

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.

Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum



THINK-TANK



# You're biased!

Many of us will have heard that response in the heat of a debate or argument. If you're a parent, any comment on your teenager's language, choice of dress, behaviour, career aspirations, and so on, may also elicit the same response. So, what is going on? Could your teenagers be right?

It turns out that our thinking, ability to process information, judgment, decision-making, and even memory, is subject to and influenced by cognitive biases. This field of study, now more commonly known as cognitive sciences or behavioural economics, was introduced about 50 years ago by a pair of Israeli psychologists, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. Although criticized when they first started to publish their papers in the 1970's, it wasn't long before the implications of what they had described were observed in fields as diverse as medicine, psychology and economics. Both of them eventually left Israel and moved to the United States to different universities but continued to collaborate. Tversky died in 1996. In 2002, Kahneman

was awarded a Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in recognition of the work he had done with Tversky. So, what exactly is a cognitive bias?

At a simple level, a cognitive bias is a repeated error in judgment or thinking that influences a person or group of people to basically ignore or disregard facts in favour of a subjective preference. This is often referred to as a departure or deviation from rational thinking and can happen without any specific intention to do so. A more comprehensive definition is provided by a well-referenced entry from Wikipedia:

*A cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment.<sup>[1]</sup> Individuals create their own "subjective social reality" from their perception of the input.*

*An individual's construction of social reality, not the objective input, may dictate their behaviour in the social world.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, cognitive biases may sometimes lead to perceptual distortion, inaccurate judgment, illogical interpretation, or what is broadly called irrationality.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup>*

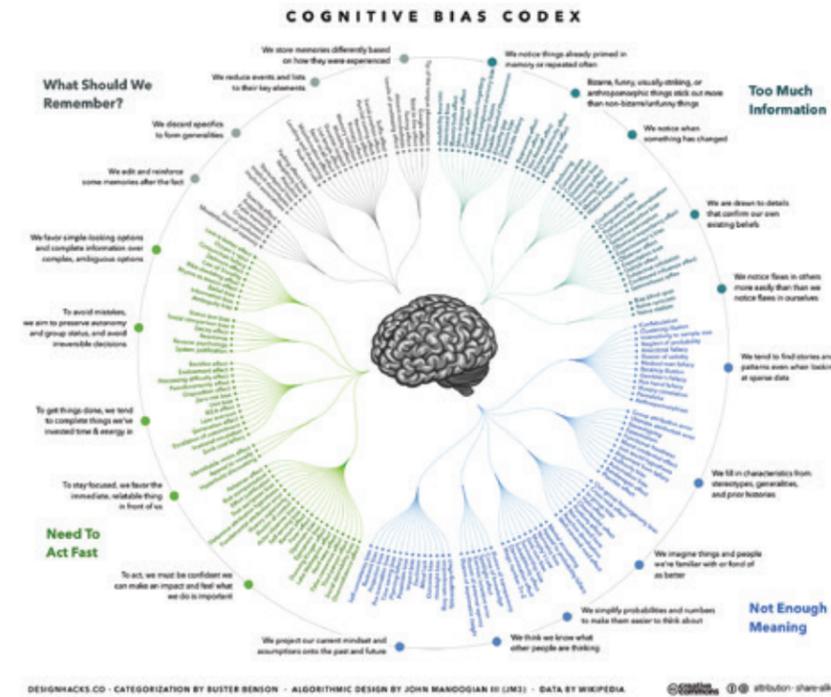
A continually evolving list of cognitive biases has been identified over the last six decades of research on human judgment and decision-making in cognitive science, social psychology, and behavioral economics. Kahneman and Tversky argue[d] that cognitive biases have efficient practical implications for areas including clinical judgment, entrepreneurship, finance, and management.<sup>[1][12]</sup>

As of September 2016, 188 cognitive biases had been identified and described. The Cognitive Bias Codex below is a beautiful illustration of how these biases influence our thinking.

See <https://bit.ly/2o9MKsG> to explore more comfortably with some magnification!

Aside from having to concede that your teenager might actually be right sometimes, why does knowing about cognitive biases matter?

In today's world, more than ever, we are being bombarded with a ceaseless torrent of information and also expected to respond almost instantaneously to every query or challenge. This can be a



particularly toxic combination if we allow ourselves to leap to judgements and decisions without adequate consideration of the facts. Perhaps in time, we will learn to develop, train and validate systems utilising machine learning and AI to help safeguard our thinking from our natural tendencies and cognitive biases. Until

we get to that stage, we can only rely on ourselves and each other to ask the right questions, understand the reluctant information, and ensure that we also understand the context and challenge where necessary. Developing an open mind that can question, seek out and actively listen to different perspectives and

evaluate information/evidence is critical to guard ourselves against our own biases in judgement and decision-making.

Jersey has a culturally rich and diverse population and is covered by a democratically elected assembly of members, most of whom are not formally constrained by political ideological frameworks that might reinforce certain cognitive biases. The very active business community, volunteer sector and civil society in Jersey are other important stakeholders. This landscape presents an exciting opportunity in the public policy arena for stakeholders to challenge themselves and each other with open minds and probing questions, to confront the cognitive biases that inherently exist in each and every person. Intellectual curiosity, courage and trust in one another could be well-rewarded with more effective and efficient decision-making with the aim of creating a better future for Jersey and its population. We might even get better at managing the dramas with our teenagers as a bonus!

**What do you think? The Jersey Policy Forum is entered in your views. Please share them with us by email to [contact@jerseypolicyforum.org](mailto:contact@jerseypolicyforum.org).**