

Blink Study Guide

Blink by Malcolm Gladwell

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Summary

“Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell is a non-fiction work that describes the values of snap judgments and rapid cognition both of which are part of being human. Although snap decisions seem to come out of nowhere, they are actually based in volumes of that resides in our subconscious. It is the locked chamber of the brain that we trust our snap decisions to. These quick assessments are not baseless and although the information in our subconscious cannot be explored per se, there are ways to make some reasonable assumptions about it.

One way to tap this store of data and experiences, is to use a process called thin-slicing. It is not a subject that is taught in school although practice can hone this innate ability. Thin-slicing may sound like psycho-babble, but it is actually a process that is quite natural and organic. When a person first meets another person he or she naturally sizes that person up. For one, the ego will compel the person to make sure that the stranger exhibits no signs of danger.

Thin-slicing a person for signs of danger would include checking to see if he has any weapons, battle scars, missing teeth, a leering look, heavy perspiration – anything that would indicate that danger lurks. This process takes only seconds. But how does one know that battle scars, weapons and a leering gaze are indications of danger? That association was made long ago and was stored in a locked area of the subconscious mind. The person doesn't have to go through a long process to come up with a list of nefarious characteristics – the list is waiting there in the unconscious to be tapped.

Snap judgments can be good but that can also be disastrous. There cannot be total reliance on the data the subconscious provides because misinformation and biases are also stored in the subconscious. The subconscious doesn't make judgments. It's like a computer and can only print out what has been input into it. When Amadou Diallo was gunned down on his front porch in New York City by four white cops, they thought the young man was holding a pistol in his hands when it turned out to be a wallet. He was unarmed and had done nothing wrong. He was black, he was out late at night and had a gun... which was actually a wallet. The police officers had associations stored in their subconscious that led them to believe Diallo had to be guilty of something. Were he a white man, would he still be alive?

When a young female trombone player tried out for the Munich Philharmonic she was chosen over thirty other candidates. They had all performed behind a screen so biases would not impact the selection committee's decisions. However, when she walked from behind the screen the committee had assumed that she was a man. They were aghast. The trombone is a masculine instrument. Women play violins and oboes. Looks like they really didn't get the purpose of the screen. The Philharmonic eventually modernized and learned to evaluate musicians solely with their ears and not their eyes.

Gladwell provides many anecdotal incidents as well as the results of extensive research and experiments on the human's ability to make snap decisions and where those

strengths and flaws originate. The best way to take advantage of this natural ability is to know it's there, recognize its power and limitations and learn how it works.

Chapter One: The Theory of Thin Slices

Summary

A young, attractive couple, Bill and Susan, visited the laboratory of psychologist John Gottman at the University of Washington. They were set up in two office chairs on a raised platform with sensors and electrodes clipped to their ears and fingers which monitored bodily functions and movements. They were left alone and told to discuss any points of contention in their marriage. Bill didn't like the new puppy they got – it was too large for their apartment. Susan loved the puppy. A video revealed that the conversation was civil and without anger.

Conventional wisdom would declare that more information would be necessary to properly evaluate the relationship and predict its continued viability. Had Bill and Susan talked about more important things such as money, children and in-laws, surely more would have been revealed about them and their relationship. However, John Gottman proved that theory wrong.

Gottman has brought more than 3,000 married couples into his “love lab” since the 1980s. He analyzed the videos of his client couples using SPAFF (specific affect) a process which codes every emotion that the couple expressed, either verbally or through facial expression, during their short, casual conversation. The data collected from the electrodes and sensors connected to them were also factored in. With this process, Gottman has been able to predict with 95 percent accuracy whether a couple will still be married fifteen years after their initial visit. With the process, John Gottman has devised a way to capture the critical part of rapid cognition known as “thin-slicing.”

The author sat with a graduate student who assisted Gottman in his analyses. She pointed out that Bill was using a “yes-but” defense tactic making it appear that he agreed with Susan but really did not. The student caught Susan in a few eye rolls that indicated contempt. There were no overt signs of anger but being a trained technician, the student was able to evaluate emotions at a more subtle level. The student pointed out that happy couples aren't reluctant to give each other credit for trying to get along. Susan showed an inflexibility that she undoubtedly maintained in discussions about issues more important than dogs. Successful relationships have a five-to-one ratio of positives to negatives.

Couples tend to have distinctive patterns that emerge in their relationships. Just like messages sent using the Morse Code, the lapses of time between dots and dashes establish a pattern that is unique to that sender. Using this concept, Gottman concluded that once this pattern is revealed, the marriage can be “decoded” and easily assessed. One pattern that is found in most relationships is the “negative” or “positive” override. The positive override is one in which one spouse makes an excuse for the bad behavior of the other. In the negative override, one spouse perceives everything a partner says or does as negative. Gottman measures the positive and negative emotions of the couples



he evaluates. Once a negative pattern is identified, it usually never transforms into a positive override. Gottman cleverly figured out a way to simplify his methodology in making predictions. Watching the videos himself, author Gladwell found the process challenging and recognized how difficult it was for the untrained eye to catch all the expressions and impressions. Gottman is so proficient at thin-slicing marriages that he feels comfortable with his assessment of a relationship by just overhearing part of a conversation of a couple sitting at a nearby table in a restaurant. He has short-circuited his own process. He abandons focus on the twenty emotions that his methodology is based upon in favor of the Four Horsemen: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism and contempt with the latter being the most telling.

Applying this thin-slicing process to the world of physicians and malpractice revealed through interviews, most plaintiffs who sued their doctors had been treated shabbily by their physicians. A patient typically does not sue a doctor he likes. Doctors who develop a relationship with their patients and are available for their questions and concern are not likely to be sued even if they are guilty of malpractice in a specific incident.

Analysis

The author introduces one of the main elements of his book, “Blink” the “thin-slicing” of data stored in our subconscious. It was important for him to present this information in the first chapter as it impacts the entirety of the book. By introducing a difficult topic – thin-slicing – early on, the author allows the reader to become familiar with the term at the beginning of the book because he will refer to it often in succeeding chapters. And as the reader passes through the pages and chapters, seeing that term repeatedly in the proper context will underscore its meaning and illuminate its purpose.

The author is obviously introducing difficult subject matter for the average person. While most people are aware of the existence of the subconscious, or unconscious as he sometimes refers to it, they probably don’t understand how it works. No one knows a lot about it but Gladwell has called upon the knowledge, research and experimental results of psychologists, researchers and other experts and scholars who know more about the subconscious than most people.

Through scientific as well as anecdotal accounts, Gladwell is gradually familiarizing the reader with the power and purpose of the subconscious as well as its frailty. In this first chapter he demonstrates its usefulness in a practical application which most readers will find relatable.

Vocabulary

droll, nondescript, buffeted, nuance, analogy, replicate, qualitatively, stoic



Chapter Two: The Locked Door

Summary

Pro tennis coach Vic Braden found he was able to accurately predict when a tennis player was about to double-fault on his or her serve. He was thin-slicing the serves of the tennis pros but couldn't really explain his accuracy. His ability resided in his subconscious and he relied on it to make quick, snap-judgments about the serves. Those who allow their subconscious to take the lead experience physical reactions including mental rushes and even nausea.

Snap decisions take place behind locked doors in our subconscious. Braden tried to look inside that room to learn how he was able to predict double-faults with such accuracy but he was unable to. Instead of trying to figure out the ability to make snap judgments, it should just be appreciated and respected.

Psychologist John Bargh developed an experiment that used words related to aging that made the young students who participated in the testing feel old and walk slower after the session. Speed-dating has become a popular social practice among young adults. For example, six young men and six young women are brought together in a bar. Each man chats for six minutes with each of the women. In that short period, they have to decide if they want to spend more time with the person. These young adults make snap judgments about each other based on things as diverse as likability, accent and body piercings.

It would be interesting to look behind the closed door in our subconscious but that's not possible; the mechanism of our unconscious thinking is hidden from us forever. Trying to force a person to defend their snap judgment has some interesting results. Sheena Iyengar and Raymond Fisman, two Columbia University professors, attempted just that in their speed-dating experiments. The professors learned that what a person claims they want in a partner does not match what they are actually attracted to. Fisman who is an economist believes that the "real" person is revealed in actions while Iyengar who is a psychologist feels that the discovery of the "real" person is more complicated than that.

