

Do you believe in ghosts?

Biases are not things people like to talk about. For some, bias has a very negative connotation. For others, bias has no place in decision-making because it lacks rational foundation. Yet, we are haunted by these “ghosts,” our biases, and they inform almost every action we take. Like Scrooge in the Charles Dickens’ novel *A Christmas Carol*, we can think of bias in terms of the past, present and future.

Past

People’s brains are wired to respond to information in different ways. A portion of the brain functions based on instincts. Some of these are ingrained and some are “learned” at such a basic level people may not be aware of the source — they just “know.”

Some of these biases played a large part in survival of the species when quick response was needed to determine whether fight or flight was required.

Other biases, based on experience, form a type of cognitive shorthand and are related to daily decisions and behaviours — habits. American theorist Buckmin-

ster Fuller said, “Ninety-nine per cent of who you are is invisible and untouchable.”

While there are many positive aspects to instincts and biases, there are also negatives. We may respond to threats that do not exist or maintain habits that are no longer helpful or a good use of our time.

Present

Another portion of the brain is focused on reason. It uses explicit information and processes information in a serial and slower way. This is sometimes described as rational



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thinking or conscious decision-making. Complex situations and decisions require a more thoughtful, less rushed approach.

However, there are flaws to this approach. Biases often seep into what a person takes as rational information without challenge or investigation. People are more aware of bias in others than themselves and thus are less likely to challenge themselves.

Finally, we don’t know what we don’t know and may not take the time to explore broadly enough. Examples of negative consequences of this complacency in thinking are racism, stereotyping and acting or deciding based on inaccurate or insufficient information resulting in poor outcomes.

Future

The good news is people can think and be self-aware. They can understand that bias in the form of quick action, instinct and habit are appropriate responses. They can also challenge first impressions. They can broaden information inputs by deliberately introducing uncertain-

ty, exploring new situations, tapping into group intellect, evaluating options and decisions, and not justifying them.

Biases are a fact of life. When biases overwhelm thinking and decisions in any aspect of living and decision-making, there will likely be consequences.

Humans are blessed with self-awareness and the ability to observe, learn, remember and reason. We need to learn to surface our “ghosts” and be more aware of their impacts on us. We also need to communicate with each other, and share experiences, knowledge and, yes, even biases to create a better understanding of other experiences and realities.

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