

Being human is being biased. But while many biases make evolutionary sense, they cloud our judgment and reduce our ability to make rational and reflected decisions. And furthermore, cognitive biases often contribute to reducing diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Being aware of your own biases as they occur, will help you to control and manage them actively. And thereby help you make better decisions. And ultimately you will foster an environment that is more diverse and inclusive.

For each day of December, I will open the window to a new cognitive bias so that you may learn and perhaps be inspired to manage your own cognitive distortion.

**December 1. Ambiguity effect.** Better the devil you know than the devil you don't. The ambiguity effect refers to the human bias towards preferring the well-known option to the less well-known option. This bias makes a lot of evolutionary sense ("eat only the berries you know because then you know they won't kill you") but in modern society and business, it also predisposes leaders to prefer people that look and act like someone they already know. A bias to beware of and manage carefully as it is a foe of diversity.

[Read more](https://medium.com/@michaelgearon/cognitive-biases-ambiguity-effect-e0fe2c213061) https://medium.com/@michaelgearon/cognitive-biases-ambiguity-effect-e0fe2c213061

**December 2. Backfire effect;** Ever tried arguing with someone online? Then you have probably experienced the backfire effect. It is the flipside of the confirmation bias (see my update from December 4) – and it describes the phenomenon when someone "digs in their feet" in an argument rather than actually listening and trying to understand the other side. Culturally can also be seen when a group of people rallies around strong opposition from the outside. Like most western world political arenas these years...

[Read more](https://www.partisanissues.com/2019/03/what-is-the-backfire-effect-and-how-it-affects-facebook-twitter/) https://www.partisanissues.com/2019/03/what-is-the-backfire-effect-and-how-it-affects-facebook-twitter/

**December 3. The Anchoring Bias;** the art of judging a book by its cover. This bias is at the heart of any prejudice and generalization. It describes the misconception of trying to make complex judgment simple by focusing on just one part - the anchor.

[Read more](https://www.sciencedaily.com/terms/anchoring.htm) https://www.sciencedaily.com/terms/anchoring.htm

**December 4. The Confirmation Bias;** doing everything to confirm what you think is right and ignoring what contradicts your belief. This bias is a favorite of biases and pitting two people with opposing confirmation biases against each other can be... well an endless game of bickering and "speaking > listening".

[Read more](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation\_bias

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**December 5. The Dunning-Kruger Effect;** a particularly darling bias of mine. Describes the fact that the more someone knows about something, the less confident they will be about their knowledge. And of course the other way around: the less an individual knows about something, the more overconfident they will be! This can be entertaining to watch - for a few moments. At times senior leaders can display this bias. And in politics.

[Read more](https://catalogofbias.org/2018/03/22/twenty-years-of-bias-and-the-dunning-kruger-effect/) https://catalogofbias.org/2018/03/22/twenty-years-of-bias-and-the-dunning-kruger-effect/

**December 6. Declinism Bias;** A little-known but often experienced bias. This is the tendency to expect things to be on a path of decline – society, youth, a company or an ideology. That “everything was better in the old days”. Of course, sometimes things are in fact getting worse and the past was better. But most often, it is actually just the declinism bias making its mark. This bias was already heard of back in the days of Aristotle who is famously “quoted” for saying young people in his own generation were much more respectful and humble than later generations of youths...

[Read more](https://effectiviology.com/rosy-retrospection-and-declinism/) https://effectiviology.com/rosy-retrospection-and-declinism/

**December 7. Attribution error;** The human desire to “make it personal” and attribute cause and effect to stable individual traits rather than situational explanations. Like believing that someone suffers is depressed just because they didn’t smile back at you in the subway. The attribution error is actually one of the more frequent sources of bias in job interviews when inexperienced (or just intellectually lazy) interviewers extrapolate single-situation behavioral examples to generalized personality hypotheses.

[Read more](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_attribution_error) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental\_attribution\_error

**December 8. In-group Bias;** This is the bias of biases. The mother of all prejudices. It is about judging those who look like you to be much better suited than those who look different for... well, anything that you think is important. This bias leads to the Danish “rip-rap-rup effekt” in leadership teams and its result is often seen when everyone around the table looks and behaves kind of the same. The best cure for in-group bias is a healthy dose of diversity and loads of individual openness and empathy around the table. Peace out, Sunday!

