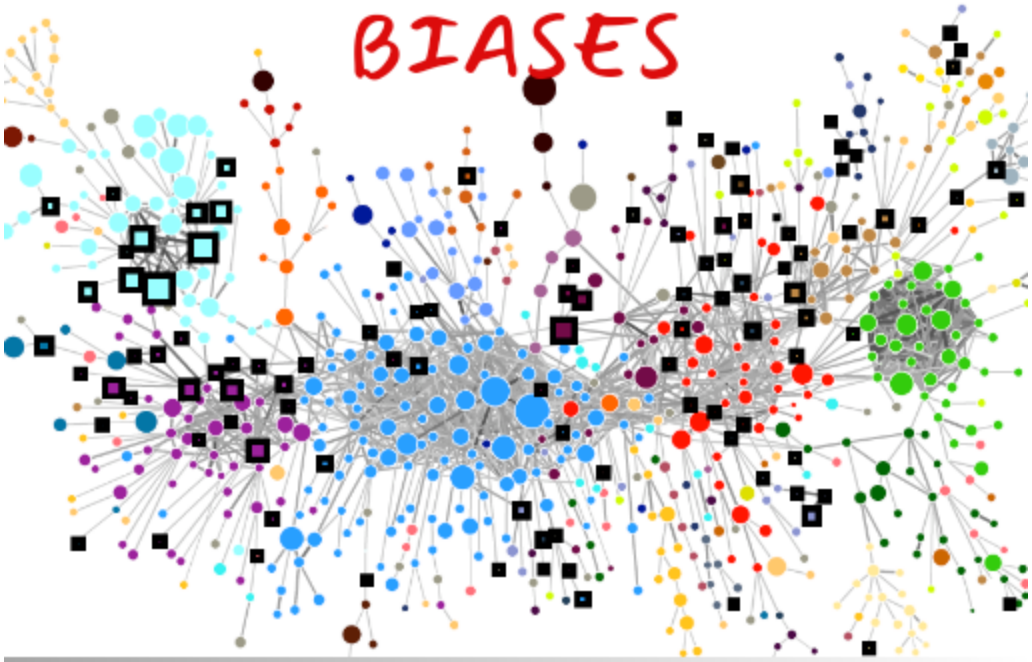
20 MIND TRAPS FALLACIES AND BIASES



The Brain' Shortcuts that lead astray

BROOKE DAVIS

INTRODUCTION

The human brain, while remarkable in its capacity for complex thought, is not without its flaws. These chapters explore the intricate web of fallacies and biases that shape our cognitive processes, influencing decision-making, perception, and social interactions. Understanding these inherent tendencies is crucial for cultivating critical thinking skills and fostering a more nuanced awareness of our thought patterns. Writing this book, I discovered that providing value is not about numbers (a bias of mine), but it was too late. That's why there are way more than 20 fallacies and biases to provide more value.

Understanding Mind Fallacies and Biases: Navigating Cognitive Terrain

What are Mind Fallacies and Biases?

Mind fallacies and biases represent systematic errors in thinking that deviate from objective and rational judgment. They are cognitive shortcuts the brain employs, often unconsciously, to process information efficiently. While these mental mechanisms evolved to help us navigate the complexity of life, they often lead us astray.

What Mind Fallacies and Biases Are Not

Contrary to intentional deception or conscious manipulation, these cognitive patterns are typically automatic and unintentional. They don't necessarily indicate a lack of intelligence, but rather highlight the inherent limitations and evolutionary quirks of human cognition.

Effects on Thinking and Decision-Making

Mind fallacies and biases can significantly impact various aspects of thinking and decision-making:

1. Distorted Perceptions: Biases like confirmation bias and illusory correlation can skew our perceptions, leading to a distorted understanding of reality.

2. Faulty Decision-Making: Anchoring bias and overconfidence can influence decision-making, leading to suboptimal choices and misjudgments of risk.

3. Social Dynamics: In-group bias and the false consensus effect affect social interactions, contributing to groupthink and reinforcing stereotypes.

How to Deal with and Utilize Mind Fallacies and Biases

1. Harnessing Positive Biases

Certain biases, like the optimism bias, contribute to resilience and motivation. Leveraging these positive biases can be beneficial for personal growth and achievement.