Vic Braden talked with numerous pro tennis players but none could explain exactly how they play so well. He asked baseball great Ted Williams how he was able to hit so accurately. Williams said he could literally "look the ball into the bat." But that was impossible due to the speed of the ball. He explained to Williams that when the ball nears the hitter, the hitter is virtually blind because of the ball's close proximity and speed. Williams had no further explanation as to how he hit the ball so well – he just did.

Psychologist Norman R. F. Maier found through experimentation that when a very subtle hint is dropped, the conscious person often misses it but the omnipotent subconscious never does. The hint may cause a new idea to dawn on the person. But that person will



be adamant that he thought of the idea himself, totally unaware that the subconscious had grasped onto it and made it available to the conscious person.

Analysis

The author adds another layer of information about the subconscious and our ability to make snap decisions. He introduces the concept of the locked chamber within our subconscious that houses this voluminous data. It is a stretch to buy into the idea that we have a vast store of information that we cannot consciously explore. We can only access it on the subconscious level when we have the need to make quick decisions. It is part of our survival system. If a person is being chased by a man with a knife, he does not have to stop and think about what he should do to survive. It's all there for him to tap and the rapid cognition process will begin the process.

The importance of this chapter is the author's emphasis on the power and mystery of the subconscious. The information that we unknowingly input in what the author sometimes refers to as a big computer in our brains is data that is returned to us when we need it. We are only able to tap this wealth of data when it is necessary to make a snap decision.

Again the author provides examples of the use and purpose of the decision-making mechanism so that the average reader will find something that he can relate to and, therefore, increase his chances for a deeper understanding of the difficult subject matter.

Everyone has had an idea just pop into their minds. We all think how brilliant we are to come up with such a great idea. However, it actually comes from the subconscious who grasped a subtle hint that we missed. The subconscious doesn't miss anything.

Vocabulary

nuances, kouros, susceptible, distillation, contagious



Chapter Three: The Warren Harding Error

Summary

Harry Daugherty who was a lawyer and lobbyist was simply entranced with Warren G. Harding when he first met him. He looked like a president. He wasn't concerned whether Harding was qualified to be president or not. He was one of his biggest supporters when Harding ran and won the presidency. Harding was not presidential material and was one of the nation's worst presidents. But Daugherty wasn't the only person impressed with Harding's appearance and bearing. There were many others who thought he looked presidential and, therefore, believed he was intelligent, courageous and a man of principle. Harding's allure is an example of the dark side of rapid cognition. We should learn to trust our gut feelings but look for the danger signs that could lead us astray.

Questions about race and gender both have strong automatic responses. Our feelings about race and gender and other issues are measured on a subconscious level by the IAT. Those deeply held associations are often diametrically opposed to the thoughts and opinions of the conscious mind. Racism that exists in the subconscious results from decades of messages that white is good and black is bad. Bias in gender issues stems from consistent messaging that has filtered into the subconscious telling us that men are smart and are businessmen and women take care of babies and bake cookies. IAT results can predict how an individual will react when confronted with controversial topics or experiences involving race or gender. Tall men receive more respect than short men. The taller candidate running for president usually wins the election. Most CEOs are taller than average. No board would ever deny a qualified individual for the CEO position because he was short – not consciously at least. But the subconscious has paired “tall” with “boss” and “CEO” and other titles of authority and it's difficult to discount that powerful influence. Salary data proves that tall people on the average earn higher incomes than short people – especially men.

Unconscious prejudice is difficult to combat. However, the unconscious can be altered but not through words but rather through deeds. If a person wants to improve the way he interacts with black people, the best way is to reach out to them and gain a deeper understanding of them and their culture. Once understanding the power of the subconscious, it is our job to try to manage and control the associations that are stored behind the locked door.

Analysis

The importance of this chapter is the introduction of the dark side of rapid cognition. Everyone who has a computer knows, it can only print out what has been input into it. It



is the same with the information that is stored in the subconscious. The subconscious does not make value assessments or decide whether the data is right or wrong – it simply is a receptacle that guards the data it receives until it is tapped through the rapid cognition process.

Gladwell provides a classic example of the dark side of the process. By the dark side, he means those times when “bad” information is extracted from the subconscious and leads the conscious person astray or otherwise causes problems or disasters. Harry Daugherty was the first person to urge Warren G. Harding to run for President. He knew nothing about him when he made that assessment but did so because Harding looked like a president. And because he looked like a president he must be smart and courageous and patriotic.

But Harding was none of those. He enjoyed gambling and chasing women and drinking too much. That didn't matter to Harry – Harding looked like a president. It was an association he had made years before and was stored in his subconscious. He made the snap decision that Harding should be the president and was one of his biggest supporters when he ran and won the presidency. Harding was not an inspiring man or great leader and had policies that were muddled and unclear. But he looked like a president.

Readers can relate to this historical footnote and begin to have an understanding that not everything regurgitated by the subconscious is positive.

Vocabulary

shrewd, ambivalent, facetious, fidelity, embodiment, connotations, mortification, virtuoso



Chapter Four: Paul Van Riper's Big Victory

Summary

Paul Van Riper, or Rip as his friends called him, was a former Marine commander during the Vietnam war. He was selected by the Joint Forces Command to play the enemy rouge commander in a computerized war game called the Millennium challenge.

Joint Forces Command or JFCOM is the strategic arm of the U.S. military and is in charge of running war games. It is located in Virginia a few hours south of Washington, D.C. JFCOM is where new warfare strategies are developed. The Pentagon recognized that modern warfare would no longer achieve victory by brute force and military strikes alone. Rather, taking apart the adversary's support system is what would lead to the defeat of the enemy. Understanding the links between a nation's military and economy was thought to be vital in achieving victory over the adversary.

The goal of the Millennium challenge was to prove that advance technology could lift the fog of war. Rip was the perfect foil because he didn't believe that technology could ever take the place of gut reactions and leadership. He didn't believe that the fog of war could be lifted and that a good commander stuck to his basic instincts.

Improvisational comedy is a perfect example of the kind of thinking that Blink inspires – making good decisions in an instant without a script or directions. Improv requires the players to create a funny scenario in the moment. Improv groups practice their skills by rehearsing. But since they have no script, how can they rehearse? They rehearse by making up scenarios and becoming adept at creating funny and credible skits. Their practice sessions are tucked away in their subconscious minds and are available to be tapped when they perform.

Basketball is a high-speed game of quick decisions. But play is only successful when those quick decisions are based on hours and hours of structured practice in which their skills are honed and valuable data is stored in the unconscious. Improv actors are able to liberate actions and thoughts that had been repressed. Police line-ups generally have good results because they call for a person to tap his subconscious and make a snap decision.

Gary Klein interviewed a firefighter who urgently ordered everyone out of a building before there was any sign of danger. After the people were evacuated, the building collapsed and would have killed everyone. The firefighter figured he had ESP. Klein didn't accept that answer and pushed the firefighter for more. In the end, the firefighter recalled that the fire was hotter than it should have been and that it wasn't noisy. Although it was unknown at the time, these factors pointed to the fact that the main fire was in the basement. The firefighter didn't take the time to figure that out – he sensed



that something was very wrong and by thin-slicing the facts before him he instinctively knew to order everyone out of the building.

In 1996, Brendan Reilly became chairman of Cook County Hospital's Department of Medicine. The ER was deluged with patients claiming they were having heart attacks although many of them were not. These patients took valuable time and resources from those who were really sick. With outside consultants, Reilly developed a "decision tree" which was a way of using thin-slicing to quickly determine if a person was having a heart attack. Although it met with resistance initially, it proved to be success and freed up physicians and made available extra beds for the sick and injured.

Analysis

In this chapter, Gladwell compares the strength of rapid cognition against the strength of conscious planning that includes the consideration of as much information as is available. In other words, he demonstrates what can happen if a snap decision is abandoned in favor of a concerted effort to consciously figure out a better solution.

