

Hard To Think Straight: Processing Prejudice

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We all have a bit of irrationality in us. Even if we think of ourselves as logical and deliberative, we still make decisions and judgments, based not entirely on the facts of the matter, but upon seemingly inconsequential information, random cues that we take from the world around us.

Some of our irrational thinking is just quirky. For example, simply reading food labels in a difficult-to-read typeface can make us more fearful of food additives, while an easy-to-read label can diminish our perception of risk. We are more reluctant to ride roller coasters—and even to invest in new companies—with difficult-to-pronounce names. In general, we like more—and fear less—anything that we can perceive and mentally process with ease.

Psychological scientists call this the familiarity heuristic, or the fluency bias. Ease of cognitive processing is a powerful cognitive cue to what's familiar, and familiarity distinguishes the safe and good from the perilous. Sometimes these irrational judgments go beyond the merely quirky, and indeed can have serious consequences.

That's the view of two UCLA scientists, David Lick and Kerri Johnson, who have been investigating the ways that familiarity and fluency, as cognitive cues, might skew our interpersonal judgments. Specifically, they believe that fluency and familiarity might play a significant part in personal prejudice, operating at the most basic cognitive level. They summarize their work, and that of others, in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

Here's an example, having to do with the most fundamental kind of perception. We all categorize people who we encounter—put them in boxes like gay or intelligent or masculine or white. It's simplistic to pigeonhole complex human beings, but it's one of the tools we have for making quick sense of the world. When Lick and Johnson studied this social categorization in the laboratory, they found that people categorized as gay were viewed less favorably than people categorized as straight, in part because their sexual orientation and gendered appearance were processed more slowly. Similarly, others have shown that biracial faces were seen as less attractive—and less favorably in general—when people had trouble classifying them by race. This line of research suggests that the fluency with which people sort others into boxes—this basically irrelevant clue powerfully shapes first impressions. In other words, sexual minorities and biracial people may experience prejudice simply because they pose a perceptual processing problem.

Vision is just one sensory process that is skewed by this cognitive bias. In another study, subjects judged the trustworthiness of English speakers, some of whom had a mild or heavy accent. They were less apt to believe statements uttered with accents, compared with the same statements in unaccented speech—and it was clearly the processing difficulty that was shaping these judgments. Similarly, another study found that people with difficult-to-pronounce names were judged to be less likeable than people with easy-to-say names. These findings are not confined to the lab either. In a naturalistic study, attorneys with

difficult names held inferior positions in their firms, compared to attorneys with easy names.

In yet another study, racially diverse subjects who had trouble communicating with each other electronically—a manipulation to make communication cognitively difficult—had less interest in future interactions, compared to those with smooth interaction. Importantly, these fluency effects appeared only in interracial encounters. Fluency had no influence on the desire to interact with others of the same race, indicating that this potent cognitive bias is especially consequential in the judgments of out-group members.

So it seems that when we perceive and process other people with ease, we judge them favorably. When we have difficulty—for whatever reason—we judge them negatively. Since our perceptual system is called upon to make near-constant judgments in a complex world, it's unsurprising that we use mental tools to simplify this overwhelming task. Yet as helpful as these tools may be for making quick sense of the world, this cognitive machinery underlies the pervasive and hateful prejudices that fuel everything from overt discrimination to genocide.

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