

PSYCH!

Social Psychology

Edition #8

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EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the eighth edition of our Newsletter! We're so excited you're here. We're so excited you're here. This edition is truly a labour of love, created by all 19 of our dedicated members. For many of them, this is their very first issue—making it an especially meaningful one for our team.

We've been part of the department since day one, and what keeps us going is the same thing that brought us here in the first place: a genuine passion for psychology—and for sharing it with others.

This space is our way of sparking conversations, building connections, and geeking out together over the fascinating ways our minds work. Inside, you'll find everything from fresh research and insights to practical tips and a glimpse into everything PsychSoc has to offer.

And don't stop reading too soon—our monthly book and movie recommendations are waiting for you at the end! So grab your FuelZone coffee (or whatever keeps you going), get comfy, and dive in.

Happy reading!

Myrah & Ananya

COLOUR CODING KIDS: *pink vs blue*

When I was three, I wanted my entire room to be pink—walls, curtains, even the bedsheet. By the time I was six, though, I refused to touch anything pink. Somewhere between those years, I'd learned that liking pink was expected of girls, and that made me want nothing to do with it. It's strange how early these unspoken rules take hold—how colours, of all things, determine your gender. But, where did it all start? Was it always how it is today: blue for boys and pink for girls?

Infants, before the 19th or early 20th century, wore white. It was simply a matter of function over fashion. White cotton can be bleached, so children—until the age of six—wore dainty white dresses, regardless of sex, as it made it easier to change diapers. Then, pastel colours became a fad, but they weren't gendered. All children alike wore the whole rainbow. In June 1918, however, American trade publication *Earnshaw's Infants' Department* published an article saying, "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl."

In the 1920s, baby books, clothing catalogues, and department stores often gave conflicting advice about which colours suited which sex. There wasn't a fixed rule—yet people still looked to others for guidance. Over time, repeated imitation of what seemed 'normal' in one's social circle gradually turned these scattered practices into conventions. This process, known as norm formation, explains how social norms can emerge even from inconsistency: when people are uncertain, they imitate the patterns they observe around them.



But these conflicting rules didn't last forever. Over the next two decades, things shifted dramatically. Around 1940, there was what became famously known as the 'pink-blue reversal'. This wasn't exactly a universal immediate shift, but by mid-century the pink-girl and blue-boy association had solidified. After World War II, advertisers and retailers doubled down on this tactic. Society followed these norms by making sure they were buying the 'right' coloured clothes for their child—without thinking twice about what it all meant. In the 1980s, as prenatal sex testing advanced, parents got the chance to announce their baby's 'correct' colour before birth. Amidst all this, looking back to the 1970s, there had been efforts to stop colour coding in the US and some parts of Europe. The second wave feminist movement pushed parents, specifically middle-class educated ones, to stop boxing their children into categories of 'girly' and 'boyish'. For a while, this trend was followed, with toy companies focusing on only producing gender-neutral blocks and unisex toys. Yet the persistence of gendered colours proves how easily social influence can be disrupted and how strong the pressure to conform to the 'traditional' norm is.

It's tempting to say, "Pink used to be for boys, then it flipped." But that would be an oversimplification. Across cultures, colour associations vary, and today, many parents and brands reject the strict pink-blue divide altogether. On a daily basis, we force ourselves to question social norms, to prove that what feels 'natural' may just be learned behaviour, and therefore, can be changed. The 'rules' aren't set in stone. If babies once wore white, we can reimagine a world where they only wear green. It's a social construct—so what do you know? Maybe the next generation will laugh at us for thinking colours had genders.

Written by: Esha Dalal

Reviewed by: Arusa Bajaj

A PRISON OR A PLAY

The Illusion of the Stanford Prison Experiment

I used to think the Stanford Prison Experiment revealed something dark about human nature. Now I think it revealed something dark about psychology itself. It was conducted by Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues, who were curious about the psychology of imprisonment. They set out to show whether ‘normal’ people would behave in pathological ways when assigned roles of prisoners and prison guards, without any external interventions or pressures. Barred cells, solitary confinement and a 24/7 surveillance system in the basement of Stanford’s psychology department was where history took place.

Twenty four psychologically healthy student volunteers participated for money. Half became guards, and the other half prisoners. The prisoners were arrested at their homes and delivered blindfolded to the prison. They were stripped, deloused and issued numbered uniforms, chains and caps to strip them of individuality. Guards wore khaki uniforms, sunglasses and batons to symbolise authority and anonymity.

Zimbardo noted that guards often acted spontaneously in an effort to maintain the ‘psychological environment’ of the prison. Early punishments included push-ups, where one guard even stepped on a prisoner’s back. By day two, a rebellion broke out to which the guards responded with fire extinguishers, stripping inmates, and placing ringleaders in solidarity.

