

Cognitive biases

R-2 Read the following passage about cognitive biases and give your own examples of these biases

We like to think of ourselves as rational beings, proudly saying that we make decisions and perceive the world around us in a purely rational, intelligent way. Nevertheless, behavioral psychology and social studies demonstrate that in the majority of cases people are prone to biased suggestions that they (ironically) can't rationalize. Below you will find a shortlist of most common cognitive biases which limit our behavior patterns and often lead to false assumptions and wrong decisions.

KEY VOCABULARY

Bias –
 prejudice -
 assumption –
 rational -
 superstitious -
 prone to -
 pattern -
 intrinsic -

Availability heuristics

Availability heuristics describes the way we are deceived when we estimate probability of certain events. **The easier** it is for us to imagine (or remember) a certain event, for example a plane crash, **the higher** we perceive the event's probability.

Such tragic events **as** plane crashes are usually widely covered in mass media and are a common plot twister in modern action movies. Sitting in a departure lounge of an airport or waiting for the plane to finally touch ground, we can easily and vividly imagine a catastrophe which makes us believe that the likelihood of thing going wrong during our flight is considerably high.

However, airplanes are statistically the safest means of transport. On average, the probability (about 1 to 10000000) is thousands of times lower than when crossing a street.

Confirmation bias

This phenomenon describes the tendency for people to (consciously or *unconsciously*) search information that supports their pre-existing view points, and subsequently ignore information that goes against them, both positive and negative.

As an example, remember the way people tend to stick to their superstitious beliefs and find confirmation for them while ignoring numerous cases when their prediction didn't work. A basketball player puts his lucky charm on before an important match: he believes it works all the time **because** his team won when he wore it last time. However, he refuses to take into consideration those times when his team lost while he was wearing the charm. **Instead** of realizing that the charm has nothing to do with their defeats and victories, he may find dozens of reasons why the charm didn't work.

In the heat of an argument a teenager can only remember those times her parents treated her unfairly, refused to listen to her or let her down. **Thus**, she finds arguments to convince herself even more that she has "bad parents" while ignoring those majority of cases when her parents acted supportively, kindly and lovingly.

Ultimate attribution bias

This kind of bias can also be considered a type of ingroup biases (when people tend to treat members of their social group better

than they treat outsiders). It describes the way prejudices about other social groups (religious, racial, national, etc.) are formed: when a member of another social group does something wrong, we think of it as a result of their intrinsic character traits. On the other hand, when a member of another social group does something positive, we tend to attribute it to circumstances. When Christians hear that a radical Islamic group is terrorizing another village in Syria, they start thinking that it is because all Muslims are aggressive and naturally prone to violence. Nevertheless, they do not jump to a conclusion that all Muslims are kind-hearted, generous people, when they hear stories of Arabian soldiers protecting Israeli children or giving away food and water to refugees.

Hindsight bias

This kind of bias affects the way we remember things. It is best described by the

phrase “I knew it all along”. When you see the result of some plan or chain of events it is quite easy to remember that this kind of outcome was clear since the very beginning, **although** in reality there was no way you could predict the outcome **due to** lack of information.

Illusion of control

This bias helps casinos and online gambling websites make a fortune without even doing much. As rational beings we may even know from the Probability theory that there is no way our funny rituals (**e.g.** blowing on a pair of dices before throwing them on a casino table) or previous throws affect the current one. Unfortunately, the Universe simply doesn't work this way. Casino owners just support this myth and distract you from what is really going on with shiny sparkly atmosphere of their salons because the illusion of control helps them earn money

S-3 Discuss the following questions:

- 1) What is prejudice?
- 2) How can you be sure that what you believe in is true?
- 3) **Why should a scientific theory be “fallible”?**

Дополнительное чтение:

Карл Саган – известный популяризатор науки – рассуждает о природе человеческих заблуждений, развенчивает современные мифы и псевдонаучные учения в своей книге **«Мир полный демонов. Наука как свеча во тьме»**.