[Read more](https://dictionary.apa.org/in-group-bias) https://dictionary.apa.org/in-group-bias



**December 9. Cognitive Dissonance bias;** This classic, cool and slightly complex-to-explain bias is at play when your low expectations are exceeded - and you feel great about something which is actually just mediocre. Like for example if you expect a movie to be terribly dull and it actually turns out to be OK. In this case, your cognitive dissonance bias will distort your perception and you'll feel that the movie was actually great. Beware, hiring managers: sly, slick and serpentine recruiters will sometimes try to prey on your cognitive dissonance bias and stack their candidate list to you with a few would-be "wildcard" candidates - who they know would never actually get the job offer, but who they include to make the other candidates look better... Stay objective, stay unbiased.

[See more](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y17Ya2RRvY) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y17Ya2RRvY>

**December 10. Barnum Effect;** I love the Barnum Effect! It is a classic experimentally documented bias and it describes the tendency to believe positive (but very general) statements about oneself to be true. Like hearing in a personality test feedback that "you can effectively take charge in a group if it is needed but are also good at giving others the space to step up and shine". I bet that 11 out of 10 people would pretty much agree to that statement... The Barnum Effect is often leveraged in horoscopes, bad personality tests or social-media marketing to get people hooked on something. Beware the Barnum Effect, it clouds your judgment.

[Read more](https://medium.com/@michaelgearon/cognitive-biases-the-barnum-effect-b051e7b8e029) <https://medium.com/@michaelgearon/cognitive-biases-the-barnum-effect-b051e7b8e029>

**December 11. Placebo Effect;** Although strictly not an assessment bias, the placebo effect is at its core a cognitive distortion mechanism so I'll include it here as a cognitive bias. Placebo is the term for medically unexplained effects of medicine - the mind plays tricks on the body and distorts perception of clinical symptoms. Little-known placebo effect studies have for example found that bigger tablets have a larger clinical effect than smaller tablets (even if the amount of active ingredient is the same). Sometimes placebo is actually more effective than the active ingredient in a pill! But of course, let's not tell that to the patients...

[Read more](https://www.health.harvard.edu/mental-health/the-power-of-the-placebo-effect) <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mental-health/the-power-of-the-placebo-effect>

**December 12. Just-world Bias;** Also known as "Karma bias". Believing that good things happen in the end and interpreting cause and effect in a "bigger picture" of balance between good and evil. This is actually a cute (and sometimes very psychologically healthy) bias. Unfortunately it has no real bearing. Bad things do happen to good people - and great things happen to terrible people. Sorry to burst your bubble... In a work-context this can be useful for teams making sense of terrible bosses or for surviving through bad times - but besides that, it's not really a good bias at work.

[Read more](https://psychcentral.com/encyclopedia/just-world-hypothesis/) <https://psychcentral.com/encyclopedia/just-world-hypothesis/>

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**December 13. Bystander effect;** While not a bias, the bystander effect is based on a number of cognitive biases. These include interpretative biases (not judging an emergency as an emergency because other bystanders do not take relevant action) and conformity biases (not daring to stand out in the crowd of passive bystanders). The bystander effect is a well-researched effect and is at the heart of much organizational and cultural psychology.

[Read more](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander\_effect

**December 14. Optimism Bias;** The loveliest of biases! Optimism bias describes our intrinsic hope for good outcomes and belief that good shall come to us. Optimism bias can cloud judgment – but deep down, I really would wish for everyone to experience as much of this bias as they can! Spend a moment to watch this Ted talk.

[See more](https://www.ted.com/talks/tali_sharot_the_optimism_bias/transcript) https://www.ted.com/talks/tali\_sharot\_the\_optimism\_bias/transcript

**December 15. Pessimism Bias;** The opposite of the optimism bias, pessimism bias describes the tendency of an individual to overestimate negative outcomes. Having too much of this bias is one of several clinical indications of depression – but as with all cognitive filters, pessimism bias has its place.

[Read more](https://thedeisionlab.com/biases/pessimism-bias) https://thedeisionlab.com/biases/pessimism-bias

**December 16. Sunk-cost fallacy;** The bias that makes you keep pursuing a bad endeavor because “now that I said A, I must also say B”. Investment professionals know and love this bias – it is at the heart of amateur investors holding on to bad investments because they feel like “now I can’t lose any more and just need to wait for the equity to turn around”. Psychologically it can also explain why people stay in bad jobs or toxic relationships – but that’s for a different story...

