

## 4 | Cognitive Biases

### Individual Habits and Social Beliefs

In chapter 3 we considered how the history of argument and debate was linked with aggression and the idea of conquering your opponent. We also considered how this history combines with the strong emotional content of our social identity to create fertile ground for pseudoreasoning. We considered how cooperative reasoning, the third skill of an intellectually empathic critical thinker, provides us with a better model for thinking and reasoning about social identity issues as compared with the adversarial method. Yet even if we work to argue cooperatively about social identity and social differences, there are still some common habits we are all prone to when forming and organizing our beliefs. In this chapter we will look at some of these habits and the ways they can work against our ability to reason cooperatively, critically, and empathically when it comes to social differences.

The mistakes we will consider here affect our ability to take in information and form acceptable beliefs. Psychologists and argument theorists use the term “cognitive bias” to refer to the ways that individuals are prone to particular kinds of habits when we take in and process information. There is a second type of pseudoreasoning called *fallacies* that we will consider in chapter 5, and these occur in outward expressions when we communicate and interact with others. Both cognitive biases and fallacies can seem persuasive, despite the fact that they often contain false, misleading, or irrelevant information.

We have the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to thank for doing some of the very first work documenting fallacies.<sup>1</sup> Knowing how important public dialogue was to public policy, Aristotle sought a way to organize the mistakes that people made in speeches, arguments, and debates so that those mistakes would be easy for ordinary citizens to identify. When it comes to cognitive biases, we have the psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman to thank for their pioneering work in the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Tversky and Kahneman were interested in whether people actually

reasoned according to rational choice theory, a popular model for understanding human behavior in economics and political science. What they discovered instead is that many people seem to use *heuristics*, which are rules that make processing information simpler for the brain but nevertheless systematically introduce errors in our reasoning.

Keeping in mind the web of belief, let's consider some of the common cognitive biases that can affect the way we take in and position beliefs within our weblike system. Remember that beliefs positioned at the core of our web are practically impossible to revise because a change at the core will have dramatic repercussions for the structure of the entire web. Beliefs that lie more on the periphery are much easier to revise because they have less influence on the entire structure. We said that confirmation bias, a cognitive bias we are already familiar with from chapter 1, works to reinforce and strengthen connections in our web because it motivates us to take in information that is consistent with our existing set of beliefs. At the same time, confirmation bias works to exclude or dismiss information that is inconsistent with our web of belief. This means that our cognitive habit is to not seek out information and evidence that could disconfirm our already existing system of beliefs. This habit has some practical value. If we take in available information and begin to form a coherent web of belief, then we move through the world more efficiently (though not necessarily more effectively) if we do not have to attend to every counterinstance and contrary occurrence. The young child who has come to believe that Brussels sprouts taste bad does not ordinarily waste time considering whether this belief may be false, nor does the child seek out different kinds of Brussels sprouts experiences to test her or his belief. Like most of us, the child holds on to that belief until something forces her or him to challenge it, leading the child to either reconsider or seek out new evidence. While this is an efficient strategy for preserving beliefs, it can mean that we miss out on important evidence as well as experiences that could challenge our beliefs. So, though cognitive biases can have practical value, they are not always aligned with good critical thinking.

When it comes to beliefs about social identity and social issues, there are several cognitive biases that appear with frequency in dialogues and debates. Again, these biases (and the same will be true of fallacies) only become *bad* habits when we rely on them at the cost of gathering and considering actual available evidence relevant to an issue under consideration. In other words, biases and fallacies are *context sensitive*.

For instance, if I asked you to go out and find as much information as possible confirming a particular belief you had about Mexican immigrants in the United States and you came back with a whole host of evidence that

did confirm your belief about Mexican immigrants in the United States, you would not be guilty of a confirmation bias. The evidence is relevant because I asked you specifically to retrieve information that would confirm *your* belief. If I asked you to gather information about the situation of Mexican immigrants in the United States in general, the bias would occur if you only retrieved information confirming the beliefs you have about Mexican immigrants. The issue in the former case is whether or not you found evidence to confirm your beliefs about Mexican immigrants in the United States, and the issue in the latter case is whether or not you found credible evidence about Mexican immigrants in the United States in general. The point of carefully attending to this distinction is that when the issue involves some aspect of social identity, it is quite common for people to mistake evidence for their own beliefs as relevant evidence in general. If you are not considering all acceptable evidence, even evidence that does not align with your own beliefs, then you are not thinking critically.

