

# Believing what we want

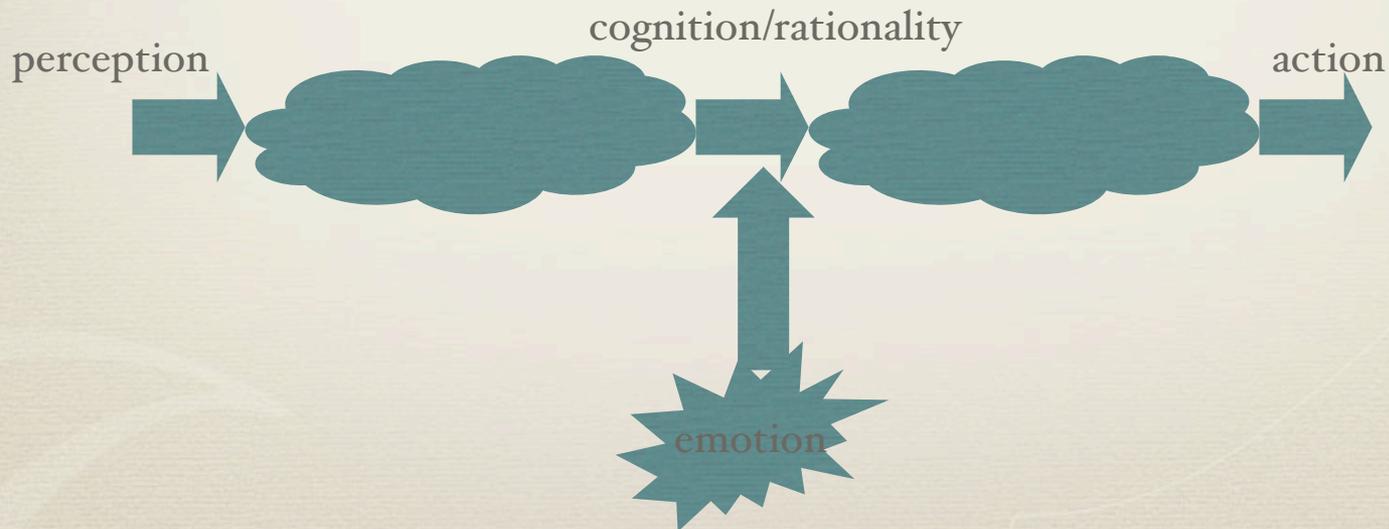
- Motivational and social determinants of belief: tendency of people to believe what they want to (esp. with respect to future success).
- "Lake Wobegon effect": the fictional community in which "all children are above average".
- A large majority of people think that they are more intelligent, more skilled in driving, etc. than average.
- 94% of university professors think they are better than average at their jobs...

# Believing what we want

- Evidence that people generally attribute their successes to themselves and failures to external circumstances
- Athletes attribute victories to themselves and losses to bad officiating or luck.
- Teachers attribute student success to their teaching ability and student failure to lack of effort.
- People expect to succeed, and only take responsibility for events when they do – clearly self-perpetuating.

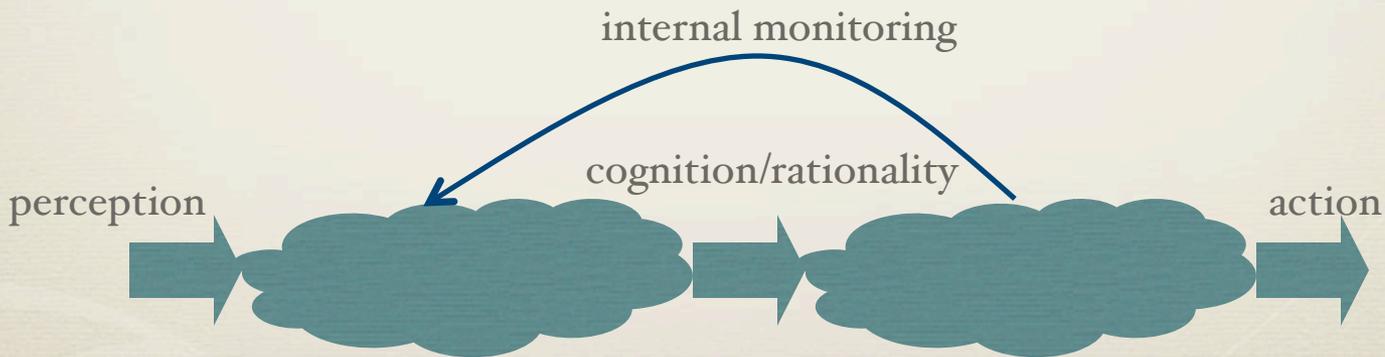
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- Two possible explanations for this:
- Motivational: We adopt self-serving beliefs because it satisfies a psychological need to maintain our self-esteem. In other words, emotion interferes with 'proper' rationality.