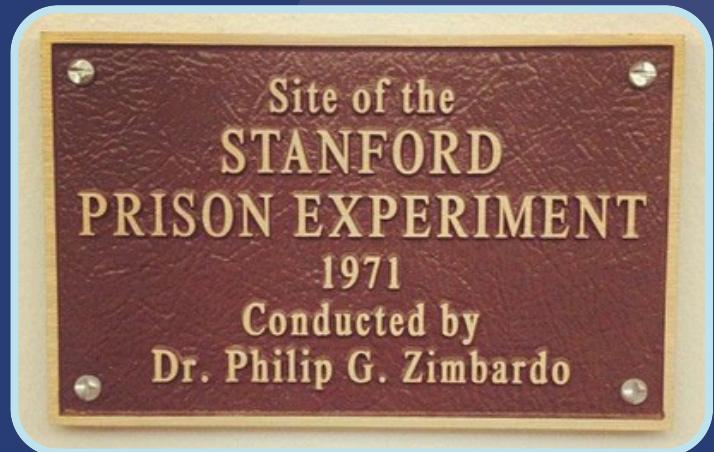
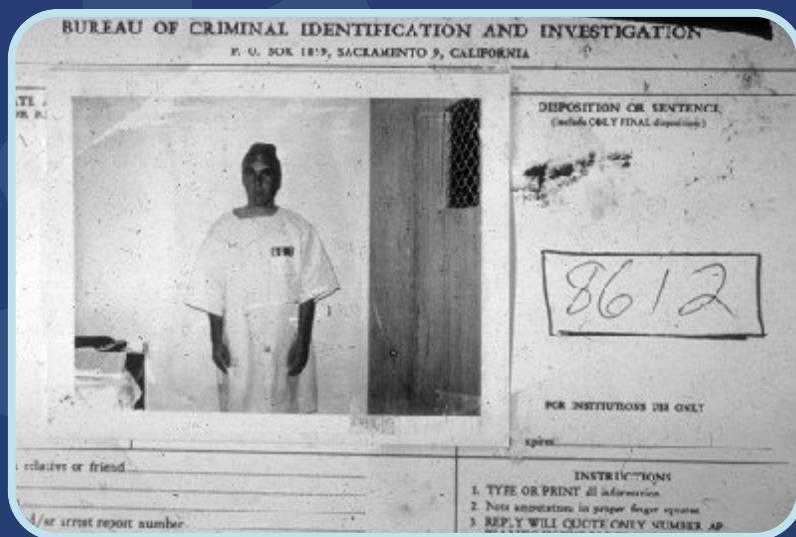
Zimbardo later admitted that he wanted the guards to escalate the situation. He also cast himself as the “superintendent”, staging performative visiting hours by improving the living conditions of the prisoners to reassure the parents. When rumours spread of a mass escape, Zimbardo stopped data collection entirely to plan countermeasures. He even admitted, “the security of my men and the stability of my prison was at stake...and I have to contend with this bleeding-heart academic worried about an independent variable.” (Zimbardo, et. al., 1971). His words reveal how far he had slipped into the role.

Conditions quickly deteriorated. Prisoners were forced to use buckets to defecate in their cells, guards humiliated them further by ordering toilet scrubbing with bare hands. One participant broke down only after 36 hours and several others developed psychosomatic rashes and cried uncontrollably. Instead of letting them leave freely, Zimbardo treated their collapse as data. Even requests for parole were manipulated, prisoners agreed to forfeit their pay, only to be sent back to their cells. By the end, guards showed open sadism. Some seemed to relish, as Zimbardo described it, “the ultimate aphrodisiac of power.” (Zimbardo, et. al., 1971). Others stayed passive, enabling cruelty by silence. What was intended as a two-week study collapsed after six days, with prisoners withdrawn, humiliated, and guards increasingly hostile.

When I first encountered Zimbardo’s own account of the Stanford Prison Experiment, my perspective was shaped almost entirely by the way he dramatized his observations. In fact, his study popularised to an extent where it inspired various novels like Giordano’s Black Box and three feature films. Despite noticing the obvious ethical concerns, I accepted the results and data collection as convincing evidence of situational power. Only later did I realize how much of this narrative had been carefully staged, exaggerated, or selectively reported, and how little it actually demonstrated about human nature.

One of the strongest critiques comes from Banuazizi and Movahedi (1975), who tested whether students could guess the expected outcome of the SPE. When given a description of the setup, eighty one percent correctly identified the hypothesis that guards would be abusive and prisoners would resist or comply. Ninety percent predicted the guards would be “oppressive, hostile, aggressive, humiliating.” This finding suggests participants in the SPE did not simply ‘fall into roles’, but acted according to what they thought Zimbardo wanted, demonstrating compliance with demand characteristics. Similarly, another weakness lies in self-selection bias. Carnahan and McFarland (2007) argued that volunteers for a study advertised as a psychological study of prison life were more likely to be authoritarian, aggressive, or drawn to dominance. If the pool of participants was already skewed, the results cannot be generalized to “normal” populations. Even though the SPE filtered psychologically healthy males, they must not have used dimensions like machiavellianism, narcissism, and dominance to test specific personality traits relevant to the study.