### Seven Cognitive Biases in Arguments about Social Differences

Let's start by considering seven of the most common cognitive biases that cause people to misread or misinterpret evidence so as to support their existing web of belief. These are (1) actor-observer bias, (2) in-group bias, (3) group polarization, (4) out-group homogeneity effect, (5) status quo bias, (6) false consensus bias, and (7) hostile media effect.

*Actor-observer bias* refers to the tendency to judge our own behavior as resulting from the particular circumstances we are in rather than some general fact about our personality. Yet when we judge other people, we are more likely to attribute their behavior to their character rather than to external, situational factors. Interestingly, researchers have found that people tend to succumb less to actor-observer bias when it comes to judging the behavior of close friends and family members.<sup>3</sup> The explanation is that when we know more about people's beliefs, desires, and motivations, we are more likely to account for the external forces that impact their behavior. The less we know, the more likely we are to attribute their behavior to internal factors. This gives us further evidence for why online dialogues and debates between strangers can be breeding grounds for faulty reasoning. A good example of actor-observer bias can be seen in this comment following an article that appeared on CNN online following a story titled "The Return of the Welfare Queen." The commenter DebbieIndiana states:

I am a single mother and when my daughter was little I decided to go back to school to earn my nursing degree. I was in a tough situation financially and so I applied for food stamps. I used them for a time but I got off them once I could earn a decent living. Most of these people today though on food stamps just want a free handout and they expect everyone else to take care of them.<sup>4</sup>

This commenter is able to see the structural reasons that led to her temporary need for food stamps, but when it comes to others she attributes their use of food stamps to laziness and an unwillingness to work. Notice that the claim referring to "most people" does not provide any evidence to justify the belief that welfare recipients "want a free handout and everyone else to take care of them." Rather, it seems that DebbieIndiana is biased in favor of a structural explanation to make sense of her previous difficult circumstances but is not biased in favor of a structural explanation for strangers in a similar situation. In this way, actor-observer bias can lead to far more compassionate interpretations of our own behavior and the behaviors of those close to us and far less empathic interpretations of the behaviors of those we do not know personally.

Similarly, *in-group bias*, which refers to our tendency to prefer people whom we believe belong to the same groups that we do, can lead us to minimize or discount people whom we believe belong to groups with which we do not identify. It does not seem necessary that we have to have overt negative beliefs about out-group members for social bias and stereotyping to play a role in our thinking. As social psychologist Marilyn Brewer put it in her summary of the evidence, "Ultimately, many forms of discrimination and bias may develop not because out-groups are hated, but because positive emotions such as admiration, sympathy, and trust are reserved for the in-group."<sup>5</sup> In-group bias is context sensitive in the sense that the groups with which we identify can vary in significance and priority depending on the context. For instance, if we attend a sports event, our identification with fans of the team we prefer will be more prominent during the game than our identification with other groups to which we belong. Similarly, when we are not at the sporting event and are instead at an ethnic festival celebrating our cultural heritage, our identification with the sports team will be far less prominent.

Because in-group bias is sensitive to context, it can lead individuals and groups who might not ordinarily prioritize a certain aspect of their identity to suddenly become consciously aware and protective of that identity. If the issue of gender is raised, for instance, a group of people who ordinarily have

a lot in common could suddenly shift to identifying with only those who share their gender. If a debate about gender arises, the third cognitive bias, *group polarization*, can play a role. Group polarization refers to the way our individual beliefs and attitudes can become more extreme and more rigidified in the presence of other members of our social group. In other words, our tendency to identify with others in our social group can lead us to a common view that is more extreme than an average view. The outcome of in-group bias is that arguments within and between groups wind up generating extreme beliefs and attitudes rather than midpoints between extremes.

If we include the *out-group homogeneity effect* in our analysis, we can see why many people tend to judge as extremists those with whom they debate and who are outside of their social group while judging those within their own group as having more varied and nuanced perspectives. Out-group homogeneity effect refers to the tendency to see those in the out-group as all alike and interchangeable and even expendable while viewing the in-group as made up of unique and diverse individuals.

The combined effect of in-group bias, group polarization, and out-group homogeneity can lead to dialogues such as the following that occurred between three posters commenting in Time Magazine Online (December 2012) on an article about gun violence:

LuvMyGuns: It is not guns that need to be controlled in Chicago, it is some of its citizens who think their answers to most everything is pulling a trigger. Obama's gun control laws will only wind up punishing legitimate citizens who own firearms.

