

An Analysis of Blink

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The ideas expressed in *Blink* are not new or unique. *Psychocybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz explored similar ideas in the 1960s. Self-help guru Tony Robbins also has a module about trusting one's first instincts. He mentions various CEOs and others who make decisions based on their gut feelings and why this should be done more often. Where *Blink* does a good job is in showing not only the areas in which the subconscious works in our favor, he also shows when it can backfire. This paper will dissect the book's six sections: Thin-Slicing, The Locked Door, Warren Harding Error, Paul Riper's victory, Kenna, and Seven Seconds in the Bronx.

Thin-Slicing

Thin-slicing is not only the first section of *Blink*, it is also the foundation of all the follows. In the book it is defined as follows:

“Thin-slicing” refers to the ability of our unconscious to find pat-

terns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience.

Every other section in the book involves a different facet of thin-slicing, so it's important to understand what it describes. It is, essentially, the mind picking up on cues that occur so quickly we cannot register them consciously. This helps us determine the true nature of the situation even when it is actively being hidden from us. For example, in the final section of the book author Malcolm Gladwell watches Kato Kaelin testify at OJ Simpson's trial. By watching it in slow motion he's able to see Kato make a face in a split second when he's otherwise presenting a very stoic response to questioning. Although the conscious doesn't see it, the subconscious does and it gives us a sense of unease. It's that sense of unease someone feels when they're being tricked by all but the most sophisticated confidence men. So it provides protection from outright trickery. There are examples of this behavior all the time. Studies have shown that men and women know almost as soon as a date starts whether or not there will be second dates or any intimacy. (Although the next section explores the issues in trying to put it into words)

The study mentioned in *Blink* in which a more accurate portrayal of someone could come from studying their dorm room than from spending time with them shed some interesting light on the MTV series Room Raiders. The show almost completely mirrors the study mentioned in the book. Three contestants are picked up without warning one morning and then a member of the opposite sex is able to go through their rooms unchaperoned. In the

end that person must select one of the three contestants to go on a date with. The person going through the room makes the same points made in *Blink* - they get to know if the contestant is messy or clean (because they didn't get a chance to clean), who their favorite bands are (by posters on the wall), and perhaps what they cherish (what items/photos do they have on their night stand?).

There isn't anything controversial about this section of the book.

The Locked Door

The principle behind *The Locked Door* is that we often cannot articulate the effects of thin-slicing. Worse than that, the attempts at explaining the thin-slicing often end up distorting or even contradicting the wisdom imparted by the subconscious. Gladwell gives examples of a tennis pro who knows instantaneously when a tennis player will double fault, but cannot articulate what he is seeing. Gladwell also speaks of speed dating and men and women who cannot actually articulate what they want in a date or a spouse. This section of the book also deals with priming - giving two examples - one that makes participants feel old and another that made people very patient.

This is the aspect of thin-slicing that most self-help gurus tend to gloss over or outright ignore because it is, if left unchecked, a way in which thin-slicing fails us. After all, of what use is being able to know when a tennis player is going to double-fault if that skill can't be parlayed into practical ad-

vice? The person with the skill can't use it to improve his game and he can't use it to improve the games of others. The dating example is also troubling because most people socialize by talking about their dates and relationships. If the act of describing the relationship forms the wrong impressions on the conscious mind, it certainly could lead to errors in who to pursue long-term relationships with.

However, the most damning part of this section is the priming. It shows that, for all our sophistication, humans are still able to be programmed like the golems of Jewish mythology. This is disturbing because it reveals that even the most savvy media consumer can have their conscious mind bypassed by crafty ad men and politicians. It is a worrying thought that we may not understand why we act simply because someone else has found the code to literally push our buttons.

Warren Harding Error

The Warren Harding Error can best be summed up as: you treat people unconsciously based on how they look and your conscious and unconscious prejudices. Gladwell mentions the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and Car Dealerships. A recent episode of *This American Life* covered the same issue, but with respect to housing. It covered how people were sent to find housing in New York City and African Americans who met all the qualifications of success in America (married, white collar jobs, good credit scores) were

told there were no apartments available for rent. Caucasians with the same qualifications were told there were apartments.

