

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Egocentricity Bias *

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We view small children as egocentric, but few of us are aware that the same tendency remains with us in adulthood. Anthony Greenwald, an Ohio State University psychologist, calls this tendency an **egocentricity bias**.

All of us bias our view of reality, experiencing life through a self-centered filter. This bias affects how we interpret what happens to us and how we recall events from memory. It leads to an **illusion of control** – believing that we have control over events in our life when, objectively, we do not. For instance, lottery players believe their numbers have a higher chance of winning than they really have. This is even more likely, if they pick their numbers rather than have them randomly determined by the computer.

We interpret events in ways that put us in a favorable light. We are ready to take credit for our successes, but not our failures. Greenwald illustrates this with students.

"For example, if you talk to students after they've gotten their grades back on an exam and ask them if it was a good test of their abilities, they'll say it was if they did well. But if they did poorly, they will tell you it was a rotten exam."

The egocentricity bias is even stronger in memory. Several studies indicate that we remember information easier if it relates to us. We tend to create and restructure memories to support our importance. We remember our past as a drama in which each of us is the leading player. This egocentricity bias in memory is not just common – it is **universal**.

"The mind is organized to perceive and store information in terms of the egocentric bias. It serves as an essential cognitive function: the bias organizes our experience in a stable and consistent way so that we can later recall it."

At the extreme, egocentricity can cause us to interpret impersonal events as personal – or perceive personal threats from people who are not even aware of us. This can indicate a mental disorder.

"An overly anxious person, if he hears a siren, will think, 'Something is wrong with someone in my family?' A paranoid, of course, will think, 'They're after me!' If something goes wrong, a depressed person will think, 'It's my fault,' and if something goes well, a manic person will take the credit."

The difference between sick and normal is a matter of degree. With a mental disorder, egocentricity is rigid and extreme – views are maintained in spite of convincing evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, it is hard to avoid egocentricity. After all, isn't each of us at the center of our own universe?

* Adapted from Daniel Coleman's "A Bias Puts Self at the Center of Everything," *Psychological Updates: articles on Psychology from The New York Times*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1991, pages 51-52.