Paul Van Riper was a Marine commander in Vietnam. After his retirement, he was asked by Pentagon officials to play the role of the enemy commander in a war game called the Millennium Challenge. The Blue Team believed that the fog of war could be lifted with the use of advanced technology.

Van Riper, commander of the enemy Red Team, couldn't disagree more. He believed that the fog of war could not be lifted and that a good commander needed only to go with his gut and stick to his guns. While the Blue Team continually reviewed their progress and had charts and graphs and maps and intel reports, Van Riper attacked the Blue Team's warships and defeated them. The Blue Team had too much information which distracted them from the battle. While the Blue Team was trying to lift the fog of war, they only made it foggier.

By providing a successful application of split-second decision making and contrasting it with the cumbersome task of starting from square one, the reader will begin to recognize the economy and efficiency of the process.

Vocabulary

reconnoiter, parlance, portfolios, inherently, pandemonium, spontaneity, introspection, anomalies

Chapter Five: Kenna's Dilemma

Summary

Kenna, a rock star, is the child of Ethiopian immigrants and grew up in Virginia. His father attended Cambridge and is an economics professor. He wasn't exposed to rock music until he heard U2's *The Joshua Tree*. He played that tape until he destroyed it. He is a talented and humble young man. In his first big concert engagement he was the opening act for No Doubt.

Kenna taught himself to play piano when he was a teenager. He began singing and writing music. He recorded a demo after scraping enough money together. His demo got into the hands of Craig Kallman, co-president of Atlantic Records. Kallman was impressed. Paul McGuinness, U2's manager, flew him to Ireland for a meeting. He was booked to perform in high-profile venues. Industry people loved his music but in the end it wasn't a reliable factor for predicting his popularity with fans.

Only a relatively small number of records make it on the radio. Songs are focus-tested before decisions are made about radio play. Ordinary people rated his music low, in the 0 to 4 range. The conclusion of the record industry was that Kenna's music lacked a core audience and had little potential for success. Having a great appreciation of how good Kenna's music was required an exploration into the complexities of making snap judgments.

Some products fail simply because they don't look like other items in the same category. Furniture maker Herman Miller commissioned designer Bill Stumpf to design an office chair that looked different than any other chair but was also extraordinarily comfortable. The chair Stumpf designed looked different. Many thought it was a monstrosity. Although it was comfortable, it didn't look comfortable. It was ultra-modern looking and was structured totally different than other office chairs. Focus groups didn't understand the aesthetics; some thought it looked like a lawn chair. Miller stuck with the chair and manufactured and distributed it. It received an initial frosty reception but then it began to catch on. After a few years, the Aeron was the best selling chair that Miller had ever produced. Now the chair is even considered beautiful by most people. Focus testing the chair was unfair to the chair. It was so different that those tested could only compare the chair to their idea of what a chair should look like.

It's difficult for market researchers to distinguish between a product that is "bad" from one that is just "different." Two sit-coms that didn't follow traditional formulae – *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore* show – focus-tested extremely poorly because they were so different. They both went on to become huge hits once viewers became comfortable with the new territory that the series had ventured onto.

Those testing music or food or a new TV series who have no expertise in the specific fields cannot explain why they like or don't like the new product. Those who are experts



in the various fields have the vocabulary to express their opinions and the experience to, in a sense, tap what lies beneath. This doesn't mean that non-experts have no credibility in their snap judgments. It's just that the non-expert does not understand exactly what the judgment he made was based on.

Analysis

Gladwell focuses on the importance of snap decisions being made by experts in their fields. A music industry executive knew after listening to Kenna's demo tape for a few moments that the kid had talent. He thin-sliced Kenna's music and knew he had a winner. What was stored in his subconscious were his many years of experience in recognizing musical talent. His snap-decision was based on substance.

When Kenna's music was tested by a focus group, it was not well-received. Snap decisions were made about the music but the focus group was comprised of average people who were not music executives or experts. Both the music executive and the focus group made snap decisions but one was associated with experience in the field and a superior knowledge of musical talent.

Vocabulary

braggadocio, problematic, assuage, inexorable, cloying, egregious, monstrosity, aesthetic, pantheon, adulterated

Chapter Six: Seven Seconds on the Bronx

Summary

Twenty-two year-old Amadou Diallo was an immigrant from Guinea and lived in the Soundview section of the Bronx. He was a street peddler and on February 3, 1999, when he returned late at night after work he stood on his porch for a few moments before going inside. Four white cops who were assigned to the NYPD's Street Crime Unit, spotted Diallo and were immediately suspicious. They thought he was a robber or rapist. When he was approached he didn't immediately respond to the cops because he was afraid. When he dug in his pocket and pulled out a small dark object the cops thought it was a gun. The four cops mowed him down with 41 shots. It wasn't a gun he was holding, it was a wallet. It was the needless death of a innocent young man because the cops tapped their store of information and made a snap decision about who this man was and what he was probably up to. It was thought by most that racism was the core cause of his death.

The most common form of rapid cognition is the impression and judgment we make of other people. The cops were suspicious of a black man who had done nothing but stand on his stoop, innocent and unarmed. But the cops made the judgment that he was eluding them and therefore must be up to something. When they saw a dark object in his hand, it confirmed their suspicions. They had better shoot first or they'll be mowed down by this criminal. Diallo was terrified. Being able to distinguish between a person being terrified and being brazen is a fundamental element of being human. But the cops could not make that distinction. Perhaps they were terrified. Were they brazen? Reading the minds of others is something that people attempt to do on a daily basis but normally not with such tragic results.

Silvin Tomkins and Paul Ekman were responsible for making great strides in "mind-reading." Tomkins was a psychology professor during the Depression and his work on making predictions inspired the young psychologist Paul Ekman. Paul devoted years of time and resources to developing a process that would link facial expressions with emotions locked in the unconscious. He was ultimately able to create a catalogue of over 3,000 unique expressions which was an important element in reading another's mind. His catalog was utilized by many analysts and therapists in assessing their clients.

An autistic person cannot distinguish one facial expression from another and therefore cannot "mind read" what emotions that person may be experiencing. They lack what is necessary to make a first impression of another person. Ami Klin teaches at Yale University's Child Study Center. He has a 40-year old patient, Peter, who has an advanced education and is a highly-functioning individual despite the fact that he is autistic. What Peter cannot do is interpret the world around him. Klin has noted that



Peter focuses only on Klin's words. He totally disassociates any expression or gesture that Klin may make in their conversation from his words. The gestures and expressions have no meaning for Peter.

The optimal state of arousal is the state in which stress improves performance. Larry Bird, the basketball great, claimed that the game would seem to be in slow motion when he was ready to sink a three-pointer. The heart rate is heightened to between 115 and 145. If the heart rate goes over that ceiling, there is a breakdown of cognitive thinking. The mid-brain, which is the same as a dog's, takes over from the forebrain. When a person is extremely upset and not thinking properly, having a conversation with that person would be as futile as talking to a dog. It has been frequently reported that a person in this state of emotional meltdown cannot even remember how to dial 911. Many police departments have banned high speed chases because the cops are in a state of dangerously high arousal after the incident that can lead to unnecessary violence.

Analysis

The tragic tale of Amadou Diallo is described in this chapter. It is another example of the fallibility of rapid cognition. The author demonstrates how police officers are particularly vulnerable to making poor snap decisions in the highly charged field of law enforcement. Since police officers carry deadly weapons, bad snap decisions can have devastating results.

Gladwell presents both sides of the incident that led to the death of Diallo. He was an innocent man gunned down by police. The police officers wondered why he was outside at midnight. They thought he might be a criminal. They saw something dark in his hand. It could be a gun. They had built a case against Diallo before they even talked to him. They were new in the crime-ridden neighborhood and were probably on edge themselves.

Diallo was innocent of any crime and was holding his wallet, not a gun. But when they approached him, he made the snap decision to turn and run – probably out of fear – but it was a bad move on his part. It made him look guilty. He was black. Their snap decision was based at least in part on racism. Had he been white, he may still be alive. Mind-reading can be used effectively. But in the case of the cops and Diallo their attempt to read his mind was a total failure.