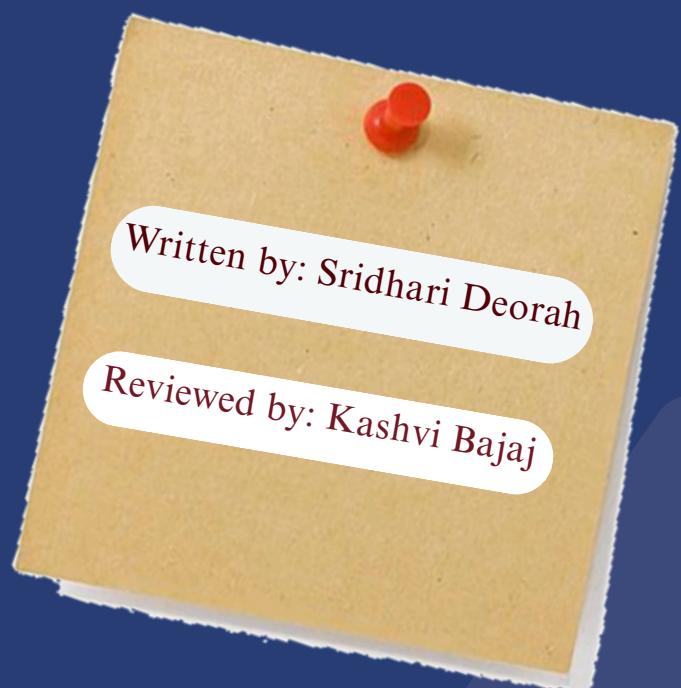
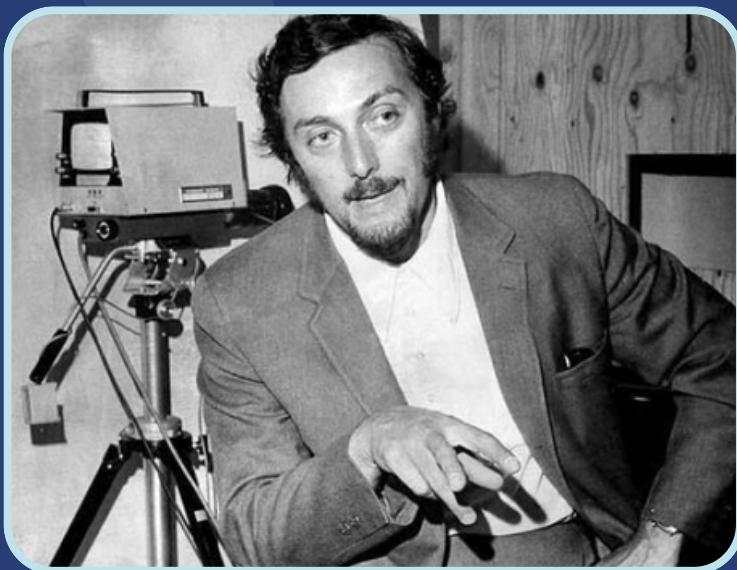
The supposed objectivity of the data is also questionable. In the study conducted by Le Texier (2019), he reveals that despite Zimbardo's claims of systematic record-keeping, less than 15% of the 150 hours of the experiment were captured on tape. What was recorded tended to be the most dramatic moments, counts, breakdowns, and staged visits. As Haney (n.d.) later admitted, "for the most part, our concerns in filming were cinematic." Zimbardo himself later acknowledged that the visual nature of the SPE made it ripe for television and other media coverage. Yet, this dramatization, framed as a "battle between Good and Evil" (Zimbardo, 2003, p. 289), overshadows the very real confusion and distress of the students caught between an experimenter's authority and their twisted sense of self.



Even the claim that "half the prisoners broke down" has been exaggerated. Archival evidence suggests only two participants genuinely exhibited nervous breakdowns, others exaggerated symptoms to escape the study. As one prisoner admitted, "I instinctively knew how to work myself up" because feigning collapse was the only way to leave (Le Texier, 2019). Moreover, archival materials analyzed by Le Texier (2019) show that guards were not acting spontaneously but were subtly trained. They were told to generate a "psychological environment" that would mimic real prisons. When Zimbardo later claimed guards independently devised their degrading tactics, he omitted his role in shaping their behavior. This critique is further strengthened when compared to other similar research. In 2003, Haslam and Reicher's BBC Prison Study recreated similar conditions but removed Zimbardo-style interference. The outcome was starkly different. Guards did not uniformly become sadistic, and some prisoners resisted authority collectively. The researchers concluded that people do not automatically assume roles that are given to them. This directly contradicts Zimbardo's interpretation and shows that his heavy involvement produced the violence in his study.

The study's conclusions were also pre-written. As early as the second day, Zimbardo announced that the experiment proved prisons dehumanize people and that reforms were necessary ("News Release," 1971, p. 3). His aim was not open-ended inquiry but the production of evidence to support his prior stance on the toxicity of incarceration. Moreover, the study did not make any attempts to compare their experiment with real life prison institutions to discuss baselines or limitations.

In conclusion, the SPE tells us far less about human nature than about how easily scientific authority can blur into theatre. It remains influential in classrooms and cultures because of its vivid images and compelling story, not because of its empirical strength. As Le Texier (2019) concluded after reviewing the archives, the experiment was inaccurately reported, ethically compromised and scientifically invalid. Maybe what the SPE reveals isn't the dark side of human nature, but how powerfully authority and media can shape what we see as evidence. Should we be rethinking not just this study, but the way we're taught psychology's history itself?



