Blink

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM GLADWELL

Malcolm Gladwell was born in England and grew up in Canada. He studied history at the University of Toronto, and afterwards went to work for the conservative magazine *The American Spectator* in Indiana. By the late 1980s, Gladwell had risen to begin covering science and business news for the *Washington Post*, and gradually found that he excelled at simplifying complex information for a lay-audience. Gladwell began writing for the *New Yorker* in 1996, and has stayed there ever since. He rose to success after penning a *New Yorker* article called "The Tipping Point," the basis for his first book. After publishing *The Tipping Point* in 2000, Gladwell became a popular guest speaker for businesses, think tanks, and universities. Since 2000, he's published four successful books, including *Blink* (2005), *Outliers* (2008), and, mostly recently, *David and Goliath* (2013). He continues to write for the *New Yorker* and appear as a guest speaker around the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Blink alludes to many important historical events, including the feminist movement of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s: during this period, women entered the work force in record numbers. Gladwell also mentions several U.S. Presidents, including Warren G. Harding and Ronald Reagan. Warren G. Harding, who was the president from 1921 to 1923, is often criticized for being a corrupt, incompetent leader—Gladwell suggests that Harding succeeded in politics because of his impressive, "presidential" appearance. Gladwell also mentions John Hinckley's assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan in 1981—Hinckley, a mentally disturbed man, succeeded in wounding Reagan in the left lung only a few weeks after Reagan was inaugurated, though Reagan ultimately survived his wounds and went on to serve as president for another eight years.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Tipping Point has a lot in common with some of the other works of "pop sociology" published between the 1990s and the 2010s—and as with the authors of these other books, Gladwell has been alternately praised and criticized for making complex sociology and psychology simplified accessible to a lay-audience. Books in a similar vein include *Freakonomics* by Steven Levitt (2005), *The Black Swan* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007), and *The Better Angels of Our Nature* by Steven Pinker (2011).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking
- **When Written:** 2003-2004
- **Where Written:** New York City and Toronto
- **When Published:** January 11, 2005
- **Literary Period:** "Pop sociology"
- **Genre:** Sociology, psychology non-fiction
- **Point of View:** Third person, with frequent first-person asides

EXTRA CREDIT

Even smart people are wrong. Malcolm Gladwell is the first to admit that he's made mistakes. His 2000 bestseller, *The Tipping Point*, was credited with popularizing (and even glamorizing) the controversial "broken window theory" of law enforcement—a strategy for cracking down on crime that has been praised for reducing the crime rate but criticized for violating basic rights and civil liberties. In a 2013 interview, Gladwell admitted that he was "too in love with the broken-windows notion," and added that he was "so enamored by the metaphorical simplicity of that idea that I overstated its importance."

TED Talker. Gladwell is a frequent guest at "TED Talks," the popular program that invites speakers in the fields technology, entertainment, and design to deliver their ideas in 18 minutes or less. With his eloquence, easy humor, and concision, Gladwell is a natural for the TED format. The TED website describes Gladwell as a "pop R&D gumshoe"—not a bad way of describing his unconventional journalistic career.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the 1980s, the Getty Museum of Art in California purchased an ancient Greek **statue**. Experts spent months confirming that the statue was, indeed, ancient—eventually, they concluded that it was. But other people, including some renowned art historians, thought otherwise. After looking at the statue for just a couple seconds, they had an intuitive feeling that something was wrong about the statue. Sure enough, the statue turned out to be a likely forgery, sold on the black market. *Blink* is a book about intuitive feelings and snap judgments—judgments which are often (though not necessarily) more accurate and insightful than months of analysis.

In the first chapter of the book, Gladwell introduces some of

the basic rules of snap judgment, or "rapid cognition." Humans are capable of making complex, rational judgments about the world, but they're also capable of something called "thin-slicing"—taking a very small, specific amount of evidence about the world and then drawing big conclusions from this "thin slice" of reality, using a combination of experience and intuition. In the case of the Getty's statue, the art historians who immediately thought that the statue was a fake may have thin sliced the available evidence (the statue's appearance) and drawn the conclusion that the statue was a fake.

The psychologist John Gottman has trained himself to thin slice interactions between married couples. By studying the conversational patterns and facial cues of a couple for just a few minutes, Gottman can predict to a near-certainty whether or not the couple will still be married in 15 years. While Gottman is an expert at thin-slicing, Gladwell argues that all human beings are innately good at thin-slicing.

Gladwell has shown that rapid cognition allows people to make often surprisingly accurate judgments about the world. But in Chapter Two, he introduces a strange problem: even if people are good at making snap judgments about the world, they're bad at *explaining* their own judgments. For example, psychologists have found that people's actual tastes in romantic partners are very different from what they *think* their tastes are: put another way, people can't explain what they want. The world of professional sports is full of examples of people who intuitively do certain things, but can't put into words why they do them—for example, the tennis great Andre Agassi always claimed that he "rolled" his wrist when he returned a shot, even though experts have determined that he did no such thing. In short, there are certain human behaviors for which the explanation takes place "behind a **locked door**." Instead of trying to explain everything, perhaps people should accept that there are limits to rational explanation.

So far, Gladwell has been talking about how thin-slicing can be a helpful way for humans to understand the world. But of course, there's no guarantee that thin-slicing is accurate at all. In Chapter Three, he talks about stereotyping—i.e., the cases in which people's snap judgments about the world are wrong and even harmful. The political career of President Warren Harding is a great example of how wrong snap judgments can be. Millions of people elected Harding because he *looked* presidential—and yet he turned out to be one of the worst presidents in history. Although people may be reasonable and accepting in their day-to-day lives, they're often capable of making prejudicial or even racist *snap judgments* when they're put under pressure. In car dealerships, for example, it's been found that black people receive higher initial offers than white people do. While one could interpret this evidence to prove that car salesmen are consciously being racist, Gladwell suggests a more subtle explanation: even if car salesmen are tolerant and unbiased in their *conscious* minds, they may still make racist judgments about people when they thin-slice.

In the second half of the book, Gladwell explores some of the case studies of his theory of thin-slicing. In Chapter Four, he looks at the famous Pentagon war game of 2000, in which an enemy red team and a heroic blue team engaged in a mock-war for control of the "Middle East." The red team was controlled by Paul Van Riper, a former Vietnam commander who used an improvisational, intuitive style of leadership. Although the blue team had far more soldiers and firepower than Van Riper's red team, and used a rigorous, rational decision-making process, Van Riper was able to devastate the blue team's forces. One important lesson to draw from this story is that more information isn't always helpful in the decision-making process; in fact, extra information can distract and confound the decision-makers. Gladwell describes the process of "verbal overshadowing," in which the act of attempting to vocalize and rationalize one's decisions *prevents* one from making good intuitive decisions. Van Riper succeeded as a commander because he didn't overburden his troops and commanders with excessive information: he used intuition and rapid cognition to fight the blue team.

In Chapter Five, Gladwell studies the process of polling, a good example of how poorly people understand their own needs and desires. The musician Kenna has been trying to make it big for more than a decade: he's highly talented, and gets glowing reviews from professional musicians, producers, and lyricists, but for some reason, his music has never "tested" well among audiences (i.e., when a sample audience is asked to listen to his music and rate it, he never gets good reviews). Gladwell argues that Kenna's poor audience tests don't necessarily prove that he's a bad musician, or that he couldn't be a big star. Polls and tests are notoriously unreliable, because they force people to put into words what they do and don't like about a product: a process that often interferes with people's rapid cognition. Gladwell discusses many examples of successful products (margarine, the Aeron chair, the TV show *All in the Family*) that tested poorly but ended up being hugely successful. In a poll or test, it's easy for sample audiences to confuse "different" and "bad," with the result that often, revolutionary new products test poorly simply because they're so novel. Perhaps Kenna's problem is that music studios are too reliant on test audiences—a new, creative musician like Kenna won't necessarily do well with test audiences, even if he could be a superstar.

In Chapter Six, Gladwell studies the tragic case of Amadou Diallo, an immigrant who was murdered by four plainclothes police officers in 1999. While Diallo's death seems like a textbook example of police racism (Diallo was unarmed and standing outside his apartment building when the police officers approached him), Gladwell suggests that the four police officers weren't consciously racist in their behavior; rather, they experienced a crisis of rapid cognition, during

which they may have fallen back on subconscious racist behaviors. Intuitively, humans are good at reading other people's expressions and gestures. But in a high-stakes situation, such as a police chase, people lose their ability to interpret expressions and gestures, becoming—in Gladwell's phrase—"temporarily autistic." Gladwell argues that police officers should be trained to interpret facial cues, as this will help them act sensibly in high-stakes situations and avoid making the kinds of racist snap-judgments that led to Diallo's death.

In the Conclusion, Gladwell talks about the rise of blind auditions in the world of classical music—which has led to record numbers of women entering elite orchestras. Blind auditions are a great example of rapid cognition at its best, because they allow judges and selection committees to hear performers without any biases or prejudices. In short, Gladwell suggests that rapid cognition isn't inherently good or bad—sometimes, thin-slicing helps us make insightful judgments about others, and sometimes it leads us to stereotype. However, by controlling the process of thin-slicing just a little—by training police officers to interpret facial cues more accurately, by introducing blind auditions, etc.—we can use rapid cognition to make the world fairer and safer.

CHARACTERS

John Gottman – Psychologist and researcher who developed such sophisticated techniques for interpreting couples' interactions that he could predict, with 95 percent accuracy, whether a couple would still be married in 15 years.

Bill – One of the subjects interviewed by John Gottman, husband of Susan.

Susan – One of the subjects interviewed by John Gottman, wife of Bill.

Brian Grazer – An important American movie producer, who claims to have decided that Tom Hanks would be a box-office star within a few seconds of meeting him.

Tom Hanks – Academy Award-winning American actor and movie star.

Sigmund Freud – Influential Viennese psychologist who developed the idea of psychoanalysis.

Vic Braden – World-class tennis player, and later coach.

Iyengar Fisman – Researcher who studied the psychology of speed-dating.

Raymond Fisman – Researcher who studied the psychology of speed-dating.

Harry Daugherty – Early 20th-century lobbyist and political "king maker," often credited with the election of President Warren Harding.

Warren Harding – 29th President of the United States, often considered to be one of the worst American presidents.

Bob Golomb – Highly talented car salesman who Gladwell uses as an example of the importance of social cues and facial expressions.

Paul Van Riper – Decorated military veteran whose improvisational leadership style during the Vietnam War led to his inclusion in a 2000 Pentagon war game.

Brendan Reilly – Chairman of the Cook County Hospital in Chicago, whose controversial organizational techniques have been crediting with significantly reducing the number of improper heart disease diagnoses.

Lee Goldman – Controversial doctor and medical researcher who developed a "decision tree" for diagnosing heart disease.

Joseph Kidd – War veteran whose mental health records were used in a psychological experiment.

Kenna – Ethiopian-American musician whose career never quite took off, in spite of the glowing reviews he won from producers, writers, and other music insiders.

Craig Kallman – The former president of Columbia Records.

Dick Morris – Influential political pollster, and a key campaign adviser to Bill Clinton.

Bill Clinton – 42nd President of the United States, sometimes criticized for being too reliant on polling data.

Louis Cheskin – Influential business researcher whose findings about the importance of packaging have been used to market thousands of goods and products.

Gail Civille – Professional food taster for the company Sensory Spectrum.

Judy Heylmun – Professional food taster for the company Sensory Spectrum.

Amadou Diallo – Guinean immigrant who was killed by four plainclothes police officers on the night of February 3, 1999, triggering a national debate about racism and stereotyping in the police force.

Silvan Tomkins – Pioneering psychologist of "affect theory," the idea that humans externalize even their subtlest emotions through facial expressions.

Paul Ekman – Psychologist and student of Silvan Tomkins, and another pioneer of affect theory.

Harold Philby – Soviet spy whose trial is a good example of how the human face externalizes secret emotions.

Peter – Autistic adult whose reaction to the human face inspires Gladwell's theory of "temporary autism."

John Hinckley – Would-be assassin who tried and failed to shoot President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Ronald Reagan – 40th President of the United States.

Abbie Conant – Professional trombone player, and an early beneficiary of symphony orchestras' blind audition process.

Sergiu Celibidache – Director of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra.

Julie Landsman – French horn player for the New York Metropolitan Opera.

Andre Agassi – World-class tennis player.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RAPID COGNITION, "THIN-SLICING," AND THE ADAPTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

At the heart of *Blink* is the concept of rapid cognition, or "thin-slicing," the process by which people make quick assessments of the world using a limited amount of evidence. Sometimes, people base their decisions on thorough, deliberate, and rational choices—yet Gladwell shows that a staggering number of our decisions result from thin-slicing and instinctive hunches about how to act. This kind of decision-making process has some notable advantages, but also some clear problems.

In the early chapters of his book, Gladwell sketches out the basic steps and components of thin-slicing. To begin with, he divides the human mind into two distinct parts: the conscious, rational mind, and the "adaptive unconscious" (the part of the mind that engages in the process of thin-slicing). The conscious mind is good at studying a wide range of evidence and drawing conclusions about what to do from this evidence. However, the adaptive unconscious works very differently from the conscious mind: it's adept at assessing a very small amount of evidence about the external world (a "thin slice") and then making an instinctive decision about how to respond to this evidence. (It's worth noting that Gladwell's model of the adaptive unconscious is very different from Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious: unlike Freud's unconscious, the adaptive unconscious is constantly responding to literal, external stimuli.) It's important to recognize that the adaptive unconscious acts instinctively and, in a sense, reflexively; put another way, a human being doesn't necessarily *know* when he or she's using the adaptive unconscious. *Blink* studies the strengths and weaknesses of the adaptive unconscious, and theorizes about the extent to which it's possible to control it.

As Gladwell acknowledges, the process of rapid cognition has some disadvantages. Rapid cognition is, by definition, prejudicial: it consists of making assessments of other people without all the evidence—in short, "judging a book by its cover." Therefore, people sometimes make bad decisions because they rely too heavily on the adaptive unconscious; for example, they favor people who *seem* trustworthy and likable, but aren't. Put another way, they act on "bad evidence"—the thin slice that determines their behavior (e.g., a person's appearance or demeanor) isn't representative of reality. Rapid cognition can also lead people to fall back on racist or sexist stereotypes about other people (see Prejudice theme).

But in spite of its clear problems, rapid cognition also has some notable benefits. Perhaps most importantly, rapid cognition is … rapid. There are many occasions when people don't have the time to weigh all available evidence. In such a moment, people need to use the adaptive unconscious to decide what to do. The adaptive unconscious is also more adept at interpreting subtle pieces of evidence such as facial cues, which the conscious mind often ignores. In all, Gladwell suggests that human beings would have gone extinct long ago if rapid cognition hadn't helped them act in times of crisis.

Gladwell never claims that rapid cognition is either perfect or morally right. However, he argues that rapid cognition plays a valuable role in human behavior—a role that's too-often ignored. By themselves, neither rational decision-making nor thin-slicing can guide humans one hundred percent of the time. But perhaps by combining rationality and rapid cognition in their lives, Gladwell suggests, humans can make the best possible decisions.

RAPID COGNITION AND PREJUDICE

One of the most evident problems with rapid cognition is that it can be prejudicial. By definition, rapid cognition involves making judgments (often about other people) in the absence of all the information—something we're usually taught *not* to do from an early age. Furthermore, rapid cognition is prejudicial in the sense that, over a lifetime, the adaptive unconscious can "accumulate" stereotypes and bigotry, with the result that rapid cognition sometimes motivates bigoted behavior. But while Gladwell acknowledges that rapid cognition is prejudicial, he argues that it's also possible for people to use rapid cognition to *fight* racism and other forms of prejudice.

In the first half of *Blink*, Gladwell shows how the adaptive unconscious accumulates bigotry, sometimes causing bigoted behavior. Over the course of a lifetime, people experience bigoted or stereotypical representations of other people. For example, films, TV shows, and other media portray African Americans as dangerous and criminal to an unfair and unrealistic degree. While people may be consciously aware that these kinds of stereotypes are *just* stereotypes, the adaptive unconscious may internalize the same stereotypes and respond

to them. The result is that the same person may be consciously aware that racism is immoral, and yet *act* racist, due to the power of the adaptive unconscious. For instance, Gladwell shows that when people are asked to pair dangerous objects with photographs of either black or white people, they're quicker to associate the objects with black people, perhaps reflecting the racist stereotypes accumulated in the adaptive unconscious. The adaptive unconscious acts intuitively, and often falls back on quick, heavily reinforced mental associations; therefore, in a society where the media ascribes negative stereotypes to certain groups of people, the adaptive unconscious will trigger some bigoted behavior.

While freely admitting that the adaptive unconscious sometimes triggers bigotry, Gladwell goes on to argue that most bigotry results from the *absence* of rapid cognition, and that rapid cognition can be used to fight bigotry. Although rapid cognition involves making assessments based on limited evidence, it also involves simultaneously assessing many different *kinds* of evidence, such as facial cues, clothing, age, race, etc. Therefore, a bigot, it could be argued, is someone who focuses on only one form of evidence—a person's race, age, gender, etc.—and ignores all other available evidence. To make his point, Gladwell discusses Bob Golomb, a highly successful car salesman. Golomb sells a huge number of cars each month because he's adept at sizing up his clients—"thin-slicing" their facial cues, their gestures, etc. Where many other car salesmen focus most of their attention on older, white, male clients, Golomb claims to treat all his clients the same, regardless of their age, race, or gender, instead of letting these factors cloud his judgment. In short, Golomb uses thin-slicing to overcome the bigotry common in his profession—because he focuses on small but important details about his clients' behavior, he makes perceptive, accurate judgments about the people who walk into his car dealership.

