

Module 9: Debiasing

Psychologists have come up with dozens of biases, and a lot of them are worth thinking about. The ones that I’ve introduced you to in these sessions are some of the most important, where the consequences can be pretty severe. We can get into incredibly fierce arguments, by failing to realize that our understanding of the world is an interpretation, not revealed truth. Some of the most important tools we use to shape our understanding of the world are schemas and heuristics, which are generally useful, but far from foolproof. And some of the most consequential errors we make are due to our susceptibility to biases such as the fundamental attribution error. Finally, many of the inferences we make about the world can be regarded as tests of hypotheses. Unfortunately, too much of the time we simply confirm our hypotheses rather than actually testing them. When we ignore all of this information that may change our minds and influence decision making, we have the ostrich effect. I love that visual.

So, what can we do to better our decisions and judgments? First, we must attempt to escape this illusion of objectivity. It does not require that one stops seeing things through the prism of one’s own expectations, needs and experiences. That is not possible. What is possible is to acknowledge that one’s own perspective may be no more valid than someone else’s. Indeed it may be less valid. History provides a remarkable example of such acknowledgment in the content of one of the most momentous events in America. Frederick Douglass, a leader in the abolitionist movement that sought to end the practice of slavery before and during the Civil war, had often demonstrated impatience with the pace of the president, Abraham Lincoln’s steps towards abolition. Therefore, at the dedication of The Freedom Memorial Monument honoring Abraham Lincoln, there was little surprise when Frederick Douglass offered this assessment of Lincoln:

Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull and indifferent.

But then he showed remarkable capacity to get beyond his own perspective by adding: Measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical and determined. Taking him all in all, measuring the tremendous magnitude of the work before him, considering the necessary means to end, and surveying the end from the beginning, infinite wisdom has seldom sent any man into the world better fit for this mission than Abe Lincoln.

What Douglass did that spring day is something we must all strive to do if we are to understand the world around us more clearly: we must recognize that our view of the world is just that – a view that has been shaped by our own vantage point, history and knowledge. Lincoln himself had a similar capacity for open mindedness – he famously remarked about a political opponent, “I don’t like the man, I must get to know him better”. This charitable reaction conveys an important truth: often when we get to know someone whose words and deeds were off-putting, once we get a better sense of how that person is understanding events, our dislike dissipates.

Our knowledge of heuristics and other mental tools that we use to understand the world has also told us that our own view of the world might be error ridden. The reason we make a decision is inside of us and although it’s not completely and clearly understood, I hope you see that it is predictable based on our values and beliefs and biases. The bias itself creates the outcome and then do a posthoc rationalization. Biases are not easy to avoid, but there are some things that we can do to help minimize their effects. This can help us make more accurate judgments in our day-to-day life. Things we can do include:

- Become more aware of this tendency: Research has found that when people become aware that they are susceptible to these biases, they are often able to correct themselves and make more accurate judgments.
- Reflect on your judgments to check for bias: As you are making decisions about people or events, spend a few moments thinking about how bias might be affecting your choices.
- Apply logic to problems: As you solve problems, focus on thinking through them logically. Learning more about critical thinking skills and logical fallacies can also be helpful.
- Ask others for feedback: It can be difficult to spot biases in your own thinking, so it can sometimes be helpful to ask other people for feedback. Explain your thinking and ask them to check for possible biases. Consider feedback, even if it is hard to hear.
- Keep learning: The more knowledgeable we become, the less likely we are to have invisible holes in our competence. As the old proverb goes, when arguing with a fool, first make sure the other person isn't doing the same thing.

I hope you remember all of the things we talked about – frames, schemas, heuristics, biases and how they work in concert to influence our decisions and judgments. Acute awareness will help us move away from the foibles of this process to more reason-based, less error prone decision making.