

Hello everyone. Welcome back to *This is Berthoud*. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the show where I get to talk about all of the things that you're talking about, so that together we have something new to think about.

Today, let's talk about biases! Yay! We all have them, and most of them are completely harmless. For example, I am strongly biased toward the Chicago Cubs, even if we're in another rebuilding year, and I am biased against the St. Louis Cardinals. I'm biased towards the pizza from Taylor Street Pizza a few blocks from my dad's house in Chicago. I'm biased toward dogs over cats, and I'm biased toward spending copious amounts of time with my husband. But we're not going to talk about preferences today, we're going to talk about cognitive biases. Rather than just preferences, cognitive biases are ways that our brains simplify the process of thinking for us, usually without any sort of awareness on our part. Basically our minds are beyond lazy, so they create all kinds of shortcuts based on our beliefs and previous thoughts and experiences. Most of the time these shortcuts don't cause any problems for us. But sometimes they do, especially when we're trying to work with others. So let's get into a few, and talk a little bit about how these may affect the conversations that we have here in Berthoud.

First, in all good humor I have to tell you, if your thoughts when I mentioned cognitive biases sounded anything like, "Amie, I'm not biased that way, other people are, but not me," congratulations, you have just demonstrated to yourself blind spot bias, where you are unable to see your own biases even if you can recognize them in others. Now, just like when we were talking about fake news, I'm not bringing up biases to make people feel bad or pretend that these make some people better than others. I'm bringing these up because the only way to counteract the negative effects of these biases is to acknowledge them. The ones that come back to bite us are the ones that we can't, or won't, admit to.

So let's start, for real this time, with the Dunning-Kruger Effect. This is an interesting phenomenon where people who know very little about a complex process or problem will overestimate their knowledge about it, whereas actual experts who know more will, because they realize just how complex the issue is, underestimate their own expertise. Sort of the same thing, in the same vein I guess you could say, is the way that we see concepts as simple and easy to understand when we know very little about them, and much more complex the more we learn. Where have we heard this kind of bias at play here in Berthoud? Well, I'll tell you, if you've been listening to any of the conversations around this community regarding Covid-19, you'd think that every single member of this community is a doctor or a nurse or an infectious disease expert. In reality though, while a few people listening to this episode may, in fact, be doctors or may work for one of the public health departments, the majority of us are bankers, or insurance agents, or chefs, or personal trainers, or checkout clerks, or librarians, and as such, we are way too likely to overestimate our knowledge of how to handle Covid-19. And at the same time, those people who are doctors can be expected to say, "There's still a lot we don't know yet" because they understand the complexity of the disease and aren't cognitively trying to make it simpler than it is. Am I saying we shouldn't talk about Covid-19? I most certainly am not saying that - in fact, over the last year, most of us have needed to talk about it since we've been trying to figure out how to run our businesses or organizations or lives in the midst of not enough information. Am I saying we should blindly trust experts? Maybe not blindly, because data and evidence are wonderful things, but certainly we need to consider who we might consider experts and make sure we're relying on people who have some training or education or experience in the field.

So that was the Dunning-Kruger Effect, amateurs overestimating their expertise and experts underestimating their expertise. What's next? Let's see. Since we're on Covid-19, let's talk about false consensus. Unlike the Dunning-Kruger Effect, this one is not named after psychologists, so it's a little bit easier to puzzle out what this one means. Consensus is when everyone agrees, and so false consensus is when you assume everyone agrees, even when they don't. Our assumption of consensus has only been heightened by the pandemic. You see, we've been spending the majority of our time with a smaller, concentrated group of people, much smaller than normal anyway, and since none of us enjoy spending all of our time arguing or trying to convince people that we're correct, we tend to hang out with people who, by and large, think the same way that we do. But the more the people around you agree with you, the more likely you are to assume that everyone agrees with you. We are, at least on the surface, a little bit more careful with this one than some communities, but I can tell you that whether we're talking mask mandates and Covid protocols or elections and politics, law enforcement reform, development and building applications, or anything else this community is passionate about right now, I've had people say to me in a conversation at the library or in a meeting, "Well the majority of people here think..." fill in the blank, and I've thought, "Really? I mean, really, because I spoke with someone else a little while ago, and they told me the majority of people here think differently than that, and neither one of you has any data to back up your majority claim." I sincerely hope that as restrictions continue to lift, and as we are increasingly able to interact and discuss with each other the important issues that we're facing as a community, we will be able to hear all the different and often brilliant ideas that people have, but in the meantime, beware assuming that everyone agrees with you. That is your brain trying to make things simpler than they are.