Gladwell arrives at the strange conclusion that, while some bigotry results from rapid cognition, not all rapid cognition is bigoted, and in fact, rapid cognition can stave off some forms of bigotry. Most people are taught not to "judge a book by its cover," because it's morally wrong to presume things about other people; or, put another way, because the "cover" isn't always representative of what's inside the book. Gladwell offers an interesting reinterpretation of the old saying: he argues that it *is*, in fact, possible to learn a lot about a book by thin-slicing its cover. To extend the analogy, a bigot isn't someone who judges a book by its cover; rather, a bigot is someone who focuses on only one small aspect of the "cover" (for example, race, gender, age, etc.), and ignores the rest of the "cover" (facial cues, gestures, intelligence, conversational style, etc.). Thus, *Blink* argues that there's nothing necessarily wrong or immoral about thin-slicing, provided that we use the adaptive conscious to its full potential.

RATIONALITY VS. INTUITION

In order to talk about the psychology of human behavior, Gladwell analyzes the adaptive unconscious: the part of the mind that acts according to instinct and intuition. But, as Gladwell notes, there is a problem—and maybe even a contradiction—in the idea of *analyzing* intuition. Sometimes, when people try to talk about their snap judgments, they find themselves unable to explain them at all. In other cases, the act of talking about intuition causes people to *lose* their intuition momentarily. These cases bring up an important question—to what extent is it possible to analyze and explain intuition, and, more generally, to what extent is it possible to control or develop the adaptive unconscious?

In the second half of his book, Gladwell shows how the relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind can be antagonistic. Often, people do things without being able to explain why: in Gladwell's terminology, people are capable of exercising the adaptive unconscious without being aware that they're using it. As a result, they can't explain *why* they hold certain beliefs or perform certain actions, beyond a "hunch."

Sometimes, a new problem arises when people are asked to explain their hunches; i.e., when people are forced to rationalize the behavior of the adaptive unconscious—they lose the power of that "hunch" altogether. For example, a psychological study found that subjects are intuitively good at evaluating the tastes of different kinds of jam. But when they're asked to *explain* the reasons underlying their preferences, subjects turn into "jam idiots"—they lose their sophisticated tastes and their ability to remember different flavors. Gladwell terms this process—in which the use of the rational mind prevents the unconscious mind from functioning normally—"verbal overshadowing." The implications of Gladwell's argument are enormous: there seems to be a limit to how much we can understand our own hunches and snap judgments. While there may, in fact, be rational explanations for why people get hunches and snap judgments, our attempts to understand and explain them can interfere with the snap judgments themselves. Gladwell uses the metaphor of a "**locked door**" to describe the behavior of the adaptive unconscious—sometimes, it's best for rapid cognition to remain "behind the door" and beyond rational explanation.

Gladwell believes that humans can teach themselves to improve their snap judgments through practice and experience (for instance, he argues that police officers should be trained in facial recognition). Nevertheless, his points about the locked door of the mind suggest that there is a limit to how greatly people can "tinker" with their own intuitions. Put another way, intuition can be developed and strengthened, but not always explained.

FREE WILL

One of Gladwell's most challenging and provocative arguments concerns the role of free will in decision-making. Most people believe that human beings are free to choose what to do: they use their reason, experience, and emotion to reach a conscious choice. The only times when a human *wouldn't* be acting freely would be if they were being physically forced or threatened, or if their mind were brainwashed. *Blink* challenges this common-sense belief by introducing the concept of the adaptive unconscious.

The adaptive unconscious undermines our traditional understanding of free will by showing that human behavior is often the product of unconscious urges and unpredictable mental associations. According to *Blink*, it is possible for a human to act a certain way without knowing why. For instance, subjects in one psychological experiment read a paragraph that contained numerous "trigger words"—i.e., words that evoked strong mental associations and inspired specific forms of behavior. Afterwards, the subjects walked out of the experiment more slowly than they'd walked into it: the trigger words influenced them to slow down their movements unconsciously. Similarly, *Blink* shows that it's possible for humans to consciously *choose* to act a certain way, and yet behave differently due to the interference of the adaptive unconscious. During a series of psychological experiments, subjects exhibited racist behavior after being exposed to racist images and signs. Although the subjects weren't overtly racist people, and even condemned racism, they were triggered to exhibit racist behavior: the images influenced their unconscious minds. In these psychological experiments, the subjects did not, in an ordinary sense, *choose* to walk more slowly or exhibit racist behavior—indeed, some of the subjects consciously chose to do the opposite. Instead, their unconscious minds influenced their behavior. The subjects' actions suggest that the common understanding of free will is too simplistic—humans do not simply decide what to do; the adaptive unconscious "nudges" them in different directions.

Gladwell's interpretation of free will might strike some people as frightening or disconcerting, since it suggests that humans are, in some ways, slaves to their own unconscious minds. And yet in some ways, Gladwell's model of free will is preferable to the common-sense one. As Gladwell points out, it's probably a good thing that the adaptive unconscious makes some decisions "on behalf" of the conscious mind: if the conscious mind had to decide what to do at all times, it would quickly be overwhelmed with decisions. In effect, the adaptive unconscious acts as a "valet," making some choices independently, and allowing the conscious mind to focus on others. Furthermore, Gladwell's model of free will doesn't suggest that humans are totally incapable of making rational, conscious choices—it just suggests that people aren't always as rational or single-minded as they think they are. In a way, *Blink* characterizes free will as a "spectrum": our choices are neither completely conscious and free, nor are they completely unconscious and predetermined; they incorporate elements of both the adaptive unconscious and the conscious mind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE "GREEK" STATUE

Because *Blink* is a work of nonfiction, there aren't many overt symbols. One exception is the statue that Gladwell discusses in the introduction. The statue, presented as an authentic Greek "kouros" (ceremonial statue), was acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum in California. While many of the Getty employees decided that the statue was real, other noted art historians immediately and intuitively judged the statue to be a modern fake. As Gladwell argues, the statue—which probably indeed turned out to be an ingenious fake (although this is still in question even years later!)—symbolizes the power, and the danger, of rapid cognition. For the art historians who immediately "knew" that the statue was a fake, rapid cognition acted as an important observational tool. But for the Getty experts who *wanted* to believe that the statue was real, rapid cognition acted as a barrier to the truth—because of their biases, they wrongly judged the statue to be real.

THE LOCKED DOOR

Gladwell compares the actions of the adaptive unconscious to a locked door. The human mind is a complicated place, and most of its behaviors are difficult, if not impossible, to understand—in fact, the act of trying to interpret intuition often interferes with intuition itself. In this sense, the locked door symbolizes the mysterious, complicated nature of the mind, and the fact that attempting to understand it actually *changes* it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Publisher edition of *Blink* published in 0.

Introduction Quotes

❝ When [the art historians] looked at the *kouros* and felt an "intuitive repulsion," they were absolutely right. In the first two seconds of looking - in a single glance - they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than the team at the Getty was able to understand after fourteen months.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In the Introduction to *Blink*, Gladwell offers a good example of how rapid cognition can help people understand the world. In the 1980s, the Getty Art Museum acquired a beautiful Greek statue. But some art historians felt an intuitive sense that the statue was "wrong." In Gladwell's terminology, they used rapid cognition—the largely unconscious process of assessing the world through intuition—to assess the statue quickly and efficiently.

Rapid cognition has some obvious problems, which Gladwell will discuss soon enough, but this example emphasizes the one critical advantage of rapid cognition—it's "rapid." The art historians who felt an intuitive repulsion around the statue knew more about it in seconds than other people knew after months of study. So even in the world of art preservation (which doesn't require too many split-second decisions) the advantages of rapid cognition are clear—if the Getty officials had listened to the art historians mentioned in the passage, they could have saved themselves months of time (not to mention a huge sum of money). In the worlds of law enforcement, war, comedic improvisation, etc., rapid cognition isn't just faster and potentially more accurate than ordinary, rational thinking—sometimes, in the heat of the moment, it's the *only* kind of thinking humans are capable of. Therefore, it's important for us to understand how rapid cognition works and what its strengths and weaknesses are.

❝ We really only trust conscious decision making. But there are moments, particularly in times of stress, when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions can offer a much better means of making sense of the world. The first task of *Blink* is to convince you of a simple fact: decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell acknowledges that he has his work cut out for him: there's a very strong bias against the kind of snap judgments that he'll be writing about. As he explains here, people tend to think that snap judgments are narrow-minded, ignorant, and generally not useful. Gladwell's response is that, although snap judgments are often ignorant and useless, there are moments when they can be *more* insightful than the most thoughtful, measured judgments.

Maybe the most important word in this passage is "can"—snap judgments *can* be insightful, but not necessarily. As Gladwell will show, there is no guarantee that rapid cognition offers a good way of deciphering the world. However, the potential rewards of rapid cognition—and there are plenty—mean that we should study snap judgments more closely instead of dismissing them altogether.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Gottman may seem to be an odd example in a book about the thoughts and decisions that bubble up from our unconscious. There's nothing instinctive about his approach. He's not making snap judgments. He's sitting down with his computer and painstakingly analyzing videotapes, second by second. His work is a classic example of conscious and deliberate thinking. But Gottman, it turns out, can teach us a great deal about a critical part of rapid cognition known as thin-slicing. "Thin-slicing" refers to the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience.

Related Characters: John Gottman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell discusses a psychological researcher named John Gottman. Gottman's research concerns videotapes of married couples—amazingly, Gottman has found that he can predict, with a high degree of accuracy, whether or not young married couples will still

be married in fifteen years, based entirely on analyses of their brief conversations. Gottman's analysis is a good example of thin-slicing: the practice of extrapolating large conclusions from very small pieces of evidence. In this case, the small pieces of evidence would be the short conversations between a married couple, and the large conclusion would be whether or nor the couple will be married in fifteen years.

One strange thing about Gottman's research, which Gladwell discusses here, is that is that Gottman has taken years to train himself to assess couples' compatibility. Thus, the passage exemplifies how, even if thin-slicing is usually an instinctive behavior, people can train themselves to get better at thin-slicing. When Gottman began his research, he didn't know how to interpret interactions between couples—but after hundreds of hours of practice, he's a pro at it.

❝ Most of us have difficulty believing that a 275-pound football lineman could have a lively and discerning intellect. We just can't get past the stereotype of the dumb jock. But if all we saw of that person was his bookshelf or the art on his walls, we wouldn't have that same problem.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell gives an example of how thin slicing can be more insightful and accurate about other people than a traditional, well-reasoned judgment. If we were to meet a huge, sweaty football star who happened to have an IQ of 195, we probably wouldn't think that he was a genius—our stereotypes about athletes would cloud our judgment (or so Gladwell assumes). However, if we thin-sliced his living quarters and saw the books on his shelf, we'd probably stand a better chance of assessing his intelligence correctly.

The point of this example is that thin-slicing isn't necessarily ignorant or close-minded. Tiny pieces of evidence really *do* communicate a lot of information—and it's up to humans to interpret these pieces of evidence. By the same token, the passage suggests that thin slicing and prejudice aren't one and the same. One the surface, it seems that thin-slicing is, by definition, a form of prejudice: it involves makes judgments about people before we have all the information. But Gladwell's counterintuitive point is that thin-slicing can actually be a way to *sidestep* prejudice: by limiting the amount of evidence we study, we also limit our chances of having our judgment clouded by stereotypes or bias.

❝ This time around, the observers' ratings predicted with better than eighty percent accuracy which marriages were going to make it. That's not quite as good as Gottman. But it's pretty impressive - and that shouldn't come as a surprise. We're old hands at thin-slicing.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter closes on an interesting note: when John Gottman trained laypeople to interpret couples' interactions, he found that they were remarkably good at doing so. Gottman was able to teach ordinary people most of the rules that he'd taught himself over the course of many years, so that, in the end, laypeople could watch footage of a husband and wife interacting and predict, with eighty percent accuracy, whether they'd remain together in fifteen years. Eighty percent may not be as good at Gottman's ninety-five percent, but it's still pretty impressive. Moreover, the fact that laypeople could train themselves to interpret couples' interactions so accurately suggests that all human beings, regardless of their intelligence or talent, are in a sense hard-wired to make insightful snap judgments about the external world. Even if these snap judgments aren't always accurate, we can train ourselves to improve our own rapid cognition and become more observant, intelligent people.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ We need to respect the fact that it is possible to know without knowing why we know and accept that - sometimes - we're better off that way.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Gladwell introduces a strange and somewhat frustrating idea: sometimes we have to accept

that it's possible to know things without knowing why we know them. In other words, we need to learn how to trust our intuitions without understanding them completely. The reason that this is the case is that most of our snap judgments are unconscious—since they take place in the adaptive unconscious area of the mind. In other words, humans will make decisions and judgments—hunches—without being able to explain them rationally. Almost by definition, a hunch can't be explained: only rational decisions can be explained fully, since rational decisions originate in the conscious mind.

In the rest of the book, Gladwell gives examples of some of the pitfalls of explaining hunches and snap judgments. He shows that when we try to put our tastes or our memories into words, we *lose* our tastes and memories: our rational thoughts overshadow and drown out our unconscious judgments. Thus, Gladwell concludes, we should accept that it's okay not to know why we know certain things—why we prefer one kind of jam to another, for example. Any attempt to study *why* we have hunches could interfere with the hunches themselves.

❝ The results from these experiments are, obviously, quite disturbing. They suggest that what we think of as free will is largely an illusion: much of the time, we are simply operating on automatic pilot, and the way we think and act - and how well we think and act on the spur of the moment - are a lot more susceptible to outside influences than we realize.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell's ideas have some surprising and, as he admits, disturbing, implications. Specifically, the idea of the adaptive unconscious challenges our ordinary understanding of free will. Most people would say that human beings are capable of making free choices, using their rationality, their emotions, and their tastes. Gladwell would say that there is a limit to human freedom. At times, people do things because they've been unconsciously conditioned—or "primed," as he phrases it—to behave a certain way. For example, when people read a list of trigger words such as "old," "grey," etc., they walk more slowly afterwords.

Gladwell's comments about freedom might seem depressing. Nevertheless, Gladwell *isn't* saying that humans can be brainwashed into doing anything—trigger words, for example, can nudge people into certain behaviors and actions, but they can't cause people to lose their willpower altogether. Perhaps it's fair to say that free will exists on a spectrum: humans are capable of *some* free choices, but not as many as they thought. Our choices aren't completely out of our own control, but they are at least partly "susceptible to outside influences."

❝ "Is the real me the one that I described beforehand?"
She paused, and Fisman spoke up: "No, the real me is the me revealed by my actions. That's what an economist would say."
Iyengar looked puzzled. "I don't know that's what a psychologist would say."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, two psychological researchers, Iyengar and Raymond Fisman (they're married) discuss their findings. The Fismans have been studying the psychology of speed-dating. Much to their surprise, the kinds of people that people *say* they're attracted to are very different from the actual partners that they like most during a speed-dating session. One could say that there is a gap between what people want and what they think they want—at least when it comes to romantic partners. (Gladwell will later apply this principle to the science of polling.)

As the passage shows, there is no correct way to interpret the "gap." For Iyengar, people are defined by what they think and believe; for her husband, however, people are defined by what they do. The reality, of course, is that neither one of these answers is totally satisfactory—people are defined by both their thoughts and their actions. In part, *Blink* studies the gap between people's thoughts and their actions.

❝ Everyone in that room had not one mind but two, and all the while their conscious mind was blocked, their unconscious was scanning the room, sifting through possibilities, processing every conceivable clue. And the instant it found the answer, it guided them - silently and surely - to the solution.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell talks about an experiment in which people were "primed" to come up with a solution to a complex logic puzzle. The point of the experiment, as Gladwell interprets it, is that the adaptive unconscious can be better at finding solutions to problems and puzzles than the conscious, rational mind. In the experiment, people tried to use their rational minds to solve the puzzle; however, it was only because their unconscious minds were "scanning the room" that they finally arrived at an elegant solution.

The passage foreshadows some of the following chapters, in which Gladwell will show how the adaptive unconscious can be a site of creativity and insight. Rationality and logic are important, but sometimes unconscious snap judgments are more effective in solving problems. Thus, the passage is a good illustration of the advantages of "blinking."

Chapter 3 Quotes

The Warren Harding error is the dark side of rapid cognition. It is at the root of a good deal of prejudice and discrimination.

Related Characters: Warren Harding

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In the first two chapters of *Blink*, Gladwell mostly explored how rapid cognition can be a "tool for good," in the process avoiding the common-sense belief that rapid cognition is shallow and ignorant. But in Chapter Three, he admits that, indeed, rapid cognition *can* be tremendously ignorant. He studies the life of Warren Harding, an unremarkable but presidential-*looking* man who somehow rose to become the President of the United States. Gladwell suggests that people elected Harding because of a failure of rapid cognition: in their haste to vote, they made a decision based on a "thin slice" of evidence (his stately, distinguished appearance), and paid for their mistake.

So Gladwell finally arrives at a point that was, perhaps, obvious from the beginning: rapid cognition is by definition prejudicial, in the sense that it involves making judgments about the world before all the evidence is in. For the rest of the chapter, however, Gladwell will attempt to argue that we shouldn't "throw the baby out with the bathwater"; in other words, just because some rapid cognition leads to poor decision making, we shouldn't avoid rapid cognition altogether—it still has some legitimate uses.

