

Cognitive Bias Field Guide



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FRACTIONAL SOLUTIONS



Factory Settings Shaping our Daily Thoughts



MEMORY

Fundamental Attribution Error

We judge others on their personality or fundamental character, but we judge ourselves on the situation.

Sally is late to class; she's lazy. You're late to class; it was a bad morning.

SOCIAL

Self-Serving Bias

Our failures are situational, but our successes are our responsibility.

You won that award due to hard work rather than help or luck. Meanwhile, you failed a test because you hadn't gotten enough sleep.

LEARNING

In-Group Favoritism

We favor people who are in our in-group as opposed to an out-group.

Francis is in your church, so you like Francis more than Sally.

BELIEF

Bandwagon Effect

Ideas, fads, and beliefs grow as more people adopt them.

Sally believes fidget spinners help her children. Francis does, too.

MONEY

Naive Cynicism

We believe that we observe objective reality & that other people have a higher egocentric bias than they actually do in their intentions & actions.

The only reason this person is doing something nice is to get something out of me.

POLITICS

Groupthink

Due to a desire for conformity and harmony in the group, we make irrational decisions, often to minimize conflict.

Sally wants to get ice cream. Francis wants to shop for T-shirts. You suggest getting T-shirts with pictures of ice cream on them.

Halo Effect

If you see a person as having a positive trait, that positive impression will spill over into their other traits. (This also works for negative traits.)

Taylor could never be mean; she's so cute!

Moral Luck

Better moral standing happens due to a positive outcome; worse moral standing happens due to a negative outcome.

X culture won X war because they were morally superior to the losers.

False Consensus

We believe more people agree with us than is actually the case.

Everybody thinks that!

Curse of Knowledge

Once we know something, we assume everyone else knows it, too.

Alice is a teacher and struggles to understand the perspective of her new students.

Google Effect (aka Digital Amnesia)

We tend to forget information that's easily looked up in search engines.

What was the name of that actor in that funny movie? I've looked it up like eight times...

Planning Fallacy

We underestimate the time, costs, and risks of future actions while overestimating the benefits.

A home renovation budgeted for 3 months and \$10,000 takes 9 months and \$27,000.

Availability Heuristic

We rely on immediate examples that come to mind while making judgments.

When trying to decide on which store to visit, you choose the one you most recently saw an ad for.

Defensive Attribution

As a witness who secretly fears being vulnerable to a serious mishap, we will blame the victim less and the attacker more if we relate

Sally got rear-ended while playing with her phone at a green light. Greg, who is known to text and drive, got out and yelled at the person who hit her.

Just-World Hypothesis

We tend to believe the world is just; therefore, we assume acts of injustice are deserved.

Sally's purse was stolen because she was mean to Francis about their T-shirt and had bad karma.

Naive Realism

We believe that we observe objective reality and that other people are irrational, uninformed, or biased.

I see the world as it really is — other people are dumb.

Loss Aversion

The pain of losing something is psychologically about twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining the same thing.

Losing \$100 feels far worse than gaining \$100 feels good, so we take irrational steps to avoid any loss.

Authority Bias

We attribute greater accuracy and trust to the opinions of authority figures, even outside their domain of expertise.

A celebrity doctor recommends a supplement with no clinical evidence, and sales skyrocket.

Forer Effect (aka Barnum Effect)

We easily attribute our personalities to vague statements, even if they can apply to a wide range of people.

This horoscope is so accurate!

Dunning-Kruger Effect

The less you know, the more confident you are. The more you know, the less confident you are.

Francis confidently assures the group that there's no kelp in ice cream. They do not work in the dairy industry.

Anchoring

We rely heavily on the first piece of information introduced when making decisions.

That's 50% off? It must be a great deal.

Automation Bias

We rely on automated systems, sometimes trusting too much in the automated correction of actually correct decisions.

Your phone auto-corrects "its" to "it's," so you assume it's right.

Endowment Effect

We overvalue things simply because we own them — we demand more to give something up than we would pay to acquire it.

A seller asks \$200 for a mug they paid \$5 for, simply because it now feels valuable as "theirs."

False Dichotomy

We present two options as if they are the only possibilities, when in reality more options exist.

You're either with us or against us. (Ignores all nuanced positions in between.)

Peak-End Rule

We judge an experience almost entirely based on how it felt at its most intense point and at its end, rather than the sum of every moment.

A painful medical procedure remembered as "not so bad" because the last few seconds were mild.

Bystander Effect

The more people present in an emergency, the less likely any one individual is to offer help — everyone assumes someone else will act.

Fifty people watch a man collapse on a busy street. No one calls 911 because everyone assumes someone already has.

Confirmation Bias

We search for, interpret, and recall information in a way that confirms our existing beliefs, ignoring contradictory evidence.

A manager who thinks an employee is a poor performer notices every mistake but overlooks their successes.

Hindsight Bias

After learning an outcome, we believe we would have predicted it beforehand — "I knew it all along."

I knew the market was going to crash — it was so obvious! (said after the crash).

Mental Accounting

We treat money differently depending on its source or intended use, even though a dollar is always a dollar.

Spending a "found" \$50 bill freely but agonizing over a \$50 purchase with earned wages.

Recency Bias

We give disproportionate weight to recent events and underweight older historical data when making decisions.

An investor assumes markets will keep rising after a bull run, forgetting historical cycles.