



## Heuristic biases and internet dating

Traditional bride or groom hunting in the good old days was spread over several rounds of vetting by various people. This ensured that people formed their individual views and put them in a pot to arrive at a well-rounded assessment of the match. Nowadays with dating portals and chat rooms, things are quite instant. Impressions are formed within seconds and ways forward based on these impressions decided in minutes. While these avenues offer choices and options in a time-poor world, it's vital to note here is that we all succumb to naturally-occurring biases that blind us. With limited information and interface, these biases can either paint a fantastic picture or make us reject options that can actually be viable.

While social and dating websites encourage audio and visual interaction, it can all turn out to be a mind game leaving people emotionally drained. Because of biases, the mind can conjure an image which fits into the mental schema and a person can fall in love with that schema. What's worse, the person can pine, fret and mourn if this mental persona falls short of reality.

It's good to know how our mind and comprehension can be biased so that we are able to assess stimuli in as objective a way as we possibly can. Here are some cognitive biases that can impact the way we synthesize information at any given point of time.

### Commonly known heuristics

**Primacy effect**- is the propensity to recall and weigh initial events more than subsequent events. So a good start would be etched in your memory more than middle.

**Recency effect** – is the propensity to weigh recent events more than the earlier events. That's why a great ending stays fresh in the mind for a long time

**Stereotyping** – is when common knowledge is applied and the mind tends to believe that certain common traits are applicable to all falling within that category.

## Biases across the romantic relationship framework

### *Bumping into each other*

All equations begin on the exploratory mode. As people begin to peel various layers and get to know each other, the below biases can crowd the mind.

**Halo effect** – is the proclivity for a person's positive or negative traits to spill over from one area of their personality to another in others' perceptions of them. Like a halo, they form a glow all around and eclipse the reality.

**Dunning-Kruger effect** – is a two-fold bias. Some less-talented people tend to overrate their capabilities while some skilled people seriously underrate their abilities. You would have come across this in the introduction phase.

**Illusory superiority** – occurs when people overestimate one's desirable qualities and underestimate their undesirable qualities relative to other people. People impression-manage all the time.

**Forer effect (Barnum effect)** – is the tendency to give high accuracy ratings to descriptions of their personality that are tailored for them, but are in fact vague enough to apply to a lot of people. For instance, people identify with horoscopes on an individual level when in fact they are quite generic.

### *Painting the initial picture*

With initial spadework done, people tend to check the viability of forming an equation. Crudely put, they resort to 'grading and calibrating'. Here are some biases that can come into play.

**Trait ascription bias** – is the tendency of people to view themselves as relatively variable in terms of personality, behaviour and mood while viewing others as much more predictable. Very often this leads to varying personality descriptions to suit the situation.

**Attentional Bias** – people tend to be drawn to the dominant stimuli in the environment that preferentially holds your attention. For instance, common likes and preferences would trigger off familiarity and therefore enhance comfort levels.

**Confirmation bias** – people interpret information in a way that *confirms* their hypotheses and preconceptions. So you walk in to an equation with pre-conceived notions and subsequent conversations serve to strengthen those.



**Anchoring** – Like any product has a USP, this bias picks up on one anchor, trait or piece of information and your mind would then automatically process information around this dominant information. It's like ticking all boxes on an auto mode basis a couple of most compelling factors.

**Framing effect** – When initial information is mulled over time and time again, different conclusions are drawn depending on how the information is presented. It's like looking at the picture at different times of the day in varying light conditions. As the options are evaluated, the picture frames are altered, re-designed and even re-fitted!

### ***Evaluating Options***

Very often, people keep a few options open as they discover chemistry. Some equations score high on the attraction quotient while some get intense with time. During this process, biases that can cloud objective analysis are as follows -

**Distinction bias** – kicks in when you are comparing two dissimilar people simultaneously as opposed to evaluating them individually and separately. If you don't compare apples with apples, orange lovers would find apples less tempting.

**Contrast effect** – Usually a follow on from distinction bias, contrast effect is a natural comparison mode when you start to enhance and re-calibrate measurement while evaluating contrasting objects. So rather than the parameters being fixed, they start to move a bit here and there.

**Bias blind spot** – Turning a Nelson's eye on glaring shortcomings? Well, with bias blind spot, you tend to rationalise you are less biased than others. You tend to convince yourself and the prospect that you are very forgiving and accepting which again is not the 'real' you.

**Choice-supportive bias** – is the tendency to rate one's choices as better than they actually are. If you are known to pick up great looking shoes or clothes, you might tend to overrate your discernment and taste of fine things!

### *Relationship launch pad*

With comfort levels established, people embark on a relationship. Usually within a 'test relationship' framework, various stimuli and responses are carefully evaluated. This is when some more biases can surface.

**Illusion of transparency** – is when people overestimate others' ability to know them as they also overestimate their ability to know others.

**Impact bias** – is the tendency to overestimate the length and impact of future feeling states. So if you perceive your future state to be of sheer happiness, your mind may well project an exaggerated state which obviously would be removed from reality.

**Illusion of control** – As intimacy progresses, this bias gives a false illusion of overestimating one's influence over external events. This could lead to daters imagining knights in shining armours coming to rescue damsels in distress.

### *Subsequently...*

After the bait is bitten and the relationship takes off, early days can pose several questions and dilemmas.

**Projection bias** – is the tendency to unconsciously assume that others share one's current emotional states, thoughts and values.

**Negativity bias** – People of negative orientation tend to pay more attention and give more weight to negative than positive experiences. This can spiral into a negative loop often leading to unhappy consequences.

**Optimism bias** – On the other side of the coin, people can tend to be over-optimistic about the outcome of planned actions. One tends to overestimate the probability of a favourable outcome.

**Moral luck** – is the tendency of people to ascribe greater or lesser moral significance based on the outcome of the event rather than the intention.

**System justification** – makes people defend and bolster status quo. At the end of the day, some people prefer the comfort of existing social, economic and political arrangements and disparage alternatives even at the expense of individual or collective interest.



### ***Conclusion***

While the modes of interaction may change, the search for romance/ companionship and interpersonal dynamics remain the same. Forge ahead in the belief that we all are fallible and nothing ventured, nothing gained!

Love can blind you, even if you walk into it with your eyes open. As Rod Stewart sings – Give all you've got, no holding back. Ain't it better to lose in love than to never love at all?'