The disturbing thing about the test is that it shows that our unconscious attitudes may be utterly incompatible with our stated conscious values. As it turns out for example, of the fifty thousand African Americans who have taken the Race IAT so far, about half of them, like me, have stronger associations with whites than with blacks. How could we not? We live in North America, where we are surrounded every day by cultural messages linking white with good.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell discusses the IAT, a test in which people are asked to associate a list of words with one of two categories. The IAT has many different applications, but one of these applications is that it can measure people's propensity to discriminate against certain ideas and concepts. For example, when people are asked to categorize words as either "good or African American" *or* "bad or white," they complete the test far more slowly, and make more mistakes, than they do when the categories are "bad or African American" *or* "good or white." These results might suggest that people (even black people, as Gladwell states here) in North America have been conditioned, over the course of a lifetime, to associate negative ideas with black people—the very definition of racism.

But Gladwell's real point is that, contrary to what it might seem, the IAT doesn't prove that most people "are" racist. Because of the power of the adaptive unconscious, it is possible to be a tolerant, unprejudiced person in one's beliefs, and yet make some prejudiced judgments in the heat of the moment. Even if the conscious, rational mind is capable of tolerance and understanding, the adaptive unconscious might harbor some prejudicial thoughts and ideas.

He may make a million snap judgments about a customer's needs and state of mind, but he tries never to judge anyone on the basis of his or her appearance. He assumes that everyone who walks in the door has the exact same chance of buying a car.

Related Characters: Bob Golomb

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell discusses Bob Golomb, a brilliant car salesman who sells huge numbers of cars every month because he doesn't discriminate against people on the basis of their age, race, gender, etc. In the car business, discrimination of all kinds is common: car salesmen have only a couple minutes to get potential clients' attention, and so they fall back on old, unfair stereotypes—for example, they direct most of their attention to older white men, assuming that old white men are more likely to buy cars than, for example, young black women. The point of the passage is that Bob Golomb sells more cars because he ignores stereotyping of this kind altogether. Instead of assuming that certain kinds of people are more likely to buy cars than others, he treats all people the same.

The crux of the passage, however, is that Golomb continues to thin-slice his clients. He doesn't ignore people on the basis of their race or age, but he *does* pay close attention to their facial cues, mannerisms, expressions, etc. Thus, the passage is a good example of how people can practice rapid cognition without being prejudiced—and, in fact, how rapid cognition can actually *counteract* prejudice at times.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ This is why, in many ways, the choice of Paul Van Riper to head the opposing Red Team was so inspired, because if Van Riper stood for anything, it was the antithesis of that position. Van Riper didn't believe you could lift the fog of war.

Related Characters: Paul Van Riper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

In the year 2000, the Pentagon established the "Millennium Challenge"—a war game between two mock-armies, the Red Team and the Blue Team. The purpose of the Millennium Challenge was to find the optimal way to wage a war and to test military strategies and new technology. Thus, the Red and Blue Team were given two opposing strategies. The Blue Team opted for a strategy that involved getting as much information as possible. Commanders on the Blue Team weighed every piece of evidence carefully, never once acting on a mere "hunch." The Red Team, headed by the charismatic former Vietnam commander Paul Van Riper, was very different. Van Riper had a unique philosophy of war: he believed that war is inherently "foggy"—there will always be a limit to the amount of information commanders can obtain about the opposing side. Therefore, Van Riper believed, a good commander *must* act on hunches and intuitions.

Van Riper's philosophy of war is very close to *Blink's* philosophy of life. While the Pentagon thought that it's possible to make the best decision using technology, information, and rationality—i.e., using the conscious mind only—Van Riper thought that some of the best decisions are based on hunches—i.e., that good decisions make use of the adaptive unconscious. For the rest of the chapter, Gladwell shows that the adaptive unconscious can be an important component of good decision-making, whether in war, comedic improvisation, or medicine.

❝ Basketball is an intricate, high-speed game filled with split-second, spontaneous decisions. But that spontaneity is possible only when everyone first engages in hours of highly repetitive and structured practice - perfecting their shooting, dribbling, and passing and running plays over and over again - and agrees to play a carefully defined role on the court. This is the critical lesson of improv, too, and it is also a key to understanding the puzzle of Millennium Challenge: spontaneity isn't random.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

The passage discusses the relationship between randomness and spontaneity. While common sense might say that spontaneous actions are random—unpremeditated, unrehearsed, unpredictable—Gladwell argues that, paradoxically, it's possible to *practice* spontaneity. Basketball players, police officers, soldiers, and all sorts of other professionals have to spend years training themselves how to act in the heat of the moment. In doing so, they optimize their split-second decision-making skills.

The concept of practicing spontaneity is a little confusing, and Gladwell will spend more time analyzing it carefully. For now, it's important to notice that just because people

practice spontaneity doesn't necessarily mean that they understand their spontaneity any better. Even a tennis pro like Andre Agassi, who's practiced for thousands and thousands of hours, can't explain the way he plays. Even after all that practice, the source of spontaneity (the adaptive unconscious) remains behind a "locked door."

Suppose I were to ask you to take a pen and paper and write down in as much detail as you can what your person looks like. Describe her face. What color was her hair? What was she wearing? Was she wearing any jewelry? Believe it or not, you will now do a lot worse at picking that face out of a lineup. Chapter 4

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a good example of "verbal overshadowing"—the process by which the rational, conscious mind interferes with the functioning of the adaptive unconscious mind. If you were asked to describe the person who served you your coffee this morning, Gladwell says, you could probably picture them pretty clearly, even if you didn't know them well. But if you were then asked to describe this person's appearance in words, and *then* pick the person out of a lineup, you probably wouldn't be able to do so. The act of rationalizing and literalizing your unconscious memories destroys the original memories of the person's face.

The passage shows why it's so important to keep the actions of the unconscious mind behind a "locked door"—in the act of "opening" the door, we run the risk of interfering with the unconscious mind's actions. Furthermore, the passage reinforces the idea that rapid cognition can be more insightful and accurate than thoughtful consideration—we can "blink" and remember someone's face, but when we think about it too much, we undermine our own memories.

What Goldman's algorithm indicates, though, is that the role of those other factors is so small in determining what is happening to the man right now that an accurate diagnosis can be made without them. In fact - and this is a key point in explaining the breakdown of Blue Team that day in the Gulf - that extra information is more than useless. It's harmful. It confuses the issues. What screws up doctors when they are trying to predict heart attacks is that they take too much information into account.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

In Chicago, the Cook County Hospital introduced a controversial new algorithm for assessing people's likelihood of heart disease. The algorithm was controversial because it boiled the necessary evidence down to only a couple key points—ECG readings, history of heart disease, fluid in the lungs, etc. And yet the hospital administrators found that by using the simplified algorithm, doctors dramatically increased their success rate with diagnosing heart disease.

As the passage explains, the algorithm's success is startling because, ordinarily speaking, it's good to have as much evidence as possible, especially when making a decision as important as a heart disease diagnosis. Gladwell's point, though, is that at times more evidence isn't really that helpful. Indeed, more evidence can actually cloud the decision-making process, forcing doctors (or, as the passage suggests, soldiers during the Millennium Challenge) to get "bogged down" in excessive detail.

Truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

The passage is a good summing up of Gladwell's conclusions in this chapter. Gladwell has shown that excessive information, contrary to popular belief, isn't necessarily better. There are some situations—particularly high-stakes situations—in which it's best to have a smaller, more manageable amount of information.

As the passage makes clear, Gladwell *isn't* saying that

doctors, soldiers, and other professionals should always make decisions according to their hunches. Rather, the best decision is often one that balances intuition with evidence, instead of veering too far in either direction. Evidence, training, and logic are, of course, highly important components of any successful decision—but they're not the be-all, end-all. There are times, especially in high-stakes situations, when we have to embrace uncertainty, spontaneity, and improvisation.

Chapter 5 Quotes

f you double the size of the chips in chocolate chip ice cream and say on the package, "New! Bigger Chocolate Chips!" and charge five to ten cents more, that seems honest and fair. But if you put your ice cream in a round as opposed to a rectangular container and charge five to ten cents more, that seems like you're pulling the wool over people's eyes. If you think about it, though, there really isn't any practical difference between those two things. Chapter 5

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164-165

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Gladwell explores the psychology of advertising and packaging. Studies show that it's possible to make a product seem more appealing by packaging it in novel ways (for instance, it's been shown that food products are often more appealing when they're wrapped in red packaging). Big companies like Coca-Cola spend millions of dollars to find out the best ways to market and advertise their products.

One might say that it's immoral or unethical for companies to spend so much time and money researching the psychology of advertising. In essence, companies are trying to trick their customers into enjoying their product more without changing the product itself. Gladwell's rejoinder is that marketing and advertising a product aren't any more or less "honest" than altering the actual product, because a consumer's overall *perception* of a product incorporates both gustatory and non-gustatory elements (in other words, when I enjoy a chocolate-chip cookie, I'm not just tasting the cookie itself; I'm enjoying the shape of the cookie, the color of the wrapping paper it came in, etc.). For better or worse, the packaging and advertising for a product *is* a part of the product, because it's a part of the way people experience that product. Therefore, there's nothing necessarily unethical about a corporation spending a lot of money on advertising.

The problem is that buried among the things that we hate is a class of products that are in that category only because they are weird. They make us nervous. They are sufficiently different that it takes us some time to understand that we actually like them.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Many companies and businesses use polling and test audiences to determine what people want to see in a product. For example, a chair company might ask a couple hundred people to take a survey about their favorite kinds of chairs (e.g., how soft is the chair, how high off the ground is it, what materials is it made from, etc.). Or the company might show a test audience a chair it's been working on, and ask the audience if it likes the chair.

But the problem with polling and test audiences is that, sometimes, the public doesn't know what it wants. Indeed, the history of polling is full of examples of revolutionary products that didn't "test" well, but went on to be huge hits. Often, test audiences don't like revolutionary products for the simple reason that these products are new and different. But once people get used to a revolutionary product, they might come to enjoy it. In this way, it's possible for a product to fare poorly among test audiences but become very popular later on.

By making people think about jam, [the psychological researchers] turned them into jam idiots.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter ends with another good illustration of the antagonistic relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind. When subjects were asked to rank a series of jams from best to worst, it was found that the subjects had excellent taste—they gave the jams the same rankings as a group of trained jam experts. But when a

comparable group of subjects was asked to *explain* why they did or didn't like the same jams, the subjects lost their exceptional taste. In short, the act of rationalizing and explaining one's tastes can interfere with taste itself.

The passage reiterates one of Gladwell's key points—that the explanations for snap judgments should remain behind a locked door. Furthermore, the passage suggests that polls and test audiences aren't always the best ways to determine what people do and don't like. When polls ask too many questions, the poll's participants may change their original answers, just like the subjects in the jam experiment. It's possible that many excellent products and talented musicians never make it big—not because they're bad but because they don't "test" well.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The Diallo shooting, in other words, falls into a kind of gray area, the middle ground between deliberate and accidental.

Related Characters: Amadou Diallo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the book, Gladwell studies the Amadou Diallo shooting—a tragic case in which plainclothes police officers shot Diallo, an unarmed immigrant in his own apartment building. While many consider the Diallo shooting to be a textbook example of the racism of American law enforcement, Gladwell offers a more nuanced point. While he doesn't excuse the police officers for their actions, he suggests that it's not necessarily true that the officers were racists. Perhaps, in the heat of the moment, the officers experienced an error of rapid cognition—they fell back on instinctive, prejudicial behaviors. Gladwell will show how, during the course of a police chase, the heart rate can approach 175 beats per minute—at which point the average human being can barely think at all.

The biggest point to draw from this passage is that Gladwell draws a grey area between deliberate and accidental, encouraging us to rethink the usual categories of free will. Most people believe that humans are free to choose what do; therefore, it follows that people can either be guilty or innocent of a crime. However, Gladwell has already shown that free will isn't as powerful as we'd like to believe; there are cases when people's unconscious minds push them in a certain direction, even if they don't consciously realize it. In this sense, Gladwell suggest, perhaps it's possible to be both guilty and innocent of a crime.

❝ Most police officers - well over 90 percent - go their whole career without ever firing at anyone, and those who do describe the experience as so unimaginably stressful that it seems reasonable to ask if firing a gun could be the kind of experience that could cause temporary autism.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell theorizes that the four plainclothes police officers who shot at Amadou Diallo were in a state of "temporary autism" after chasing Diallo into his apartment building. This is a surprising idea because, one would think, confronting suspects is "old hat" for a police officer. However, Gladwell points out that even for seasoned police officers, a dangerous confrontation involving firing a gun at a suspect is a pretty rare occurrence; indeed, the vast majority of police officers never fire a weapon at anyone.

Gladwell goes on to posit that when police officers are thrust into high-stakes life-or-death situations, they can't think clearly. As a result, police officers fall back on their instincts—and as a result, they sometimes fall back on racism and bigotry—even if they would consciously disavow racist ideas. In a state of "temporary autism," of the kind brought about in a high-stakes situation, police officers can't interpret people's facial expressions—thus, in the case of Amadou Diallo, the police officers couldn't see that Diallo was clearly frightened and panicking—had they noticed, they might not have shot Diallo.

❝ What police training does, at its best, is teach officers how to keep themselves out of this kind of trouble; to avoid the risk of momentary autism. In a traffic stop, for instance, the officer is trained to park behind the car. If it's at night, he shines his brights directly into the car. He walks toward the car on the driver's side, then stops and stands just behind the driver, shining his flashlight over the shoulder onto his or her lap.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234-235

Explanation and Analysis

The passage discusses the format of police training. Ideally, police officers are trained to follow a strict procedure that minimizes the number of occasions during which they might have to deal with sudden, high-stakes situations. For instance, when a police officer pulls over a driver, they are supposed to stand to the side of the driver, so that if the driver suddenly thrusts his hand into his pocket (as if to draw a weapon), the officer will have an extra split-second to decide what to do. In this way, police officer training is designed to reduce the number of times when an officer might have to make a snap judgment—for example, whether or not the suspect is reaching for a gun or a wallet.

The passage is a good example of Gladwell's balanced, nuanced approach to discussing rapid cognition. Gladwell isn't saying that rapid cognition is always ideal. Indeed, in the case of law enforcement, it's pretty obvious that rapid cognition can lead to some pretty tragic results—for instance, the death of Amadou Diallo. Thus, when a police officer deals with a suspect, they should try to follow routine as thoroughly as possible, instead of depending excessively on rapid cognition. Nevertheless, Gladwell isn't saying that rapid cognition is always bad, either. Indeed, there are many situations when a police officer *must* make split-second, life-or-death decisions. In those situations, the police officer should be trained to read facial cues and respond to body language—i.e., the officer should improve their rapid cognitive abilities.

❝ Look at how the officer's experience and skill allowed him to stretch out that fraction of time, to slow the situation down, to keep gathering information until the last possible moment. He watches the gun come out. He sees the pearly grip. He tracks the direction of the muzzle. He waits for the kid to decide whether to pull the gun up or simply to drop it - and all the while, even as he tracks the progress of the gun, he is also watching the kid's face, to see whether he is dangerous or simply frightened. Is there a more beautiful example of a snap judgment?

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of the chapter, Gladwell discusses a case in which a police officer held a suspect at gunpoint, contemplated shooting him when he reached for his pocket, and then didn't. The police officer noticed that the "kid" was holding a gun, but "something told him" to give the kid a chance and wait a split second longer.

As Gladwell interprets it, the story is a great example of how rapid cognition can actually be a boon to law enforcement. At times, it's bad for police officers to depend excessively on snap judgments; indeed, it was arguably the four plainclothes officers' reliance on snap judgments that led to the shooting of Amadou Diallo. However, rapid cognition can be a life-saver in other cases. When officers train themselves to respond to facial cues—as the police officer in this story did—they can use their instincts to decide whether or not to fire their guns. In this case, for example, an officer made a snap judgment, responding to the expression on the kid's face, which probably saved the kid's life.

Conclusion Quotes

❝ When the screen created a pure *Blink* moment, a small miracle happened, the kind of small miracle that is always possible when we take charge of the first two seconds: they saw her for who she truly was.

Related Characters: Julie Landsman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell discusses the rise of blind auditions in the world of classical music. Beginning in the 1980s, orchestras began auditioning performers from behind a screen, so that selection panels couldn't tell if the performers were male or female. Amazingly, orchestras began to hire more and more women, where previously, women had been *de facto* excluded from the world of classical music altogether. In Gladwell's terminology, the introduction of blind auditioning replaced one kind of rapid cognition with another. Before the 1980s, selection panels who auditioned female performers may have made snap judgments about them before they even began to play—because the performers were women, in other words, the selection panels may have been biased against them, no matter how well they played. But when blind auditions became commonplace, however, selection panels could no longer discriminate against women. When the talented performer Julie Landsman auditioned for one prestigious orchestra, the selection panel felt that Landsman was a great musician within just a

couple seconds of her performance.

With this passage, Gladwell ends his book on a positive note. Rapid cognition is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. However, at its best, rapid cognition can be a powerful weapon *against* prejudice and discrimination, helping Julie Landsman rise through the classical music world.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: THE STATUE THAT DIDN'T LOOK RIGHT

In 1983, the J. Paul Getty Museum in California acquired a **statue** on loan. The art dealer who sold the statue claimed that it was an ancient Greek *kouros*—a very rare kind of ancient marble statue. The statue was in near-perfect condition—so perfect that the Getty officials suspected that it was a fake. However, the art dealer produced legal documentation, showing that the statue had been bought legitimately, rather than stolen. Furthermore, art historians determined that the statue was covered in a layer of calcite, which must have taken thousands of years to form—therefore, it seemed likely that the statue was real. The Getty officially bought the statue for ten million dollars in the fall of 1986.