DionysBeer: Removing guns from gangs makes it harder for them to kill as many people. I'd think even the most ardent gun fanatic would see a value in taking guns from gang members.

CliffCabbage: Chicago has some of the strictest gun control laws in the country and it is the murder capital of the United States. Obviously gun control laws aren't effective at getting guns away from gang members.

LuvMyGuns: Exactly!

DionysBeer: We have laws that prohibit drunk driving. People still drive drunk so do you propose that we give up those laws? Of course not, you still support the laws because it is better than not having any!

CliffCabbage: Yeah but we don't take away cars or alcohol from people if they are caught driving drunk. We punish the people driving.

These new gun control laws are going to make it easy for the government to take my guns.

LuvMyGuns: Anyone with common sense can see that gun laws don't work!

DionysBeer: You NRA skills are all the same. You need a gun to prove your masculinity and hide that fact by using words like "freedom" and "patriot."<sup>6</sup>

The dialogue begins with LuvMyGuns stating that more gun control laws will not lead to a decrease in violence in Chicago and will only serve to restrict or punish those who legally own guns. DionysBeer makes the point that making guns harder to obtain will result in fewer guns in the hands of gang members. CliffCabbage then enters the discussion and makes the point that Chicago has some of the strictest gun control laws in the nation and yet has one of the highest rates of gun-related violence. LuvMyGuns sees this as supporting evidence and exclaims "Exactly!" LuvMyGuns now has an ally in the debate. DionysBeer then makes the point that drinking and driving laws, which have not eliminated drunk driving, have nevertheless reduced the number of incidents. CliffCabbage retorts that those laws are not analogous since they do not restrict the use of alcohol or driving but instead punish the person driving under the influence. With CliffCabbage and LuvMyGuns aligned as members of an in-group, their position, as expressed by LuvMyGuns's statement "gun laws in general will not work" is now more extreme than LuvMyGuns's original claim that Obama's efforts at gun control may wind up punishing noncriminal gun owners. The transition to this more extreme position can be attributed to group polarization. DionysBeer ends the debate employing the out-group homogeneity effect by casting all those who oppose stricter gun laws as all alike and simple-minded. No doubt DionysBeer views him/herself and those who share his/her views on gun control as more sophisticated and nuanced in their thinking and less monolithic than those "NRA skills."

Our fifth cognitive bias, *status quo bias*, refers to an unjustified preference for the current state of affairs. The mistake here is thinking that any change is equal to a loss. Unless we evaluate available evidence, we cannot assume beforehand that a change in the current conditions will result in a negative outcome. We can see evidence of this bias in many public reactions to the changing demographics in the United States. The Pew Research Center has reported that by 2050, whites who are currently 70 percent of the U.S. population will make up only 47 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup> The largest growth in population will come from Hispanic and Asian groups, and a

much smaller proportion of these groups will be foreign born as compared with 2005 data. By 2025, the rise of the immigrant population in the United States will surpass the peak of immigration nearly a century ago. Estimates are that by 2050, one in five Americans (19 percent) will be immigrants as compared with one in eight (12 percent) in 2005. In response to these predicted changes, some white Americans have voiced their anxiety and even fear that they will face oppression as the new minority. Sociologist Charles Gallagher, who researches white racial attitudes, was baffled to discover that many whites find themselves to be an embattled minority group following the news of changing demographics.<sup>8</sup> Comments such as the following by “SKACALL2010” sum up this anxiety:

I wouldn't say we're oppressed. . . . But I definitely see it coming down the road. We have a harder time getting jobs and getting into college because we're white, and because public colleges (and many private ones) give preference to other races. Many companies are more likely to hire you if you're not white, and most levels of government have diversity policies that require them to give hiring preference to people who aren't white. We have a whole system devoted to making it harder for white people to survive in America. It's so sad!<sup>9</sup>

We can say several things about this anxiety relative to the status quo bias. One, if a group has benefitted from being in the majority, a change in that status will be anticipated as a coming loss rather than as a neutral or positive outcome. What is worth noting is that this expectation is a bias rather than the result of considering available evidence. If whites have not had advantages in virtue of being a racial majority, then why worry about shifting to a minority status? The worry reveals that there is a belief that by shifting from majority to minority status, whites will lose advantages. This anxiety is expressed by SKACALL2010 in the comment above when s/he says that it is “harder for white people to survive in America.” Is this reasonable in light of the available evidence?

