

Cognitive Biases that Can Cloud Judgment

Our decision-making processes are vulnerable to cognitive biases that can cloud our ethical decision-making. The following questions, pulled from research in cognitive and behavioral science, are useful for healthy self-assessment, to guard against unconscious and unintentional biases.

Cognitive dissonance theory and confirmation bias: are we unwilling to fairly consider an alternative point of view or alternative evidence simply because we have deep-seated commitments to one particular choice or idea?

Cognitive Dissonance theory describes a “state of tension” and mental discomfort that occurs when we are confronted with a belief, attitude, or idea that is directly contradictory to our own long-held beliefs or ideas. The theory is that we will often seek ways to reduce the jarring discomfort, sometimes through unfairly criticizing, distorting, minimizing, or dismissing the evidence that we are wrong. The concept of cognitive dissonance, Carol Tavris argues, is closely related to **confirmation bias**: we want to believe we are right, especially about long-held ideas to which we are very committed. Thus, when confronted with evidence that we are wrong, we will seek minor flaws and magnify them to discredit the contradictory evidence. In fact, we will do more than “resist” the evidence: we may come to insist on our original belief even more vehemently, in what Tavris calls “a backfire effect”(2007).

Normalization of deviance: Are we cutting corners just because we’ve been able to do that successfully in the past, with no impact on quality or safety? If we take a risky shortcut or do something slightly unethical but manage to get by with it a few times, we may begin to cut corners in more significant ways, and if there are no obvious or immediate negative impacts, we may over time begin to see the shortcuts as “normal” choices – until before long gross deviations can become “the new normal.” (Very likely we have all participated in normalization of deviance: anyone who has ever looked at a speed limit, then made the decision to join the speeding cars going way over the speed limit, has been practicing the normalization of deviance. The red flag is this thought: “Everyone’s doing it, so it must be okay.” Some may even argue that it is safer to “go with the flow of traffic” – and the kicker is that sometimes, it IS safer. That’s the challenge of normalization of deviance: sometimes the deviance may seem to make a lot of sense, because the regulations or rules are in fact unwise in that given situation. This is very slippery ethical territory, though, and trying to argue later that “everyone else was doing it” is not going to hold up in a court of law.

Motivated Blindness and Ethical Fading: Are we overlooking flaws in our own decisions and rationalizing our own behaviors in ways that we would not tolerate if we saw the same behavior in the decisions of others? Patricia Werhane (2013) explains how the strong human tendency *to want to believe we are good people* can blind us to our own unethical behavior. If we are motivated to overlook the ethical

ramifications of decisions, over time, those can fade to the point that we do not even realize there are ethical dimensions to the problem.

Groupthink or “Abilene Syndrome”: Is it possible that other people affected by a bad decision are not questioning it just because they think everyone else agrees with the decision? Don’t assume that silence always means consent. Based on a phenomenon first observed by Jerry Harvey in 1988, this tendency not to question extremely poor decisions that everyone else seems to have accepted comes from the desire for social conformity and acceptance.

Uncertainty: Does the problem contain a great deal of uncertainty? If it does, be wary of unintentional bias. Max Bazerman and Ann Tenbrunsel argue that the more uncertainty is involved in a particular decision, the more likely we are to unconsciously select solutions that are self-serving (2011).

The Milgram phenomenon: Are we acting in this way because we believe that figures in authority expect us to act in this way, and we feel powerless to question them? Coming out of studies on Stanley Milgram’s experiments at Yale University in the 1960’s, this question makes us aware that ethical decisions can be highly vulnerable to pressure from authority figures. (Werhane, 2013).

Works Cited

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