Bias Busting - Tube Snap Judgements

## Introduction

I was recently discussing with [Tom McGivan](https://tommcgivan.com) the extent to which we should make snap judgements of people based on their appearances.

He phrased the problem as follows:

On the one hand, I feel bad for looking at how people appear and making a judgement. Maybe they won't live up to my poor expectations. In fact they may end up being incredible people who I never meet because I've ruled them out so superficially.

On the other hand, how people appear seems a pretty decent rule of thumb as to where people's values lie. For example, I was just on the tube and saw these two guys. One was wearing a thin-layered gilet, woollen tie, signet ring etc. The other a fancy suit. And I thought to myself, I expect these guys chat about something I don't agree with (assuming it would be something sexist, racist or to do with spending money/time in a way I don't value). And lo and behold they did. So my judgement on the basis of appearance served me well. And it often does in situations like this.

But the question remains, where to draw the line between these two propositions?

A classic response to this conundrum is the Buddhist idea of non-dualism. This states that we use our perceptions to place everything in the world into fixed categories. For example, on the Tube we might decide that some people are worth talking to and some are not. Or that some people are interesting and some are not. These categories are inherent falsehoods. They are simplifications of the inherently complex, unique and ever changing people behind the categories. Buddhist's argue that to reach "enlightenment" we must abandon such notions and perceive the world for what it truly is.

Today I will investigate what modern cognitive psychology research has to say about this Buddhist approach and how our brains jump to conclusions about the people around us.

## An Intro to Systems Theory

Daniel Kahneman is an academic who works in the intersection between Psychology, Cognitive Science and Behavioural Economics. He is seen as the godfather of the field of Heuristics and Biases. As you will see, this area is very relevant to the topic of snap judgements. One of his main ideas is Systems Theory.

He models the brain as running two systems:

**System 1** is the emotive system designed to respond quickly and make leaps of judgement, like when you judge someone based on their appearance. Pre-historic humans had to live in a rapidly changing environment. This system allowed them to see a lion and then run away without actively thinking: "There's a lion. If I stay here it will eat me. Therefore I must run away".

**System 2**, on the other hand, is the thinking system. It's used when you think through the pros and cons of a big decision or plan for the future. It likely developed later in our evolutionary history.

## Bothersome Biases

Kahneman has spent his life categorising the errors made by each system. These are called biases and lead to the majority of human mistakes.

One classic mistake, made when we make snap-judgements, is the substitution of System 1 for System 2. Unfortunately, System 2 has a fatal flaw: it is energy limited. Every time you make a decision it uses energy and adds to your "decision fatigue". When your brain is trying to judge someone on the tube, there are probably more important dilemmas later in you day. In order to conserve energy, your brain doesn't attempt to use System 2 and think through the problem, it acts lazily. It passes the problem onto System 1, which quickly jumps to a conclusion. Far easier!

Fundamental Attribution Bias is another mistake your brain makes when making snap judgements. It is the tendency to place emphasis on the internal characteristics of a person rather than the things that act upon them. For example, if someone is being annoying on the tube, your brain jumps to the conclusion that they are an inherently irritating person. But in fact their actions could be brought about by any number of external factors. Maybe their train was delayed, making them late for work.

## Ingenious Intuitions

Because of these biases Kahneman is very suspicious of the snap-judgements made by our System 1. However, Gary Klein, another Psychologist, argues that we should trust our System 1s. He tells a story of a team of fireman gruelingly batteling a fire in a burning building. The head fireman felt an intuition and told everyone to get out of the building. They all got out and a few seconds later the building collapsed. The fireman had no evidence that the building was going to collapse he just had an intuition. His System 1 was telling him something.

But where do these intuitions come from? Throughout history and still today people have explained these gut feelings mystically. They are messages from God. Or the universe. Or your true self. But in fact these inuitions are simply pattern matching. A fireman has been in so many fires and seen so many buildings collapse that his system 1 notices the patterns subconciously.

Another example of this is the famous chess match between the Deep Blue supercomputer and the chess Grandmaster Kasparov. Deep Blue could crunch 200 million positions per second compared to Kasparov's 3 per second. So how could Kasparov even compete? The answer: patter matching. A grandmaster like Kasparov is able to instinctively notice similarities between the current game and those in his history. This gives him a wealth of stored knowledge that is still difficult to program into a computer.

## My System 1 is a RACIST!

One of the most repugnant aspects of System 1 is how it treats groups other than your own. Once, when I was walking around London late at night I realised that I, Julyan Davey, am a racist. Well not quite. But maybe my System 1 is. If I saw someone acting a bit suspiciously I was way more likely to think "this is the night when I get robbed or stabbed" if that person was black than white. But it's not just limited to race. My System 1 possibly has the same reaction with working class white people. Now you could say this was a good reaction because black people and working class people are probably statistically more likely to be criminals or involved in knife crime. But this is like the argument that we should strip search Muslims at airports because they are indeed more likely to be terrorists. Plain crazy! The number of black criminals or Muslim terrorists is so small as a percentage of the population as a whole. Obviously on a dark road you should be careful whoever you can see. But in this case System 1's assumption jumping seems to be truly detrimental.

If you are interested in testing your own biases towards particular groups then a website, set-up by a group of researches, called [Project Implicit](https://www.projectimplicit.net) will give many people a big shock. There you can test your instinctive reactions to particular gender, sexual, racial, age or ethnic groups. Although you tell your friends you don't have a [racist/sexist/elitist] bone in your body, maybe your System 1 thinks differently.

## Combating Intuition

How much should we try to fight our flawed instinctual reactions?

Or should we just go with our gut?

Researches have repeatedly conducted experiments attempting to de-bias subjects from their flawed thinking. But time and time again, this has proved challenging if not impossible. Ultimately we may be stuck with our intuitions, as they are deeply embedded in how our brains process our environments. The best I think we can hope for is to realize the extent to which we are flawed.

So when you next look at someone on the tube who looks like they've just left the nearest psychiatric ward and you think: "They look absolutely mental!" You're probably pretty spot on. But realise that you too are a flawed human and sometimes will be deceived.