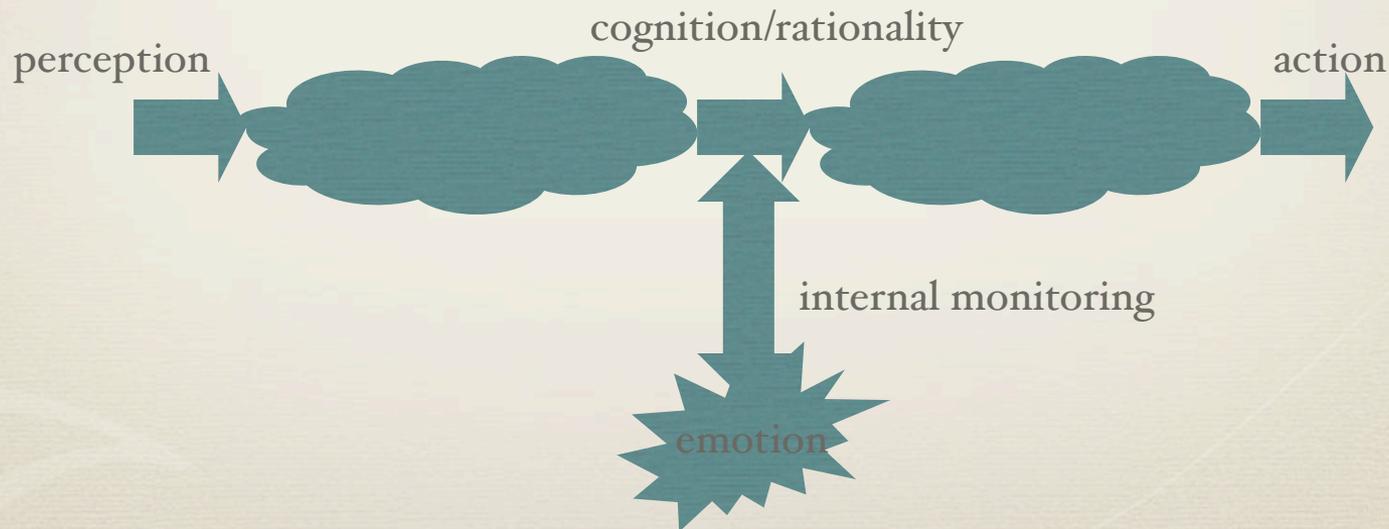
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- Cognitive: The perfectly rational person might still arrive at these beliefs (i.e., have better data about ourselves). We know we tried, and know we usually succeed. Therefore, success is from trying and failure is external.



# Believing what we want

- Gilovich is correct in suggesting that these explanations are not mutually exclusive: people seem to rely on both emotion and rationality, operating together.



# Believing what we want

- Beliefs are seldom, if ever, formed in the absence of emotion (Damasio experiments).
- Ziva Kunda points out that people only draw conclusions that are consistent with the evidence they can muster up, but that 'mustering' is informed by their goals and desires.
- In general, we seem to ask questions like "What evidence is there to support this belief?" Which is biased towards finding evidence in favour of the belief we are evaluating.