Gladwell begins the book with an intriguing anecdote about the history of the Getty's prized Greek statue—a symbol of how much information people can learn about the world in only a few seconds. The Getty Museum acquired the statue because it seemed to be a legitimate piece of ancient Greek art, with all the documentation to prove it—put another way, the "rational evidence" for the statue's value seemed incontrovertible.

There was a problem with the Getty **statue**—it just "didn't look right." One art historian who saw the statue for the first time decided that the statue was a fake almost immediately. Another expert looked at the statue for a couple seconds and then told the Getty board of trustees not to buy it—she had an "instinctive sense" that something wasn't right. A few years later, it turned out that the art dealer who'd sold the statue to the Getty was a liar—the documents he'd produced to verify the statue's legitimacy were proved to be forgeries. Furthermore, the statue turned out to be a strange pastiche of half a dozen other Greek statues. Finally, experts discovered that it is possible to create a layer of calcite around a statue in a few years, rather than many centuries. In short, it took years for experts to decide that the statue was a fake—the same information that other art historians had gotten in just a few seconds. *Blink*, Gladwell informs us, is about what goes on in the human mind in those few seconds.

Gladwell contrasts the strong "rational evidence" for the statue's value with art historians' instinctive hunches that the statue was "wrong" in some fundamental way. In the end, hunches turned out to be more insightful and perceptive than months of formal research. As Gladwell interprets it, the history of the Getty's kouros *suggests that sometimes, intuition can be more powerful than rationality. With this striking illustration of the power of intuition, Gladwell begins his book.*

There was a psychological study that involved playing a complicated card game. Participants were asked to bet money on the number and suit of red and blue cards, but they weren't told what the penalties for failed bets would be; they had to figure it out on their own. Slowly, the participants learned that the best strategy was to bet on blue cards, rather than red ones, because blue cards offered the most reliable payouts. On average, it took the participants about eighty bets to figure out the optimal strategy. But the most interesting part of this study is that the participants "knew" the optimal strategy long before they were consciously aware of it. The study measured participants' sweating and heart rates, and determined that participants intuitively gravitated toward blue cards within just a few rounds of betting.

Gladwell's second example of the power of intuition is more systematic and scientific than the first—this time, a formal experiment measures the extent to which people's instincts guide their behavior. Once again, the example suggests that intuition has some notable advantages over rationality. Instinctive is quick and decisive—instead of wasting lots of time weighing the evidence, people use their instincts to decide what to do. Notice, also, that instinct is as much a physical phenomenon as it is a mental one—people's bodies (their heart rates and perspiration) seem to be telling them what to do.

To sum up what we've learned so far, Gladwell says, there are two ways of thinking: consciously and unconsciously. In the card experiment, participants took about eighty turns-worth of weighing the evidence before they consciously decided on a strategy. But the participants also used the second form of thinking: instead of weighing all the evidence carefully, they made a snap judgment based on a small portion of the evidence.

In short, Gladwell distinguishes between the rational, conscious mind, which is characterized by logic, methodical thought, and evidence-weighing, and the unconscious mind, which is characterized by instinct, snap judgments, and impulsivity.

Gladwell calls the part of the mind that leaps to sudden conclusions the "adaptive unconscious." The adaptive unconscious is different from the unconscious mind famously described by the psychologist Sigmund Freud. One major difference between the Freudian unconscious and the adaptive unconscious is that the adaptive unconscious is constantly assessing the external world and responding to available evidence. Some psychologists think that the human species would have died out long ago if it hadn't been for the adaptive unconscious—in times of crisis, humans depend on the adaptive unconscious to decide what to do. One important application of the adaptive unconscious is assessing personality. Often, people decide whether to trust others within just a few seconds of meeting them—a potentially life-or-death decision.

The adaptive unconscious will be one of the key concepts of the book. In times of intense pressure or danger, human beings fall back on their adaptive unconscious in order to decide what to do—in other words, when there isn't enough time to weigh the evidence methodically, humans must stop thinking logically and start acting instinctively. Without instinct and intuition, furthermore, it's likely that the human race would have died out a long time ago—otherwise, humans would never have had the speed and cunning to survive danger in the wild.

There are some obvious problems with the adaptive unconscious. We're often told to *ignore* snap judgments—hence the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Snap judgments aren't necessarily right. Indeed, the Getty art historians who initially determined the legitimacy of the Getty **statue** may have been guilty of making snap judgments of their own—as Getty employees, they immediately *wanted* the statue to be real, and then used their extensive training to legitimize a conclusion they'd already reached. Thus, Gladwell says, he'll need to study cases of the adaptive unconscious being wrong, not just examples of when it's right.

On the surface, Gladwell's thesis runs contrary to almost everything people are usually taught. While people aren't supposed to judge a book by its cover, Gladwell argues that being able to judge a book by its cover is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. However, the passage also contains an important caveat—there's no rule that says that snap judgments are inherently right*; indeed, the book will explore many examples of how snap judgments can go horribly wrong.*


Blink is a book about a big, complicated idea, but it will try to explore this big idea by looking at specific case studies. There are some obvious advantages to such an approach, Gladwell informs us: by focusing on the particular, we can get a precise, real-world sense of how humans behave. In all, *Blink* will try to show that "there can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis."

In a sense, the form of Blink *mirrors its content: instead of a systematic examination of all the scientific evidence, the book provides a quick, insightful look at a small handful of the evidence, and then extrapolates some big conclusions. (In effect, Gladwell's book is an exercise in "thin slicing.")*

CHAPTER 1: THE THEORY OF THIN SLICES

"Some years ago," Gladwell begins, a young couple went to visit a psychologist named John Gottman. The couple—given the pseudonyms of Bill and Susan—were very likable. Gotmann made a videotape of Bill and Susan having a conversation. During the videotaping, both Bill and Susan were hooked up to machines that measured their perspiration and heart rate. For the fifteen minutes of the video, they talked about dogs. Bill claimed that he didn't particularly like dogs, and he and Susan bantered playfully about dogs' "oily fur." The conversation seemed perfectly ordinary.

The chapter begins with a seemingly ordinary conversation between two happy-seeming young people. But Gladwell will show that it's possible to analyze the couple's conversation so minutely that we can predict whether the couple will still be together in fifteen years.

One might assume that Bill and Susan's conversation didn't really tell us anything about who they were. But in fact, the conversation was very revealing. Gottman interviewed Bill and Susan, along with thousands of other couples. The goal of Gottman's research was to study how couples interact. He believed that by measuring perspiration and heart rate, and by studying facial expressions, he could measure brief moments of conflict between people. The research yielded some surprising conclusions: by analyzing just fifteen minutes of conversation between a husband and wife, he could predict with ninety percent accuracy whether the couple would still be married in fifteen years.

One reason that it's possible to tell so much about the world in just a few seconds is that human beings speak a secret language of facial cues, body language, etc. Thus, many of the intuitive snap judgments that people make are based in an instinctive awareness of other people's facial cues and body language—Gottman has done more than almost anyone to explain how this "language" works.

John Gottman's research is a good example of "thin-slicing"—in other words, using the adaptive unconscious to draw conclusions from small samples of experience. Gottman took a lot of time to draw conclusions from his research, but nevertheless, he drew impressive conclusions (about the fate of a marriage) from a very small amount of evidence (fifteen minutes of conversation).

Thin-slicing—the way that the adaptive unconscious makes sense of the external world—is one Blink*'s key themes. Essentially, the concept of thin-slicing implies that intuition is empirical; even if snap judgments don't take all the evidence into account, they require* some *evidence—at least a thin slice (for example, Gottman's fifteen minutes of observation).*

The key premise of Gottman's research is that couples argue with one another in subtle, almost subliminal ways. For example, when Bill and Susan talked about dogs, Bill used a strategy of conversation called "yes, but"—in other words, he seemed to agree with Susan, but then contradicted her. There are many small ways for people to show their contempt for one another—for example, rolling one's eyes. When Susan and Bill talked about dogs, Susan rolled her eyes on several occasions. Bill and Susan exhibited many other signs of marital tension. For example, when Bill asked Susan for credit for taking good care of their dog, Susan refused to give him credit. Also, Susan didn't give Bill basic positive reinforcement (smiling, nodding, etc.) when Bill was talking about taking care of the dog. In short, Bill and Susan's conversation—despite seeming normal to the untrained observer—betrayed many signs of marital tension, suggesting that Bill and Susan would divorce in the future.

Gottman suggests that the way that couples converse is indicative of the way they think about each other, and how well they get along with each other. Therefore, it's possible for a trained expert like Gottman to draw some surprising conclusions about a couple after observing them for a very short amount of time. One interesting thing to keep in mind about Gottman's experiment is that almost anyone *can guess how well two people like each other after watching those two people converse—even if we can't all be as insightful as Gottman, we can get a pretty decent "read" on people's compatibility. As Gladwell argues, all human beings are capable of thin-slicing, especially with regard to other people.*

The crux of Gottman's research is that married couples communicate through subtle signals and patterns, such as facial cues, response times, and reinforcement techniques. A good analogy for Gottman's point can be found in the history of coded messaging. During World War II, the British intelligence officers realized that it was possible to determine the "personalities" of enemy German broadcasters. Although the German broadcasters were sending messages in complex codes, they sent these messages in highly distinctive rhythms, or "fists." In short, it was possible for British intelligence to determine *which* Germans were sending out codes, based strictly on the rhythm of the broadcasts. Some spies became so accustomed to the "fists" of certain German broadcasters that they could identify the broadcasters after a few seconds of listening to a coded broadcast. Furthermore, because spies could tell who was broadcasting which codes, they could also tell from where in Europe the broadcasts were being sent—and therefore, where the German army was moving.

Gladwell transitions from talking about Gottman's psychological research to the history of code-breaking during World War II. The crux of the second example is that any code—whether it's the Morse Code or a couple's speech patterns—can be recognized very quickly, even if the code can't necessarily be cracked. In Gladwell's terminology, it's possible to "thin-slice" a code very quickly: people can recognize the rhythmic patterns with which the code is being broadcast. Thus, during World War II, English intelligence workers could recognize the pattern *of radio broadcasting, even if they had no idea what the broadcasts meant.*

Gottman's research, then, suggests that married couples communicate with a distinctive "fist"—a pattern of interaction that reveals itself within just a few minutes. Some fists are positive and healthy, and some are not. Gottman became so adept at analyzing communicative fists that he could graph a couple's positive and negative feelings from minute to minute.

Gottman is adept at thin-slicing a couple's interactions because he can pick up on certain patterns and "fists" of conversation after only a few minutes.

Gottman has become adept at "thin-slicing" conversations between people, focusing on the key aspects of their interactions. Gottman identifies four potential problems in a conversation: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism, and contempt. By far, the best predictor of a couple's happiness is the amount of contempt in their conversations. Gottman defines contempt as a form of criticism delivered from "a superior plane"—i.e., a situation in which one person thinks they're superior to another. Gladwell proposes that the adaptive unconscious is capable of making the same kinds of quick assessments that Gottman has taught himself to make: in other words, to analyze a thin slice of evidence and draw conclusions from it.

For Gottman, contempt is a conversational style that indicates some deep-seeded problems with a relationship; relationships in which the two partners show contempt for each other rarely last long. In general, Gladwell argues, Gottman's adeptness at drawing big conclusions from seemingly trivial conversations is a good example of the powers of the adaptive unconscious—and to some extent, all human beings are capable of thin-slicing, just like Gottman.

During a job interview, an interviewer tries to draw as much information as possible from an interviewee. One might think that, ideally, an interviewer should spend as much time as possible with the interviewee, in order to get the largest amount of evidence. But in fact, some psychological research suggests that interviewers can tell more about an interviewee in a few seconds than they can in a week. One psychologist conducted an experiment in which he assessed the personalities of eighty students, measuring their extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, etc. Then, he asked these students' closest friends to assess the students using the same criteria. Finally, he asked strangers to guess the students' personalities, based strictly on the students' dorm rooms. Surprisingly, the strangers who visited the dorm rooms were slightly better at assessing the students' personalities than the students' close friends.

Continuing the pattern of earlier examples, Gladwell shows how short, quick evaluations can sometimes be more insightful than long, thorough evaluations, whether in job interviews or personality tests. It seems hard to believe that complete strangers could be more insightful about subjects' personalities than the subjects' best friends. But perhaps this makes sense: the subjects' best friends will be biased, and have lots of confounding information about the subjects; total strangers, on the other hand, can be more objective in their assessments.

The strangers who assessed the students' living spaces were engaging in thin-slicing: making big judgments about people (their personalities), based on a small sample of evidence (their rooms). One reason that thin-slicing is so effective is that it bypasses stereotyping. For example, it might be hard to believe that a muscular football player is a genius—stereotypes about athletes prevent an honest assessment of the football player's mind. But if one were to visit the football player's room and see his book collection, one might assess the football player's IQ more accurately. In short, the strangers who assessed the students' dorm rooms were conducting an amateur version of John Gottman's marriage research—identifying the recognizable "fists" of student behavior and drawing conclusions about personality from the evidence.

In this passage, Gladwell introduces the paradoxical idea that thin-slicing can counteract *stereotyping. One might think that thin-slicing is tailor-made for stereotyping, since it involves "judging a book by its cover." But in fact, Gladwell argues, thin-slicing can be more fair-minded and objective than rational assessment because it reduces the number of opportunities for easy stereotyping. The passage also reinforces the concept of "fists" in thin-slicing: the reason that it's possible to make accurate snap judgments is that small, recognizable "fists" of information tell a clear story sometimes.*

Another good example of thin-slicing can be found in the world of medical malpractice insurance. Consider two ways of determining which doctors are most likely to be sued for malpractice: first, studying the doctors' medical histories in great detail; second, listening to the doctors talk to their patients very briefly. The second approach has been shown to be much more effective in predicting medical malpractice. One reason this method is so effective is that people sue their doctors because they don't *like* them, not just because their doctors engage in malpractice. Studies find that the doctors who are least likely to be sued talk to their patients for longer periods of time than the average doctor, and also make more "orienting statements," such as, "I'm going to examine you now." Some psychologists have concluded that it's possible to predict a doctor's likelihood of being sued for malpractice based entirely on the speech patterns the doctor uses while communicating with patients. Doctors tend to exhibit a distinctive "signature" while talking with their patients—therefore, experts can predict the doctors' likelihood of being sued based on just a few seconds of communication.

This example emphasizes the point Gladwell has already made: sometimes, tiny, seemingly trivial pieces of information speak louder than mountains of thorough evidence. Thus, it's possible to tell more about a doctor from a couple seconds of conversation than from thorough medical records. It's interesting to note that, in the case of medical malpractice, a doctor's likelihood of being sued doesn't necessarily correlate with their abilities—in other words, a doctor who gets sued for medical malpractice isn't necessarily better than doctor who doesn't get sued. Gladwell's point is that, good or bad, a doctor who establishes a good rapport with their patients will be less likely to anger the patients, and therefore less likely to face a lawsuit.

It's striking to consider how many different professions have a term for the ability to draw conclusions from small slices of evidence. In the French military, for example, a general is expected to have "the power of the glance"—the ability to judge the right strategy after just a few seconds of looking at the battlefield. The Hollywood producer Brian Grazer tells a story about meeting the young Tom Hanks for a few seconds and instinctively "knowing" that Hanks would become a huge movie star.

This passage brings up a point to which Gladwell will return in a later chapter: professional people are considered "experts" in part because of their ability to make intelligent snap judgments; for example, to judge which people could and couldn't be big stars in just a few moments.

It's important to recognize that thin-slicing isn't an "exotic gift"—all human beings are capable of thin-slicing to some degree. Recently, psychologists presented Gottman's videos to a group of laypeople. The psychologists gave the laypeople some simple instructions about how to interpret the conversations, and allowed the laypeople to watch each video twice. The psychologists found that laypeople could predict a marriage's success with an 80 percent success rate—not a bad accuracy at all. In short, Gladwell concludes, "We're old hands at thin-slicing."

The chapter ends with an important clarification. So far, Gladwell has been talking about experts, insiders, and scientists. But he then argues that thin-slicing isn't just for geniuses and experts—any human being knows how to thin-slice. True, we may not be as good at evaluating couples' relationships as Gottman is, but, in a way, we're "old hands" at thin-slicing, because we use it in our actions and interactions every day.

CHAPTER 2: THE LOCKED DOOR

Vic Braden was one of the world's best tennis coaches. Over the course of his career, Braden discovered that he could always predict when a player would "double-fault" (i.e., fail to make a serve twice in a row). He became so adept at predicting double-faults that he could predict "twenty out of twenty right." Braden's ability to predict double-faults is similar to an art historian's ability to identify a fake Greek **statue** in the blink of an eye—they use their adaptive unconscious.

The chapter opens with a familiar-sounding example of the powers of the intuitive mind: Vic Braden excels as a tennis coach in part because he's in touch with his own adaptive unconscious. Braden can thin-slice a tennis match to evaluate, in the blink of an eye, whether or not a player will double-fault.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Vic Braden's ability to predict double-faults is that he can't explain how he predicts them. But in general, Gladwell says, people make snap judgments without being able to explain them. Put another way, snap judgments take place behind a "**locked door**." When people try to explain their snap judgments, the explanations are never very convincing. Gladwell argues that it's a mistake to listen to rationality exclusively and ignore intuition altogether. Instead, "We need to respect the fact that it is possible to know without knowing why we know."

