

Handout

Introduction

Once a person has decided on their favoured explanation they are likely to selectively seek evidence which confirms their preferred explanation and unlikely to select information which might challenge their explanation (Snyder cited in Arkes and Hammond 1986). This is now recognised to be one of the most important human failings to be aware of in assessment. It is often referred to as 'verificationism' (Scott 1998; Sheppard 1995) or 'confirmatory bias' (Munro 2008; Plous 1993). We have a tendency to form our views fairly early on in proceedings and then unconsciously select and weigh the information emerging in a way that ensures that our early beliefs will be supported rather than tested (Munro 2008).

Inquiries and serious case reviews have highlighted some of the ways in which this confirmatory bias can feed into ineffective and damaging judgements and decision making in child welfare. In terms of neglect, verificationism may result in agencies not taking action when they should. Brandon et al. (2008) commented on the management of caseloads under pressure and noted that in one instance 'the current climate in (local authority) would have put pressure on staff to keep as low as possible the numbers of children looked after' (p. 87). In a climate of limited resources and high caseloads, confirmatory bias may allow practitioners to conclude that a neglected child or young person is not at risk or does not meet a threshold for intervention when, in fact, a more balanced examination of the evidence would reveal evidence which disconfirms this initial belief that no further action is required.

Munro (2008) advises that we may unconsciously use a number of techniques to avoid seeing challenging evidence:

- **avoidance;**
- **forgetting;**
- **rejecting;**
- **reinterpreting.**

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Guarding against confirmational bias

There is little psychological research in the literature on decision-making on how to avoid such confirmational errors (Plous 1993). However, one strategy shown to be effective in research is to focus on motivational factors (Snyder et al. 1982 cited in Plous 1993). In practice we may benefit from approaching all interviews and discussions with clients and other professionals with the belief or mind-set that whoever we are speaking to may think that we have already made our minds up and are just going through the motions. Deliberately concentrating on open-minded and non-judgemental questioning may result in practitioners gaining more balanced views.

To avoid confirmatory bias (i.e. only seeing the evidence that supports your explanation and not the evidence which challenges you) it should be embedded in practice that you should always consider the opposite and try to seek evidence which disconfirms your favourite explanation (i.e. if your main explanation is that the child's difficult behaviour is linked to the parent's volatile nature then you need to explore the possibility that the difficult behaviour is not linked to the parent's temperament). For example, instead of carrying on questioning about anger and irascibility, explore the possibility that the parent is patient and calm when feeding the child.

Reframing our hypotheses and seeking disconfirming evidence does not come easy and simply considering that you may be wrong is not in itself enough to overcome tendencies toward confirmatory bias (Plous 1993). However, techniques can be learned and this way of questioning judgement needs to become ingrained in practice.

Simply saying to yourself "I must not be biased" is simply not enough. Being aware of a tendency towards bias can help avoid it; it has been shown that overconfidence in decision making can be reduced if decision makers can consider why their judgements might be wrong (Koriat et al 1980; Lord et al 1984). However, the confirmatory bias is such a strong tendency that it needs attention at all levels.

Strategies for Avoiding Verificationism

- Individual** – be aware of tendency, accept that your judgement may be wrong, seek disconfirming evidence.
- Agency** – demand good quality supervision, come prepared to supervision to explore judgement, seek "devil's advocates" and "critical friends" to help see other perspectives and test your thinking.
- Organisations** – accept the uncertainty in practice and teach the skills required to think in this environment, create and maintain supervision policy, build checks for conformational bias into points of review.