biased than you are. Do you find yourself attributing the beliefs or behaviors of others to biases you assign to them? Can you identify biases of your own that might be activated in similar situations?

There are lots more biases where those come from. If you find the notion of biases and biased behavior intriguing or relevant to your life, read up on the popular literature on rational and irrational behavior. Of course, you can also start tuning up your perceptual radar to detect possible biases that show up in the behavior of others. And you can trace out more of your own biases by observing more closely the things you say and do every day. **PE**



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