WHY WE JUDGE SO QUICKLY: THE SCIENCE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Picture this: You walk into a room filled with strangers; instantly, you know within seconds who appears to be confident, friendly, or honest. Here's the amazing part, chances are, they've made similar assessments of you just as fast.

Psychologists refer to it as impression formation i.e. the process of building mental images of individuals from limited data. It is revealed in studies that individuals make assessments of traits such as trust and competence within less than one second. It is such quick evaluation that is described through the aspect of thin-slicing, our brain's ability to make judgments based on very brief observations (Willis & Todorov, 2006; Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993).

From an evolutionary standpoint, human beings had to make quick evaluations in order to decide if someone was friend or foe. With our brains, we employ subtle differences in facial expression, posture, and vocal tone in order to make these quasi-instant evaluations. Although this ability can be quite precise, it's also subject to biasing and generalization.



Impressions have a tendency to linger once made. This is described in psychological terms as the primacy effect, the tendency for initial information to carry more weight than later evidence (Asch, 1946). Since the brain processes information in a manner where all information has to first go through working memory and can then only move to long-term memory after the attention consuming process of doing multiple rehearsals, the earlier presented items get more attention and rehearsal which makes them easier to remember. This leads to a situation where even when subsequent information goes opposite to our first impression, we tend to retain the original judgment.

The positive is that awareness gives some sense of control. Actions like keeping the eyes up, flashing a sincere smile, and adopting open body positioning assist in conveying warmth and assertiveness. Meanwhile, understanding just how fast we do pass judgment promotes understanding and tolerance in developing opinions.

Did you know?

- 100 milliseconds is all it takes to form a basic impression of someone's face (Willis & Todorov, 2006).
- Children as young as 3 also make trait judgments from faces (Cogsdill et al., 2014).

Written by: Vivaan Celly

Reviewed by: Srishti Ladha

THE CURTAINS ARE FALLING

Written by Sourish Grover

the curtains are falling
and I'm on the stage
a thousand thoughts are crawling
a thousand eyes staring my face
perhaps fear is the price to pay
for my overwhelming consciousness.
I'm still on stage
an hour has passed
but the clock just turned a minute
I am waiting, for the curtains to close
I'm afraid of being afraid
and I'm afraid of that
I'm crying my eyes out —
it's my character's act
but the reason I came on stage
the reason I got selected for my role
is cause I was a natural —
at disconnecting myself,
at pouring my tears,
inside my prison of thought
at handcuffing myself,
beneath the chain of my nihilistic ego
at handicapping myself —
my broken sense of self-worth.

the reason I acted on stage
was because I actually wanted to cry
and I wanted to be afraid.
it was never an act,
and it never will be.

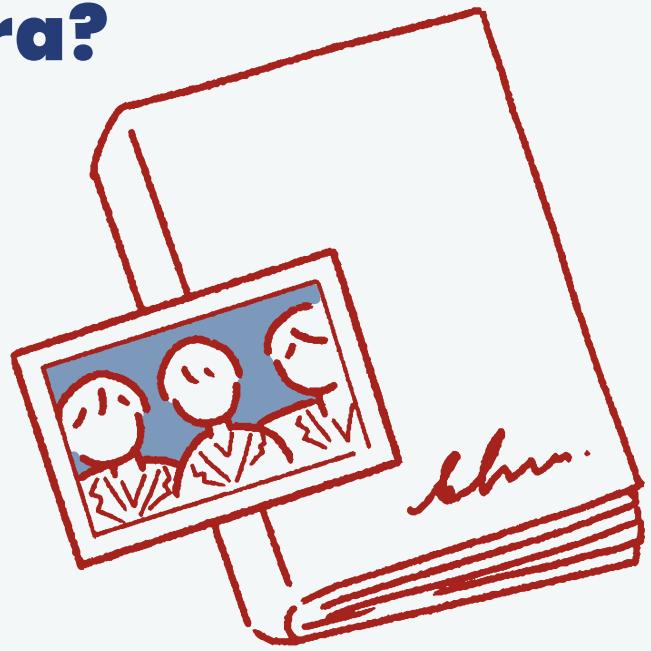


The Myth of Perfect Memory: Why We Don't Remember Life Like a Camera?

We like to think our minds capture life perfectly, holding every detail ready to be recalled as per our convenience. You see it all the time - friends retelling a wild story, or a witness confidently recalling the details of a burglary. The common thread that links such situations together is our belief in our memory being highly accurate, almost like a camera that records everything we see and hear. But, in reality, our memories are more like patchwork stories, stitched together using emotions, fragments and experiences.

The thought that our memory is always perfectly accurate is tempting to believe, isn't it? It would definitely make our lives way easier! But, as fascinating and convenient as that phenomenon sounds, psychological research tells a different story. Research has shown that human memory isn't a flawless recording device but a dynamic, reconstructive process. In other words, it's a story we continually revise and reinterpret.

