

Black White Grey

We are all affected by confirmation bias. It seems impossible to know exactly how or when our preconceived notions are exerting too much influence because our biases are deeply imbedded below our awareness. Perhaps the best we can do is become more aware of the phenomenon. That way we can at least question whether we are ignoring important evidence.

Here is an activity to raise the issue of confirmation bias among your team so that you can begin to discuss its effect on group decisions.

Goal: to describe confirmation bias and its effect on decision-making

Time: 20 minutes

Materials: A copy of either Figure A or Figure B for each person (See the last page of this PDF)

Participants: Any number

Procedure:

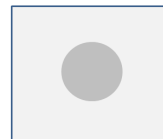
Divide the participants into two groups and give a copy of Figure A to each person in one group and a copy of Figure B to each person in the other group. Ask a few people in each group to describe what they see on their card.

Possible responses from those with Figure A: *A white square with a grey circle; A dark circle in a light square.*

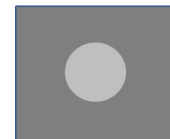
Possible responses from those with Figure B: *A black square with a grey circle; A light circle in a dark square.*

Now ask each person to find a partner who has the opposite Figure that they have. Ask them to hold their copies of Figure A and Figure B side-by-side and determine which has the darker circle. Take a few conclusions from several pairs.

TRAINER'S NOTES



A



B



Next, ask each person to fold their Figure in half and hold it next to their partner's so they make a complete circle between them. Again ask which has the darker circle. (Comparing circles to circles, they will look the same.)

Invite people to speculate about what is going on; why the circles appeared different initially but now look the same.

Provide this explanation of why the circles change their appearance:

All the data our senses pick up is compared to something else. There is no specific intensity of light that produces white or black so the degree of darkness is dependent on the background. For example, black is only black when next to something lighter.

This simple experiment is a metaphor that illustrates confirmation bias – a tendency we all have to favor our own point of view even when presented with new and contradictory information. It demonstrates that the *context* for all of our decisions is as important as the choice we make. Any new idea we encounter (the grey circle) is held side-by-side against the ideas we already have. It is unavoidable that the history and context of our knowledge base surrounds and affects how we view the new information. We are predisposed – and hard wired – to favor what we already know.

Invite the whole group to engage in a substantive discussion of confirmation bias by using some of the following questions.

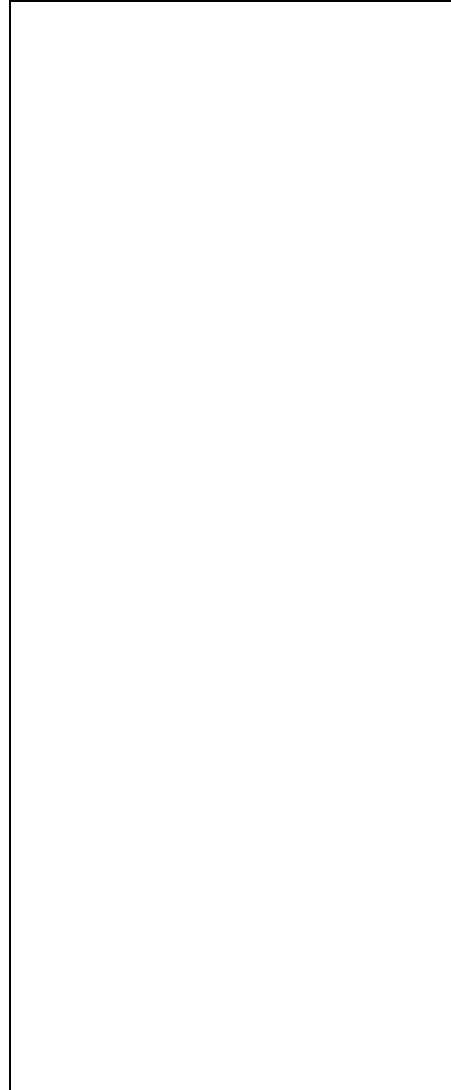
Discussion:

- ◆ How confident did you feel about which circle was darker when you first compared your card with your partner's?
- ◆ How did you react when you folded your card



and compared your circle directly with your partner's?

- ◆ What examples of confirmation bias have you seen in other people? (e.g. People who support a politician even after that person has suffered a loss of reputation.) How have those people justified keeping their original position?
- ◆ Can you identify a time you were the victim of your own confirmation bias – why or why not?
- ◆ Why do you think it is so difficult for us to change our opinion about controversial issues?
- ◆ Confirmation bias affects us as individuals. How might it affect the dynamics of a team or larger group? (e.g. Suppressing discussion or contributing to group think)
- ◆ What are some ways confirmation bias might be positive? (e.g. Because they have withstood the test of time, some of our existing beliefs may be more viable.)
- ◆ What are some strategies to avoid the negative effects of confirmation bias? (e.g. Seek and test alternative hypotheses)
- ◆ What might you now do differently when confronted with a very different viewpoint from your own in the future?



Handout

Print this page and make enough copies so you can cut A and B apart along the dotted lines and give one or the other to each participant.

