

Who, me? Biased?! (A Brief Look at Cognitive Bias)

A cognitive bias is a mistake in reasoning, evaluating, remembering, or other cognitive process, often occurring as a result of holding onto one's preferences and beliefs regardless of contrary information. It happens to all of us sometimes, despite our best attempts at accuracy. Our Bible (in its original manuscripts) is inerrant; we are not. Our interpretations of the Bible are not inerrant and neither are our applications. So we may as well admit it: we're fallible. The more we understand some of the why and how of our fallibility, the better equipped we become to diminish it on any particular subject.



Cartoon source: <http://chainsawsuit.com/comic/2014/09/16/on-research/>

In the “[Cognitive bias cheat sheet](#),” Buster Benson describes four problems that biases *help* us address:

1: Too much information. (With sub-points including “We are drawn to details that confirm our own existing beliefs” and “We notice flaws in others more easily than flaws in ourselves.”)

2: Not enough meaning. (With sub-points including “We find stories and patterns even in sparse data,” and “We fill in characteristics from stereotypes, generalities, and prior histories whenever there are new specific instances or gaps in information.”)

3: Need to act fast. (With sub-points including “In order to get anything done, we’re motivated to complete things that we’ve already invested time and energy in,” and “We favor options that appear simple or that have more complete information over more complex, ambiguous options.”)

4: What should we remember? (With sub-points including “We edit and reinforce some memories after the fact,” and “We discard specifics to form generalities.”)

So our cognitive biases help us to function and accomplish a lot more than we could if we didn’t have them. But they also deceive us into thinking we know a lot more than we really do. Each of

the sub-points mentioned above suggests blind spots that likely affect our missiological thinking. The lists of dozens and even hundreds of cognitive biases to which we're subject (see below), give a modern illustration of the biblical truth that "we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12, ESV). And others who disagree with us see through a *different* mirror dimly.

What can we do to diminish our biases? The article "[200 cognitive biases rule our everyday thinking](#)" offers this counsel: "Listen better...Understanding the predispositions we bring to the table should make us more open to understanding other people's points of view. If you're not so special, not so right, not so perfect all the time, there's a greater likelihood that you have something valuable to learn from others." As the Apostle Paul put it in Ephesians 4:2, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (NIV).

When we're willing to learn from each other, your insights can help overcome my biases, and hopefully some of my insights can help overcome your biases. It's an important application of "one another" to our discussion about all kinds of major topics, including our approaches to sharing the good news with those who need to hear it.