This raises the question - if memories aren't fixed recordings, how do they take shape? A major aspect of this answer lies in our schemas - mental frameworks that help us make sense of things by organising and interpreting information that we absorb. For example, in a course where we scan QR codes for attendance, we develop a mental schema that attendance is always marked at the end of the class. This routine can distort the fact that we might have forgotten to scan it, even when we later realise our attendance wasn't recorded. Such schemas heavily influence our memory - a phenomenon perfectly shown in Bartlett's study (1932). English participants were asked to read a Native American folk tale called "The War of Ghosts" which included aspects that were unfamiliar to their culture. Over time, when asked to recall the story, they unintentionally altered certain details to fit their own cultural frameworks, showing how their memory was reshaped by existing cultural schemas.



Similarly, Loftus and Palmer's 1974 experiment demonstrated how people's memory recall also depends on the way they are asked about a specific event. After watching clips of car accidents, participants gave different speed estimates of the cars depending on whether the question used words like "smashed" or "contacted". This goes on to show how one's language schemas can influence the way memories are reconstructed.



The list doesn't simply end here - several more factors contribute to the unreliability of memory recall. Two of these include EbbingHaus Forgetting Curve and Johnson, Hasthroudi, and Linday's Source Monitoring Framework. Ebbinghaus' Forgetting Curve states that memory decays over time, while the Source Monitoring Framework shows that people often struggle to distinguish between internally generated information (imagined or thought) and externally derived information (seen or heard).

But what about memories that are tied to strong and intense emotions - such as shock and surprise? One might assume that such vivid experiences would surely remain accurate when recalled. On the contrary, research suggests that even such emotionally heavy and personally significant memories - also known as flashbulb memories - lose accuracy over time, even if we remain confident in our recollections. For example, you might think you can recall every single detail of the moment you opened your Ashoka acceptance letter - but it's highly likely that you would miss or misremember parts of what actually happened.

Despite such contradictory and convincing scientific evidence, people continue to argue that their recollection of an event is always accurate. This happens because the confidence, conviction, or emotional intensity surrounding a memory can make reconstructed versions of it feel real. Recognizing this tendency shows the importance of viewing memory critically - it can be reliable at times, but it is by no means foolproof every time. Even the clearest recollections may be less accurate than they appear. On that note, I genuinely hope that this piece does your memory justice!

Written by: Rhea Dhole

Reviewed by: Mihika



IMPLICIT BIAS

The Invisible Filter That Shapes Our Choices

Our brains are relentless Type-A classifiers, consistently sorting observations into specific categories. They love taking shortcuts while building an intrinsic perception database of the world, automatically generating certain thoughts and opinions without our conscious approval. A cognitive mechanism our brains employ for this is the phenomenon of implicit bias.

Explained by the NCBI, implicit bias is the attitude or internalized stereotype that unconsciously affect our perceptions, actions, and decisions. Though we are outwardly unaware of the associations that emerge upon encountering a stimulus, these snap judgments still narrow our worldview and make us selectively biased in our choices. These biases are not a sign of moral corruption; rather, they are a mere concoction of the brain, designed to help us navigate our labyrinthine social world with ease. Over time, implicit biases can become rigid, pervasive blocks in the way we interact with others by obstructing growth and allowing only certain groups – those perceived positively – to pass under the radar of consciousness.

Since people have unprecedented agency in shaping their information diets, they may gravitate toward content that reinforces their ingroup while internalizing negative portrayals of outgroups. This unconscious pattern can inadvertently foster intolerant attitudes. Gradually, these biases solidify as inflexible, prejudiced attitudes that privilege some groups while marginalizing others - all without our conscious knowing. (Kroon et al., 2022)

Even the world of fiction is rife with these impetuous biases. Consider the patterns hiding in plain sight: why do media powerhouses portray the Asian kid as an academic weapon, a mathematical genius destined to win every spelling bee? Why are queer characters, especially in early-2000s TV shows, depicted exclusively as quirky sidekicks with their personalities reduced to a set of predictable tropes? Unfortunately, it is not lazy writing alone. It is the same bias, seeping from the subconscious into the stories we tell. The reason for this stems from our survival-oriented cognition. In a world bursting with stimuli from media, culture and communication, our brains are forced to rely on shortcuts wherein biases form and take root in our thought processes. They can shape how someone is assessed in an unfavourable light. When repeated exposure reinforces the same patterns, these shortcuts strengthen neural pathways, perpetuating biases in even more insidious ways. This unconscious mechanism takes a hefty toll. A study demonstrated that when a white male and a Black male presented synonymous medical symptoms, the white male was more likely to receive better care and a higher dosage of medication while the black male was unconsciously given less.

In the workplace, similar patterns are sustained through exclusion. Men are often favoured over women for promotions and employees from certain social or ethnic groups may be unfairly judged based on stereotypes rather than merit. Therefore, implicit biases shape who is seen as competent, who is trusted and whose ideas are heard- often without the perpetrator realizing it. (Moss-Racusin et al, 2012)

Now you might be wondering: what does implicit bias have to do with an Ashokan student whose life (Thursday nights aside) is confined to the 25-acre campus? The answer is leadership. Even in this sphere, unconscious judgments influence who we see capable of leading. Someone may even form a bias against you – earning you the reputation of a slagger based off one lousy presentation. Thus, it is urgent to bring these biases into mainstream discussion: only by turning implicit bias into explicit awareness can we begin to challenge it. To overcome these biases, one can adopt strategies such as:

- Counter-stereotypic imaging: Consciously recall or imagine an individual from a stereotyped group who defies the common stereotype. This helps to weaken automatic associations.
- Individuating: Treat each person as a unique individual rather than as a representative of a group. Choose to focus on their personal qualities instead of relying on preconceived group-based assumptions.
- Perspective-taking: Deliberately adopt the viewpoint of someone from a different social or cultural group by putting yourself in their shoes to cultivate empathy and understanding.