Here Gladwell brings up an interesting side effect of thin-slicing: often the person doing the thin-slicing can't explain in words where the snap judgment came from. Gladwell uses Vic Braden's example to argue for a seemingly strange conclusion: sometimes, it's possible to know something without knowing why *you know it.*

Gladwell describes an experiment in which students were sent into a professor's office and asked to read a seemingly random series of words, such as "sky the seamless gray is." When the students left the office, they were found to walk more slowly than they had when entered the office. The list acted as a "priming device"—it contained "trigger words," such as "gray," "old," etc., which tend to inspire people to move slowly. Further studies suggest that people can be "primed" to behave in different ways—words can influence people to be polite, rude, etc.

Gladwell introduces the concept of "priming"—there are certain stimuli (images, words, etc.) that can influence people to change their behavior in measurable ways. "Primers" in the psychological study are carefully controlled, of course, but in real life we are being subconsciously "primed" in different ways by countless stimuli every day.

Priming might sound like brainwashing, but it's not. Priming can't force people to perform complicated actions (such as robbing a bank). Nevertheless, priming can inspire some interesting changes in human behavior. In one study, psychologists instructed students to answer twenty questions from the GRE, the graduate school admission test. When students were asked to identify their race in a pretest questionnaire, African American students performed considerably worse. The psychologists argued that negative stereotypes associated with African Americans primed African American test-takers to answer fewer questions correctly. Perhaps part of the reason that there's an achievement gap on standardized tests is that racial questionnaires prime whites to believe that they're smart, while priming black test-takers to question their own intelligence.

The concept of priming brings up the idea of free will for the first time, as unconscious thin-slicing might seem to contradict or override conscious decisions and beliefs. For a long time, there has been an "achievement gap" between white and black students: black students lag behind their peers on standardized tests. While there have been many theories about the source of the achievement gap, Blink *suggests that one explanation is priming: race questionnaires prime black students to score poorly and white students to score better, thanks to internalized stereotypes that black people are less intelligent than white people.*

Gladwell acknowledges that the phenomenon of priming is a little disturbing because it challenges our notions of free will. The concept of free will, it might seem, is an illusion—usually, humans behave a certain way because they're primed to do so. However, there are some advantages to priming. In a way, the adaptive unconscious acts as a "valet," adapting the body to environmental cues (such as trigger words) so that the conscious mind can concentrate "on the main problem at hand" instead of wasting excessive time interpreting words.

Based on what we've learned so far, it might seem that free will, as it's traditionally understood, is just an illusion. Human beings do not consciously choose what to do; external influences "nudge" them into certain behaviors. But one advantage of surrendering freedom to the adaptive unconscious is that the adaptive unconscious saves a lot of time: instead of agonizing over every decision (for example, how to climb stairs or eat and read at the same time), the adaptive unconscious acts as a "valet" and decides what to do without disturbing the conscious mind, which can then make bigger decisions (although even then, never wholly free from bias and "priming" from external stimuli).

The adaptive unconscious can be an extremely useful part of the mind. Researchers have discovered a part of the brain called the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VPC), the part of the brain that deals with decision making, sorting through huge amounts of information in the process. People with damaged VPCs struggle to make even basic decisions. When these patients were given the blue/red card test mentioned in the Introduction, they were able to develop a strategy after eighty or so moves, but exhibited no signs of intuitively recognizing the pattern right away. In short, patients with damaged VPCs lacked an adaptive unconscious: they had no way of acting instinctively. In short, Gladwell concludes, sometimes it's better not to think rationally—humans need an adaptive unconscious "pushing" them in the right direction.

The adaptive unconscious can be time-saving and potentially life-saving; while it's important to weigh evidence in order to decide the right thing to do, people also need an unconscious impulse pushing them to act. In times of crisis, one can imagine, people without a VPC would be totally unable to decide how to proceed; they wouldn't be able to run away from danger or protect themselves from an attacker. Put another way, the VPC is necessary because it helped people translate thoughts into actions—the adaptive unconscious helps people act fast and ask questions later.

Speed-dating is a great example of thin-slicing because it involves making judgments about people in a couple minutes. In a typical speed-dating session, participants spend an hour talking to another person for five minutes at a time. At the end of the session, participants check the boxes of the people they liked; if two participants like each other, they've provided with each other's emails. Speed-dating sessions like these are popular because they ask people to make snap judgments. But, Gladwell asks, what if we forced people to *explain* their snap judgments?

Speed-dating is a particularly good example of snap judgments in action because it's very difficult to put into words why we want to date specific people and avoid others.

Two psychologists, Iyengar and Raymond Fisman, have conducted experiments with speed-dating in which they ask speed-daters to fill out a questionnaire about what they value in a romantic partner. The speed-daters must fill out this questionnaire four times: the day before the speed-date, the evening after, the month after, and six months after. The strangest thing about the questionnaire is that people *change* their romantic preferences over the course of the four questionnaires. The evening after the speed-dating event, participants seem to alter their answers to reflect the qualities of the people they liked at the speed-date. But then, over the next six months, participants change their survey responses, so that they gradually revert to the responses they gave the day before the speed-dating event. In short, the people that speed-daters are actually attracted to and the people that speed-daters *think* they're attracted to are rarely the same.

The crux of the Fismans' study is that people's ideas of a good romantic partner and their real-world preferences in romantic partners are two very different concepts. On paper, a subject might say that she's attracted to tall, blonde men—even if, during a speed date, she clearly prefers short brunettes. Perhaps the reason that people can be so wrong about their own romantic tastes is that movies, commercials, and ads "prime" them to think that they're attracted to certain kinds of people, even if they're really not.

The Fismans' research reflects a puzzle about human nature: are human beings defined by what they think they want, or what they do? There is, of course, no correct answer to this question. There is always a gap between the conscious mind and the adaptive unconscious—or, put another way, between what people believe they want and what they want instinctively. Much the same is true of tennis players. Braden has interviewed many great tennis pros, but he's found that tennis pros are bad at explaining their own techniques. The tennis legend Andre Agassi claimed that he "rolled" his racket over the tennis ball before hitting a forehand shot. In fact, Agassi almost never rolled his wrist on a forehand shot—there was a gap between his actions and what he *believed* his actions to be.

The Fisman's experiment raises an interesting philosophical question, to which there's no correct answer: are humans defined by their beliefs or their actions? Gladwell's discussion of Agassi further reinforces the point that people can be very wrong about themselves—in the same way that speed-daters can misjudge their own romantic preferences, tennis pros can misjudge their own performances very badly. This phenomenon of great athletes being very bad about explaining *their talent has been recorded elsewhere as well.*

There was a psychological study which asked subjects to solve a puzzle: there were four ropes hung from the ceiling of a room, and participants were asked to find four ways to tie the four ropes together. Most participants could think of three ways to tie the ropes together. But the conductor of the study "primed" the subjects to think of a fourth way to tie the ropes together: by pretending to brush against one of the ropes, the conductor subtly gave his subjects the idea to swing the rope like a pendulum. When asked about how they came up with the idea to swing the rope, few subjects said that the conductor's hint helped them think of the solution—instead, they told elaborate stories about how dreams, childhood memories, or jokes "inspired" them to solve the puzzle. These subjects weren't lying—they'd just received a hint so subtle that they couldn't remember receiving it.

The subjects who participated in this experiment exemplify the hunger for a cohesive rational explanation. Instead of recognizing that they've been primed to solve the puzzle, the subjects unconsciously created elaborate rational explanations for how they discovered the solution. Perhaps the explanations for a lot of phenomena are simpler than they're usually said to be—instinctively, most people refuse to accept that an explanation can be as simple and "inelegant" as the explanation for how the subjects solved the rope puzzle.

There are limits to rational explanations for human behavior. People want to think that there are logical explanations for why they fall in love with certain people, or why they think of solutions to a puzzle. Put another way, "People are ignorant of the things that affect their actions, yet they rarely *feel* ignorant." Because of this, they try to invent elaborate rational explanations for their own behavior. Perhaps, Gladwell suggests, it would be better to keep certain human behavior behind a **locked door**.

Strange though it sounds, there are times when we shouldn't demand an explanation—or, as Gladwell put it earlier, we should accept that it's possible to know something without knowing why *we know it. In the following chapters, Gladwell will strengthen this thesis by showing how our attempts to explain and rationalize a mental process can interfere with the mental process itself.*

CHAPTER 3: THE WARREN HARDING ERROR

In 1899, two men had an important meeting. The first man was Harry Daugherty—a lawyer and well-known political "fixer"—and the second was Warren Harding—at the time, a newspaper editor from Marion, Ohio, and a candidate for the Ohio state senate. Daugherty was impressed with Harding's charisma and handsome face—indeed, he was so impressed that he suggested that Harding would make a great president. On paper, Harding didn't seem presidential—he wasn't too smart, he'd had countless affairs with women, and he'd never distinguished himself either as a politician or an editor. When he served in the U.S. Senate, he passed no notable legislation. The only reasons Harding continued to ascend in government were that 1) Daugherty helped him, and 2) he *looked* like a great, charismatic leader. Eventually, Harding ran for president, was elected, and became—according to most historians—one of the worst presidents in American history.

Warren Harding is, notoriously, one of the worst presidents in American history—an incompetent man who, Gladwell argues, only won the presidency because he dazzled the populace with his face and demeanor and because he had a "master puppeteer," Harry Daugherty, controlling him. It's important to notice that for once, Gladwell begins a chapter with an example of a mistaken judgment (i.e., electing Warren Harding) rather than a brilliant insight, setting the tone for the rest of the chapter.

So far, Gladwell has been talking about how thin-slicing can be an effective, accurate way for humans to study the world. But of course, there's no guarantee that thin-slicing be accurate. Sometimes, people's "slices" of the world aren't representative of the truth. The election of Warren Harding is a good example of the "dark side of rapid cognition": sometimes, in their haste to make a decision, people base their decision on bad evidence. In the case of Harding, American voters assumed that Harding would be a great president because of the intuitive "evidence" that he *looked* presidential.

In this chapter, Gladwell will clarify and qualify some of the arguments he's made so far. While continuing to argue that snap judgments are an important part of human nature and a powerful tool for understanding the world, he will acknowledge that at times, snap judgments can be prejudicial and objectively wrong.

Psychologists have studied the way people jump to conclusions using a tool called the Implicit Association Test, or IAT. On the IAT, subjects were given a list of words and asked to divide them into two categories: words that reminded them of men *or* careers, and words that reminded them of women *or* family. Then, they were asked to perform a similar test, but with one important difference: they were asked to divide a list of words up into two new categories: words that reminded them of women *or* careers, and words that reminded them or men *or* family. The second version of the test was much more challenging for test-takers: they took more time to complete the test, and there was a wider range of responses. The reason that people found the second test more difficult to complete is that, stereotypically, people tend to associate women with family, while associating men with work. The point of the IAT is that people tend to have strong preconceptions about race, gender, age, etc.—and these preconceptions influence the speed with which they make snap judgments.

The reason that subjects took longer to complete the second version of the IAT is that this version of the test went against the stereotypical, sexist association of women with domesticity and the home. Thus, the results of the IAT suggest that people use stereotyping as a kind of "mental shortcut"—they use convenient stereotypes about races, genders, etc., to make quick decisions. A further implication of the IAT is that people are more likely to behave in a bigoted way when they're in a hurry or when they're in a high-stakes situation: when the pressure is on, people fall back on stereotypes instead of using their rational minds.

In one disturbing version of the IAT, subjects were asked to divide up a series of photographs into two categories: good *or* European American, and bad *or* African American. Subjects completed this version of the test far more quickly than the second version, in which the categories were switched to "bad *or* European American" and "good *or* African American." How should we interpret the results of the IAT test? It would be easy to conclude that most Americans are secretly (or not so secretly) racists. But perhaps the truth is subtler: even if people are conscious of believing in the equality of races, their adaptive conscious minds might harbor some racist attitudes. This means that when people interact with people of different races, they might be a little stiffer and less friendly—even if, consciously, they're not racist at all.

Gladwell uses the theory of the adaptive unconscious to propose an interesting theory of bigotry: even if people don't subscribe to overtly bigoted beliefs, they can still behave *like bigots because of the influence of the adaptive unconscious. The passage also reiterates some of Gladwell's ideas about free will—the existence of an adaptive unconscious complicates our usual understanding of free will by showing how people can behave in a racist manner even when they're consciously trying to be fair-minded.*

There are many other applications of the idea that the adaptive unconscious can be irrationally prejudiced. In job interviews, it's been shown, the taller candidate has the higher chance of getting the position, all other things being equal. Indeed, the average American CEO is 1) a man, and 2) about six feet tall, almost three inches above the national male average. Perhaps it's true that, while the majority of American businesspeople aren't consciously racist, sexist, or "heightist," they have an unconscious bias in favor of tall, white men—explaining why a disproportionately large number of CEOs are tall, white men.

It's often argued that there is a strong, conscious bias against women, people of color, etc. in job interviews. Gladwell doesn't deny that such a conscious bias exists in some cases, but he suggests that more often people may be unaware of their biases because they're unaware of their unconscious behavior. This would explain why bigotry can be so difficult to fight—people might not even realize that they're participated in bigoted behavior.

In the town of Flemington, there's a Nissan car dealership whose sales director is a man named Bob Golomb. Golomb is a phenomenal salesman—indeed, he sells about twenty Nissans a month, more than twice the rate for an average salesman. In part, Golomb excels at sales because he's good at thin-slicing. He can assess a person's interest in buying a car within a couple seconds of meeting them. And yet Golomb doesn't assess anyone on the basis of their appearance—he claims, "everyone who walks in the door has the exact same chance of buying a car." So although Golomb sizes people up very quickly, he tries to pay attention to more than just a person's height, gender, race, or age—in short, he avoids the "Warren Harding" problem.

Golomb's record as a car salesman is interesting because it shows how thin-slicing and rapid cognition need not be prejudicial. Golomb sizes people up in a few seconds, essentially judging a book by its cover. And yet, Golomb doesn't (supposedly) let stereotypes cloud his judgment: he avoids the Warren Harding problem (i.e., making the wrong decision about a person based on limited evidence about that person) by considering all *the superficial evidence about his clients (their mannerisms, facial cues, etc.). In short, Gladwell argues, there's a right way and a wrong way to judge a book by its cover.*

It turns out that car dealerships suffer because of the Warren Harding problem. One study concluded that, all things held equal, white men receive initial price offers for cars that are about 200 dollars less than the initial prices offered to white women, and nearly a thousand dollars less than the initial prices offered to black men. One might think that the study proves that car dealers are racists: car dealers assume that women and black people are less intelligent than white men, and therefore try harder to sell them an overpriced vehicle. The problem with this hypothesis is that the men and women who participated in the study were college graduates, and certainly didn't give off the impression of stupidity. So if car dealers are consciously racist, then they are so obliviously racist that they ignore all the evidence about their customers. This seems pretty unlikely, Gladwell says.

Following the evidence Gladwell has already considered, it would seem that car dealers are just as susceptible to errors of the adaptive unconscious as any other person, like the subjects who took the IAT. Most car dealers may not be overtly, consciously racist (in fact, Gladwell argues, it's pretty unlikely that they all are), but like many people they can allow preconceptions to cloud their judgment. Of course, it's also worth noting that just because someone is a college graduate it doesn't mean they appear intelligent on the "snap-judgment" level, so this caveat doesn't really invalidate claims of racism or sexism (as Gladwell claims).

The most likely explanation for the racism of car dealers is that, unconsciously, they assume that women and black people are less sophisticated than white men. Like the people who voted for Warren Harding, or people who take a long time to finish an IAT, they immediately jump to conclusions about their potential customers because they've been unconsciously trained to think this way.

Put in "Blink terminology," a bad car dealer will thin-slice one small aspect of a person's appearance, and then extrapolate irrational conclusions from that evidence.

Gladwell asks: Is it possible to fight Warren Harding errors? Unconscious discrimination seems difficult to change, because people don't realize how pervasive it is. Interestingly, when people take the IAT immediately after looking at pictures of famous and beloved black figures like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, they find it easier to complete the IAT quickly—visual cues can reconfigure the adaptive unconscious to associate races with positive qualities. But there are also some clear limits to how greatly humans can change their own unconscious minds. In the next three chapters of his book, Gladwell will look at three examples of how people can "confront the possibilities of first impressions and snap judgments."

At the end of this chapter, Gladwell suggests that it's possible to fight unconscious discrimination—and, in general, that it's possible to strengthen and train the adaptive unconscious. If it's possible to condition the unconscious mind to respond negatively to images of black people, it might also be possible to train the unconscious to respond differently. In general, Gladwell is trying to argue that, although the adaptive unconscious is far from perfect, it's also possible to improve it and use it as a force for good.

CHAPTER 4: PAUL VAN RIPER'S BIG VICTORY

Paul Van Riper is a tall, elderly man. He fought in the Vietnam War as a commander, and was involved in some of the toughest fighting of the entire war. Soldiers remember Van Riper being a charismatic, intensely fair commander who sometimes took dangerous risks with his soldiers, but who was willing to risk his own life for the good of his company.

Paul Van Riper will be the "main character" of this chapter: an excellent example of how improvisation and snap judgments can be important elements of success.

In 2000, a group of Pentagon officials recruited Van Riper for a highly expensive "war game" designed to train American troops and test new theories about military strategy. In this war game, known as the Millennium Challenge, soldiers would fight against a fictional Middle Eastern military commander who was threatening to pull the entire region into war. Van Riper was cast as that military commander. In most Pentagon war games, the battles (between a heroic Blue Team and a villainous Red Team) take place in a remote part of Suffolk, Virginia. For two and a half weeks in 2000, Van Riper and other commanders participated in the war game, fighting in highly realistic "battles." Although nobody knew it at the time, the war game anticipated the literal war that the U.S. would fight in Iraq a few years later—except that, instead of a fictional Middle-Eastern dictator played by Van Riper, the U.S. would be fighting a real-life dictator, Saddam Hussein.