2. Collaborative Decision-Making

In group settings, recognizing biases and encouraging diverse perspectives fosters more well-rounded decision-making, mitigating the impact of individual cognitive limitations.

3. Strategic Use in Persuasion

While ethical considerations are paramount, understanding common biases can aid in effective communication and persuasion. Tailoring messages to align with cognitive tendencies can enhance impact.

4. Balancing Intuition and Analysis

Acknowledging the role of intuition in decision-making while balancing it with analytical reasoning allows individuals to leverage both aspects effectively.

Fallacies Common in Leadership

- **Ad Hominem**

Latin for "to the person."

An ad hominem fallacy attacks the arguer, rather than the argument itself.

It insults the individual, questions their motives, and calls their character into question—in the hopes of diverting from the actual reasoning.

- **Straw Man**

This fallacy misrepresents an opponent's argument, making it appear weaker than it is.

Next, it argues against the distortion before claiming victory over the weakened ‘Straw Man’.

- **False Dilemma**

Also known as the "either-or" fallacy. It presents a limited number of options (usually two) as if they're the only possibilities.

This is common in politics, where complex issues are reduced to black-and-white choices.

There’s often a spectrum of options to consider.

- **Personal Incredulity**

This fallacy argues that something can't be true because you find it hard to understand or believe.

It substitutes subjective disbelief for objective reasoning.

It's an argument from ignorance—"I can't explain it, so it can't be true."

- **Hasty Generalization**

Drawing broad conclusions from limited evidence is a recipe for faulty reasoning.

Hasty generalizations jump to conclusions without sufficient data.

Example: "I had a bad experience with one plumber. Therefore, all plumbers are bad."

- **Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc**

Latin for "after this, therefore because of this."

This fallacy assumes that because event B followed event A, A must have caused B.

But as the saying goes, correlation does not equal causation.

Just because two things occur in sequence doesn't mean the first caused the second.
E.g.: It looks like everyone who died drank water, so drinking water must be killing people.

- **Appeal to Ignorance**

This involves claiming something is true because it hasn't been proven false (or vice versa).

However, the absence of evidence is different from evidence of absence.

The burden of proof rests on the person making the claim.

- **Circular Argument**

Also called "Begging the question."

Circular arguments take for granted what they’re trying to prove.

Example: "Using logic is important because it’s important to use logic."

By including the conclusion in the premise, the reasoning collapses on itself.

- **The Fallacy of Composition**

This assumes that what is true of a part must be true of the whole.

"Atoms are invisible, so everything made of atoms must be invisible."

Just because individuals have a trait doesn't mean the group shares that trait.

- **Fallacy of Division**

The opposite of composition assumes that what is true of the whole must be true of the parts.

"The team is the best in the league, so each player must be the best."

Just as a great band can have mediocre musicians, a great team can have average players.

Australians travel a lot. Gary is Australian, so he must travel a lot.

- **Red Herring**

This fallacy introduces irrelevant material to the issue being discussed, often to distract from the main argument.

It’s a common tactic when someone wants to change the subject or avoid addressing a point directly.

- **Tu Quoque**

Latin for "You too," this fallacy tries to discredit an argument by pointing out the arguer's hypocrisy.

Person A: "Smoking is unhealthy. You should quit."
Person B: "But you smoke too!"

Person B's point is irrelevant. Smoking is still unhealthy, regardless of who says it.

An argument's validity has nothing to do with the arguer's actions. Even hypocrites can make logically sound points.

My wife: You never do any chores. Why?

Me: Well, you don't pay any of the bills.

- **The Slippery Slope**

This asserts that a relatively small first step will lead to a chain of events that end badly.

“If I fail this class, I will become homeless”.

While this can happen, it's fallacious to argue that it must. There's usually a lot of middle ground between A and Z.
Example:

- Me: We should lower the legal drinking age
- My sister: No. Everybody will start drinking. Children will buy booze. A 10-year-old will get drunk in the car. The world will come to an end.

- **The Nature Fallacy**

This argues that something is good or right because it occurs in nature.

But natural doesn't always mean better.

