



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

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Of Course!

Most of us have read or heard about the results of some research in the behavioral sciences and had one of the following responses: “Of course. Everyone knows that.” “What’s new about that?” “Why did they have to do research on something so obvious?”

Suppose a study finds that better decision-making occurs when more than one person contributes to the decision. The reaction might be, “Of course. Two heads are better than one.” Or suppose the results of a study indicate that better decision-making occurs when only one person makes the decision, rather than a group. The response might be, “Of course. Too many cooks spoil the broth.” Either way, the reaction may well be something akin to “I knew it all along.” In the same vein, depending upon the outcome of lovers being separated, one can either conclude that “absence makes the heart grow fonder” or “out of sight, out of mind.” Either way, the result can seem commonsensical.

Also referred to as the “I knew it all along” phenomenon, the “hindsight bias” refers to the common tendency to overestimate previous knowledge once an outcome is known. It is believed that self-enhancing motivation is one contributing factor to the hindsight bias. A person may feel better and/or look better to others if she/he reports having known an outcome beforehand. After-the-fact explanations may also help us feel that outcomes are more controllable than they actually are. The malleability of memory is another important factor in the hindsight bias.

There are negative consequences of the hindsight bias. It can lead to overconfidence about one's ability to make future judgments/predictions. Related to this, if one erroneously believes that he/she already knew the outcome, then there may be no learning in a situation in which there is something to be learned. Students in a psychology class may not be motivated to prepare for an exam because the information seems so obvious. Interpersonally, we also tend to impose the hindsight bias on others in the form of believing that another person "should have known" what was going to happen. Unrealistic blame can result. For example, it may be believed that a mental health professional "should have known" that a patient would become violent, even though violence can be very difficult to predict or anticipate.

Interestingly, forewarning people about the hindsight bias doesn't necessarily eliminate the bias. What does seem useful, however, is to have people think about how they might have made sense of some other outcome. This requires taking an alternative perspective, one of the most useful strategies for counteracting bias.

While the hindsight bias is common, it certainly doesn't always occur. There are times when people are genuinely surprised by an outcome or result, and acknowledge the same.

None of this may be new information to you. By this point you might have come to the conclusion that you already knew about the hindsight bias!

Note: Listen for the hindsight bias on the Monday after the Super Bowl. "I knew that the Colts/Saints were going to win."

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