What's insidious about this effect is that, similar to *The Locked Door*, it is largely out of control of the person experiencing it. These associations are so deeply embedded into our subconscious by society that even those who harbor absolutely 0 racist attitudes find themselves "failing" the IAT. This brings up many different issues. First of all, it makes one wonder just how enlightened they should feel if they still fail the IAT - revealing prejudices below the surface. Second, it sheds a different light on whether affirmative action-type programs need to remain in place even though there is very little outright racism. Finally, there's the question of how much we can hold people accountable for these actions since they are rooted in the subconscious. Although there is some hope in the car salesman who works hard to work against his subconscious prejudices. However, there is money on the line for him and that's rarely the case for most people.

Paul Riper's Victory

Paul Riper's Victory arises from creating the conditions for success. The title is a reference to an infamous simulated battle that was supposed to prepare the USA for war against Iraq. The infamy arises from the fact that the USA didn't learn from Paul Riper's victory. Instead they reset the games and hampered his team so they could win. They then used those lessons to

disastrous effect.

In a less dramatic example, Gladwell shows how creating conditions for success in improv makes it easier for anyone to succeed at improv. The most important principle in improv is to always answer with “yes and”. In other words, never use negativity because that closes the possibilities for exploring the situation.

In a way, this is the section of the book that stands out the most because it has the least to do with thin-slicing. The principles from this chapter can just as easily be used to create conditions for success with conscious thought as well as unconscious thought.

Kenna

This section is about the perils of market research. In a way it is building upon *The Locked Door* by showing that market research participants can't properly articulate their preferences. In another way it builds somewhat on Paul Riper's *Victory* because it's also partially about the fact that the way things are tested affects the answer. This is especially apparent in the Coke vs Pepsi story in which it is shown that Pepsi will win a sip test because in small quantities humans have evolved to crave sugar. However, in large doses, humans don't enjoy it quite as much and so Coke wins when respondents have to drink an entire can or two.

The main story, about Kenna, is one of the most revealing exposés about

the music industry. It reveals that griping about the lack of creativity in modern music is not only a product of rose-tinted nostalgia. Just like all large entities the music industry has become risk-averse. That means that before any money is poured into an artist they must be market-tested. But, just like Coke, what music market testing favors is the single. Kenna's work, however, is best consumed as an album. This is why, in the time since Gladwell wrote this book, the music geeks have preferred independent artists who are able to be more creative without the shackles of the record industry and who can find an audience and money due to the Internet. It only costs \$35 for an artist to submit an album to iTunes and the artist keeps 70% of the profits. By contrast, the artist keeps about 10% of the iTunes profit if they are signed to a label. So while Gladwell's points are still valid, at least an artist like Kenna need not be in such dire straits today.

7 Seconds in The Bronx

This section contained two stories. One was the all too common situation where police misjudge what's happening and kill an innocent person. The other was the identification of facial micro-features mentioned before. Although not too much of a shock, it was interesting to learn that simply making a face causes the person to experience those emotions. Then again, the mind-body interface is more of a two way street than is usually thought. An article that was posted recently on the woman's issues site Jezebel spoke of

marital counseling advice of how often couples should have sex. It contained the following information from an expert:

She says they recommend scheduling [sex] in large part because there's still this huge myth that couples should always be in the mood first before getting into the act. "Research is showing that desire often emerges simultaneously with sexual arousal and sometimes even after the body is turned on, especially in women," she says

Thus providing another example of the body influencing the mind, which in turn further influences the body.

The story with the police that opened the chapter was quite eye-opening. When we read tales of police violence on innocent people it is very easy to assume overt prejudices. While there are certainly times where this is the case, the book makes the case that at times it may simply be an honest misreading of the situation. Again, this is not so hard to comprehend. *Psychocybernetics* mentions that the world's reality and the mind's reality are not necessarily correlated. It has the example of a man who thinks a bear is making noise in the bushes. It doesn't matter if it is really a rabbit - until the man finds out otherwise, all his actions will be consistent with the belief that a bear is in the bushes. Because police have a matter of seconds to react to a situation that could lead to their death, any actions that look like a perpetrator taking out a weapon will be treated as if he has a weapon.

Of course, the book does provide remedies for the police issue - namely slowing the action. If this is truly proven to save lives, it is criminal that it is not the standard procedure for the majority of policework.

Conclusion

Although *Blink* does not contain many new concepts, it is a brilliant packaging of a number of stories and research that helps to bring to the fore the importance of the subconscious. It can help us if we pay attention to it, although sometimes the results remain locked away. However, it can also blind us or cause us to act according to prejudices we didn't even know we had. So it is important to make a conscious effort to remove the prejudices when they might occur as was the case with the orchestras who started holding auditions behind walls to allow more women to join.