The Millennium Challenge has become notorious in the world of military strategy because it inadvertently predicted the war in Iraq: soldiers were being trained to fight a rogue Middle-Eastern dictator, not unlike Saddam Hussein. The Millennium Challenge is also a good illustration of how perfect information and careful considerations of the evidence aren't always useful components of military strategy; there are times when perfect information can interfere with the decision-making process.

The Millennium Challenge yielded some interesting results. To begin with, the Blue Team fought the war game with the help of a tool called Operation Net Assessment—a decision-making procedure that broke down all military decisions into its economic, social, and political factors. By contrast, the Red Team used improvisational, unpredictable tactics. Casting Paul Van Riper as the enemy commander was a clever choice, because Van Riper had always believed that war was inherently unpredictable—that it was based on commanders making intuitive snap judgments. Van Riper maintained that conventional decision-making strategies—i.e., weighing all options carefully—were too slow for the military.

Operation Net Assessment arguably symbolizes the dangers of conscious, perfectly rational thinking—as Gladwell will show, perfect rationality and evidence-weighing aren't always as powerful and effective as people think. In short, the Millennium Challenge is a great "case study" for the clash between the conscious, rational mind (as represented by the Blue Team's military strategy) and the unconscious, intuitive mind (as represented by Van Riper's Red Team).

As the war game began, the Blue Team, representing the U.S., sent the Red Team (led by Van Riper) terms of surrender. When Van Riper refused to surrender, the Blue Team tried to disable the Red Team's communications with bombs. Much to the Blue Team's surprise, Van Riper improvised a series of complex codes for communicating with his red soldiers. The Blue Team assumed that it would be easy to predict what the Red Team would do next—but it quickly found that its predictions weren't accurate. Then, in a single day, Van Riper struck out against the Blue Team and disabled the vast majority of its ships and aircraft. Despite the fact that the Red Team was badly outnumbered, it crushed the Blue Team. Somewhat like the Getty officials being unable to predict that their Greek **statue** was a fake, the Blue Team leaders were unable to predict that Van Riper would be able to override their predictions and defeat them.

Right away, the Millennium Challenge exemplifies some of the advantages of intuitive decision-making and some of the pitfalls of rational evidence-weighing. The Blue Team believed that it was making the right decision, but in fact it was wasting valuable time on predictions that turned out to be inaccurate. Van Riper's greatest strength as a commander was his unpredictability—again and again, Van Riper was able to outwit Operation Net Assessment, perhaps suggesting the limitations of excessive rationality. Like the Getty experts who evaluated the Greek statue, the Blue Team allowed evidence and information to cloud their judgment.

A good example of spontaneous thinking is the art of humorous improvisation. In an improv group, members ask for audience suggestions, and then use these suggestions to create a skit. Improvisation seems incredibly difficult, since it apparently involves making up an entire skit on the spot. But, upon close inspection, it turns out that improvisation isn't as "random" as it might appear. After each show, members of a good improv troupe critique one another's performances and determine how to improve in the future. Improv might seem random, but in fact, it's governed by a series of rules.

Improvisational comedy is a great example of the methods of spontaneity. It might seem contradictory to talk about "methods of spontaneity," (since, one could argue, spontaneity is by definition not *methodical) but in fact, Gladwell shows, certain rules govern spontaneous behavior and can provide the proper environment for it to best arise and function.*

The crucial lesson of improvisation comedy, and of the Millennium Challenge in which Paul Van Riper participated, is that spontaneity isn't random. When people are in a high-stakes situation (war, performance, etc.), they act quickly and make snap judgments, but they also follow certain intuitive rules. A good example of a "rule of spontaneity" is the "yes, and" rule in improv: the rule that, when a performer offers a suggestion or new idea, the other performers immediately agree with that idea and use it to "move the scene forward." It's important to notice that the "yes, and" rule doesn't offer any advice for *what* to do or say in an improv performance; rather it creates the optimal *conditions* for a good performance. By the same logic, Van Riper's behavior during the war game might have seemed random a to the Blue Team—and yet, he was careful to "create the conditions for successful spontaneity."

There is a big difference between spontaneity and randomness. Randomness is chaotic, muddled, and by definition impossible to plan. Spontaneity, on the other hand, can be rehearsed and trained for. For example, Van Riper spent many years as a soldier perfecting his ability to be spontaneous under pressure. While it may seem like a contradiction to say that spontaneity can be practiced, Gladwell argues that there's no contradiction at all. Even if spontaneous behavior itself will always be unpredictable and to some extent random, it's possible to perfect the development of the proper conditions *of spontaneity.*

When Van Riper was fighting in Vietnam, he often heard gunshots in the distance. At first, he made the mistake of radioing his troops in the field to ask about the gunfire. But gradually, Van Riper realized that his troops didn't necessarily know anything more about the gunfire than he did. From then on, whenever Van Riper heard gunfire in the distance, he would "stop and do nothing" for five full minutes. It was better, he decided, to let the soldiers firing the shots resolve the situation themselves than it was to create a potential panic by alerting everyone of the danger.

It might seem like poor leadership for a military commander to do nothing after hearing gunfire in the distance. But in fact, Van Riper's decision to do nothing reflects years of experience and careful consideration. Van Riper recognizes that by contacting his soldiers in the field, he might be interfering with their ability to resolve a problem.

Van Riper also applied the lessons he'd learned in Vietnam to the war game. He made an effort to cut down on long meetings and introspective explanations. He also warned his troops to cut down on military jargon words like "effects." In short, Van Riper's management technique was to encourage people to use rapid cognition.

Not unlike a good comedic improviser, Van Riper tried to optimize the conditions of spontaneity for his soldiers: instead of weighing his soldiers down with excessive orders and questions, he gave them the space and the freedom to "work it out."

While rapid cognition isn't perfect, it has some clear advantages over conventional thought. For example, Gladwell says, if someone asked you to identify the person who served you coffee this morning, you could probably do it. However, if someone asked you to describe this same person, or draw their face, you'd probably struggle to remember specific details of their appearance. And *then*, if you were asked to pick the person out of a police lineup, you'd (presumably) have a much harder time doing so. In short, conscious thought can impede rapid cognition.

Gladwell argues again that rationality can interfere with spontaneity: the act of verbalizing a stranger's face can prevent you from visualizing that stranger's face (although, of course, Gladwell's example here might not apply to everyone). To put it another way, the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind occupy two different "territories," and when one part of the mind intrudes on the other, problems arise.

The phenomenon by which conscious thought can interfere with rapid cognition is called "verbal overshadowing." In general, rational thought can overshadow rapid cognition. In brainteasers, rational thought isn't always enough to solve the puzzle—either you have a "eureka" moment and see the answer, or you don't see it at all. Furthermore, when people are asked to "talk through" their attempts to solve the brainteaser, they become less likely to solve it successfully. In other words, when people try to verbalize their thoughts, they sometimes sabotage their chances of making an insightful snap judgment.

Verbal overshadowing is an important concept because it shows how excessive rationality can undermine the overall power of the mind. Solving a puzzle or a brainteaser (or, to bring it back to Van Riper, winning a war) isn't necessarily a rational act; sometimes, the only way to succeed is to use the unconscious mind. Thus excessive rationality and verbalization can undermine the unconscious and prevent it from discovering the solution to a problem.

"There once was," Gladwell says, a group of firefighters who'd been sent to put out a fire in the kitchen of a house. The firefighters tried to put out the fire, but found that the fire kept burning. Suddenly, one of the firefighters had a sudden impulse to get out of the building—so he shouted for his friends to leave with him. Seconds after they'd left, the floor they'd been standing on collapsed—it turned out that the fire was in the basement. This story is a great example of thin-slicing in action—without being consciously aware of what the danger *was*, the firefighter was able to make a rapid judgment from behind the "**locked door**" of his mind, and save his friends' lives. During the 2000 war game, the Blue Team's mistake was to rely too excessively on slow, rational deliberation. The Blue Team underestimated Van Riper's ability to improvise under pressure (e.g., using codes to communicate in secret); also, the Blue Team itself was unable to improvise well—instead, it held long meetings, full of complicated plans and arguments. The Blue Team "extinguished" its ability to make snap judgments.

As the example of the firefighters suggests, rational, logical decision-making has a notable disadvantage: it takes too long. In the heat of the moment (whether in a fire or on the battlefield) people rarely have the time to consider all the evidence fully. Therefore, the best course of action is often to make a "gut decision." During the Millennium Challenge, for instance, Van Riper succeeded as a commander because he excelled at gut decisions—whereas the Blue Team failed because it relied too heavily on a thorough, information-heavy decision-making process.

Another good example of the importance of snap judgments is the Cook County Hospital in Chicago—the hospital that inspired the TV show *ER*. Until the late 1990s, the hospital was extremely disorganized: it was loud, poorly lit, and underserviced (there were too many patients, and never enough nurses). Because of hospital conditions, nurses had a tough time diagnosing patients with potential heart disease problems. The standard procedure for diagnosing heart disease involves asking lots of questions (such as "Do you have diabetes?" and "What's your cholesterol level?"). But nurses didn't always have time to ask these questions. So, in order to avoid malpractice suits and help as many people as possible, the nurses at the Cook County hospital were forced to admit many patients who *might* be suffering from heart disease—even though only a small fraction of these patients did, in fact, have heart disease.

Another good example of a high-stakes, "heat of the moment" situation is a hospital diagnosis. Often, doctors and nurses only have a short time to decide whether a patient has heart disease (or any other condition) or not, and the consequences of a bad diagnosis are obviously enormous. As the passage makes clear, the Cook County Hospital had a strategy for avoiding wrong diagnoses: 1) admitting too many people, and 2) asking lots and lots of questions. Gladwell will show how this strategy actually interfered with the process of diagnosing patients.

In 1996, a man named Brendan Reilly became the chairman of the Cook County Hospital. Reilly had been a professor at Dartmouth University, but he wanted to pass on his experience and education to an underfunded hospital like Cook County. One of the first things Reilly did to reorganize the hospital was to use the work of a cardiologist named Lee Goldman. Goldman developed an algorithm, or "decision tree," for how to treat heart disease patients as efficiently as possible and with the greatest level of success.

The strategy of Reilly and Goldman is basically to put the idea of "thin-slicing" into practice—but on purpose, and in often life-or-death situations.

Goldman's method of diagnosis involved asking the patient only a small number of questions. It was controversial, however, because 1) doctors believed that more time was needed to perfect the "decision tree" and 2) doctors believed that individual doctors should use their own training and observations to diagnose heart disease, instead of using a fixed algorithm. Reilly chose to use Goldman's decision tree because he had to act fast to improve hospital conditions. He first instituted Goldman's heart disease treatment methods in only half of the hospital, in order to compare Goldman's methods to the norm. After a month, it became clear that Goldman's methods were far safer and more reliable than traditional methods for diagnosing heart disease. A doctor, using their own training and decision-making methods, could correctly diagnose heart disease about 80 percent of the time; Goldman's decision tree could do so 95 percent of the time.

By choosing to adopt the decision tree of Lee Goldman, Reilly essentially was ordering his doctors to make life-or-death decisions based on an deliberately limited amount of information: ECG readings, history of heart disease, etc. Before Reilly, doctors at the Cook County Hospital had a different strategy: obtain as much information about the patient as possible. And yet, when the results came in, it was clear that Goldman's method was the best. By cutting down the diagnosis process to the bare minimum of questions, Goldman encouraged doctors to work quickly and efficiently, and helped them avoid the pitfalls of "overthinking" the diagnosis.

The Cook County Hospital experiment is important because it suggests that sometimes the more information doctors have, the *less* they know. Intuitively, we might imagine that more evidence is the best way to reach the right decision. But in fact, it's often better to limit the evidence to a few main points—in the case of Goldman's decision tree, "the evidence of the ECG, blood pressure, fluid in the lungs, and unstable angina." Goldman's ideas have been controversial, because they contradict people's instinctive trust for information and rationality. Doctors in particular think that a life-or-death decision "must be a difficult decision." But in reality, Gladwell claims, life-or-death decisions are often the simplest decisions—and, as the Cook County Hospital experiment suggests, there are some clear dangers in overthinking such decisions.

Gladwell acknowledges that Goldman's findings seem very counterintuitive. One might assume that the best medical diagnosis uses as much evidence as possible. However, Gladwell argues that sometimes, more evidence is bad: as we saw with the Millennium Challenge, excessive evidence can cloud the decision-making process and result in bad decisions. Thorough decision-making is also slowly and inefficient—a major problem at the overcrowded, understaffed Cook County Hospital. By convincing his doctors not to overthink their diagnoses, Reilly improved the overall quality of his hospital.

There was a psychological study in which different psychologists were asked to consider the mental health of a war veteran named Joseph Kidd. Different psychologists were presented with different amounts of information about Kidd—some were given his basic medical records, some were given long interviews with his parents, some were given detailed reports of Kidd's experiences in the army, etc. Finally, all the psychologists were asked to make predictions about Kidd's behavior. The psychologists who had more information were more *certain* about their responses than psychologists with less information, and yet the psychologists were all more or less equally *accurate* in their predictions.

The study reiterates the basic theme of this chapter: more information isn't necessarily better. Excessive information is also a problem because it encourages people to be irrationally confident *in their decisions. A psychologist who makes a bad diagnosis but thinks she's right is probably more harmful than a psychologist who makes the wrong diagnosis and isn't sure if she's right or not—the second psychologist will be more open to changing her opinion later on.*

There are a couple of important lessons to learn from this chapter, Gladwell says. First, "truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking." Snap judgments can be helpful at times and prejudicial at others; similarly, deliberate thinking can be helpful in some situations, but it can also cloud the decision making process. Another key lesson is that "in good decision making, frugality matters." Excessive information and deliberation might sound good, but they can also interfere with the intuitive cognition of thin-slicing.

Gladwell is not saying that instinct is always better than rationality—just as he's not arguing that rationality is always preferable to instinct. Rather, Gladwell argues that the best decisions incorporate elements of both rationality and intuition. For this reason, it can be dangerous to incorporate too much information into one's decision, because excessive information interferes with intuition.

There was a famous experiment in which grocery store shoppers were offered six different kinds of jam, while other shoppers were offered many dozens of kinds. The shoppers who were offered six different kinds of jam bought considerably more jam than those who were offered many more kinds—the reason why is that buying jam is a snap judgment, and the more choices people are offered, the less likely they are to reach a final decision. By the same token, Paul Van Riper tried to limit the amount of excessive information that reached his soldiers in the war game. While the Blue Team weighed down its soldiers with "perfect information," Van Riper encouraged his Red Team to balance information with intuition—and as a result, he devastated the Blue Team.

The chapter closes with an elegant example of how "too much information" can harm the decision-making process. The customers who had dozens of jam options never reached a decision about which jam to buy: they just continued to weigh the evidence. By the same logic, the Blue Team commanders may have wasted too much time weighing the evidence and carefully considering all available information—while Van Riper acted quickly and instinctively, devastating the Blue Team in the process.

Toward the end of the war game, the Pentagon stepped in to undo some of the "damage" the Red Team had done. Although it was clear that the Red Team was winning the war, the Pentagon officials ordered for the war game to revert to an earlier stage—the ships Van Riper had destroyed were "un-sunk" and the Blue Team leaders Van Riper had assassinated were "un-killed." Van Riper was allowed to continue with his war against the Blue Team—but he was forbidden from improvising. As a result, the Blue Team beat the Red Team handily. Pentagon officials rejoiced, thinking that they'd proven that perfect information and deliberation were the keys to winning a war. Then, a couple months after the war game was over, the Pentagon received word of a real-life Middle-Eastern dictator who was opposed to the United States. Using the strategy it had developed for the war game, the Pentagon eagerly began to plan a real-life attack on this dictator—and "how hard could that be?"

The chapter closes with another illustration of people's bias against instinct and intuition. The lesson of the Millennium Challenge should *have been that intuition plays an important role in warfare. But the Pentagon refused to give the adaptive unconscious the respect it deserved—instead, it concluded that in warfare, more information and technology is always better. Gladwell implies that the mistaken conclusions of the Millennium Challenge played a major role in the fiasco of America's military intervention in the Middle East during the Bush presidency of the 2000s. The American military believed that it could use its superior firepower and perfect information to easily depose Saddam Hussein. But, as readers of* Blink *probably know well, American intervention in the Middle East didn't go according to plan—suggesting that there's always an element of randomness and spontaneity in warfare.*

CHAPTER 5: KENNA'S DILEMMA

The musician Kenna grew up in Virginia Beach. His family was well-educated, and he grew up watching CNN and playing the piano. When Kenna was still a young man, he was discovered by a talent scout, who referred him to Craig Kallman, the president of Atlantic Records. Kallman had a difficult job—he had to listen to hundreds of songs a day and choose the two or three that might be hits. When Kallman heard Kenna's music, he was convinced that Kenna would be a huge star. Kallman sent Kenna to meet with the manager of the rock group U2, among many other important musicians and producers. But there was a problem. Even though Kenna was highly popular among producers, executives, and musicians, he didn't seem to appeal to actual listeners. Kenna's songs never "tested" well—when played for a small sample audience, the audience didn't give him good marks. Bafflingly, Kenna's career began to stall: even though he got glowing reviews from music professionals (i.e., people who are paid to predict what the public will like), the public itself didn't like him. Some of Kenna's fans—and Kenna himself—have suggested that Kenna's career stalled because his music is difficult to categorize: it falls somewhere between indie, funk, and dance music.