[Read more](https://www.behavioraleconomics.com/resources/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/sunk-cost-fallacy/) https://www.behavioraleconomics.com/resources/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/sunk-cost-fallacy/

**December 17. The Spotlight effect;** The feeling that you are at the centre of everybody’s attention. Do you ever brood for days and days about some little thing you said at a meeting? And wonder what the others think of you now? That’s the spotlight effect playing tricks on you. But don’t worry – people generally care way less about what you do and say than you think! Sometimes that’s comforting to know...

[Read more](https://medium.com/personal-growth/the-spotlight-effect-why-no-one-else-remembers-what-you-did-feb3ba8dbfc0) https://medium.com/personal-growth/the-spotlight-effect-why-no-one-else-remembers-what-you-did-feb3ba8dbfc0



**December 18. Negativity effect;** Ever hear that it takes 10 positive feedbacks to outweigh one negative? Then you have heard the layman's version of the negativity effect, which is the psychological tendency to remember and brood over negative things more than positive things. Negative feedback can set off an avalanche of negative priming – unfortunately for most people the level of negative priming is much stronger than positive priming.

[Read more](https://www.psychom.net/negativity-bias) https://www.psychom.net/negativity-bias

**December 19. Curse of knowledge;** This is not the smart-peoples bias but rather a description of the tendency for people to assume that others have a higher baseline of knowledge than they actually do. It is when someone talks as if others are already partially in the know. But people beware: others do not know what you know and if you think they do, they will soon fall victim to the Dunning-Kruger effect (see my bias from December 5...)

[Read more](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_knowledge) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse\_of\_knowledge

**December 20. Availability Heuristic;** This bias is actually caused by intellectual laziness – it is when we think something happens because of the first thing that springs to mind. You could say it is actually over-reliance on intuition – but fundamentally it's just because humans are sloppy thinkers if they can get away with it. Fortunately – intuition is actually often right (if the intuition is related to something you actually have substantial experience with!).

[See more](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSR7cpdP0d8) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSR7cpdP0d8

**December 21. Groupthink;** This bias stems from our human desire to belong and identify with each other. Groupthink happens when a group of people fails to challenge each other's logic or assumptions. Beware of groupthink at work – whether in recruitment teams, in management teams or just in organizations as a whole.

[Read more](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/the-bandwagon-bias-the-dangers-of-groupthink) https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/the-bandwagon-bias-the-dangers-of-groupthink

**December 22. Reactance bias;** Especially seen in teenagers doing the exact opposite of what their parents ask of them.. The Reactance Bias is the feeling of strong resistance to a request or argument presented to you – and when you were actually on the fence, you feel deeply compelled to choose the option that is in direct opposition to what you are asked to do. BTW – this bias is not just seen in families but also in adult work groups...

[Read more](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactance_(psychology)) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactance\_(psychology)

**December 23. Belief Bias;** On this day before Christmas, let's look at a little-known but often practiced bias. The belief bias is defined as our tendency to make logical mistakes simply because "we just know it is true". Like for example that water will soak a shirt. Or that a leader who has been "second in command" for a long time won't be accepted to step up and take the helm. The belief bias just reveals that at heart, people just tend to be more guided by gut-feel than sheer logic when making a lot of decisions. To counteract it, expose your beliefs and unsaid truths (at least to yourself) so as to allow for them to be challenged by facts.

[Read more](https://dictionary.apa.org/belief-bias)

**December 24. Halo effect;** Ending the series of cognitive biases, I bring to you the Halo Effect – which is what happens when someone confirms an already established positive impression of someone else (or a situation) rather than remain logical and objective. The Halo effect has an evil twin: the cloven-hoof effect, which is of course the confirmation of a negative impression. This effect is what we see when we talk about "first impressions last" or when we hear about recruiting managers making up their mind about a candidate in the first 45 seconds of the interview.

[Read more](https://www.economist.com/news/2009/10/14/the-halo-effect)

I hope you have enjoyed the 2019 Christmas Calendar of cognitive biases. Being aware of your own biases as they occur, will help you to control and manage them actively. And thereby help you make better decisions. And ultimately you will foster an environment that is more diverse and inclusive.

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