Let's consider the claim that it is getting harder for whites to get jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for black male college graduates 25 and older in 2009 was twice that of white male college graduates, with a rate of 8.4 percent as compared with 4.4 percent. A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Labor Economics* found that white, Asian, and Hispanic managers tended to hire more whites and fewer blacks than did black managers.<sup>10</sup> The Economic Policy Institute reports that between March 2013 and February 2014, nationwide unemployment

rates were 5.8 percent for whites, 8.1 percent for Hispanics, and 12.0 percent for blacks. These elevated rates have grown since 2007 along with the racial disparities. In 2007, the nationwide unemployment rates were 4.1 for whites, 5.6 for Hispanics, and 8.3 for blacks.<sup>11</sup>

For the past four decades through good economic times and bad, the black unemployment rate has been roughly double that for whites. The disparity is evident across education levels and occupations, which complicates efforts to close it. It is simply not true that it is harder for whites to get jobs because they are white as compared with other racial and ethnic groups, and there is no evidence to suggest that it will become harder. This is especially so when we consider how important friends, networks, and connections are for getting a job. The more people who are established in positions of management and leadership, the more chances are that people they know and connect with will fill open positions. Of course, this is not to say that merit alone can never win out over personal connections, but if someone does not feel like the right fit from the point of view of a manager, it will be harder for merit to prevail.

What about the concern that it is becoming harder for whites to get into college because of affirmative action policies and the changing demographics of the population? Research has shown that only the top 20 percent of colleges actually consider racial preferences when making admissions decisions.<sup>12</sup> This is because these colleges receive many more applications as compared with available slots, and the admissions criteria are very rigorous. Other things being equal (grades, test scores, writing samples), an underrepresented racial minority might take preference over a majority student for a coveted slot in the same way that a talented athlete or musician would. Assuming that 15 percent of students selected at these schools are black or Hispanic and that absolutely all of them are accepted based on their race (given comparable test scores, grades, etc.), this would make affirmative action just 3 percent of all selective college admissions in a year.

University of Chicago economist Brent Hickman discovered a similar estimate in his research.<sup>13</sup> Hickman found that affirmative action reduces nonminority enrollment at the top one-fourth of schools by about 4.2 percent a year. This means that at a university such as Harvard, which received 35,000 applications for admission in 2011 and accepted only 6.2 percent (2,065 students), if we assume that 60 percent (1,239) of those students are white (a conservative estimate), affirmative action would give roughly 34 seats to nonwhite students (4.2 percent of the remaining 826, or 40 percent, accepted) that could have gone to whites. Remember that 35,000 students overall applied. So, if fewer than 2 percent of all accepted students

benefitted from affirmative action and this rate is only relevant at the most elite colleges and universities, why is it so common for whites to feel that they are being cheated in college admissions by affirmative action policies?

In a paper titled “Affirmative Action and Its Mythology,” Harvard economist Roland Fryer and Brown University economist Glen Loury explain this feeling by drawing an analogy with parking.<sup>14</sup> Suppose a single unused parking space in front of a popular restaurant in a crowded city is reserved for disabled drivers. Nondisabled drivers who observe the unused space while trying to park might resent this policy, imagining that it prolongs their parking search. But when parking is tight it is likely that, even if the disabled space were not reserved, it would have already been taken by the time any given driver came along. The result is that many nondisabled drivers will overestimate their chance of getting the unreserved space if only it were not reserved for the disabled. Hence, the perceived policy favoring the disabled is seen as a high cost for the nondisabled, despite the fact that the policy has a negligible effect on the mean duration of a parking search. So too, Fryer and Loury argue, are the perceived costs to whites from racial affirmative action in higher education.

