



BELIEVING YOUR BIASES

Why You See What You See

H B Gelatt

We tend to see more through our thoughts and opinions than through our eyes.

Jon Kabat-Zinn

It is our thoughts and opinions (and our beliefs), not our eyes that determine and distort reality. We see things the way we see things; and we believe that's the way things are. A bias is "a preference that inhibits impartial judgment" (Dictionary). So our belief biases are beliefs where impartial judgment of reality is inhibited.

When George Bush looks at the war in Iraq, he has a hard time seeing things the way they really are because of his belief biases. When anyone looks at the war in Iraq, they have a hard time seeing things the way they really are for the same reason. The point is we all believe our belief biases. Since we are usually not aware of these biases, I believe they need to be illuminated, understood, and reevaluated. That is the purpose of this newsletter.

This essay is part of my Process of Illumination, creating a collective worldview that is open and inclusive in order to change the direction the world is heading. How you and I construct our beliefs about the world is full of oversights, misperceptions, rationalizations, generalizations (biases) that influence how we see and what we do. Because these belief biases may prevent us from developing an open and inclusive worldview and because you may not be aware of some of yours, I will describe some of them. They may or may not be yours, but they are very common. They are problematic only if you are closed-minded about them.

Belief Biases

By the time perceptual information reaches consciousness, each individual has transformed it into something new and unique. This reconstruction of reality is the foundation from which we construct our beliefs about the world. Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman

The 2006 book Why We Believe What We Believe is the source of the above quote. The authors focus on how our complex views are influenced by our brains and much of what I am discussing is from their brain research. They list 27 ways our brain distorts reality. The Wikipedia encyclopedia list of cognitive biases includes 71 decision making and behavioral biases. I am selecting four from these two lists that are closely related to the basic theme of the Process of Illumination. (Direct quotes in italics).

1. Perceptual Bias: *Our brain automatically assumes that our perceptions and beliefs reflect objective truths about ourselves and the world. This leads to the old saying, "Seeing is believing."*

I have written repeatedly about the concept of "believing is seeing," and the impossibility of "the objective observer." I believe this perceptual bias is in critical need of personal illumination. Do you automatically assume that what you see is what is? If not, how do you get off automatic?

2. Uncertainty Bias: *Our brain does not like uncertainty and ambiguity; thus we prefer to believe or disbelieve, rather than remain uncertain.*

My Positive Uncertainty decision making "philosophy" is designed to overcome this uncertainty bias. Being comfortable with uncertainty is essential for the kind of worldview I am promoting (See The Certainty of Uncertainty). Do you prefer not to be uncertain? If not, how do you



manage your uncertainty?

3. Bandwagon Bias: *This reflects our tendency to go along with the belief systems of whatever group we are involved with. The more people we are surrounded by, the more likely we'll be to modify our beliefs to fit theirs.*

Cultural indoctrination, religious doctrine, family teachings, group think and other belief systems we are exposed to often determine what we believe. I suggest we illuminate where they came from and then decide what we choose to believe. Do you always go along with your group's belief system? If not, how do you justify a contrary position?

4. Self-Serving Bias: *A tendency for people to evaluate ambiguous information in a way beneficial to their own interests.*

The tendency to acquire and maintain beliefs that benefit our own interest and goals is widespread and clearly does not promote achieving an open and inclusive worldview --- unless that is our self-interest and goal. To me this illustrates the potential power of the Process of Illumination. Do you interpret information to fit your own interests? If not, how do you avoid self-deception?

H B's Belief Biases

In previous essays I have stated that I believe some beliefs are better than others. This is clearly not a demonstration of impartial judgment. Now I want to describe two other belief biases that are closely related to the basic theme of the Process of Illumination. I am sure I am not aware of all the ways I distort my reality

Open-minded Bias

It is clear that I am promoting beliefs that are open and uncertain --- capable of change. I believe open beliefs are better than others. Instead of a bias against uncertainty, I have a bias in favor of uncertainty. I favor uncertainty over certainty, tentativeness over dogmatism, and doubt over knowing for sure. Positive uncertainty is my major theme although I don't always live up to it.

If everyone was open-minded, there would be no dogma, no dead certainty. People, organizations, religions, cultures and nations would be receptive to new and different ideas.

Inclusive Bias

I believe inclusive, holistic beliefs are better than exclusive, partial beliefs. Instead of a self-serving bias, I am promoting an inclusive-serving bias. This is a bias to always look for the interconnected wholeness. This bias will be hard to sell and hard for me to live up to.

If people, organizations and nations continue to do only what is in their best interests, we will continue to experience divisive actions. The triple bottom line in business is a hopeful sign of trying to overcome the self-serving bias.

Other Identified Biases

Do you recognize any of these? In you? In others?

- **Authoritarian Bias:** *believing those who hold positions of power and status*
- **Expectancy Bias:** *propensity to "discover" what you are looking for*
- **Probability Bias:** *overestimating the probability of good things happening*
- **Information Bias:** *continuing to seek information even when it cannot effect action*
- **Status quo Bias:** *tendency to like things to stay the same*



What are some of your personal biases? Can you name three?

Reflective Illumination

*Most people fail to recognize how many cognitive biases they actually have,
or how often they fall prey to these biases. Blind-Spot Bias*

Believing Your Biases is about the factors that influence the way you see things and do things. Beliefs are basically personal biases that contribute to your worldview. The purpose of the POI is to illuminate and clarify your personal biases.

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