

How My Mother Overcomes the “Mother of All Biases”

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My mother has opinions. Lots of them. Strong ones. These beliefs are decreed with the force of gospel to all comers: The King’s English is the only proper way to speak. Jack Daniels makes the best bourbon. Airlines pad their flight times to artificially produce more on-time arrivals. Outback Steakhouse’s Bloomin’ Onion is the definitive cause of the obesity epidemic in America. Once we tell the [42 percent](#) of Americans who have some doubts that humans cause global warming that 97 percent of scientists have no doubts whatsoever, then the 42 percent will see the light.

That my mother has intuitions about how the world around her works is unremarkable—we all hold these beliefs. What is completely remarkable is the ease with which she will abandon these opinions and pet theories in the face of countervailing evidence. As someone who studies, thinks, and writes about biases, I know that this capacity is no small feat.

Of the [various biases](#) that derail our ability to perceive the world as it truly is, confirmation bias ranks as especially sinister. After developing a pet theory of how the world works, confirmation bias convinces us of the infallibility of our theory. As new evidence arises, we emphasize that which coheres with our theory, deeming it “especially important.” Yet when we encounter evidence that undermines our theory, we tend to discount or ignore it. Consequently, we often convince ourselves that even our most dubious, unsupported theories are correct. For this reason, some social psychologists view confirmation bias as the “[mother of all biases](#).”