With the high-profile shootings of black young men by white police officers, the reader may be able to gain a little insight into how snap decisions on the part of both the cop and the suspect can lead to disaster.

Vocabulary

vestibule, brazen, anomalous, martyr, virologist, indulgent, repertoire, zygomatic, hauteur, virtuosos



Conclusion: The Lessons of Blink

Summary

Abbie Conant was a professional musician, a trombone player, and had applied for openings with eleven orchestras. She received only one reply. The response was from the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra. In their letter they addressed her as “Herr” Conant which should have sent up a red flag.

There were 33 candidates all of whom played behind a screen making them invisible to the selection committee. Even though she made one error, the committee was blown away by her performance. They chose her but were aghast when Herr Conant turned out to be Frau Conant. The music director was from the old school and held that a woman could not play the trombone. There were a few women in the orchestra but they played “feminine” instruments like the violin and the oboe. Yet Conant survived two more tryouts and was hired by the orchestra. After a year she was demoted to second trombone with no reason given. Conant took the matter to court. The orchestra claimed that she was short of breath when playing Mozart’s Requiem. But she had an exam that found her to be physically fit. An expert called in to evaluate her playing ability was effusive in his praise for her. After eight years in the court system, she was reinstated to first trombone. She sued the orchestra again when she learned that she wasn’t being paid on a par with male musicians. She won her claim again.

Until just recently, the world of classical music, especially in Europe, had been dominated by white men. The accepted belief was that women just could not play as well as men. Select committees were trusted for being honest in evaluating candidates and, therefore, were never challenged on their biases. Modernity has changed the art. In the United States, musicians formed unions so they could get fair contracts, proper benefits and fair tryouts. In recent times, screens have been widely utilized so that select committees cannot see the gender, race or physical appearance of the candidate. Some mediocre musicians look great while they play while other more talented musicians display poor postures during performances. After screened auditions became commonplace, the outcomes have been much fairer and are no longer slanted toward white men. Those evaluating the tryouts could no longer listen with their eyes.

If we are to take our snap decisions and rapid cognition seriously, we have to address their fragility. There also has to be the recognition that we do not have to live with snap judgments that are proven to be based on misinformation or biases that are locked within us. Female musicians have benefited from the improvements that orchestras have instituted in their audition process. But orchestras have also benefited – they wind up with the best musicians because they now listen with their ears.



Analysis

A female musician, a trombone player, had to fight the prejudices and biases of sexism that had probably resided within the subconscious of the philharmonic conductor and select committee for decades. Having performed behind a screen during her audition, the woman was selected as the best trombone player. When she emerged from the screen, the conductor was appalled that she was a woman. A woman doesn't play a trombone!

The author provides this example to demonstrate the poor snap decisions based on prejudices exist everywhere and in every walk of life. Conventional wisdom might tell us that someone in the arts like the conductor would be above such cruel biases and put the love of music and art above any prejudices. The author is enlightening the reader on how widespread prejudice is and that it is minorities and women who get the short end of the stick.

The woman thought enough of herself to consciously fight the prejudice even taking a complaint to the courts. This anecdote shows how the conscious mind sometimes has to do battle with the subconscious of another.

Vocabulary

imperious, effusive, repertoire, dissonance, belabored

Important People

Paul Ekman

Much of the current knowledge available on mind-reading comes from the work of the duo of Silvan Tomkins and Paul Ekman, teacher and pupil respectively. Tomkins was a psychology professor at Princeton and Rutgers but during the Depression was a handicapper for a horse-racing syndicate and lived the high life on Manhattan's Upper East Side from the earnings he made from his accurate predictions. He believed that faces were revealing, even those of horses. He could always peg a liar. Ekman was a young psychologist who wanted to study facial expressions. It was destiny that the two would collaborate. Ekman was astounded that Tomkins could accurately describe the characteristics and nature of several New Guinea tribes just by watching a video of them.

Ekman and his partner Wallace Friesen decided to create a taxonomy of facial expressions and their connections to emotions. They worked on expressions and expression combinations for three years. In the end they catalogued 3,000 unique facial expressions. Facial expressions are important for the snap decisions we make because they are directly linked in the subconscious to specific emotions. Experts, including John Gottman of marriage counseling fame, used Ekman's catalogue of facial expressions to help in his analyses. The catalogue has been used by a wide range of professionals including animators at Pixar and DreamWorks and psychiatrists dealing with schizophrenia.

Our expressions are signs of what's going on inside our minds. Through their studies and research, Ekman and Friesen learned that one's expression can alter the autonomic nervous system. 'Which came first, the emotion or the expression?' was the obvious question. There are voluntary and involuntary expressions. Involuntary expressions may be fleeting and seen only at the micro level – but an expression that matches a particular emotion is always there. When someone has a “poker face” he has taught himself to show no emotion and present a façade that is averse to his authentic emotions.

Paul Ekman did some experiments with subjects who were to determine from a video clips who was lying about something and who was telling the truth. The researchers found that stroke victims and adults who were abused as youngsters both do well at determining truth tellers and liars because they learned out of necessity to be more sensitive to their surroundings.

Amadou Diallo

Amadou Diallo was an immigrant to New York City from Guinea. He lived in the Soundview neighborhood of the South Bronx. He was 22 years old and working as a



peddler in lower Manhattan, selling a variety of items. On February 3, 1999, Diallo returned to his apartment late at night and was taking in the night air on the steps of his building. Four plainclothes white police officers assigned to NYPD's Street Crime Unit, came racing down the street in an unmarked police car. One of the officers spotted Diallo at the top of his stairs and thought he was a "push-in" robber. He also fit the description of a serial rapist who was being pursued.

The policemen stopped the car in front of Diallo's building. The four cops approached Diallo who did not respond to their questions either out of fear or because of his stutter and poor grasp of the English language. As they came toward him, he ducked inside the building. The cops pursued him and thought he was hiding a gun in his hand. The officers all open fire on him striking him 41 times. When the ambulance arrived, the officers discovered that he was holding his wallet in his hand – probably trying to offer his ID to the cops. They felt terrible but Diallo felt worse – he was dead. They went on trial for charges ranging from first-degree manslaughter to second degree murder.

In the aftermath of the Diallo shooting and death, there was a great variance in the interpretation of what had occurred. It was a tragic accident in the view of many including the jury that found the cops not guilty. Many others believed it was an obvious case of racism. Neither side was completely right or completely wrong. The Diallo killing falls into a gray area between deliberate and accidental. It was a case of mind-reading gone terribly wrong.

The cops who shot Diallo were initially too far away to catch an expression that would help them read his mind. They thought... it was late, Diallo was small and probably had a gun to protect himself in the crime-ridden neighborhood. When the cops approached and were close enough to read his expressions, he didn't give them the chance – he turned and ran into the building. The cops were new to the neighborhood and on edge themselves. They probably got to that over-aroused state where things start to fall apart. They saw him grasping something black and assumed it was the gun they figured he had. Besides Diallo was black and probably a criminal. Once Diallo grabbed his wallet, it was no longer on the cops' radar to try to read his mind. Their state of mind was that of basic survival. One of the cops yelled, "He's got a gun," confirming to the others that the suspect was armed. After the shooting and his innocence was obvious, one of the cops sat down on the stoop where Diallo had just stood and cried.

Brendan Riley

In the 1996, Cook County Hospital in Chicago changed the way physicians diagnose ER patients complaining of chest pains. When Brendan Reilly became the chairman of the hospital's Department of Medicine, the hospital was overcrowded, in disarray, had inadequate facilities and equipment and in most ways was behind the times. Most Chicagoans didn't want to come within a mile of the hospital. A large number of patients were prisoners who were shackled to their beds.



Reilly saw the ER as the top problem facing him. He paid particular attention to ER patients who complained of chest pains. The process was a protracted one. These patients took up more time and resources than any other group. In his efforts to improve the system, he found that doctors were all over the map in the treatment of these patients and relied a great deal on guesswork. The doctors erred on the side of caution causing Cook to spend valued time and money on people who were not having heart attacks.