In this chapter, Gladwell considers the science of polling. For the rest of the chapter, Gladwell will try to explain how test audiences, polls, and expert opinion can differ so enormously. For now, however, it's important to pick up on the fact that Kenna's music is very difficult to categorize—it doesn't fall into any single musical genre. As we'll see, test audiences often react negatively to new and radical products, ideas, and works of art—in other words, one problem with polls and test audiences is that laypeople have a bad habit of confusing "different" with "bad."

In general, polling is an important technique. In politics, for example, politicians can use polls to appeal to their constituents. The political pollster Dick Morris tells a funny story about meeting Bill Clinton for the first time in 1977: when Clinton met Morris, he asked Morris about his polling techniques. Unusually (even for a politician), Clinton was so fascinated with the details of polling that he spent four hours talking with Morris—later, when Clinton ran for president, he hired Morris to help with his campaign. But perhaps there's a problem with polling—as we've seen already, people can't always *explain* why they choose to do certain things; they act intuitively. So maybe we should take polls with a grain of salt—maybe people can't always explain what they want.

As Gladwell showed in the previous chapter, the act of explaining one's tastes, instincts, and intuitive decisions sometimes interferes with the decisions themselves. Therefore, there seems to be an inherent problem with polls—in which laypeople are often asked to explain their intuitions about new products.

A good example of the unpredictability of polling came in the early 1980s, when Coca-Cola was trying to distinguish itself from its rival, Pepsi. In the 1970s, Pepsi had introduced the "Pepsi challenge," in which ordinary people were blindfolded and asked to choose between small cups of Coke and Pepsi. A slim but statistically significant majority of people said they preferred Pepsi to Coke. In response to Pepsi, Coca-Cola released a new product: New Coke. New Coke "tested" very well—people were asked if they preferred New Coke or regular Coca-Cola, and they overwhelmingly claimed to prefer the former. But when New Coke was released, it sold horribly. Coca-Cola was forced to reintroduce its original product, which it called "Classic Coke." But then, most surprisingly of all, Coca-Cola found that it had accidentally solved its biggest problem, its rivalry with Pepsi. Since the introduction of Classic Coke, Coca-Cola has remained the number-one soft drink in the world, edging out Pepsi year after year. Furthermore, ever since the introduction of Classic Coke, Coke has beaten Pepsi in the "Pepsi Challenge." In short, the story of New Coke "is a really good illustration of how complicated it is to find out what people really think."

"New Coke" is a notorious example of an unsuccessful product—it was one of the biggest flops in the history of business. But for Gladwell, New Coke is also an example of the pitfalls of polling and audience testing. Even after all the research indicated that the Coca-Cola Company should redesign their soda, the resulting product, New Coke, wasn't popular at all. Test audiences claimed that they wanted New Coke, but clearly, the general public did not. As we saw with the Fismans' research in Chapter 2, there is a fundamental gap between what people want and what they think they want. It's the job of a successful company to navigate this gap, responding to polls and test audiences, but also taking them with a grain of salt.

There are many good examples of how the presentation of a question can change the response. For instance, the "Pepsi Challenge" was designed for participants to sip a small amount of both Coke and Pepsi. But in different versions of the test, participants were instructed to take home a case of Coke and a case of Pepsi. Studies found that people preferred a small amount of Pepsi (which is slightly sweeter than Coke) but a large amount of Coke.

Gladwell begins by poking holes in the market research that led Coca-Cola to change its recipe. Contrary to Coca-Cola executives' beliefs, the "Pepsi Challenge" didn't necessarily prove that people preferred Pepsi to Coke; it just suggested that, when blindfolded, people preferred a small amount of Pepsi to the same amount of Coke.

The subtleties of polling Coke and Pepsi-drinkers illustrate the concept of sensation transference, which was pioneered by the revolutionary marketer Louis Cheskin. Cheskin observed that sometimes, people "transfer" their impressions of a product's case or packaging to the product itself. For example, Cheskin tried to find a way to market margarine—which, at the time, was a highly unpopular product, viewed as a cheap substitute for butter. Cheskin's insight was to package margarine differently, wrapping it in gold foil and thereby making it look like butter. Cheskin's strategy was highly successful—because his company *presented* margarine differently (as a fancy, shiny product), consumers unconsciously thought that margarine itself was fancy. Cheskin realized that if he had polled consumers about whether they wanted margarine to be wrapped in foil or not, they wouldn't have admitted that they did. In short, consumers didn't know what they wanted in margarine—Cheskin had to "tell" them by repackaging the margarine.

Louis Cheskin's success as an advertiser is notable because it proves that people don't always know what they want; they have to be told. In the case of margarine, for instance, people weren't consciously aware that they would respond to margarine wrapped in attractive gold foil—it wasn't until Cheskin released margarine of this kind that people "discovered" their attraction to such a product. It's also important to notice that Cheskin didn't change the taste of margarine; rather, he only altered the product's presentation. *Good packaging can be very important because it catches customers' eyes and convinces them that the product itself is good, too.*

Cheskin founded a consulting firm that still exists today. The firm has helped package hundreds of successful products. One of its most influential findings was that people prefer realistically drawn "food mascots" when they're shopping at grocery stores. These findings helped inspire a wave of semi-realistic food mascots, such as Chef Boyardee, Orville Redenbacher, and Betty Crocker. Mascots of this kind have been instrumental in selling more canned and packaged goods in the last few decades.

Cheskin's research into marketing and packaging has been very influential, inspiring hundreds of companies to revamp their products. Once a new package or advertisement is proven to be successful, many other companies will try to imitate that package or ad—hence the sudden popularity of semi-realistic food mascots.

It could be argued that Cheskin's advertising techniques are dishonest. However, Gladwell argues that these techniques are no more dishonest than charging more money for a new kind of chocolate chip cookie with bigger chocolate chips. In either case, people will pay more for a product because they believe it will taste better (either because the chocolate chips are bigger or because margarine wrapped in foil seems like it might taste better). Furthermore, people decide how a product tastes based not only on its taste but also on how it looks and how it triggers memories and feelings. Therefore, it would be foolish for a company to ignore all the non-gustatory elements of food.

While it could be argued that food corporations pay millions of dollars to "con" consumers into thinking that products taste better than they really do, Gladwell argues that presentation and packaging are themselves elements of the experience of "tasting" a food. Foods don't taste good simply because of their literal taste; they taste good because of the way they're arranged and presented. Therefore, it's not inherently dishonest for a company to spend a lot of money on packaging—a new package will change a consumer's experience of the product itself.

Coca-Cola made a big mistake when it introduced New Coke—it placed too much emphasis on blind taste tests. The idea that a product is better because blindfolded people prefer it is ridiculous—nobody consumes soda blindfolded, anyway. Coca-Cola is popular not only because of its literal taste but because of the shape of the bottle, the color of the logo, the personal associations of the consumers, and the celebrities who endorse the soda. In short, Coke focused too much on the literal taste of the product and not enough on the overall Coke "brand." Perhaps the same is true of Kenna's career—when marketers tested Kenna's songs, they focused too much on the songs, and not enough on marketing Kenna.

Gladwell suggests that perhaps the reason that Kenna didn't become a bigger success is that music studios concentrated on the literal sound of Kenna's music, and not enough on the overall experience of seeing Kenna perform. Just because test audiences preferred Pepsi to Coke didn't mean that the public would buy more Pepsi than Coke; by the same token, the fact that test audiences didn't like Kenna's music doesn't necessarily prove that Kenna couldn't have been a big star.

In the early 1990s, the Herman Miller furniture company developed a new product: the Aeron chair. The Aeron was designed to be as comfortable as possible, with good shoulder support, adjustable arms, etc. But despite the fact that it *felt* comfortable, the Aeron chair didn't look like a good chair. Consumers don't buy chairs solely because they're comfortable (although this is an important factor)—they tend to buy chairs that look distinguished and throne-like. The Aeron looked ugly and odd. When the chair was "tested," consumers said that it felt comfortable, but still insisted that they hated it. Herman Miller had three choices: selling the original chair; spending a lot of money to redesign it; or not selling it at all.

The Aeron chair is an excellent example of a new, different product—altogether unlike any other product on the market. Like many new, different products, the Aeron chair "tested" poorly—test audiences had never experienced anything like it before; partly for this reason, they concluded that it was awful.

In the end, Herman Miller chose to sell the original Aeron chair, even though it had tested horribly. To the everyone's surprise, the Aeron chair became the most popular chair in the history of the company. Even more bafflingly, it won countless design awards, and when people were asked about the chair, they described it as beautiful and elegant. The same chair that test audiences had described as hideously ugly had somehow become beautiful.

The popularity of the Aeron chair reiterates Gladwell's central point in this chapter: there is a gap between polling and popularity. Put another way, there's a gap between what people claim they like and what they actually like (echoing the Fismans' research from the earlier chapter).

The Aeron chair is a good example of how market research can't always identify what people want, because people can't always articulate their real feelings. In testing, customers said they "hated" the Aeron chair, but perhaps that was only because they hadn't seen an Aeron chair before—it was just "different." Similarly, the world of television is full of stories of test marketing failures. The famous 1970s sitcom *All in the Family*, featuring a brash, unlikable protagonist named Archie Bunker, tested so badly with audiences that the ABC network considered dropping it. But when the show finally aired, it became a huge hit. Test audiences reacted negatively to the program simply because it was "different," but once they were used to the show's style of humor, they found that they enjoyed it. A major problem with test marketing is that people easily confuse "different" with "bad," so that really revolutionary products and ideas (such as the Aeron chair) often "test" badly.

In this passage, Gladwell sums up his ideas about the flaws of polling and testing. While most polls and test audiences are accurate reflections of what the public wants and enjoys, polls and test audiences are also bad at predicting the success of really revolutionary new products. As Gladwell says here, it's easy for laypeople to confuse a new, "different" product with a bad product. But once a new product becomes widespread and isn't different anymore, laypeople sometimes decide that they enjoy the product after all.

Gladwell recalls meeting two professional food tasters, Gail Civille and Judy Heylmun, at a company called Sensory Spectrum. Sensory Spectrum (or SS) is a very important company: its food tasters are trained to measure precisely how different a new food is from the market norm. Gladwell took Civille and Heylmun to a French restaurant, where he was amazed by their ability to analyze tastes in great detail. When they tasted a bite of *crème brûlée*, for example, they described it as "missing the whole winey texture" and being "a little too woody." Civille and Heylmun are obviously experts in food tasting—in other words, they have a sophisticated understanding of "what goes on behind the **locked door** of their unconscious."

In a previous chapter Gladwell argued that, at times, it's best to keep intuition behind a locked door—for example, we should not ask laypeople to explain their hunches and snap judgments, for fear of interfering with the processes of the adaptive unconscious. However, there are some rare kinds of people—highly trained experts—who can *articulate the reasoning underlying their snap judgments. Indeed, Civille and Heylmun are paid to articulate why they do or don't enjoy certain foods.*

There was a famous psychological experiment in which food experts were asked to rank forty-four different brands of jam according to specific measures of taste and texture. Then, the scientists gave the top and bottom three jams to a group of college students and asked them to rank the jams according to the same criteria. Surprisingly, the students ranked the jams in more or less the same way as the experts—they could clearly distinguish the best from the worst. But in a second version of the test, the college students were asked to rank the same jams, and *also* explain the reasons for their preferences. This time, the students ranked the jams completely differently from the experts—the request that they explain their opinions turned them into "jam idiots." The study suggests that average people are surprisingly adept at identifying what is and isn't "good"—they just lack the sophisticated vocabulary and training to articulate *why* they prefer certain foods or products.

The interesting thing about this experiment is that, ordinarily, the average person is pretty good at ranking jams from best to worst (assuming, that is, that experts' rankings are the "right" rankings). But when laypeople are asked to articulate the reasons underlying their tastes, they lose their tastes altogether. This experiment is another good illustration of the concept of verbal overshadowing that Gladwell described in the previous chapter: the rational, conscious mind interferes with the behavior of the adaptive unconscious.

The jam experiment, along with Gladwell's interactions with Heylmun and Civille, reinforces an important point: experts and laypeople often have the same basic tastes, but while experts are good at articulating their reasons for preferring certain foods and products, average people cannot explain their preferences, and in fact, lose their ability to choose good products *because* they're asked to articulate their reasons. Gladwell asks, "Isn't this what happened to Kenna?"

Gladwell offers an important addendum to his ideas about verbal overshadowing: most of the time the rational, conscious mind interferes with people's snap judgments. But some people—trained experts—can articulate their tastes and snap judgments. One of the basic problems with polls is that they force laypeople to behave like experts—they make people articulate why they do or don't like something.

Gladwell returns to discussing Kenna's career. After many years of trying, Kenna was signed by Columbia Records and released an album. The album was a modest success—the music videos were nominated for a couple awards, and the songs were sometimes played on the radio. But Kenna never managed to get his singles played on Top 40 radio, because test audiences didn't like them. In short, the experts loved Kenna—they could explain, in very particular language, *why* they loved Kenna. But average people, when asked to explain their feelings about Kenna's music, were unable to articulate their thoughts clearly, and as a result, they said that they didn't like Kenna at all. Kenna is very popular at concerts and live performances, but he can't win over a focus group. As a result, his career has never really taken off.

The chapter ends with a further discussion of Kenna's career. The fact that Kenna is a charismatic guy and a great live performer suggests that Kenna really does have what it takes to become a star. But unfortunately, Kenna will never get the chance to be a star (at least at the time of the book's writing) because his music doesn't "test" well. It's possible that, if music studios gave Kenna's music a chance and played it on the radio, it would become very popular—similar to the way the Aeron chair became very popular, even though test audiences hated it.

CHAPTER 6: SEVEN SECONDS IN THE BRONX

In the South Bronx, on a street called Wheeler Avenue, there was a Guinean immigrant named Amadou Diallo. Late on the night of February 3, 1999, Diallo was standing outside his apartment building, looking out at the street. Meanwhile, four plainclothes police officers were driving by Diallo's building. When they saw Diallo, they thought that he might be a burglar trying to break into the apartment, based on the way he kept looking to the left and the right, and he supposedly fit the description of a reported serial rapist who'd been seen in the neighborhood. So they stopped their car and asked to speak to him. Diallo, who stuttered and spoke poor English, didn't respond right away. Diallo may have thought that the officers were criminals—indeed, one of Diallo's friends had recently been attacked by a group of armed robbers. Diallo ran into his building, away from the police officers. The officers yelled for Diallo to stop running, but Diallo did not. The officers ran into the building and chased Diallo toward his apartment. At this time, one of the police officers reports, Diallo seemed to be carrying an object that resembled a gun (the object turned out to be his wallet). The police officer opened fire on Diallo. The other officers, who were coming around the corner, heard gunfire, thought that their partner might be in trouble, and fired their own guns at Diallo, ultimately killing him.

The final chapter of the book opens with a particularly striking, tragic example of snap judgments. The four plainclothes police officers who pursued and killed Diallo made a series of decisions: 1) they decided to question Diallo because they thought he looked like a reported serial rapist, or that he might be a robber; 2) they decided to chase Diallo into his apartment building; 3) one of the officers decided to shoot Diallo when Diallo reached for his wallet; 4) the other officers decided to shoot Diallo after they assumed that their friend had been shot. Gladwell will focus on decisions 2, 3, and 4, arguing that the police officers may have acted out of confusion and bad intuition, rather than explicit, overt racism. (After the publication of Blink*, Gladwell was criticized for not spending enough time discussing decision 1—a decision that was arguably motivated by conscious racism, and which seems harder to categorize as a bad "snap judgment.")*

The most common kinds of snap judgments we make are snap judgments about other people. For the most part, humans are good at making these kinds of snap judgments—humans are adept at reading subtle facial cues and picking up on subtle displays of emotion. Clearly, the four plainclothes officers who shot at Diallo made a series of bad snap judgments: they judged Diallo to be a criminal, believed that he was going to shoot at them with a gun, etc. In the end, however, a jury acquitted the four plainclothes police officers, on the basis that they had made some bad but forgivable mistakes in judgment that night. The jury's decision outraged many people, who interpreted Diallo's death as a textbook example of police racism.

The final chapter of Blink *is about interpreting facial cues—one of the most basic kinds of snap judgments that we make. In the process, Gladwell will argue that Amadou Diallo's death was the result of some bad snap judgments and mistaken interpretations of facial cues—and not (as many argued, and continue to argue) the conscious racism of the four plainclothes police officers.*

It seems wrong to say that the four police officers killed Diallo because of a simple misunderstanding—after all, the officers had three or four "misunderstandings" in a row, beginning with their judgment that Diallo was a criminal, and ending with their tragic belief that Diallo had a gun. But it also seems wrong to say that the officers killed Diallo because they were murderous racists: indeed, none of the officers had any previous history of overtly racist behavior. As we will see in this chapter, Diallo's death falls in the "grey area" between deliberate and accidental behavior.

Gladwell returns to a provocative argument here, claiming that human beings do not always choose what to do consciously, but neither are they involuntarily "conditioned" to act. Instead, he says, freedom is a constantly shifting "grey area"—depending on the situation, people's actions are somewhat voluntary and somewhat involuntary in varying degrees.

