

Why Some People Think They Are Always Right: Fact or Bias?

Ever meet someone who is confident about being right, even if the issue seems controversial? Maybe they have a belief that politicians are crooks, or that a certain individual is a demon, or some such a view. You get the idea. How do people accept their certitude when it could be a controversial issue, or when it seems oversimplified? Well, human nature is at it again, and a study of it can help us understand this.

Psychologists and cognitive scientists have studied this human tendency and even named it. It's called a "confirmation bias." A confirmation bias is a type of thinking where we tend to stress or only see evidence that supports our personal view, and where we tend to ignore or diminish contrary evidence. For example, every time a newspaper article appears that shows corruption in politics, biased people who want to believe that politicians are crooks will say "I told you so!" And they will ignore the very next article that praises a politician for outstanding public service. They may not be completely aware that they are doing this.

The other example mentioned is the demonization of another. Every time an individual does something with a negative effect or something that is blameworthy, the biased will say "Yes, I knew it. It's as I suspected. He/she is a slimy character (or some such comment)." But they ignore the many times the individual does something praiseworthy. Their bias creates an inaccurate view of the person, which surprisingly can influence other people. An examination of history of just the last century sadly shows how demonization can be ridiculously unfair, but yet very effective.

It is probably very human to judge others, but how far do we go? Maybe a good guideline is that a person's one action or involvement in a single event *does not define the character* of that person; it only reveals what happened under a certain condition at a certain time. Judging actions seems very reasonable and is simpler than judging people.

Even though a bias can seem to have a positive effect in some cases, it is still a bias and as such promotes inaccuracy. Probably we all have some kinds of bias, but just being aware of this tendency can help us to be more objective. This is an important issue in many situations. Do you want a biased person investigating some colleague or issue and then reporting? Certainly not. They may have a strong bias in the way they collect evidence and present it. Collegial ethics stresses knowing our tendencies and striving to be objective, fair and supportive in our judgments and actions.

Much has been written about confirmation bias, and a visit to the internet or appropriate textbooks can help us understand it, identify it, and deal with it.

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