# Believing what we want

- Both scientists and laymen test hypotheses slanted towards confirmation
- Experiment: people who are told that extroversion leads to success were better able to generate a evidence that they were extroverted (same for introversion).
- Furthermore, we examine not only information likely to support our position, but we examine information *until* we find that support.

# Believing what we want

- Why does this work? Because the evidence that we get about “reality” is seldom unambiguous (i.e. it’s usually statistical).
  - Beliefs that are “reasonably consistent” with evidence (consistent enough so we don’t get ourselves in trouble) can be widely divergent.
  - Examples:
    - Believing we see a tiger when it’s a cheetah
- versus
- Believing we see a deer when it’s a cheetah
  - Consider the practical consequences of false health beliefs. You waste resources (time/money/effort), but usually don’t die.

# Believing what we want

- If we like a proposition we ask: "Does the evidence force me to believe otherwise" (Can I believe it?).
- If we don't like it we ask: "Does the evidence compel me to believe that proposition" (Must I believe it?).

# Believing what we want

- Back to Lake Wobegon: 94 percent of university professors thought that they were better at their jobs than average.
- We can now explain this result: different professors have different criteria for what counts as “Better at their job”.
- Gilovich describes this as "Framing" a question. The Wobegon effect is a result of people's tendency to frame questions so that the result of evaluating it with respect to *that frame* is comforting.

# Belief as possession

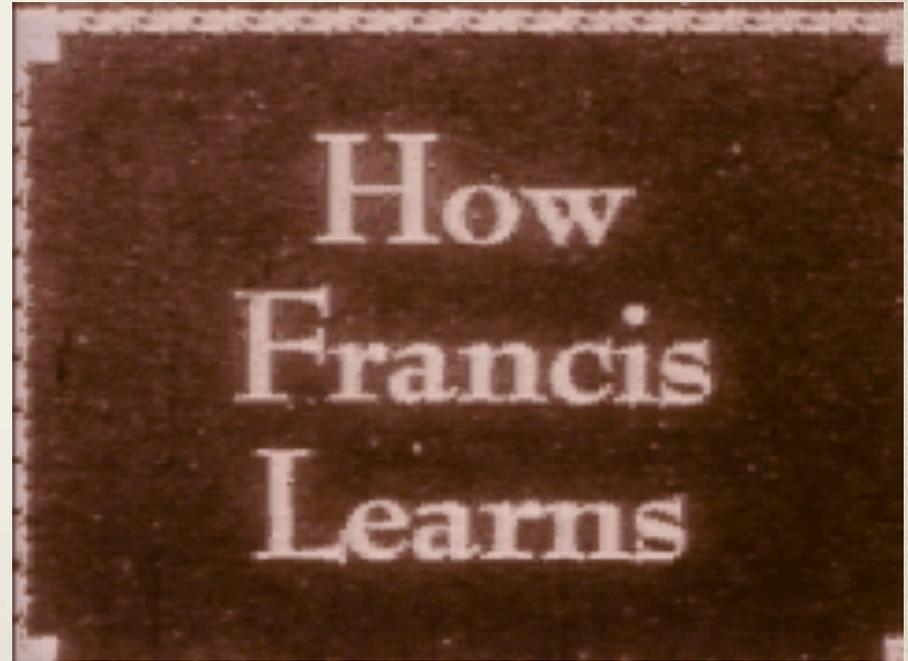
- Analogy: the endowment effect (i.e. the overvaluing of something we already own); showing off our beliefs to people who like them; our beliefs tend to "Go together" (i.e., 'not clash'); and the tension between desire (self-serving beliefs) and constraint (cognitive consistency).
- Disanalogies: ?

# Second-hand information

- Chapter 6: don't always believe what you're told.
- "Little Albert" experiments performed by J. B. Watson in the early 20s. 
- The experiment is not as clean-cut as subsequent tellings would have us believe:
  - his fear apparently generalized to all furry animals (although it did not);
  - his fear apparently remained strong over a long period of time (although it actually faded about 10 days later and had to be re-strengthened), etc.