Just as many natural things, like arsenic, tobacco, and snake venom, are harmful, artificial things can also be beneficial.

- **The Fallacy Fallacy**

This suggests that because an argument contains a logical fallacy, its conclusion must be false.

But even if an argument is poorly reasoned, its conclusion could still happen to be true.

Fallacious reasoning doesn't automatically mean the claim is false.

05 INTRIGUING BIASES

- **Zeigarnik effects**

We easily remember incomplete tasks but easily forget complete tasks because the former ones stick longer in our memory than the complete tasks. The only way to prevent the Zeigarnik effect from annoying our thoughts is to complete the tasks. But further research found that having a written plan to complete the unfinished tasks is enough to stop the effects. So, if you want peace of mind, grab a piece of paper and write down how to get the job done.

- **The clustering effects**

Have you ever seen faces on clouds? Jesus on toast? The human brain always seeks patterns and rules in everything. Investors who rely on technical analysis of charts have the uncanny ability to derive all kinds of patterns and predictions from the data. They often sense patterns and make risky investments where none ever existed. To overcome your sensitivity to pattern recognition, try to regain your skepticism.

- **The Barnum effects**

When we easily attribute our personality to vague and generalized statements, even if they can apply to a wide range of people. It's the Barnum effect. The next time you remark, "Omg that is so me" when reading your horoscope or doing an online quiz on what type of animal you are, remember that people are easily fooled by horoscopes, palm reading, and psychics due to the Barnum effect.

- **The framing effects**

We often draw different conclusions from the same information depending on how it's presented. 99% fat-free or 1% fat of meat, which one would buy? Most people will go 99% fat-free even though it's the same information. The framing effect is used by the News to frame their headlines and stories, and companies to frame their offers. The bills are overdue, or Honey, would you mind paying the bills? It's not what you say but how you frame it. There is a 90% chance you will survive this operation, or there's a 10% chance you will die from this operation. Choose one. Same outcomes, different frames that affect our emotions when making decisions.

- **The paradox of choice**

For most people, a large selection of choices of any product is seen as positive, but when the number of those products increases past a threshold, our subjective state becomes negative and leads to inner paralysis and decision fatigue. When faced with many choices, knowing the best option becomes difficult, and the more options available, and they feel the need to compare the more they feel regret about their final choice. The attractive features of

the alternatives diminish the satisfaction of the final choice. Too many choices lead people to not make any choice at all, or worse, make a bad one.

- **Survival bias**

It's a logical error where the data we are presented with is a subset of a population that has already passed a kind of filtering process. Our mind tends to focus on things that survived the process and ignore the ones that failed. For instance, you go to a new city and see all the restaurants doing well. So, you conclude that if all these restaurants are successful, you can do the same, ignoring the large number of restaurants that failed. When you only focus on winners, survivorship bias causes you to underestimate the challenges and overestimate your chance of success. Society and media only focus on winners, so the burial ground of all the failures is largely invisible to you. Be careful of thinking the challenges are easier than they seem, and of your overly optimistic beliefs caused by invisible failures.

20 Mind Fallacies and Biases

1. Confirmation Bias

The inclination to selectively gather, interpret, and remember information that confirms one's existing beliefs, while ignoring opposing information. Ignoring data that contradicts your political views and only seeking out sources that align with your perspective.

2. Availability Heuristic

A mental shortcut where individuals rely on readily available information, often from recent events or vivid experiences, to make judgments about the likelihood of future events. Overestimating the risk of shark attacks after watching a documentary about them.

3. Anchoring Bias

The tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information encountered (the "anchor") when making decisions, even if that information is irrelevant or unreliable. Negotiating a salary based on an initial offer, rather than the objective market value.

4. Hindsight Bias

The phenomenon where people perceive events as having been predictable after they have already occurred, leading to an overestimation of one's ability to predict outcomes. Thinking that it was obvious that a stock market crash would happen after it occurred.

5. Dunning-Kruger Effect

Individuals with low ability at a task overestimate their ability, while those with high ability may underestimate their competence. Inexperienced drivers believe they are better than average.

