
Questioning as we learn: An introduction to critical thinking

Material for Higher Education students in Sierra Leone by INASP, UK



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Unit 5 - Snippet 125

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities. Do you remember the Peter Wason experiment earlier (snippet 114), where people (and maybe you too) tended to pick cards which confirmed their hypothesis instead of disproving it?

Similarly, in research, the **expectancy bias** is a form of reactivity in which a researcher's cognitive bias – being drawn to details that confirm their existing beliefs – causes them to subconsciously influence the participants of an experiment. Also, the so-called **experimenter's bias** is the tendency of experimenters to believe, certify, and publish data that agree with their expectations for the outcome of an experiment, and to disbelieve, discard, or downgrade the corresponding weightings for data that appear to conflict with those expectations.

The term **cultural bias** refers to interpreting and judging phenomena by standards inherent to one's own culture. The phenomenon is sometimes considered a problem central to social and human sciences, such as economics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Prejudice and stereotyping are examples of this type of bias.

Prejudice involves judging someone or a group of people before you meet them, usually relying on stereotypes, which refers to judging a group of people different from you based on your own or others' opinions formed as a result of limited encounters with too few people from that group.

It is important to remember that bias is mostly unconscious; it even includes our wrongly thinking that we are less biased than others. Whether we like it or not, bias influences our decisions and behaviour. What we can do to limit its effect is to keep an open mind, search for and consider diverse perspectives respectfully, and weigh them all carefully before making an important judgment or decision.