In other words, even though it is unlikely that we would ever get that spot right in front of the restaurant, the fact that it is specially earmarked for someone other than us means that we overestimate its value while we are driving around looking for a spot. In the same way, many whites overestimate the few benefits and protections afforded to nonwhite Americans. This overestimation combined with the status quo bias helps us to understand the anxiety that many white Americans seem to have about changing demographics. However, this anxiety and biased thinking can significantly get in the way of actually considering the available evidence. Moreover, it generates comments such as that by “BRAVI,” a commenter following a CNN news story titled “Are Whites Racially Oppressed”:

You don't have to be a Tea-Partyer or a white supremacist to see that the US has a ton of programs supporting minorities and uplifting and celebrating minority communities (scholarships, community and student groups, etc.) but few if any designed specifically for whites. For example, I currently attend a top-100 American university, am white, and receive ZERO aid despite my parents having average income. I also know of many other white students who receive zero financial aid, and whose parents live fairly humbly. However, I have African American friends who are dropped off by their parents in shiny new Mercedes and have huge flat-screens in their rooms,

and they've told me they receive significant financial aid. Is it wrong that whites feel like a dispossessed majority when any attempts to celebrate our identity are labeled racist, and such injustices as that listed above occur on a daily basis?<sup>15</sup>

BRAVI makes two substantive claims in this comment. The first is that the United States, while having “tons of programs” to support and celebrate minorities, has “few if any designed specifically for whites,” and if whites participate they are labeled racists for celebrating their racial identity. Second, while there are ample scholarship and financial aid opportunities for minorities, BRAVI claims that there are “ZERO” for whites. Let's take each of these claims in turn.

First, is it true that there are no programs to support and celebrate whites? One aspect of racial privilege, as we discussed in chapter 3, is that it is often invisible to those who have it. People who identify (and are identified) as white are more likely to pick out their ethnicity rather than their race when asked “What are you?” For example, many whites with European ancestry will respond by saying “I'm Italian” or “I'm half German and half Irish” rather than “I'm white.” It is a feature of privilege that those who have it experience an incredible range and variety within their privilege but see a monolithic “them” when they perceive others. The idea that “they” all “look alike” or “sound alike” or “believe the same thing” is perpetuated by people with privilege who do not have to really learn about the complexity and variety of nonprivileged groups. So while BRAVI may feel that there is nothing specifically that celebrates whiteness in our culture, he ignores the preponderance of European American festivals, clubs, societies, and holidays. Moreover, when we celebrate our nation's history, our leaders—our most beloved statesmen, writers, scientists, and artists—are overwhelmingly white (and male). The few recent examples of nonwhite leaders, athletes, and artists who are celebrated are notable because of a long history in which such accomplishments were rendered almost impossible because of racist laws and policies.

BRAVI's second claim—that there are no scholarships for whites—also fails to account for “white” being equated with European American. Many of the clubs, societies, and European American organizations referred to earlier award scholarships to their members' children and members of their community. In fact, Mark Kantrowitz, a financial aid analyst, explains that “while there are very few private scholarships that are explicitly targeted at white students as a category, white students receive a disproportionately greater share of private scholarships and merit-based grants. White

students receive more than three times as much in merit-based grant and private scholarship funding as minority students.<sup>16</sup> In the case of private scholarships, while the focus is not on white students, the scholarship sponsors tend to establish funding for characteristics, activities, and talents of interest to them. These factors in turn tend to resonate for students with backgrounds similar to the sponsors. So, scholarships for equestrian sports, water sports, winter sports, golf, archery, rodeo, and wrestling tend to go to white students rather than black, Hispanic, or Asian students. Similarly, private scholarships based on a European national origin or heritage such as German, French, Czech, Danish, Polish, Italian, Irish, etc., will predominantly or exclusively go to white recipients. State scholarships from areas with a large majority of white residents such as Montana, Idaho, North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Utah, Maine, New Hampshire, Iowa, and Nebraska will award scholarships to local residents who happen to be white. Finally, scholarships based on field of study and even religious affiliation will break down along race lines, with a larger majority going to white students.

In terms of merit-based scholarships, Kantrowitz attributes the disproportionate number received by white students again not as overt discrimination against students of color but instead as the result of economic and educational disparities based on race. Middle-class and wealthier students are likely to be white and more likely to have access to educational resources and well-funded schools. This too is the outcome of a long history of racial discrimination and institutionalized racism that made it much harder for nonwhites to have access to education and equal opportunity. Yet when middle-class and wealthier white students are recipients of merit scholarships, they tend to attribute their success to their own innate intelligence and hard work rather than the advantages they had in virtue of their wealth and social privilege. This is not to deny that white recipients of merit scholarships have worked hard. Rather, their hard work was bolstered by the advantages of growing up in middle-class and wealthy communities where the vocabulary, the school systems, the cultural reference points, and even the social and recreational activities closely matched the requirements for higher education. In addition, having parents who have navigated the college experience themselves and can provide tutors and extra help for what may be lacking means that success is in part the result of some unearned advantages.