In order to understand Diallo's death, we'll need to understand the "affect theory" developed by Silvan Tomkins and Paul Ekman, two of the most important psychologists of the 20th century. Tomkins taught at Harvard throughout the 1920s and 30s; during this time, he developed a complex affect theory—in other words, a theory that humans display their innermost emotions through subtle facial expressions. Many years later, Tomkins became a mentor to the young Paul Ekman, who shared Tomkins fascination with the hidden language of the human face. Together, Tomkins and Ekman studied facial expressions by videotaping thousands of subjects from around the world. Gradually, Ekman and Tomkins found a sophisticated way to analyze facial expressions.

Ekman and Tomkins' research reiterates some of the themes that Gladwell brought up in the first chapter when he discussed the research of John Gottman. Gottman, like Ekman and Tomkins, concluded that the face, and the human body in general, speaks a subtle but important "language"—facial expressions communicate all sorts of information, including information that the person is trying to hide. Notice that Tomkins and Ekman also had to develop their "thin-slicing" abilities by studying many hours of videotapes of people's expressions.

Gladwell met with Ekman, now in his sixties, to discuss the "taxonomy of facial expressions." Ekman explains that there are at least 43 distinct "action units"—in other words, 43 different facial muscle movements. These action units can be combined in hundreds of different ways to produce different emotional "affects." For example, the normal human affect for fear is a combination of action units one, two, four, five, and twenty: inner and outer brow raised, raised eyelids, dropped jaw, wrinkled nose, stretched upper lip. Ekman and Tomkins's research has thousands of applications—for example, the animators for the movie *Toy Story* used action unit research to draw characters with realistic expressions.

Ekman has probably gone further than anyone in "breaking down" the face into a set of recognizable expressions. But the strange thing about Ekman's research, as we'll see, is that usually, human beings already *know what facial expressions mean, whether they've researched them or not. So even if Ekman is particularly good at studying facial cues, the average person is surprisingly good at doing so, too. As Gladwell said, "we're old hands at thin-slicing."*

Ekman has reached some other surprising conclusions about the human face. Usually, people think of the face as expressing an internal emotional state; for example, we smile because we are happy, not the other way around. But Ekman's research suggests that sometimes, people *feel* happier when they're made to smile. Ekman also learned that people communicate through "microexpressions"—facial affects that only last for a tiny fraction of a second. For example, Ekman studied footage of the trial of the famous Soviet spy Harold Philby. When the prosecution questioned Philby about his espionage activity, Philby tried to affect a look of confidence and security as he denied his crimes—but, Ekman discovered, Philby's face betrayed smugness, fear, and distress for a few crucial milliseconds, foreshadowing the revelation that Philby was guilty.

Ekman's findings have some interesting applications, which Gladwell doesn't explore in great depth. For example, it's easy to imagine how powerful Ekman's findings would have been in the 1950s, when Harold Philby was on trial—Ekman could have studied Philby's face and determined that Philby was a liar before Philby stole any more secrets. Indeed, one of the most important applications of affect theory is interrogation—it's fairly common for FBI and CIA agents to study affect theory so that they can tell when potential enemies are lying and when they're telling the truth.

The face, it would seem, "has a mind of its own"—it reveals our innermost emotions, even when we're trying to hide them. But this is puzzling—why, if the face is so adept at displaying its owner's innermost emotions, are humans sometimes bad at picking up on facial cues? And why did none of the plainclothes police officers who shot Diallo notice his fear or distress on the night of his death?

In this short section, Gladwell asks the question that he'll spend the rest of the chapter trying to answer—if we're so good at interpreting facial cues, then why were the police so bad at interpreting Diallo's facial cues on the night of Diallo's death?

To understand why the police officers shot Diallo, we'll need to understand how autistic people live. Many autistic adults are capable of living fairly "normal" lives—they have houses, jobs, and families. But autistic people, for the most part, are unable to pick up on basic facial cues. In one psychological experiment, an autistic adult, Peter, was asked to watch the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, while machines tracked his eye movements across the movie screen. Peter was able to pick up verbal cues in the film, but not the characters' expressions and gestures. For example, one character in the movie mentions a painting hanging on the wall. Ordinarily, people would be able to tell which painting the character is referring to because of the position of his body and the direction in which his eyes are pointed. But Peter responded to the word "painting," not the character's facial cues; as a result, he looked at a *different* painting on the wall.

As Peter's behavior indicates, it is possible for a human to observe a human face without gleaning any of the usual information. Autistic people, for example, usually can't pick on expressions and facial cues. In one sense, the face is "just another object" to an autistic person like Peter—Peter can still see other people's faces, but he lacks the usual intuition for faces. The experiment described in this section is an interesting reminder of how heavily most people rely on facial interpretation. People communicate through language, but language by itself isn't always sufficient for getting a message across.

In general, Peter paid more attention to words and physical objects than to people's faces or gestures. Gladwell speculates that Peter's condition—the inability to pick up on important facial cues—isn't as rare as it seems. Perhaps the four police officers who shot Diallo experienced a kind of "temporary autism," during which they ignored Diallo's facial expressions.

The chapter posits that the police officers who chased Diallo weren't consciously trying to hurt Diallo; they just lost touch with their own natural intuition for facial cues, and therefore failed to pick up on Diallo's expressions of fear and panic.

Another important factor in Diallo's death was the intense, high-stakes nature of the conflict—most of all, the gunfire. Although movies and TV shows portray gunfire as an everyday occurrence for police officers, more than 90 percent of officers go through their entire careers without firing a gun at another person—thus, the officers who do fire their guns tend to be in particularly intense situations before firing. Many police officers who fire their guns have reported dissociative states in the moments leading up to the gunshot, during which they forget where they are or lose their ability to hear. There is a biological explanation for these bizarre episodes: in high-stakes, life-or-death situations, people's heart rates may rise to 175 beats per minute or more—in such a situation, people forget how to perform even the simplest tasks.

Most people would probably think that police officers are used to the experience of firing a gun, but in fact, the vast majority of police officers never fire a gun at another person, meaning that using a gun in the line of duty is often an immensely stressful experience. On the night of Diallo's death, three of the four police officers heard a gunshot. Assuming that Diallo had shot their friend (rather than the other way around), they opened fire—perhaps because, as Gladwell argues here, they were momentarily traumatized by the experience of the initial gunshot.

Gladwell hypothesizes that police officers who shoot innocent people—for example, the officers who shot Diallo—lose their cognitive abilities because they're in high-stakes situations. The plainclothes police officers felt themselves to be in a high-stakes situation when Diallo ran into his apartment—in the ensuing panic, the officers lost their ability to think clearly, as well as their ability to interpret Diallo's facial expressions. As a result, they shot Diallo.

Almost from the beginning, Diallo's encounter with the police was a "high-stakes situation"—Diallo was frightened that the police officers were going to hurt him, and the officers thought that Diallo was running away and drawing his weapon. However, some have argued that the chapter shies away from the one of the most basic questions about Diallo's death—why did the police officers choose to stop Diallo in the first place, before *there was a high-stakes situation? why did they suspect that he was a dangerous criminal? Critics have argued that the officers' decision to stop Diallo was emblematic of conscious racism, rather than the kind of unconscious racism that Gladwell discusses here.*

For a vivid example of the limits of facial cue-reading, Gladwell considers John Hinckley's assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan in 1981. Hinckley pushed past other people in the crowd and fired six shots point-blank at Reagan, hitting Reagan in the lung. The mystery of Hinckley's crime is how he managed to get so close to Reagan, considering that Reagan was surrounded by bodyguards. The answer is that bodyguards have a tough job—they have to scan the crowd to determine which people are dangerous. On the day of the assassination attempt, not even Reagan's professional bodyguards had enough time to interpret the threatening look on Hinckley's face. Gladwell posits that human beings become "temporarily autistic in situations where we run out of time."

Situations of great danger and uncertainty can cause people to become temporarily autistic. Furthermore, fast-paced situations can be equally devastating for people's facial interpretation skills—even trained bodyguards couldn't protect Reagan from John Hinckley, because they didn't have enough time to consider everyone in the crowd carefully. In short, Gladwell argues that people are often thrust into situations where they become temporarily autistic.

In one psychological experiment, subjects were "primed" with a picture of a black face and then asked to identify whether they were looking at a picture of a gun or a wrench. When the subjects were allowed to go through the study at their own pace, they were able to identify the gun slightly more quickly than they identified the wrench, perhaps reflecting racist stereotypes about black people and crime. But when subjects were forced to go through the study very quickly, they began to make notable errors, mistaking the wrench for the gun. The study suggests that when people are forced to make judgments about other people in very little time, they're more likely to fall back on convenient stereotypes.

The study described in this passage resembles the IAT from earlier in Blink*; as before, the test seems to suggest that people, even if they're tolerant, non-racist people in their conscious minds, can fall back on racist thought patterns when they're put under pressure. While most people never have to face such serious consequences for their own unconscious prejudices, police officers sometimes have experiences in which they fall back on convenient stereotypes and make horrific mistakes as a result.*

Partly in order to avoid prejudicial judgments, many police departments have switched from two-officer patrol cars to single-officer cars: the reason is that when officers work alone, they work more slowly, and therefore are less likely to make prejudicial split-second decisions like the ones that led to Diallo's death. In general, many police departments have changed their procedures to encourage officers to minimize risks in the moments leading up to their interactions with suspects. For example, police departments have retrained their officers to stand slightly behind drivers who've been pulled over for speeding; in this way, the officer makes it more difficult for the driver to shoot them, and it gives them an extra second to decide how to respond when the driver moves their hands suddenly. In short, police departments have tried to cut down on the situations in which a police officer is forced to fall back on instinctive decision-making. In this way, the officer makes fewer instinctive decisions, and therefore, fewer bad, prejudicial mistakes.

For the rest of the chapter, Gladwell explores some of the ways that training and education can counteract the unconscious prejudice of the human mind. The goal of good police training, it would seem, is the limit the number of instances in which a police officer has to make a snap judgment, and maximize the amount of deliberate, careful thinking in which the police officer engages. By limiting snap judgments, police training also limits the number of occasions in which subconscious prejudice and racism dictate a police officer's behavior.

Criticisms of police shootings tend to focus on the misdeeds of specific officers—officers are accused of racism and conscious bigotry. But in fact, the police officers who shoot innocent people aren't necessarily racists at all—perhaps, in the heat of the moment, they lose their ability to think clearly, and fall back on unreliable instincts. Police departments take great efforts to prepare police officers for the dangers of active duty, but they can only do so much. The result is that often, when police officers engage in a seemingly dangerous chase or confrontation, their heart rates are well over 175 beats per minute, and they make tragic mistakes.

Gladwell suggests that perhaps people are a little too quick to accuse police officers of conscious racism and hatred—the truth, he argues, is that people don't always choose what to do on a conscious level, and therefore can't always be held fully accountable for their instinctive behavior. Gladwell certainly isn't trying to excuse the officers' behavior, but he is asking people to be more open-minded and nuanced in their reactions to shootings—a tall order, considering the inherent trauma involved in a shooting, particularly one that seems racially-motivated.

Instinct, somewhat counterintuitively, improves with practice. Indeed, Tomkins spent hours every week practicing his ability to interpret people's facial expressions. Ekman argues that ordinary people can train themselves to pick up on microexpressions in only a few hours. This kind of training could be extremely helpful for police officers. Gladwell recalls an interview with a police officer who arrested a teenaged boy. The boy reached into his pocket instead of putting his hands up—at this time, the officer realized that the boy was grabbing a gun. The officer was tempted to shoot the boy, but because he perceived the fear in the boy's face, "something told him" to wait a second longer. Sure enough, the boy dropped his gun on the floor—he had been trying to surrender, not shoot the officer. In short, the police officer responded to basic facial cues and made an educated "snap judgment" to give the boy an extra second.

So far, most police training is designed to limit the situations in which police officers have to make snap judgments. But Gladwell argues that police officers should also be trained in making these snap judgments. Gladwell's argument is strong because, no matter how much training an officer receives, sooner or later they'll have to contend with a situation in which they'll have to fall back on instinct—and in those situations, they should have the best, most reliable instincts possible. The story of the police officer who hesitated to shoot the boy is a great example of how police academies could teach their officers to remain calm and careful, even in the heat of the moment.

Gladwell now returns to the sad story of Amadou Diallo. On the night of his death, Diallo was standing outside his apartment. The plainclothes police officers saw that Diallo was standing outside, late at night, and guessed that he was a criminal trying to rob an apartment. When they asked to speak to Diallo, Diallo's face must have expressed fear and confusion—thus, he ran away. The police officers must have been frightened, too—they were in a high-stakes situation that involved chasing a man down a dark hallway; as a result, their heart rates soared. By the time the officers caught up to Diallo, they must have been "temporarily autistic." Instead of reading Diallo's face, they must have focused on Diallo's hands, carrying what they believed to be a gun. We already know the rest of the story: in less than three seconds, the officers made a horrible, high-stress decision: they opened fire on Diallo, and killed him.

The police officers' pursuit of Amadou Diallo certainly counts as a high-stakes situation: the officers feared that Diallo was going to shoot them, and Diallo must have been even more terrified that the four strange men were going to kill him. In the heat of the moment, the officers lost their abilities to interpret basic facial cues, such as fear and panic. Perhaps if the officers had received some simple training in interpreting facial cues—as Gladwell recommends for police officers—they would have hesitated a second longer before opening fire on Diallo, and Diallo would still be alive today.

CONCLUSION: LISTENING WITH YOUR EYES

In the 1980s there was a professional trombone player named Abbie Conant. She received an invitation to audition for the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra—the invitation was addressed to "Herr Abbie Conant" (i.e., a man). Abbie participated in an initial blind audition for the orchestra (i.e., an audition where the judges sat behind a screen, couldn't see the performer, and didn't know her name), and impressed the orchestra's music director, Sergiu Celibidache. But when Abbie showed up to the final, non-blind round of audition, the orchestra's music director, Celibidache, was appalled—he'd been expecting a man. Abbie, a highly talented musician, ended up being offered a position with the orchestra, despite Celibidache's objections. After a year of playing with the orchestra, Abbie was surprised to learn that she'd been demoted from first to second trombone—as Celibidache told her, "We need a man." Abbie was understandably furious, and sued the Munich Philharmonic. Abbie won her case and was reinstated as first trombone because she had proof that Celibidache respected her talent—during the initial blind auditions (i.e., before he knew Abbie was a woman), Celibidache had been highly impressed with Abbie's performance. In short, Abbie was "saved by a screen."

In the conclusion to Blink, *Gladwell studies the importance of blind auditioning in classic music (that is, listening to the musician's music without seeing the person playing). Abbie's experiences with the Munich Philharmonic suggest that even trained music professionals like Celibidache can allow their prejudices and biases to cloud their judgment—without even knowing what they're doing. The "screen" that separates performers from selection panels is a kind of insurance against prejudice and bigotry—in Abbie's case, for example, the screen helped her win her court case by proving that Celibidache, contrary to what he claimed,* did *think that Abbie was a talented musician.*

For hundreds of years, European classical music was written and performed by men, and no one else. It was believed that women were too delicate and timid to compose or perform truly sublime music. In the last few decades, however, there's been a revolution in classical music: women have begun to perform in the world's greatest orchestras. One reason that this revolution occurred, Gladwell argues, is that orchestras began to use blind auditions to select their performers. The advantages of blind auditions are obvious: in the classical music world, there are very strong negative stereotypes associated with women, and eliminating these stereotypes through a screening process allows female musicians to be judged purely on the merits of their music.

Traditionally, classical music has been among the most sexist industries—the "common wisdom" was that men, and men alone, possessed the genius, the passion, and the creativity to perform great music. The aftermath of the introduction of blind auditions proves that such an idea is bigoted nonsense—men and women have the potential to be equally proficient at music, provided that they perform for an audience that isn't automatically prejudiced against them.

Perhaps the question we should ask isn't, "Why did the classic music world remain sexist for so long?" but rather, "Why were musicians so oblivious to their *own* sexism?" The answer, Gladwell has shown, is that people can be oblivious to their own powers of rapid cognition: they can't explain where their first impressions come from. However, "by changing the environment in which rapid cognition takes place, we can control rapid cognition." The introduction of blind auditions is a proven example of how seemingly trivial environmental changes can control rapid cognition and eliminate troubling biases.

Gladwell assumes that classical musicians were unaware of their own sexism (much as the people who took the IAT were unaware of the extent of their own racism). Perhaps Gladwell is being too kind—certainly, there have been many great classical musicians who were consciously, overtly, and proudly misogynistic. However, Gladwell shows how even tolerant men in the classical music world might allow their unconscious biases to control their behavior.

Gladwell concludes with one final example of the power of rapid cognition. Several years ago, a musician named Julie Landsman auditioned to play the French horn at the New York Metropolitan Opera. During her blind audition, Landsman played brilliantly, easily winning a position as first horn. The panel that selected Landsman for the Met reported knowing that Landsman was the best candidate for the job after listening to her play for just a few seconds—a perfect example of rapid cognition. Had they seen Landsman play, however, their rapid cognition might have led them to judge her performance more harshly. In short, blind auditions created "the kind of small miracle that is always possible when we take charge of the first two seconds": the panel saw Landsman "for who she truly was."

Julie Landsman's success as a musician demonstrates the power of rapid cognition at its best. There is nothing inherently good or bad about rapid cognition—sometimes it can lead to incredible insights, and sometimes it leads to horrific mistakes. In Blink, *Gladwell has argued that we shouldn't "throw the baby out with the bath water"; i.e., we shouldn't discount the importance of rapid cognition simply because rapid cognition is sometimes prejudicial and biased. With the proper planning, people can use rapid cognition to* counteract *prejudice and bias. During Julie Landsman's blind audition, for example, the selection panel used rapid cognition to immediately and confidently judge Landsman to be a brilliant musician.*

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