Reilly initially addressed the problem by turning to data on case studies and felt that there could be a mathematical solution based on this data. With the help of consultants, he finally developed this process after three years of dedicated work. In the end, doctors did not want to believe that there was a statistical solution that was superior to their hands-on evaluation. After two years of testing, Goldman's system was found to be 70% more accurate than the old system in the identification of patients who weren't really having heart attacks. In 2001, Cook County Hospital became one of the first large medical care centers to adapt Goldman's system. A heart attack decision tree is posted in the ER which provides a graphic representation of the process.

Goldman's system is more efficient because it thin-slices the most vital data needed to make a clean diagnosis. The physicians were found to factor in too much information in making their decisions. The extra data just confused the process. Reilly believed that Goldman's system freed the doctors to explore other possible causes for the patient's illness. Reilly's process provided evidence that successful decision-making is reliant on both deliberate and instinctive thought processes. Reducing a problem to its fundamentals makes the task of decision-making faster and much more efficient.

Paul Van Riper

Paul Van Riper had two tours of duty in Vietnam with the Marines. In the first deployment he was cut down by machine-gun fire. He returned as the commander of Mike Company. He was the strong silent type and was a hands-on commander and would do whatever it took to get the job done.

During the first week in November 1968, Mike Company was engaged in a firefight with a much larger North Vietnamese regiment. They were attacking the command post and medevac copters flying in to transport the wounded. Rip, as he was called, kept his unit well-trained even insisting that training drills take place in the bush. Rip who retired in 2000 was selected to play the enemy rouge commander in a computerized war game called the Millennium Challenge.

While Rip was the commander of Red Team in the Millennium Challenge he instructed his men engaged in the battle to make their own decisions. He stayed away from daily strategy meetings and the rehashing of the day's events. It wanted the war to be fought in an organic manner. He wanted to prove the Pentagon wrong about the idea that technological advancements could take the place of good, solid leadership.



John Gottman

John Gottman is a professional counselor who has analyzed the relationships of more than 3,000 married couples at his “love lab” near the University of Washington. He videotapes the couples having simple conversations on topics of their choice. The videotape is analyzed using SPAFF (for specific affect) which is a coding system which is made up of twenty categories that correspond to the emotions that a married couple is likely to express even in a casual, seemingly mundane conversation. Using this system, the technicians are able to detect subtle indications of disgust, mistrust, deception and defensiveness any of which can bring down a relationship. Gottman and his technicians thin-slice the data to predict the likelihood of the marriage’s success or failure. Remarkably, using this methodology Gottman has proven his value by accurately predicting the fate of marriages with 95% accuracy based solely on an hour videotape of the couple talking, not about their problems, but just talking.

Kenna

Kenna is an African-American whose family emigrated from Guinea. He loved music from a young age and eventually decided to pursue a career as a singer/musician. When his demo tape was previewed by music industry professionals, they were blown away by his talent. However, when his music was played for market research focus groups, it fell short of the mark. He continued to pursue his dream but there was always a barrier to keep him from becoming the star that those in the industry knew he could be. He made an album but it wasn’t well received because the negative feedback from focus groups discouraged radio executives from promoting his music. It was finally determined that the music professionals were accurate in their assessment of Kenna’s ability because with their expertise and experience they were able to see his talent by “thin-slicing” his demos – in other words, just assessing a small sample of his work. Focus groups did not possess the level of expertise that those in the industry did and their assessments were believed to be based on factors other than just music. Unfortunately, the focus groups were given more weight in deciding Kenna’s fate than were experts who based their opinions on solely his musical ability.

John Bargh

Psychologist John Bargh devised a test tapping the adaptive unconscious with words alluding to the elderly that actually made the participants – young students – walk slower and feel older after completing the test. This test is an example of “priming” which provides insight into the nature of what is behind the locked door in the subconscious.



Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson

Psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson conducted experiments on the process known as priming. They found that black students who were required to list their race prior to taking a test performed well below average. The experiments conducted by Steele and Aronson provide evidence that people are more susceptible to outside influences than many would initially believe.

Antonio Damasio

Antonio Damasio was a neurologist who had conducted extensive research on what happens when too much thinking takes place outside the locked storage area in our subconscious. His work included the study of patients with damage to a small but important part of the brain called the ventromedial prefrontal cortex which is located directly behind the nose and plays an integral role in decision-making. People with this damaged cortex can function normally but they lack judgment. He is the author of “Descartes’ Error” in which he describes some of his case studies.

Warren G. Harding and Harry Daugherty

One day in 1899, Harry Daugherty spotted Warren G. Harding at a shoe shine stand. Harry was a lawyer and lobbyist from the Ohio state capital. Harding was a newspaper editor who was running for the Ohio state senate. Daugherty was immediately struck with the perfect proportions and Romanesque handsomeness of the man, who he did not know, and concluded to himself that the man would be a great president.

Harding may have looked like a president but that was where any resemblance ended. He wasn't particularly bright and loved to play poker and golf, drink to excess and chase women. He, of course, did become president but never distinguished himself. His speeches were uninspiring, his policies muddled and vapid.

Harding was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1914 and was a no-show on important votes about women's suffrage and Prohibition. He'd been pushed up the political ladder by his ambitious wife and by Daugherty who found Harding even more presidential as he aged. In 1920, he convinced Harding to run for the highest office. What was locked in Daugherty's subconscious was the idea planted there years before – Harding “looked” like a president. Due to a deadlock between the two leading candidates, the Republican party bosses turned to Harding as a sensible alternative. He was named their candidate and elected into office a few months later. He did not serve his full term; he died of a stroke after two years in office.



Bob Golomb

Bob Golomb is a highly successful new car salesman. He sells double whatever everyone else at his dealership sells. He attributes his success to being able to make accurate judgments about the needs and wants of his customers, always putting them first. Also he tries to never judge anyone on their physical appearance.

Stuart Oskamp

Decades ago researcher Stuart Oskamp arranged for a group of psychologists to evaluate the case of a young war veteran named Joe Kidd. The experiment was done in stages. He revealed more information with each new phase. He noted that the psychologists seemed increasingly confident in their assessments with each new phase because of the additional information. They believed that their assessments were increasingly accurate because they would revise prior answers to match the new information. The study proved that their drive for accuracy actually undermined their goal. The piling on of information caused the psychologists to lose the clarity that they initially had at first blush.

Louis Cheskin

Louis Cheskin was a great figure in twentieth-century market research. He strongly believed that when someone is asked to try a sample of food they transfer their assessment of the packaging to their opinion of the food product. From his experience, people blur the line between product and package and view it as one entity.

Cheskin conducted a taste-test on margarine versus butter. In those times, margarine was white and no one wanted it. He had it colored yellow and didn't tell the participants that some would be eating butter and some would be eating margarine. Afterward, everyone rated the food and said that the "butter" was just fine. Seven-Up sales increased when more yellow was added to the green can. The image of a sprig of parsley between the "r" and the "m" on Hormel canned meat made sales climb. These tactics are all targeted to the subconscious. Interesting packaging can't make up for bad tasting food but food can seem to taste better because of what our eyes see and what association is made in the subconscious.

Anthony G. Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji and Brian Nosek

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) was developed by Anthony G. Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji and Brian Nosek. The test focuses on pairs of ideas that are already connected in our minds. Certain associations are burned in our minds. Test results show that an association between "male" and "entrepreneur" was easy to make while there was resistance when the match was "female" and "entrepreneur." This is an instance of

strong automatic male association. When there is a strong association between two pairs of words, respondents answer quickly without hesitation.



Objects/Places

The Morse Code “Fist”

The Morse code is made up of a unique series of dots and dashes each with its own length of elapsed time. Since the Morse code is sent by humans, the prospect of human error is always a part of the mix. When operators used to send messages using old manual machines, the spaces between the dots and dashes would vary and be unique to that particular operator. Although barely detectable in many cases, an astute observer was able to pick up the motif. It was helpful in World War II; American and British decoders could identify the cadence in intercepted German messages and identify who was sending the message and where it originated from. A pattern unique to an individual operator was referred to as a Morse code “fist.”