When people with social privilege mistakenly attribute their success solely to their own hard work rather than to unearned structural advantages, they also mistakenly perceive anyone who has not achieved success as lacking innate intelligence and the ability to work hard. This explains

why someone like BRAVI may feel that there are no scholarships for whites because merit scholarships are given out on the basis of merit, which from his mistaken point of view has nothing to do with race or class.

The group biases involving in-group bias, group polarization, and out-group homogeneity effect and the status quo bias work together to create the erroneous assumption that whites are suffering at the expense of special rights and privileges afforded to nonwhites. The presumption that a right or privilege afforded to a minority group will take something away from the majority is all-or-nothing thinking. Yet if we look at our nation's history of affording rights, it is often the case that what was considered a special right for a particular social group winds up translating to a broader human right.

Consider maternity leave, which was a hotly contested legal matter throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Opponents to protected maternity leave argued that it was extending a special right to a subset of the labor force. Defenders of the measure argued that pregnant women were not a special interest group but instead were a normal part of the working population. This led to a public reconceptualization of what constitutes a "worker." The question arose, Does the idea of a lone adult male who neither becomes pregnant nor has any family responsibilities present an accurate picture of the typical worker? The decidedly negative response to that question extended the discussion of maternity benefits to a broader public discussion of family responsibilities that led to the 1993 Family Medical Leave Act. This federal law extended job protections for qualified medical and family reasons, including personal or family illness, family military leave, pregnancy, adoption, or the foster care placement of a child. So, what was initially seen as a special right just for pregnant women actually provided an opportunity for a broader discussion about human rights and the concept of worker rights. If we are only capable of an all-or-nothing reaction to proposals for extending rights and benefits, then we lose the opportunity to reflect on our concepts and revise our beliefs.

As intellectually empathic critical thinkers, what should we learn from these examples of group biases and white perceptions of shrinking opportunities and unfair advantages afforded to nonwhites? Should we just chalk it up to prejudice, selfishness, and flat-out racism? Perhaps in some cases the answer is simply "yes." But I would argue that in most cases the answer is likely more complex and nuanced. In addition, by adopting a more intellectually empathic perspective we could solicit more relevant evidence, which would in turn give us a better understanding of these seemingly irrational and biased beliefs.

The first step toward doing this is recognizing that whites, like other racially identified groups, are neither all the same nor all equally privileged.<sup>18</sup>

Poor and working-class whites are often pitted against poor and working-class people of color when it comes to limited rights and goods. I have often found, for instance, that more of my white students who come from poor and working-class families will object to rights afforded to undocumented immigrant workers than will white students who come from middle-class and wealthier families. This may be so in part because poor and working-class whites have good reasons to feel that there is already so little opportunity to go around that when rights are afforded to noncitizens, it is perceived as a loss of resources they should have as citizens.

Another factor contributing to the feeling that many whites have that there are opportunities for everyone else but them is their thin ancestral history and mixed or unknown ethnic identity. Many white Americans are the descendants of European immigrants who came to the United States fleeing religious persecution, war, poverty, and famine. Those histories were often painful in their own right, and though many of those immigrants had the advantage of assimilating into white Anglo-Saxon systems of privilege, there were still costs. Native languages were suppressed, customs and traditions eroded, and family histories were often lost or destroyed, just to survive. The result is that for many white Americans, their knowledge of their ancestral history only goes back one or two generations, and their sense of a specific culture and tradition is unclear or absent. While this does not compare to the horror of the kidnapping, enslavement, and persecution that devastated so many African American families or the violence committed against Native Americans, there is nevertheless loss and pain in the histories of many who today are considered to be white Americans. As we said earlier, when asked their ethnicity, many whites in the United States will say things like “I don’t know, some German, French, Scottish on my mother’s side and Italian, Irish, English on my father’s side,” reflecting the patchwork identities of successful assimilation. But with that success comes the costs of not having an ancestral home or a history tied to a specific place or culture. For this reason, many whites may overestimate and even resent efforts to value racial and ethnic identities. Efforts to celebrate Chinese culture or Indian heritage or African American history can be reminders to whites that they have had to give up more specific ethnic or racial identities. So, it may seem—incorrectly—that there are all sorts of ways that “everyone else” is valued and they are not.