Moreover, research suggests that implicit attitudes can change over the long term in enduring ways. As Charlesworth observes, structural changes such as the legalization of gay marriage, along with shifting social attitudes towards race and sexuality, have contributed to tangible changes in implicit attitudes. People today are less accepting of verbal expressions of prejudice, and the youngest generation – our generation – increasingly challenges conventional norms. (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022)

In conclusion, implicit bias is the invisible filter guiding our perceptions, decisions, and interactions often without our awareness. To break free, we must actively challenge what we take for granted and welcome new experiences that override our mental shortcuts.



Written by: Sarah Sodi

Reviewed by: Zitien Tickoo



It's 2 AM. You've been watching for four hours. The Netflix algorithm asks if you're still watching. Of course you are. You're not even sure what episode you're on anymore, but stopping would mean confronting the existential dread lurking behind that innocent "Keep watching?" prompt. So you click yes. Again.

The mind-numbing, zombie-esque feeling of nihilism and impending doom is something that all who indulge in the activity of "scrolling" experience. It is the dopamine-deficit state most of us experience regularly, and we use exactly what caused it in the first place to alleviate its symptoms. Copious amounts of it at that. Yet, we cannot seem to stop. Why is that? Will consuming content in the way we do ever make us feel better? Why do we keep going back to it?

The Dopamine Dealer in Your Pocket

When people talk about dopamine, they usually mean 'the happiness chemical.' That's not entirely true. Dopamine doesn't create happiness; it creates anticipation. It's the brain's way of saying, "That felt good last time. Let's do it again." The reward system starts in an area called the Ventral Tegmental Area (VTA) and projects to the nucleus accumbens, a region often called the brain's 'pleasure centre'. When we do something enjoyable, like eat something sweet or get a like, this circuit lights up and releases dopamine.

The problem begins when that system is overstimulated. Social media, binge-worthy shows, even endless online novelty flood the same neural pathways again and again. Over time, the brain starts to downregulate its dopamine receptors. That means you need more stimulation to feel the same effect. It's called dopamine desensitisation, and it's why things that once made you happy start to feel dull. This creates a cycle that looks eerily similar to addiction: the reward system keeps chasing the next high, but the "high" keeps getting more and more unattainable. You're left craving- that restless need to keep doing something, anything, to feel alive.

Now, you might think, "At least binge-watching is better than doomscrolling, right?" But no! Just like other addictive behaviours, binge-watching causes increased production of dopamine, the same chemical response you get from, well, there's no way to sugarcoat it, drugs.

The Existential Vacuum (Brought to You By Late Capitalism™)

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust (though the specificities of his time at the concentration camps are debated), coined the term "existential vacuum" to describe a profound sense of emptiness and meaninglessness that people experience when they lack purpose in their lives. He called it the "mass neurotic triad" of depression, addiction, and aggression, noting that research shows a strong relationship between meaninglessness and criminality. Frankl observed that when people can't find a deep sense of meaning, they distract themselves with pleasure.



One of the most conspicuous signs of existential vacuum in our society is boredom. People finally have time to do what they want, but don't seem to want to do anything. It's 2025, and the existential vacuum accumulates and expands as people continue to reject what is meaningful in favour of what is expedient or meets the needs of their lower instincts. This widespread phenomenon in today's world is associated with isolation, the supremacy of individual values, and the mistaken belief that pleasure is the key to happiness. In other words, we're filling the void with Netflix, Instagram and the likes, but the void remains stubbornly unfilled. Like one is trying to heal a broken leg with band-aids made of memes.

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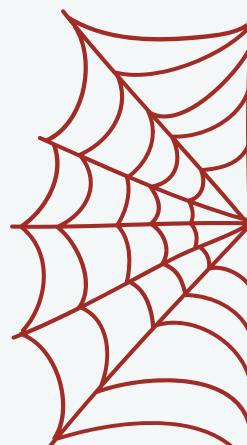
Existential crises are characterised by the impression that life lacks meaning and confusion about personal identity, often accompanied by anxiety and stress that disturb normal functioning and lead to depression. The problem can be summarised through the question: "How does a being who needs meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning?"

The Bottom Line

Nothing on Netflix cures nothingness because Netflix isn't designed to cure anything; it's designed to keep you watching. Social media isn't a community; it's a slot machine in your pocket that occasionally shows you pictures of your high school friends' families. Binge-watching isn't self-care; it's self-medication that creates the very disease it claims to treat.

The existential vacuum is *real*, and we're trying to fill it with dopamine hits and parasocial relationships with people who don't know we exist. It's not working. It's never going to work.

But here's the thing: recognising the trap is the first step to escaping it. Understanding that your brain is being hijacked by algorithms designed to profit from your unhappiness gives you power. Knowing that your feelings of inadequacy are manufactured by a system that literally relies on you feeling bad gives you agency.