The Four Horsemen

John Gottman who devised an effective way of thin-slicing the relationships of married couple he counseled which allowed him to predict a marriage’s viability with great accuracy. He further sliced the information he gathered by focusing on what he called the Four Horsemen: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism and contempt. The existence of any of these elements in a relationship was a red flag. The worst of the four was contempt. Once Gottman detected contempt he was certain that the marriage was doomed.

Speed Dating

In Manhattan, young professionals all in their twenties meet in upscale bars or restaurants after the workday in hopes of meeting a love interest. There are typically a dozen men and a dozen women. Each young man has the opportunity to sit and talk with each young woman for six minutes. After all the six-minute conversations have all taken place, each man and each woman make a decision on who they found most appealing and who they could possibly have a relationship with. This ritual is known as speed-dating. It is a practical application of making snap judgments and applying rapid cognition.

The Implicit Association Test

Psychologists have recently focused on the role of unconscious or implicit associations that are stored in the subconscious. One of the tests that gauges this behavior is called the Implicit Association Test (IAT). It was created by Brian Nosek, Antony G. Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji. The premise behind this concept is that an individual makes connections between two entities when there is an existing connection already residing



within our subconscious. The test has increasing difficulty and exposes biases like racism and sexism.

Left and Right Hemispheres of the Brain

The brain's left hemisphere thinks in words and the right hemisphere thinks in images. The ability to recognize an image is helpful in identifying a suspect in a police line-up. But if a person who has a mental image of a person in his right hemisphere tries to describe that image in words from his right hemisphere it becomes confusing. The next time he is asked to identify the face of the suspect, he will invariably have it confused with the description he formed with words in his left hemisphere. Most people have mental images of Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein but if asked to describe these icons in words, they would be very challenged.

Verbal Overshadowing

Psychologist Jonathan W. Schooler pioneered research on verbal overshadowing. Verbal overshadowing is an involuntary human reaction that displaces a person's image of an object with a verbal interpretation. Images are retained in the right hemisphere of the brain while words are retained in the left hemisphere. Once words are used to describe an object in one's memory, it displaces the image that was initially there making it difficult for the individual to recall the image.

Cook County Hospital

Cook County Hospital was located just south of downtown Chicago. The hospital was more than 100 years old and had once been one of the nation's leading health centers having pioneered cobalt-beam therapy and opened the world's first blood bank. It was the inspiration for the popular TV series, ER. However, the hospital deteriorated over the years and its reputation suffered to the point that most people avoided it like the plague. In 1996, the new chairman of the hospital's Department of Medicine launched an innovative program that would better facilitate heart attack patients who came to the ER. It took many years of research and a lot of convincing but eventually the hospital adopted a new way to evaluate ER patients who claimed they were having heart attacks.

Instead of relying on a physician's training and experience to evaluate a potential heart attack victim the hospital began to rely on a "decision tree" that was based on a sophisticated algorithm that virtually made the decision for the doctor. The "decision tree" thin-sliced the patient's condition and quickly produced a diagnosis. It was felt that a physician's diagnosis was cluttered with extraneous issues that were not essential in determining whether or not the patient was actually having a heart attack.



The Aeron Chair

Furniture maker Herman Miller, Inc. commissioned industrial designer Bill Stumpf to create a cutting edge office chair. Stumpf created an unusual chair that looked uncomfortable but was actually designed ergonomically for optimum comfort. It's unusual and industrial appearance made it a loser at focus groups because those tested had an image of what an office chair should look like. The bad reception caused a delay in the production of the chair but Herman Miller stuck with the creation and believed in it enough to mass produce it. It took perhaps longer than usual to catch on but once it did the chair proved itself to people who actually used it and it became the best selling chair in the history of the company.

Soundview, The South Bronx

Amadou Diallo lived in an apartment building in the Soundview neighborhood of the South Bronx in New York City. It was a high crime area and was the focus of the Street Crime Unit of the NYPD. On the night of February 3, 1999, four plainclothes officers from the unit spotted Diallo and thought he was about to commit a robbery or rape and that he was armed. When he turned away from them they thought he was pulling a gun and they shot him to death – 41 shots in all. He was actually pulling his wallet out probably to show them his ID. One of the factors that led the police to be suspicious of Diallo was the Soundview neighborhood in which he lived. It was a crime-ridden area that the police were cracking down on. That information along with the fact he was black led to a tragic snap decision.

The Triangle Test

A triangle test is a taste test comprised of three glasses of a beverage which are presented to test participants who are asked to identify the drinks. The example in the book is Pepsi v. Coke. Two glasses are filled with Pepsi and one with Coke. Diehard fans of either soft drink were sure they could identify their favorite drink but only a third of those tested accurately identified the colas. Adding the third glass totally threw the participants off. Only professional taste testers would have enough stored up knowledge and experience to make the distinction between the beverages.

Themes

Rapid Cognition

Rapid cognition is the process that human beings use to make snap decisions. Just as the term suggests it is a quick response to a question or situation which a person is presented with. It is an element that is fundamental to the way we think. When a decision or assessment is made based on rapid cognition, the input originates from the subconscious which is a powerful - although invisible - force in our lives. Data that we have been exposed to and experiences that we have had are stored in a locked area of the unconscious that we cannot explore. However, it is the store of information that is tapped when we make snap decisions and exercise rapid cognition. Snap judgments based on rapid cognition can only be made with a narrow bit of data. If an individual questions his snap decision and begins to weigh other factors, rapid cognition breaks down.

There is a dark side to rapid cognition that can cause problems. Just like a computer, the subconscious can only provide input that has been provided to it. It does not judge the information it receives, doesn't evaluate whether it's right or wrong. It merely stores it and allows it to be tapped when the individual needs to use it.

The overarching term for this fundamental human process could be described as instinct or an innate response to circumstances or events – a gut reaction. However, the information stored there and tapped for our rapid decision-making process can be wrong or misleading. Biases and prejudices are stored there alongside lessons learned about being kind and charitable. Once having a full understanding of this process a person can begin to discern reliable data from data that is tainted and wrongheaded. The success of decisions made under stressful situations that require rapid cognition depends upon training and a concerted effort to supplant ugly notions with loftier ideals.

People are often negligent in their use of their rapid cognition powers. Snap decisions are fragile in that they are based on limited data. They do not hold up to scrutiny and are lost if buried under the weight of external information. It is essential that we recognize the role of rapid cognition and its fallibility.

Thin-Slicing

Thin-slicing is a natural part of being human. People make quick assessments of new people they meet and have come to rely on that ability for their own well-being. It can, in fact, be a factor in one's success or failure and in some cases even in one's survival. It takes on many iterations: a basketball player has court sense; a military man has coup d'oeil, or "power of the glance." When Hollywood producer Brian Grazer first met Tom Hanks in a split second he found him likable and felt that people would relate to him. He thought he could be a star. There were young actors who were funnier, better looking



and more highly trained but Grazer had a gut reaction to Hanks that he could not dismiss. The fans proved Grazer prophetic.

John Gottman's work in assessing the relationships of married couples is reliant on thin-slicing. He was able to develop a speeded-up process that is a model for the way the unconscious mind works. The subconscious has learned to cut through the irrelevant and focus on the substance. That, in essence, is what is accomplished through thin-slicing which most often leads to successful snap decisions and judgments.

Psychologist Samuel Gosling developed an experiment called the Big Five Inventory which was an effective example of thin-slicing. In this process, people are measured on five dimensions: extraversion; agreeableness, conscientiousness; emotional stability; and openness to new experiences. By allowing perfect strangers to view the dorm rooms of students participating in the experiment, they were able to more accurately evaluate them than were close friends. The strangers "thin-sliced" the limited material they had available to them and presented assessments that were not tainted by feelings or shared experiences like those of close friends.

Gottman learned early on not to ask clients to assess their own personality. By nature, people are not objective about themselves. Gottman has used thin-slicing to devise ways to illicit aspects of personality from his subjects without direct questioning. His process focuses on an aspect of a couple's life – like their pets – to learn about the marriage without asking directly about the relationship.

When we thin-slice we can remove distractions and more easily recognize patterns that allow us to make good snap-decisions.

