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Confirmation Bias

Is that a gorilla on the basketball court, or are you just experiencing Hindsight Bias?

While searching for information on confirmation bias and cognitive biases, I came across a website that listed over 100 biases. That is amazing - over 100 forms of bias! Let me just share a few of my favorites:

- **Bias blind spot** - the tendency not to compensate for one's own cognitive biases
- **Information bias** - the tendency to seek information even when it cannot affect action
- **Hindsight bias** - sometimes called the "I knew it all along" effect, the inclination to see past events as being predictable
- **Optimism bias** - the systematic tendency to be overly optimistic about the outcome of planned actions
- **Self-serving bias** - perceiving oneself responsible for desirable outcomes, but not responsible for undesirable ones
- **Outcome bias** - the tendency to judge a decision by its eventual outcome instead of based on the quality of the decision at the time it was made
- **Omission bias** - the tendency to judge harmful actions as worse, or less moral, than equally harmful omissions or inactions
- **Confirmation bias** - the interpretation of evidence partial to existing beliefs
- **Authority bias** - the tendency to value an ambiguous stimulus according to the opinion of someone in authority on the topic
- **Status quo bias** - the tendency for people to like things to stay relatively the same; loss aversion
- **Selection bias** - a distortion of evidence or data that arises from the way that data are collected
- **In-group bias** - the tendency for people to give preferential treatment to others they perceive to be members of their own groups
- **Negativity bias** - the tendency to choose things based on the need to avoid negative experiences rather than by the desire to get positive things

One of the arguments of confirmation bias is that we are motivated to help solve a case and that this motivation can cloud our judgment and lead to misidentifications in our haste to see justice done. These arguments have some merit and may occur in some agencies. But if seeing justice done were truly our motivation, it would be just as satisfying to prove someone innocent so the real "bad guy" could be caught and held

accountable for his crime.

I have never felt the need to identify a fingerprint just because the agency submitting the case "wanted" the fingerprint to belong to the "bad guy." No one in my latent print section works a case in this manner either. When I am given a case to work, I follow the science where it leads me. The final decision I make is as free from bias as I can humanly be. When I peer-review an identification, I work to disprove the other examiner's findings. Most importantly, since it is my character and career on the line, I am proactive to prevent any bias from entering my decision. Preventing confirmation bias can be as simple as shifting the focus of your paradigm. Approach the case with no preconceived ideas; ask yourself "what am I seeing?" More importantly, what are you not seeing?

Stephen Covey, the world-renowned business leader, told a story of a man riding a bus. The bus stops and a father and his four children board the bus. The father sits quietly in his seat, but his children are making noise, running up and down the aisles of the bus, screaming, poking each other and annoying all the passengers on the bus. The father sits in his seat, making no attempt to control his children. The man can no longer stand to sit by and say nothing. He gets the father's attention and asks him to please control his children. The father hangs his head in defeat and tells the other man, "I am so sorry, we've just come from the hospital and their mother died today. I just don't know how to tell them or how we are going to make it."

The man observing the father and children viewed the situation differently. His paradigm of annoyance shifted immediately to a paradigm of understanding and sympathy. As humans we may not be able to escape our human biases, but we can certainly shift our paradigm to look at evidence in a new way, in a new light and concern ourselves with the facts.

The human experience is all about learning and discovery. Everything we feel, think, say or do is based on memories of everything we have learned, been taught or been influenced by. We are faced with some sort of bias every day. But, we are also scientists and we must fight the tendency to be biased and find ways to be open-minded and analytical. We must follow the science, rather than the outcome that seems most likely.

No one ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. We see it edited by a definite set of customs, institutions and ways of thinking. Even in our philosophical probing we cannot go behind these stereotypes; our very concepts of the true and the false will still have reference to our particular traditional customs. - Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture, 1934.

True professionals are absorbed by an endless pursuit of knowledge and the elimination of all potential for error. Always stick to the facts, the scientific method of formulating hypotheses and experimenting to test their validity and then verify the result if it can be reproduced. Do not be influenced in your decision.

Is it possible that those arguing confirmation bias and contextual bias are themselves only seeing what they want to see in their research? Maybe they are just guilty of the Texas sharpshooter fallacy - firing shots at the barn door, drawing a circle around the best group, then declaring that to be the target.

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