The point I want to make, then, is that despite data and evidence to the contrary, many whites still believe that there are fewer opportunities for

whites and that nonwhites seem to get special treatment in terms of social benefits. Rather than judging this as simply racist, I suggest that we instead consider how the invisibility of privilege can combine with class differences as well as a loss of ethnic and racial history to create the mistaken impression that everyone except for whites is afforded special opportunities.

Another bias related to beliefs about groups is *false consensus bias*. This cognitive bias occurs when we overestimate how much people agree with our beliefs, opinions, preferences, and values. This does not mean we assume that everyone believes what we believe. Rather, we assume that what we believe is the common view and is much more widely held than any evidence indicates. False consensus bias operates in interesting ways with regard to group beliefs and dynamics. For instance, group members who are prone to false consensus bias come to believe that others in the wider population share their group’s collective opinion. Since people generally do not seek out disconfirming evidence for their beliefs (confirmation bias), the effect of false consensus goes unchallenged.

For example, when a friend of mine who taught at a college in New England decided to take a new job at a small college in the rural South, he was shocked to find so many faculty members who regularly attended church. This friend was an atheist, and in the community he left, all the intellectual and creative people he knew did not identify with any organized religion, nor did they regularly attend religious services. So, my friend came to believe that scholars and artists and intellectuals did not participate in organized religion. Of course, his belief remained unchallenged as long as he remained within that community but was significantly tested when he relocated. The experience led him to revise his web of belief, particularly those beliefs having to do with the relationship between intelligence, creativity, and religion.

The final cognitive bias that we will consider is *hostile media effect*, which was first documented by Stanford psychologists in a 1985 study.<sup>19</sup>

The researchers recruited 144 Stanford students with differing views about the crises in the Middle East. The students initially filled out questionnaires detailing their general knowledge of the massacres of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila in 1982. The students were also asked about their general sympathies toward either the Palestinians or the Israelis. The researchers then divided the groups into pro-Israeli, pro-Arab, and neutral cohorts. These groups viewed identical news clips about the incident in groups of 6–12. After the viewing, students were asked to fill out forms regarding the objectivity and fairness of the news segments. This included such things as the percentage of favorable, neutral, and unfavorable references to Israel as

well as an estimation regarding how many neutral viewers would change to more positive or negative views about Israel.

The results of the study showed that the cohorts who were nonneutral saw the news reports as biased in favor of the other side. Pro-Arabs thought that the programs applied lower standards to Israel and focused less on Israel's role in massacre. The pro-Israeli group saw exactly the opposite. Both groups felt that the personal views of the news staff were in opposition to their own. Further analysis showed that the two groups actually "saw" different news programs. The pro-Arabs heard 42 percent opinions favorable to Israel and 26 percent unfavorable. The pro-Israeli group saw 16 percent favorable and 57 percent unfavorable. Besides being perceived differently, the program content was also evaluated differently. Perhaps most interesting is that the more knowledgeable students were about the incident, the more they believed that the media presented biased content.

One of the things we can learn from this study is that charges of bias against the media may come most forcefully from those who have the strongest beliefs and the most information regarding a social or political issue. Yet even though these same people might possess relevant evidence about the issue, those at either end of the extreme will perceive the very same information as unfavorable to their view as well as factually inconsistent with what they know. This may seem like the opposite of confirmation bias in that knowledgeable people with strong beliefs will attend primarily to news reports that run counter to their beliefs. Yet this is not so different from confirmation bias if we assume that the starting assumption for those with strong beliefs is that the media is biased. If this is assumed, then it makes sense that those susceptible to hostile media bias will attend to evidence that confirms their belief that the media is biased. That is, these folks are not actually looking for evidence to counter or disconfirm their beliefs about the social or political issue but instead are looking for evidence to confirm their belief that the media does not objectively report the news.

### Questions to Counter the Effects of Cognitive Biases

So, what conclusions should we draw from exploring these seven cognitive biases? First, there is a lot of evidence to show that these biases occur frequently in the thinking of ordinarily reasonable people. This means that we should pay careful attention to whether the biases are operating in our own arguments and the arguments presented by others. Second, the prevalence

of these biases should put the following questions at the forefront of our thinking and reasoning about issues related to social differences:

- When I explain my problems and the problems facing people like me, do I attribute those problems to external conditions rather than to my own behavior? And when I explain the problems facing people who are not like me, do I attribute those problems to their behavior rather than external conditions?
- Do I prefer the people who are like me in circumstances where identity becomes the issue? Do I have the tendency to take a stronger position than I would normally when I believe that people like me are under attack? Do I believe that people like me are much more reasonable and varied in their opinions about our social group and that those who are not like me are much more rigid and extreme?
- Do I prefer that things remain the way they are in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and immigrant rights because changes will bring about worse conditions for me (and people like me)?
- Am I confident in my social beliefs because most everyone I care about and spend time with shares these beliefs (rather than because I have actually challenged or tested them by seeking evidence outside of my family and friends)?
- Do I pay attention to media reports that I judge to be unfair to me and people like me and ignore those that I believe to be in favor of other groups?