Priming

Psychologist John Bargh devised an experiment that focused on sets of jumbled words. Each of the four or five word groupings was to be made into a grammatically correct sentence. Although it appeared to be some sort of language or speed test it was actually a form of priming. For Bargh's purposes, the experiment was successful as evidenced by the physical state of the young students after completing the test. Each of the lines involved the elderly or alluded to aging. Words like "gray," "wrinkle," "bingo" and "Florida" were interspersed throughout the test. The adaptive consciousness of the brain was the target of the experiment. Afterward, the students moved slower and acted older. This form of priming caused the unconscious mind to think about being old. Experiments such as this one demonstrate the power of the unconscious, especially that mysterious locked area that stores data to meet the needs of rapid cognition and to enable us to make snap decisions.

Bargh and several associates conducted similar experiment with two groups of students. One group was presented with words that connoted aggressiveness and anger and the other group words associated with being kind and considerate. Both groups were instructed to walk down the hall to another room after the test. When the



“rude” group arrived, the door was blocked (intentionally) by Bargh and a colleague deep in conversation. It only took a few minutes for those primed to be aggressive to interrupt them and insist on entering the classroom. The other group that was primed to be polite, turned out to be excessively so. They never did interrupt the professor!

In another case, when primed with thoughts of being a professor, a group of students did better in a game of Trivial Pursuit than a second group primed with words associated with playing soccer. In an experiment that demonstrated the dark side of rapid cognition, black students who were first required to indicate their race on a test paper, did not fare as well as black students who did not have the same requirement. There is an on-going debate about SAT exams and how the field is not equal. The test results of white kids who come from prestigious private high schools cannot be fairly compared to those of black kids from ghetto areas and run down schools. These black students have been primed their entire life to think they are not as good or as smart as white kids their own age.

Priming is not akin to brainwashing in that the secrets of the test subjects are not sought and will not be revealed. When a person is primed, he cannot be made to do something against his will – like rob a bank – and he cannot be made to reveal his deepest, darkest secrets.

Millennium Challenge

The goal of the Millennium Challenge was to show that the fog of war could be lifted with new technology including high-powered satellites and supercomputers. Retired Marine commander Paul Van Riper was the best choice to lead the opposition team, called the Red Team, because he firmly believed that the fog of war could never be lifted no matter how many advanced methods were utilized. He believed in the conclusions of consultant Gary Klein who wrote in “Sources of Power” that those in emergency situations make successful snap decisions but do not consider all options. Klein conducted an experiment in which day traders after a long day on Wall Street played computer war games and performed brilliantly. It was easy for the traders to make quick decisions because they did so all day long.

The Millennium Challenge was a battle between two war games teams but also a battle of two philosophies. After the games began, that data gleaned from the Blue Team’s sophisticated computer programs exposed the vulnerabilities of Red Team and predicted the next moves of Commander Van Riper. Based on their findings, the Blue Team felt comfortable in demanding Rip’s surrender. But Rip didn’t behave as the computer predicted. Blue Team knocked out communication lines but Rip knew not to count on such technologies after bin Laden was taken down. Red Team led an attack on American ships in the Persian Gulf. Had the game been a real war, thousands of American soldiers and personnel would have lost their lives.

The Blue Team was defeated by the Red Team’s reliance on rapid cognition, making snap decisions about taking offensive and defensive actions as necessary. The Blue



Team took too much time discussing how the battle was impacting the enemy's economy and society, analyzing charts and graphs and planning their next moves. The freedom in decision-making was partially responsible for Red Team's victory.

Police and Rapid Cognition

John Hinckley was able to shoot President Reagan and others in his entourage because there wasn't sufficient white space between him and his target. The bodyguards didn't have the time or space to evaluate Hinckley and stop the assassination attempt. The lack of time is a hindrance to good decision making and intuitive reactions. When forced to make a decision in an extremely brief amount of time, errors in discerning the difference between the image of a wrench and the image of a gun when flashed on a screen for only a second each are often made. When a black face is flashed before the object, results show that respondents are more likely to believe that the object was a gun. When forced to make such split-second decisions, people rely on stereotypes or their own prejudices rather than actual evidence. With these factors in mind, it is possible to understand the position that police officers are sometimes placed in and the challenges they face.

Police departments across the nation are advocating one-man cars. The officers in one-man cars operate on a slower pace. When a cop is with a partner, he tends to operate at a faster pace either out of bravado or ego. Speeding up the work of a police officer leads to more errors, citizen complaints and unnecessary shootings. Police officers are trained to take specific steps that will greatly limit the chance for violent encounters. Research indicates that police officers function best when they are face-to-face with a suspect and when the suspect is in custody. Their initial approach to an incident is where the ranking of many cops declined.

Hollywood would have us believe that policemen shoot it up all the time. But the reality is that the vast majority of policemen never fire their weapons at anyone during their entire careers. In interviewing police officers who have fired at suspects, they often claim that they had extreme visual clarity during the incident – at an almost super human level; tunnel vision; impaired hearing; and a sense that everything is taking place in slow motion. This phenomenon is nature's way of allowing an individual to focus on danger – his senses are narrowed on that one event and other distractions are blocked out.

The Pepsi Challenge

In the early 1980s, Coca Cola was panicked over Pepsi Cola's growing popularity. They were chipping away at Coca Cola's dominance in the market. Pepsi created an ad campaign called the Pepsi Challenge in which Pepsi and Coca Cola were presented to consumers in blind taste tests. The majority of those participating in the challenge preferred Pepsi. Coca Cola executives scrambled to reverse the trend. The result was New Coke which abandoned the old formula for a new smoother more Pepsi-like drink.



New Coke was beating Pepsi in taste tests across the nation. But it was a disaster. Coca Cola fans rose up in outrage. There were even protests against New Coke. Responding to public outrage, Coca Cola was restored with its old formula and New Coke was sent packing. Even though Pepsi generally beats Coca Cola in taste tests, Coca Cola remains the number one soft drink by far. It is an illustration of how difficult it is to alter what is locked in the subconscious of peoples' minds.

Pepsi acknowledged that home-testing in which consumers have the two colas for several weeks have different results than quick taste tests. Testers will often choose a sweeter drink in a taste-test while they opt for a drink that is less sweet over a longer test period. Professional taste testers Gail Vance Civile and Judy Heylmun probably could not be fooled by the Pepsi taste challenge given their vast experience in delineating flavors.

Styles

Structure

“Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell is a non-fiction book and is separated into six chapters followed by a conclusion. The book focuses on the basic human ability to make split-second decisions in the blink of an eye. Although most people assume that snap decisions are chaotic and random and merely based on current circumstances, Gladwell explains why that is not the case at all. Snap decisions originate from a wealth of information that has been fed into our subconscious minds over the entirety of our lives.

This data represents everything we have been exposed to and experienced and is stored in a locked area of our subconscious that we cannot consciously explore. But when we make snap decisions we tap a narrow slice of this data that is locked in our subconscious. We base our split-second decisions on that information. It is a seamless process referred to as rapid cognition that occurs with such blinding speed that we aren't aware that it's taking place.

Gladwell provides anecdotal accounts that demonstrate this phenomenon as well as results from a vast number of experiments and research conducted by psychologists, analysts, therapists and other experts in a variety of fields who have worked with the powers of rapid cognition and the powers of the unconscious. He meticulously explains thin-slicing, priming, the dark-side of rapid cognition, the value of spontaneity, the right way to illicit rapid cognition responses, “mind reading” and learning to listen with your ears instead of your eyes.

Gladwell has structured “Blink” to enlighten the public and to create a book that is intriguing and compelling and one that engages the reader.

Perspective

“Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell is a non-fiction work with the subtitle, “The Power of Thinking without Thinking.” The book is narrated in the first person by the author. Gladwell is a staff writer for The New Yorker and worked as a reporter for the Washington Post. He is the author of best-selling non-fiction books including “The Tipping Point” and “David and Goliath” among others.

As a reporter he is disciplined to present only factual material which he confirms with reliable sources. In “Blink” he amasses a large volume of data the veracity of which he confirms through personal interviews and contact with professionals including research scientists, psychologists, analysts, scholars and other experts in various fields. As an author and storyteller, Gladwell is able to take the facts and figures derived from experiments and research studies, that stand-alone, could be viewed as mundane and



tedious and turn them into an interesting and engaging work that every reader will be able to relate to.

