

## **Book Report: Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, by Malcolm Gladwell.**

Blink presents in popular science format research from psychology and behavioral economics on the adaptive unconscious; mental processes that work rapidly and automatically from relatively little information. It considers both the strengths of the adaptive unconscious, for example in expert judgment, and its pitfalls such as stereotypes.

### Summary

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The author describes the main subject of his book as "thin-slicing": our ability to gauge what is really important from a very narrow period of experience. In other words, this is an idea that spontaneous decisions are often as good as—or even better than—carefully planned and considered ones. Gladwell draws on examples from science, advertising, sales, medicine, and popular music to reinforce his ideas. Gladwell also uses many examples of regular people's experiences with "thin-slicing."

Gladwell explains how an expert's ability to "thin slice" can be corrupted by their likes and dislikes, prejudices and stereotypes (even unconscious ones), and how they can be overloaded by too much information. Two particular forms of unconscious bias Gladwell discusses are Implicit Association Tests and psychological priming. Gladwell also tells us about our instinctive ability to mind read, which is how we can get to know what emotions a person is feeling just by looking at his or her face.

We do that by "thin-slicing," using limited information to come to our conclusion. In what Gladwell contends is an age of information overload, he finds that experts often make better decisions with snap judgments than they do with volumes of analysis.

Gladwell gives a wide range of examples of thin-slicing in contexts such as gambling, speed dating, tennis, military war games, the movies, malpractice suits, popular music, and predicting divorce.

Gladwell also mentions that sometimes having too much information can interfere with the accuracy of a judgment, or a doctor's diagnosis. This is commonly called "Analysis paralysis." The challenge is to sift through and focus on only the most critical information to make a decision. The other information may be irrelevant and confusing to the decision maker. Collecting more and more information, in most cases, just reinforces our judgment but does not help to make it more accurate. The collection of information is commonly interpreted as confirming a person's initial belief or bias. Gladwell explains that better judgments can be executed from simplicity and frugality of information, rather than the more common belief that greater information about a patient is proportional to an improved diagnosis. If the big picture is clear enough to decide, then decide from the big picture without using a magnifying glass.

The book argues that intuitive judgment is developed by experience, training, and knowledge. For example, Gladwell claims that prejudice can operate at an intuitive unconscious level, even in individuals whose conscious attitudes are not prejudiced. An example is in the halo effect, where a person having a salient positive quality is thought to be superior in other, unrelated respects. Gladwell uses the 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, where four New York policemen shot an innocent man on his doorstep 41 times, as another example of how rapid, intuitive judgment can have disastrous effects.[1]

#### Research and Examples

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- Gladwell tells the story of a firefighter in Cleveland who answered a routine call with his men. It was in a kitchen in the back of a one-story house in a residential neighborhood. The firefighters broke down the door, laid down their hose, and began dousing the fire with water. It should have abated, but it did not. As the fire lieutenant recalls, he suddenly thought to himself, "There's something wrong here," and he immediately ordered his men out. Moments after they fled, the floor they had been standing on collapsed. The fire had been in the basement, not the kitchen as it appeared. When asked how he knew to get out, the fireman thought it was ESP. What is interesting to Gladwell is that the fireman could not immediately explain how he knew to get out. From what Gladwell calls "the locked door" in our brains, our fireman just "blinked" and made the right decision. In fact, if the fireman had deliberated on the facts he was seeing, he would have likely lost his life and the lives of his men.
- The book begins with the story of the Getty kouros, which was a statue brought to the J. Paul Getty Museum in California. It was proved by many experts to be legitimate, but when experts first looked at it, their initial responses said something was not right. For example, George Despinis, head of the Acropolis Museum in Athens, said "Anyone who has ever seen a sculpture coming out of the ground could tell that that thing has never been in the ground". However, controversy still surrounds the kouros as there is no consensus on whether it is genuine or a forgery. [2]
- John Gottman is a researcher well known for his work on marital relationships. His work is explored in Blink. After analyzing a normal conversation between a husband and wife for an hour, Gottman can predict whether that couple will be married in 15 years with 95% accuracy. If he analyzes them for 2 hours, his accuracy diminishes to 90%. This is one example of when "thin slicing" works.[3]
- The studies of Paul Ekman, a psychologist who created the Facial Action Coding System (FACS), indicates that a lot of "thin slicing" can be done within seconds by unconsciously analyzing a person's fleeting look called a micro expression. Ekman claims that the face is a rich source of what

is going on inside our mind and although many facial expressions can be made voluntarily, our faces are also governed by an involuntary system that automatically expresses our emotions. [4]