# Second-hand information

- Baby Albert movies



# Second-hand information

- Speaker constraints: The message should be:
  1. understandable;
  2. not laden with needless details;
  3. emphasizing the "greater truth" (which may take precedence over literal truth);
  4. plausible;
- Listener constraints: The interaction must be either:
  5. informative; or
  6. entertaining

# Sharpening and leveling

- Sharpening of the message means *emphasizing the central gist* of the original message.
- Levelling refers to *de-emphasizing the less essential details* of that message.
- As a result of these two forces, second-hand messages become "cleaner", simpler, and less ambiguous (inconsistencies are generally left out).

# Sharpening and leveling

- Explains the "disappointment" when we meet someone who we've only heard about second-hand, as borne out by experiments
- second-generation subjects made more extreme ratings about a target person; and a friend who only heard of one of their friend's friends made more extreme ratings regarding character traits.
- The biggest problem with sharpening and levelling is that there is seldom any good way to correct the distortions that have been introduced.

# The 'greater truth'

- A speaker's ideology can often inform the sharpening and levelling.
- Messages can be distorted by what the speaker takes to be the "Greater truth".
- The Little Albert story has been subjected to this kind of distortion
  - by behaviourists mentioning the generalization (and how well it lasts)
  - by the advocates of the "preparedness" theory emphasizing generalization along evolutionarily relevant dimensions (e.g. animals)

# The greater truth

- This is your brain



- And this is your brain on drugs



# Plausibility

- Stories are often retold because they seem very plausible. This explains the prevalence of so many urban myths—they are amazing yet *plausible*.
- To increase plausibility, speakers may introduce a degree of coherence into a story (via levelling and sharpening) that the story doesn't inherently possess.
- Recall the explanation of how magnets help healing—plausible, though false.

# Urban myths

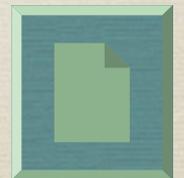
- [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)

## *Jessica Mendek Cancer Fund*

Cancer research money, guys . . . not much effort. LITTLE JESSICA MYDEK IS SEVEN YEARS OLD AND IS SUFFERING FROM AN ACUTE AND VERY RARE CASE OF CEREBRAL CARCINOMA. THIS CONDITION CAUSES SEVERE MALIGNANT BRAIN TUMORS AND IS A TERMINAL ILLNESS. THE DOCTORS HAVE GIVEN HER SIX MONTHS TO LIVE.

AS PART OF HER DYING WISH, SHE WANTED TO START A CHAIN LETTER TO INFORM PEOPLE OF THIS CONDITION AND TO SEND PEOPLE THE MESSAGE TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULLEST AND ENJOY EVERY MOMENT, A CHANCE THAT SHE WILL NEVER HAVE. FURTHERMORE, THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY AND SEVERAL CORPORATE SPONSORS HAVE AGREED TO DONATE THREE CENTS TOWARD CONTINUING CANCER RESEARCH FOR EVERY NEW PERSON THAT GETS FORWARDED THIS MESSAGE. PLEASE GIVE JESSICA AND ALL CANCER VICTIMS A CHANCE.

SEND A COPY OF THIS TO EVERYONE YOU KNOW AND ONE TO THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY AT [ACS@AOL.COM](mailto:ACS@AOL.COM)



- Seeing is believing?

# Informativeness

- Making a message informative is one of the best ways to keep an audience listening.
- There are a number of techniques:
  - increase the immediacy of the message (problems: evaluating credibility; estimating how common some phenomena is in the general population)
    - Consider: "More than 40 million Americans believe they have seen or know someone who has seen an unidentified flying object." – Peter Jennings
  - leave out some aspects of the “complete truth” (problems: qualifications omitted; stretching the facts)

# Entertainment value

- Not surprisingly, if the worth of a message is measured by its entertainment value, the likelihood of distortion increases greatly.
- The desire to entertain often creates a conflict for a speaker between satisfying the goal of accuracy and the goal of entertainment.
- The media feels the pressure to entertain more than people sometimes think.
  - The idea that journalists, or "news shows", are objective observers just reporting facts, simply doesn't apply (*really* doesn't apply for certain news outlets and topics).