The existential vacuum requires intrapersonal remedies, not digital ones. The cure for nothingness isn't more content. It's connection, creation, and the meaning that you generate yourself, not consume from strangers online with lives nothing like yours and a purpose to sell you what they've been paid to sell you. So maybe turn off the screen. Just for a minute. Feel the void. It's supremely uncomfortable, but at least it's real. And real is what we're missing.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have seven seasons of a show I don't even like to get through. I hear it gets better in season four.

Written by: Anuja Paul

Reviewed by: Kavya



Cognitive Dissonance & Identity in College Life: Samah's Story

Samah had only been at Ashoka University for a month when she first found herself at KitKat, surrounded by steaming plates of double masala Maggi and the hum of half-serious conversations. She had come with a small group from her residence hall, eager to belong. When the conversation drifted to music, she nodded along as her friends praised a band she had never really enjoyed. “Yeah, I love The Smiths too,” whispered Samah; an easy sentence, but one that carried a weird aftertaste.



Samah was experiencing Cognitive Dissonance: when our actions contradict our privately held beliefs, a psychological discomfort emerges. Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) suggests that people are motivated to reduce this discomfort, often by altering either their actions or their beliefs. In Samah’s case, she felt the tug to either convince herself she liked The Smiths or risk stepping away from the group’s rhythm.

As the semester went on, Samah noticed this pattern repeating. At the HDFC Library, while studying in a group, she downplayed her interest in philosophy, afraid that mentioning it might sound “pretentious” in front of her peers, and was more focused on Economics. At Blue Tokai, during one of those late-evening hangouts, she nodded along as friends mocked the “try-hard” students who spent nights buried in books. She’d been one of them just last week. Each shift seemed small, but strung together, they began to blur the line between who she was and who she was performing to be.

This is where Cognitive Dissonance seeps in, especially in social contexts, such as at university. New students often adjust their identities to reduce the gap between their inner selves and the personalities of the groups they want to join (and the people they want to appeal to). But the cost is subtle: a sense of dislocation, of not knowing which “self” is truly theirs. The contradictions compounded when Samah realised she was saying different things to different groups. To one circle, she would laugh about never wanting to pursue research; to another, she would speak passionately about writing papers. Neither statement was false in the moment, but inside, Samah felt a growing unease. These inconsistencies triggered what can only be described as “mini identity crises,” moments where the question wasn’t just what do I believe? But who am I, really?

It is essential to recall here that the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance is not a flaw, but rather a feature of the human mind. It nudges us to reflect on the distance between action and belief. Samah's discomfort wasn't a sign of weakness; it was her psychology telling her to pause, evaluate, and decide whether the cost of changing herself was worth the comfort of belonging (Festinger, 1957; Sukmayadi et al., 2020).

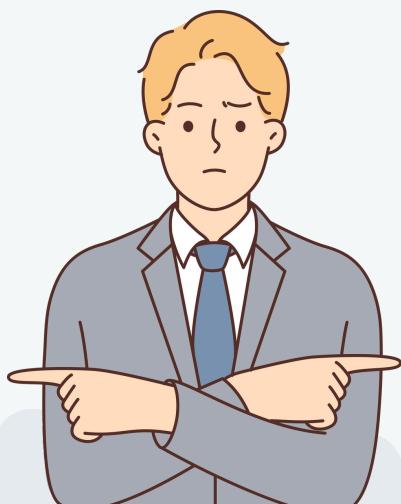
The resolution is not to avoid groups or conformity altogether. Rather, it lies in recognising these moments of dissonance as opportunities. Instead of bending herself further, Samah began asking simple but grounding questions: Do I truly want to agree, or am I just afraid of disagreeing? Will this version of me hold up when I'm alone? Slowly, she discovered that embracing her authentic self: sharing her love for philosophy, her dislike for the band, and her quieter nature in games helped her find peers who valued those traits.

In the end, the lesson is clear: college will always present social scenarios that trigger cognitive dissonance. But instead of letting this lead to identity confusion, we can learn to use it as a mirror. Each instance of conflict is a chance to align more closely with one's authentic self. And paradoxically, it is often by refusing to switch ourselves just to appeal to others that we find the right people—those who resonate with who we truly are.



