

Valuing thoughts, ignoring behavior: The introspection illusion as a source of the bias blind spot [☆]

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Abstract

People see themselves as less susceptible to bias than others. We show that a source of this *bias blind spot* involves the value that people place, and believe they should place, on introspective information (relative to behavioral information) when assessing bias in themselves versus others. Participants considered introspective information more than behavioral information for assessing bias in themselves, but not others. This divergence did not arise simply from differences in introspective access. The blind spot persisted when observers had access to the introspections of the actor whose bias they judged. And, participants claimed that they, but not their peers, *should* rely on introspections when making self-assessments of bias. Only after being educated about the importance of nonconscious processes in guiding judgment and action—and thereby about the fallibility of introspection—did participants cease denying their relative susceptibility to bias.

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In a recent news story, a federal judge defended his ability to be objective in handling a case involving a long-time friend. In another story, government scientists defended their impartiality in evaluating drug companies from whom they received large consulting fees. In each of these stories, the relevant actors were convinced of their own objectivity, while outside observers were quick to accuse them of bias. Such accusations of bias in people who are confident in their objectivity are as common in everyday life as they are in the news. When our colleague judges the average work of his friend as better than the stellar accomplishments of a mere acquaintance, or when our neighbor argues that the new bright-red fire hydrant should go in front of any house but hers, we are struck by those individuals' blindness to their own biases.

The tendency to see bias in others, while being blind to it in ourselves, has been shown across a range of cognitive and motivational biases (for a review, see [Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004](#)). This article concerns a related question: *Why* do people show this bias blind spot?

Introspection and bias perception

This research explores one possible mechanism contributing to the tendency for people to acknowledge bias more readily in others than in themselves. This mechanism involves the value that people assign to introspective information, relative to behavioral information, when drawing conclusions about the presence or absence of bias. Consider the following example. In judging whether you have been biased in your hiring of a new associate, your introspections might involve the feeling that you tried to be objective in reviewing the applicants or that you never felt any bias clouding your assessments. Your behavior might be that you hired an old college buddy. As this example portends, introspections will be less likely than behavior to yield evidence of

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bias. Biases typically operate nonconsciously, thereby leaving their influence hidden from introspection (Wilson & Brekke, 1994; Wilson, Centerbar, & Brekke, 2002).

Access to introspections

It is a truism that we have far more access to the contents of our own introspections than others have to our introspections. We generally know what we are thinking and feeling, and what we are intending to do and hoping to accomplish, better than others know these things about us. This rich introspective access puts us in a unique position, though not always a better one, for understanding our past attitudes and actions and for predicting our future ones (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Nisbett & Ross, 1980, chapter 9). One might expect, then, that the proposed self—other difference in weighting of introspective information is simply a matter of differences in introspective access. This would suggest that if one knew a person's bias-related introspections (such as those of the boss who hired his college buddy), one's judgment of that person's bias would resemble his or her own.

Valuation of introspections

The hypothesis of the current research, however, differs from this account involving introspective access. We suggest, for example, that knowing the boss's desire to be fair and his faith in the talents of an old buddy (and knowing his *absence* of any willful bias) will not radically change one's perception of bias. Instead, we predict that people's lack of reliance on others' introspections is in part due to a diminished *valuation* of those introspections. When assessing bias in someone else, people are likely to view behavior (combined with theories of what biased behavior looks like) as another important source of information. This hypothesized mechanism might be referred to as an "introspection illusion," since it involves an illusion about the relative diagnostic value of one's own versus others' introspections (Pronin, Gilovich et al., 2004). In particular, it suggests that people over-value thoughts, feelings, and other mental contents, relative to behavior, when assessing their own actions, motives, and preferences, but not when assessing others'. The term introspection illusion thus involves a self—other asymmetry in the relative valuation of introspective versus behavioral information. Although the term uses the word "introspection" rather than "behavior," the illusion inherently involves a tendency for the self, but not others, to disregard behavior (and to place unwarranted value on introspections).

Previous research

Previous research has demonstrated the tendency for people to make inaccurate self-predictions and self-assessments when introspective information is available but misleading. This phenomenon has been shown for introspective information involving intense emotional reactions (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998), care-

ful reasoning (Wilson, Hodges, & LaFleur, 1995), positive intentions (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Kruger & Gilovich, 2004), optimistic plans (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994), personal strength versus weaknesses (Kruger, 1999), wishful thinking (Pronin, Wegner, McCarthy, & Rodriguez, 2006), and even the *absence* of seemingly relevant introspective information (Latane & Darley, 1968; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977a, 1977b). The thesis of this article rests in part on people's lack of awareness of the limitations of their own introspections, and on people's consequent over-valuation of their own (but not others') introspective contents.

The studies reviewed above converge on the idea that actors' consideration of internal information leads them to make different assessments than observers. These studies have generally assumed that those different assessments are attributable to differences in introspective access. This assumption has also been made for other classic self—other asymmetries, such as the tendency for people to describe themselves in terms of private and unobservable qualities but to describe others in terms of public and observable ones (McGuire & McGuire, 1986; Prentice, 1990), and the tendency for people to describe social interactions in terms of private reactions in the case of self but public responses in the case of others (Malle & Pearce, 2001).

We do not wish to argue that differences in awareness of internal information play no role in the effects described above. What we would like to argue, however, is that differences in valuation of internal information also play a role—particularly in the case of bias perception. Thus, when a person tells us she is unbiased in taking 75% of the credit for a project completed by a team of six peers, we are likely to consider her assessment biased even if we have access to her thoughts about how much she contributed and about her efforts to provide a fair assessment.

Researchers have provided evidence suggesting that the tendency to perceive bias more in others than the self is rooted in differences in the information that people use in making assessments of bias in the self versus others (Ehrlinger et al., 2005; Pronin, Gilovich et al., 2004; Van Boven et al., 1999). However, experiments have not examined the role of valuation in this effect. Yet, some research suggests that people may value internal information more, and observable actions less, when assessing the self relative to others. People have been shown to view themselves as defined by their thoughts, feelings, goals, fears, and other unobservable qualities, even while they are inclined to view others as defined by their observable behavior (Andersen & Ross, 1984; Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001). People have also been found to view their unobservable intentions as more indicative than their observable actions for assessing their own (but not others') traits (Kruger & Gilovich, 2004).

Mechanism underlying the mechanism

Why might people value their own introspections more than others' introspections? Or, to put it another way, why might they disregard information about their behavior even

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