# Entertainment value

- The fifth estate (<http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/conspiracytheories/index.html>)
  - “He claimed that for a month before 9/11 he had tried to warn Canadian and American authorities that something terrible was about to happen. His lawyers entered the sheet of paper as evidence. On it were various words and phrases, including "World Trade Center" and "Pentagon." They insisted that it was a list of 9/11 targets that Vreeland had uncovered and been trying to warn the authorities about. The court found no basis to his claim. Mike Vreeland jumped bail and disappeared. But on the internet, he remains a poster boy for those who believe that September 11th was planned by the American government.”
- Peter Jennings (2005) UFO report “Seeing is Believing”
- Fox: Alien autopsy, Previous life on Mars, etc.
- HBO: Life Afterlife, ...

# Second-hand information

- How do we answer the question: on what should we base decisions?
- Paradoxical result:
  - Personal experience has many flaws, and second-hand information can have many flaws.
- Which should we use, especially when they conflict?
  - Embrace the fact that both sources of information may be fallible.
  - Use conflict to distinguish what we know well from what we only think is true.

# Impressions of social support

- It shouldn't be surprising that what we believe is heavily influenced by what those around us believe.
  - what others think can be an important source of information about what is true, valid, or appropriate.
- The effect of what others believe can be surprisingly strong (Asch, line length).
- Unfortunately there's a defect in our ability to discern beliefs of other people.
  - We often suppose that those around us hold the same or similar beliefs.

# False consensus

How many people would agree with you?

60%



27%



# Social support (cont.)

- This is the "false consensus effect." (though we don't think that our beliefs are necessarily shared by the *majority* of people around us)
- Four reasons for this effect:
  1. positive assessment of our own judgment;
  2. we are exposed to information that tends to support our beliefs;
  3. we take powerful situational influences on our beliefs to also be powerful influences on the beliefs of others; and
  4. people construe the same choices differently but fail to recognize that fact.

# Positive assessment

- Evidence:
  - People are likely to exaggerate the extent to which attractive, respected, and well liked people share their beliefs.
  - People tend to exaggerate perceived support when they are emotionally invested in the belief.

# Birds of a feather

- Evidence:
  - People's estimates of the prevalence of smoking is positively correlated with a number of people they know who smoke.
  - This suggests that when coming up with estimates, we rely on examples. The available examples consist of people who share our beliefs.

# Situational influences

- Evidence:
  - A study compared individuals who explained preferences in terms of personal causes (e.g., names) versus those who explained them in terms of external causes (e.g., stocks).
  - When relying on personal causes there was less false consensus effect.
- We use the degree of involvement of external causes to help indicate how likely that belief is in the general population.

# Construing choices

- Evidence:
  - People interpret questions about beliefs quite differently (e.g., do you prefer French or Italian films?).
  - But, people tend to overestimate the likelihood that others will agree with them.
- While people realize that there are differences in "the judgment of objects", they don't realize that there are often differences in "the object of judgment".

# Social support

- As a result, our beliefs are bolstered by overestimated levels of social support so we hold them with more conviction in the face of challenges.
- Unfortunately, those challenges are not always that forthcoming, for two reasons:
  1. we associate generally what those who share our beliefs; and
  2. most people are reluctant to openly question another's beliefs.

# Reluctance to question

- Informal: "Miss Manners" states that we should not go around correcting others if we want to be polite.
- Empirical: people retell stories slanted to be in line with the beliefs of their audience.
- Why?
  - to avoid the unpleasant emotions produced by social discord.
  - disagreement may cause people to dislike us.
  - group coherence can be important for maintaining effective operation

# So enjoy...

- As a result, our beliefs are not subject to scrutiny and debate, to the extent we might otherwise expect.
- This means that it is often difficult to evaluate our beliefs properly.
- The university classroom may be one of the few places that we encounter opposition to our own beliefs.
- Perhaps this is why many find their years at university to be the ones where many of their life-long beliefs were formed.

# Weekly question

- Question: What information do we gather, and how do we gather it, if we like a belief?