

Confirmation bias & motivated reasoning

People generally feel that their opinions are rational and carefully considered. But in reality, we are all vulnerable to an array of cognitive biases that distort our understanding of the world around us. We don't give all facts and pieces of information the same attention or consideration, and we have an unconscious tendency to selectively find and interpret information that reinforces what we already believe.

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Confirmation bias is...

The natural, unconscious tendency of people to notice and accept information that agrees with or reinforces their existing beliefs, and to overlook or question information that complicates or conflicts with those beliefs.

Example:

Sports fans notice and remember close calls the referees make that go against their team more than they do those that help their team.

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Motivated reasoning is...

The process of actively searching for and interpreting information in biased ways that reinforce our current beliefs. Motivated reasoning includes selectively looking for information that confirms our beliefs; failing to search for information that complicates or conflicts with our beliefs; cherry-picking evidence; and finding reasons to dismiss inconvenient facts and credible evidence.

Example:

Sports fans invent reasons to justify close calls the referees make that help their team while exaggerating the impact of those that go against their team.

Confirmation bias, motivated reasoning and ...

Information habits

Confronting information that challenges our beliefs is stressful and unpleasant. But having our beliefs and ideas about the world *confirmed* by information feels good! In fact, it gives us a **hit of dopamine**, a chemical messenger in your brain that accompanies feelings of pleasure. That is one reason why people enjoy listening to pundits and other opinionators who echo their own worldviews back to them. It's also why they enjoy filling their social media feeds with like-minded people.



Political polarization

Selective attention and confirmation bias can cause people to ignore facts and other valid support on "the other side" of a **polarizing debate**. This leads people who identify strongly as liberal or conservative to believe that their ideological adversaries' positions are incomprehensible and ill-informed.



Conspiracy theories

Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning play a big role in **conspiratorial thinking**. Selective searching online, cherry-picking evidence and reading significance into random or meaningless details are often at play in belief in conspiracy theories.



CB can cause two people with different views to focus on different details in the same piece of information.

MR can cause them to interpret those details in different ways and find ways to "justify" their inconsistent approach to the information.

Interesting studies!

CB [The Invisible Gorilla experiment](#) underscores how powerfully selective attention can affect people's perceptions of events. Half of participants who were asked to focus on the movements of a specific group of people in a video missed a person in a gorilla suit who wanders into the frame and pounds their chest. (Try it on your friends and family using [this video!](#))

MR [A study](#) published in 2017 found that participants who believed they were looking at data about a politically neutral subject (skin cream) reasoned more clearly and accurately than when the exact same data was labeled as being from a study on gun control.



News connection!

Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning impact how people perceive news coverage.

This is one reason why everyone thinks "the media" is biased, but almost no one believes coverage is biased in their favor.

Our best defenses

- 1. Slow down!** We think more rationally, fairly and clearly when we minimize the role of our emotions.
- 2. Be honest.** Taking stock of our current beliefs and approaching new information with an open mind are vital. No one is always right. A willingness to reconsider our current beliefs is an essential part of maintaining rational, well-informed beliefs.

- 3. Acknowledge personal biases.** Our natural inclination to engage in confirmation bias and motivated reasoning is intensified for issues and subjects we feel most strongly about. That also means we're most vulnerable to being misled by information on these topics.

Additional resources

- ["Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds"](#) (Elizabeth Kolbert, The New Yorker).
- ["Why we believe alternative facts"](#) (Kirsten Weir, Monitor on Psychology, American Psychological Association).
- ["Conspiratorial Thinking"](#) (NLP's Checkology® virtual classroom).