The perspective of “Blink” is for the most part from experiments and research from the field of psychology. For example, he taps the expertise of psychologist John Gottman from the University of Washington who is a leader in the field of relationship therapy. Gottman reveals the methodology he uses in determining if a couple has a good relationship and in predicting if their marriage or relationship will stand the test of time. A pro tennis coach is able to predict with great accuracy when a player is about to double-fault. He doesn't know how he does it but Gladwell is able to explain his ability based on the knowledge he gains from a number of experts. Through a number of experts he gets to the core causes of police shootings that result in needless tragedy.

Tone

“Blink” is a non-fiction book about an important process that all humans partake in but that many are not aware of. The author provides a detailed explanation of how we make snap decisions and all the elements they involve. When asked, most people would describe snap decisions as random and chaotic and based merely on gut feelings. However, they actually originate from a store of data and experiences that are locked in chambers in our subconscious minds that cannot be explored. While this data can't be tampered with, it can be altered by consciously exploring our biases and prejudices and inputting new and improved data into that locked box.

While the topic is serious and the material contained in “Blink” is informative and important, Gladwell tempers what could be a tedious and somber work with a light touch and interesting and anecdotal stories that heighten interest and engage the reader. It is easy to discern Gladwell's interest and fascination with the subject. That enthusiasm translates onto the pages of “Blink” and serves to make the topic of a strange-sounding term like thin-slicing palatable to the average reader.

By Gladwell's somewhat gentle approach to the topic, he doesn't force us to see ourselves and the world differently, he allows us to. He opens up the readers to the potential that exists within all of us to trust our rapid cognition but to also be aware that some information stored in our subconscious can lead us awry.



Quotes

Contempt is special. If you can measure contempt, then all of a sudden you don't need to know every detail of the couple's relationship."

-- John Gottman (chapter 1 paragraph 31)

Importance: Psychologist and marriage counselor John Gottman identified "contempt" as the most telling emotion in a relationship that is doomed to fail. Once Gottman detected contempt in one of the marriage partners, he didn't have to make assessments of the other emotions that the couple was experiencing.

It's [the unconscious] shifting through the situation in front of us, throwing out all that is irrelevant while we zero in on what really matters. And the truth is that our unconscious is really good at this, to the point where thin-slicing often delivers a better answer than more deliberate and exhaustive ways of thinking."

-- Author (chapter 1 paragraph 32)

Importance: This quote captures the premise of "Blink." Allowing the subconscious to take the lead, cuts through the minutia and gets to the heart of the matter.

Snap judgments are, first of all, enormously quick: they rely on the thinnest slices of experience. But they are also unconscious."

-- Author (chapter 2 paragraph 4)

Importance: This captures the basic process that allows people to make snap decisions. While they are based on just a relatively narrow slice of information, they are part of an unconscious process that is organic and part of being human.

As a society, we place enormous faith in tests because we think that they are a reliable indicator of the test taker's ability and knowledge. But are they really? If a white student from a prestigious private high school gets a higher SAT score than a black student from an inner-city school, is it because she's truly a better student, or is it because to be white and to attend a prestigious high school is to be constantly primed with the idea of "smart"?

-- Author (chapter 2 paragraph 17)

Importance: The adaptive unconscious can be "primed" with words, thoughts or experiences that convince the individual that he is smart, dumb or medium depending on those nature of that priming. The unconscious is powerful and can overwhelm other data that the person may have access to.

Part of what it means to take thin-slicing and first impressions seriously is accepting the fact that sometimes we can know more about someone or something in the blink of an eye than we can after months of study. But we also have to acknowledge and understand those circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray."

-- Author (chapter 3 paragraph 8)



Importance: While the author advocates making snap decisions on gut feelings, he warns that the subconscious can sometimes misfire, hold fast to a misjudgment and continue to emanate it.

Say you are looking at a chess board. If there anything you can't see? No. But are you guaranteed to win? Not at all, because you can't see what the other guy is thinking.”
-- Paul Van Riper (chapter 4 paragraph 88)

Importance: Paul Van Riper was the Commander of Mike Company during the Vietnam War. He emphasizes the virtues of making snap decisions as opposed to gathering intel that slows the process down because knowing more does not translate to victory.

We like market research because it provides certainty – a score, a prediction; if someone asks us why we made the decision we did, we can point to a number. But the truth is that for the most important decisions, there can be no certainty.”
-- Author (chapter 5 paragraph 50)

Importance: Market research has its values, but in some cases the results of focus groups and polls are misleading especially when an idea is new and fresh. In such cases, decisions must be made on gut reactions and value systems.

Our unconscious reactions come out of a locked room, and we can't look inside that room. But with experience we become expert at using our behavior and our training to interpret – and decode – what lies behind our snap judgments and first impressions.”
-- Author (chapter 5 paragraph 63)

Importance: The author emphasizes the importance of being in touch with our subconscious as much as that is possible. Doing so, we will be able to better understand why we made snap judgments and to accurately analyze our first impressions.

I was watching his facial expressions, and I said to my wife, ‘This is Peck’s Bad Boy. This is a guy who wants to be caught with his hand in the cookie jar and have us love him for it anyway.”
-- Paul Ekman (chapter 6 paragraph 35)

Importance: Paul Ekman who is an expert on facial expressions had this reaction when he saw Bill Clinton on TV for the first time.

We think of the face as the residue of emotion. What research showed, though is that the process works in the opposite direction as well. Emotion can start on the face. The face is not a secondary billboard for our internal feelings. It is an equal partner in the emotional process.”
-- Author (chapter 6 paragraph 40)

Importance: Facial expressions are directly linked to emotions and experts can detect



emotions that are both voluntary and involuntary. Emotions and facial expressions are both important in assessing an individual's intentions and are essential for "mind reading."

Our voluntary expressive system is the way we intentionally signal our emotions. But our involuntary expressive system is in many ways even more important: it is the way we have been equipped by evolution to signal our authentic feelings."

-- Author (chapter 6 paragraph 44)

Importance: Snap judgments about a person and a prediction of their behavior are at least in part based on facial expressions. Involuntary expressions are inexorably linked to authentic emotions that reside in the subconscious.

Some people look like they sound better than they actually sound, because they look confident and have good posture. Other people look awful when they play but sound great. Other people have that belabored look when they play, but you can't hear it in the sound. There is always this dissonance between what you see and hear."

-- Musician (Conclusion paragraph 10)

Importance: This comment from a veteran musician captures the reason why most modern orchestras have adapted a process in which auditions are performed behind screens. Those selecting the musicians possessed biases against women and minorities and one's physical appearance that precluded some wonderful musicians from being asked to join major orchestras. Using a screen got around biases and preconceived ideas of what a musician should look like.



Topics for Discussion

1

What is the “yes-but” defense used by one partner in a relationship? What is the downfall of such a tactic? What are subtle signs of a good or bad relationship?

2

How are patterns in a relationship comparable to the Morse code and why is it important to therapists? What are the “positive override” and the “negative override” and how do they impact a relationship?

3

Describe a scenario where thin-slicing is effective and one where it is not. What elements factor into successful thin-slicing and under what circumstances can results be skewed?

4

How are snap judgments made? Our subconscious is a part of us. Why does hidden information reside in the subconscious that is locked away behind a door that we cannot open?

5

What is unconscious prejudice and how can it be altered? What are the ramifications of unconscious prejudice?

6

Why is improvisational comedy a perfect example of “Blink” thinking? How is it possible to “rehearse” improv which has no scripts or direction?

7

Visualize Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein. Now try to describe them in words. What are the challenges presented by this task representative of?



8

What does height have to do with the successful businessmen and why? Why do some black students do poorly on an exam if they have to indicate their race prior to being tested?

9

What led the New York cops to stop and question Amadou Diallo? Why did he run instead of answering them? Why did the cops think Diallo had a gun? What does this situation tell us about making split decisions?

10

Why did the German Philharmonic audition musicians behind a screen? What biases existed within the conductor and select committee about the musicians they hired?