WRITTEN BY:
SOURISH GROVER

REVIEWED BY:
GURNOOR KAUR



PSYCH! WORDSEARCH



RESONANCE

COLORS

DOPAMINE

ASSOCIATION

OPINION

IDENTITY

DISSONANCE

BIAS

REPRESSION

MEMORY



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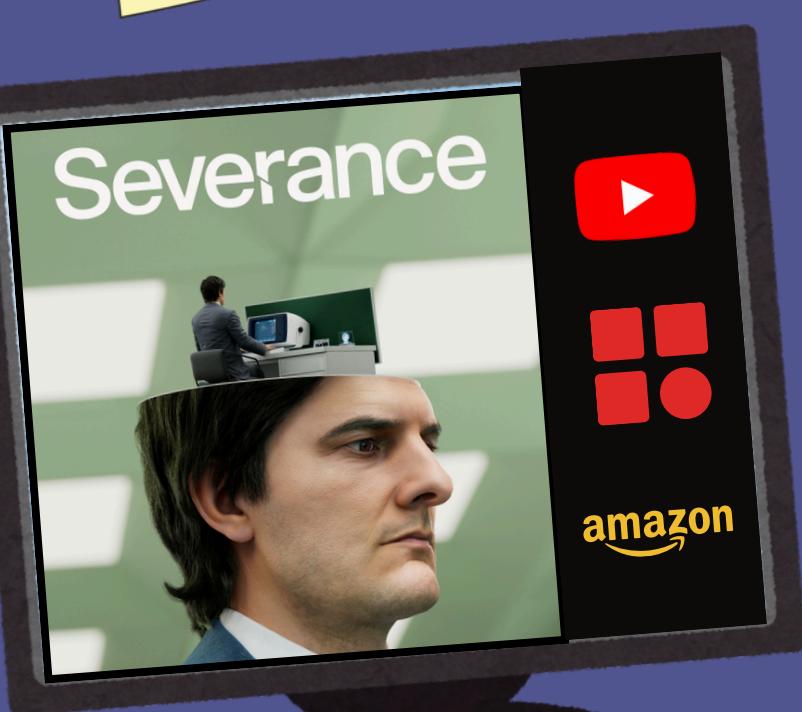
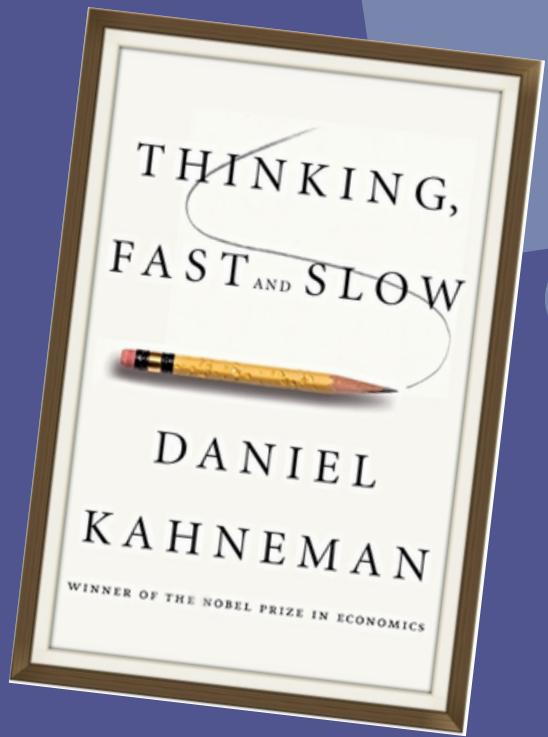
Social Psychology Edition

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RECOMMENDATIONS

BOOKS

- *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*
– Robert Cialdini
- *Thinking, Fast and Slow*
– Daniel Kahneman
- *The Secret History*
– Donna Tartt



SHOWS / MOVIES

- *Severance*
(recommended by Heeya Bhattacharjee)
- *Ted Lasso*
- *The Rehearsal*

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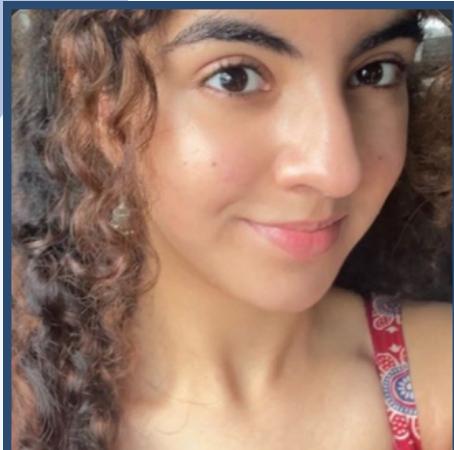
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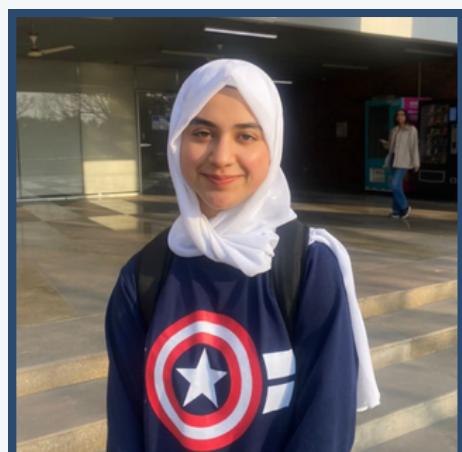
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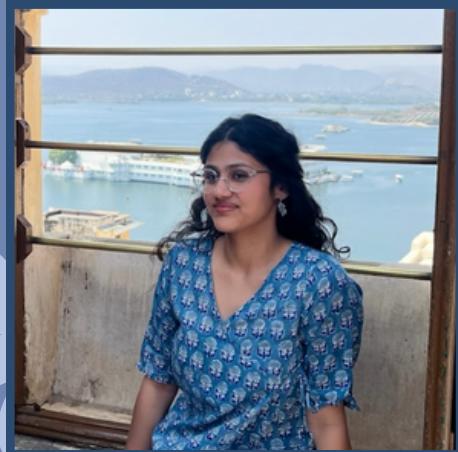
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