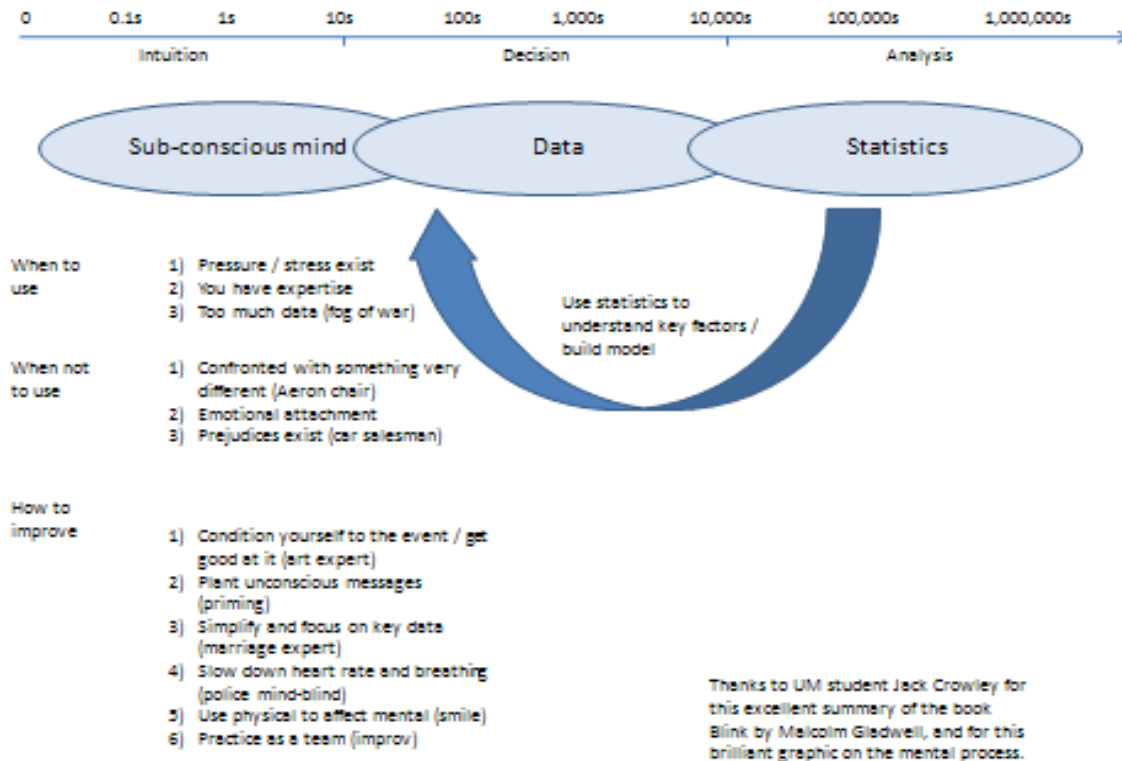
### Criticism and reception

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Richard Posner, a professor at the University of Chicago and a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, argues that Gladwell in *Blink* fails to follow his own recommendations regarding thin-slicing, and makes a variety of unsupported assumptions and mistakes in his characterizations of the evidence for his thesis.[5] The Daily Telegraph review writes, "Rarely have such bold claims been advanced on the basis of such flimsy evidence." [6]

In *Think!: Why Crucial Decisions Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye* (Simon and Schuster, 2006), Michael LeGault argues that "Blinklike" judgements are not substitute for critical thinking. He criticizes Gladwell for propagating unscientific notions:

As naturopathic medicine taps into a deep mystical yearning to be healed by nature, *Blink* exploits popular new-age beliefs about the power of the subconscious, intuition, even the paranormal. *Blink* devotes a significant number of pages to the so-called theory of mind reading. While allowing that mind-reading can "sometimes" go wrong, the book enthusiastically celebrates the apparent success of the practice, despite hosts of scientific tests showing that claims of clairvoyance rarely beat the odds of random chance guessing.[7]



## Confirmation Bias

[www.youarenotassmartasyouthink.com](http://www.youarenotassmartasyouthink.com)

This might seem like the easiest one...how hard is it to be open-minded, right?

Well recent research into the way our minds work has shown that far from being the rational beings we flatter ourselves into believing we are, unbeknownst to us, our unconscious is constantly shaping our thoughts, beliefs, and motivations in irrational ways. For example because of “the backfire effect,” when we’re presented with evidence that contradicts our beliefs, instead of changing those beliefs, they become even more entrenched. “The confirmation bias” makes us seek out and only pay attention to new information that confirms our preexisting notions, while we let information that contradicts those notions go over our heads. And “the sunk-cost fallacy” pushes us to stick with a less sensible or desirable option instead of choosing something better, because we’ve already invested time, money, or emotion in it.

In other words, our unconscious minds see our personal ideas as a great treasure, and competing ideas as would-be looters; when they’re detected by the unconscious’ security system, it unleashes the dogs and locks the gate. If you look at a brain scan of people who are listening to a political argument that

contradicts their own position, the blood in the part of the brain responsible for rational thought is depleted and is not replenished until the person hears a statement that confirms their position. When confronted with new ideas, your brain literally closes up shop and throws down the blinds until a friendly and well-known visitor knocks at the door.

All of which is to say, the ability to entertain new ideas does not come naturally. Your conscious mind has to turn off the unconscious' security system and say, "Okay, I know what's going on here. Let's not be so hasty. I'm not sure if that's a looter or a new friend. Why don't we first check and see?"

Entertaining a new idea doesn't necessarily mean accepting it and changing your beliefs every time you're presented with a different take on things. As it has been said, "Be opened-minded, but not so open-minded that your brain falls out."

Rather, you should entertain an idea in the same way you entertain a guest. You talk with him in a public setting first, at a distance. If you're intrigued, you then invite him over for a chat. You spend some time getting to know him. And if he turns out to be a bad apple, you stop letting him come around. But sometimes, the person you didn't think you had anything in common with becomes your new best friend.

The educated man has an easier time in seeing this. His varied experiences and studies have given him multiple opportunities to see how the information he has learned has changed his opinions—even if it took those new ideas a long time to be invited in. The sheltered man who only interacts with people just like him and only reads things that confirm his preconceived ideas will not have these experiences to draw upon, and will thus greet all new ideas like menacing strangers, shaking his fist at them from the safety of the other side of his crocodile-infested moat.