6. Sunk Cost Fallacy

The irrational decision to continue a course of action because of previously invested resources, regardless of the potential for future success. Staying in a failing project because of the time and money already invested.

7. Cognitive Dissonance

The discomfort or tension that arises when holding two or more conflicting beliefs, leading to a psychological drive to resolve the inconsistency. Smoking while knowing the health risks and convincing oneself that it's not that harmful.

8. Bandwagon Effect

The tendency to adopt certain behaviors or beliefs because many others are doing so, often driven by the desire to conform to societal norms. Supporting a political candidate simply because they are popular, rather than considering their policies.

9. Self-Serving Bias

The habit of attributing positive events to one's character or abilities while attributing negative events to external factors, preserving one's self-esteem. Taking credit for a project's success but blaming others for its failure.

10. Overconfidence Bias

The tendency to overestimate one's abilities, knowledge, or judgment, leading to an inflated sense of confidence. Believing you're a better driver than average, despite evidence to the contrary.

11. Recency Bias

Giving more weight to recent information or events when making decisions or forming opinions, often neglecting older but relevant data. It inflates the importance of recent stimuli. Remembering the last opinion you heard more vividly in a debate, influencing your decision.

12. Illusory Correlation

Perceiving a relationship between two variables that doesn't exist, often influenced by preexisting beliefs or stereotypes. Believing certain rituals bring good luck based on coincidences.

13. Fundamental Attribution Error

The tendency to attribute others' actions to their character rather than considering situational factors, while attributing one's actions to external circumstances. Blaming someone's personality for being late, while attributing your lateness to traffic.

14. Authority Bias

Granting undue influence to authority figures or experts, sometimes leading to uncritical acceptance of their opinions or recommendations. Blindly following advice from a celebrity on a topic they are not experts in.

15. Endowment Effect

The tendency to ascribe a higher value to things merely because one owns them, leading to resistance in parting with possessions. Assigning a higher value to a possession simply because it belongs to you.

16. False Consensus Effect

Believing that one's own opinions, beliefs, or preferences are more widespread than they are, often leading to an overestimation of shared viewpoints. Assuming everyone must love a movie because you enjoyed it.

17. Status Quo Bias

The preference for things to stay the same, often resisting changes even if they may lead to improvements. Resisting changes in workplace procedures even if they could improve efficiency.

18. In-group Bias

Favoring members of one's group over those outside the group, often leading to discrimination or exclusion. Showing preferential treatment to colleagues from the same department.

19. Mere Exposure Effect

Developing a preference for things merely because they are familiar due to repeated exposure, even if there is no inherent quality. Preferring a certain brand just because you've seen its logo often.

20. Clustering Illusion

Seeing patterns or trends in random data, a tendency to find meaning in unrelated events. Believing there's a lucky shirt because you wore it during a successful event.

21. Hyperbolic Discounting

Preferring a smaller, immediate reward over a larger, delayed reward often results in impulsive decision-making. Choosing to have a small treat now rather than waiting for a more significant reward later.

22. Regression to the Mean

The tendency for extreme values to move back toward the average over time often leads to misconceptions about causality. Believing that a student who scored exceptionally high on a test will score lower on the next one.

TREATMENT AND MITIGATION

1. Awareness

- Recognition is the first step toward mitigation. Developing awareness of one's own cognitive biases allows individuals to catch themselves in the act of biased thinking.

2. Education

- Understanding the underlying mechanisms of specific biases empowers individuals to challenge and counteract them. Education serves as a powerful tool in building cognitive resilience.

3. Critical Thinking Skills

- Cultivating critical thinking involves questioning assumptions, considering alternative perspectives, and weighing evidence objectively. These skills act as a buffer against cognitive biases.

4. Feedback Mechanisms

- Creating systems for constructive feedback, whether through peer review or self-reflection, helps individuals identify and rectify biased thinking patterns.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, navigating the landscape of mind fallacies and biases requires a multifaceted approach. From cultivating awareness and critical thinking skills to strategically utilizing biases in certain contexts, individuals can develop a more nuanced and resilient cognitive toolkit. Balancing the recognition of these cognitive quirks with proactive measures empowers individuals to navigate the complexities of decision-making and social interactions with greater efficacy.