By carefully keeping these questions in mind and paying attention to how we take in and process information, we can reduce the effects of cognitive biases in our beliefs about social differences. In the next chapter we will consider fallacies, the pseudoreasoning that affects the way we construct and present arguments when trying to communicate our social beliefs to others.

### Questions for Review

1. What is the difference between finding evidence to support your belief on an issue as compared with finding evidence about the issue in general? How does the failure to make this distinction contribute to confirmation bias?
2. Give an example from your own experience where one of the following cognitive biases played a role in your thinking:
  - Actor-observer bias
  - In-group bias
  - Group polarization
  - Out-group homogeneity effect
3. What are some of the fears that white Americans have about becoming a minority in the near future? How is this related to the status quo bias?
4. How has the transition from maternity leave to the Family Medical Leave Act demonstrated the way that a special right can become a human right?
5. What is one of the conclusions we can draw from the study of pro-Israeli and pro-Arab viewers of news reports on the massacres of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila in 1982?

### Questions for Further Thinking and Writing

1. Describe the analogy that economists Roland Fryer and Glen Loury make between white attitudes about affirmative action and a parking spot reserved for the disabled. What are the strengths of this analogy? What are the weaknesses? Can you think of a better analogy to make the same point?
2. Choose one of the questions in the section “Questions to Counter the Effects of Cognitive Biases” toward the end of this chapter and write a response reflecting on a particular experience when you were subject to a cognitive bias in your own thinking. What would you do differently now?
3. Is there a cognitive bias that was not covered in this chapter or not documented in the psychological literature that you think is important to consider when thinking and reasoning about social identity and differences?

### Additional Resources

Daniel Kahneman, one of the pioneering researchers on cognitive biases, presents an excellent overview of some of his work in a lecture titled “Biased Biases” at the History and Rationality Lecture Series at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. You can find the lecture at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CWm3i74mHI>.

Antiracist essayist, author, and educator Tim Wise has done a significant amount of work on white anxiety and resentment regarding changing demographics. You can find his website with a variety of resources at <http://www.timwise.org>. Wise also gave a talk at Google titled “White Like Me: Reflections of a Privileged Son,” which is available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV-EDWzJuzk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV-EDWzJuzk).

For some historical background on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and equal employment, see the National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/>.

## 5 | Logical Fallacies

### Ad Hominem: The Common Variety

In chapter 4 we established that cognitive biases are habits we form when taking in and processing information. These habits have advantages in some contexts but can also prevent us from examining evidence that is not already within our web of belief. In this way, cognitive biases can become bad habits that limit our critical thinking abilities. In this chapter we will consider logical fallacies, which are common argument patterns we rely on when expressing the reasons we have for our point of view. Like cognitive biases, these patterns are not always bad. However, in contexts where a common pattern relies on unacceptable or irrelevant evidence and distracts our attention away from what is relevant, the pattern is a logical fallacy.

Philosopher and argument theorist Christopher Tindale in his book *Fallacies and Argument Appraisal* provides an excellent overview of fallacy research and notes:

One thing the recent literature has made very clear is that fallacies are far more complex, and thus deserving of much fuller analyses, than the traditional textbook treatments have suggested. Two things have reinforced the recognition of how complex fallacies really are: The first of these is the appreciation that many of the fallacies are failed instances of good argument schemes or forms. Hence, we cannot dismiss all *ad hominem* arguments or *Slippery Slopes*, for example, because there are circumstances under which such reasoning is appropriate. The second feature that reveals the complexity of fallacious reasoning is the recognition that to evaluate fallacies fully we need to consider aspects of the context in which the argumentation arises. In many instances this involves the details of a dialogue between participants in an argumentative exchange. In other cases we must sift through what is available of the background to a dispute, such as the history of exchanges between the participants or the beliefs of the audience.<sup>1</sup>