Let's move on to the fundamental attribution error. I feel a little bit like a character from the Big Bang Theory when I say that - a fundamental attribution error- but anyhow, what is it? This is the tendency that our brains have to consider any mistake or misjudgment on our part to be the product of circumstances and any mistake or misjudgment of the part of others to be the product of a character flaw. Now I know some of you are thinking, "Amie, that's so childish, I know better than to do that." Sure you do, at least when you're consciously considering it. The whole point of a cognitive bias, though, is to give your brain a shortcut so you don't have to consciously consider it. Let's look at an example here. Have you ever had one of those days where everything seems to be conspiring against you? Your alarm didn't go off, your coffee maker won't brew, all three of your kids have managed to lose the shoes they need to wear that day, you forgot to stop for gas, you get caught by a train, etc and so on. What happened? You got to work late. It happens to the best of us, so hopefully your boss was understanding, but you knew that everything that could go wrong did. Now imagine a few later a coworker arrived late. Does your brain think, "I wonder if his kids also couldn't find their shoes this morning?" or does your brain think, "gosh he's lazy - he can't even get to work on time." Does your brain think, "I heard a train whistle a little while ago, I wonder if she got caught by it," or does your brain think, "she should probably work on her time management skills." If we're being honest - come on now, it's no fun if you're not honest - we'd have to admit to thinking or believing the latter. That doesn't make us jerks, it just makes us human with normal cognitive biases. How have I seen this one play out in conversations around Berthoud lately? Let's consider Berthoud Day. If you've been around Berthoud since pre-pandemic times you probably are very familiar with Berthoud Day. Let me clear up two common misconceptions right now; first, it is Berthoud Day, not Berthoud Days. Just saying, it's one singular day. Second, and more important for our

purposes today, Berthoud Day is not hosted by the Town of Berthoud. Berthoud Day is actually put on by the Berthoud Area Chamber of Commerce. Why is that important, Amie? I am so glad that you asked, and now I will tell you why. The chamber here has one staff member, and everything the chamber does happens as a result of hard work by that one staff member and a good corps of volunteers. But these aren't just any volunteers. These volunteers are business leaders, or people running your local nonprofits. In other words, these volunteers are people with full-time or more than full-time jobs who volunteer with the Chamber in whatever free time they can find. What does that mean? Bottom line - Berthoud Day, a full-day festival of parades and games and beer and music, cannot be planned in a couple of weeks. It typically takes the volunteer team about six or seven months to plan Berthoud Day. No one could have anticipated last November and December that gathering 6,000 people together at Town Park would be at all feasible come the first Saturday in June. However, these chamber volunteers did decide a few weeks ago that the parade is on! Woot! What I found most interesting is people's reactions to this news. Several people have made comments about the chamber volunteers not wanting people to have fun, or being sissy scaredy-cats, or being mean. As in: "they're so mean, they don't even want to have Berthoud Day." That, ladies and gentlemen, is the fundamental attribution error, assuming that the decision was made based on the character traits of the people involved rather than the circumstances. But please try to keep in mind that people who volunteer with the chamber aren't mean individuals who hate having fun, they are people who have had to make difficult decisions amidst changing regulations, just like everyone else. Let's notice circumstances, not invent character flaws. No more letting our brains indulge in the fundamental attribution error. Side note, Berthoud Day is the Chamber's biggest fundraiser, and this is the second year in a row that they haven't been able to host it. And while the parade is on for this

year, the parade doesn't generate any income for the chamber, so donations to keep the chamber running would not be turned down.

This is fun, let's do another one. How about anchoring bias? I think this one is fairly easy to explain. It's the way that your brain over-relies on the first bit of information it got in order to evaluate all of the rest. So if you're searching for a used car, and the first one that you look at costs \$23,000, and then you find one for \$10,000 it seems cheap, because your brain is using \$23,000 as an anchor. However, if the first one you look at costs \$3,000, then when you find one for \$10,000 it seems expensive. Neither of those assumptions take into account any factors like your budget or gas mileage or the reputation of wherever you're buying the car from. Instead, your brain shortcuts any real thinking by fixating or anchoring on the first bit of information it received. Where do we see this affecting conversations around Berthoud? Let's talk about new developments. Some of you are probably thinking, "oh, danger, Amie! Don't go there!" It's okay, this is a safe space. We will be fine. So take a deep breath and let's consider the planning process for new developments. A developer will create an initial site plan (that might not be the technical term for it, but I think you all know what I mean), so the initial site plan is submitted, and the fun begins and the plans change. There can be any numbers of reasons that plans for the site need to be altered. Sometimes input from neighboring communities changes the plan. Sometimes the town has to tell the developers that something they've planned doesn't work with the building codes and regulations and what not - not enough green space or park space, for example, or inadequate parking lots. Sometimes the developers find something out about the land itself that changes the plan. Anyway, you get the idea. It takes multiple iterations for the developers and the town to come up with a solid plan that fits the zoning and the regulations and the actual site for each new development. The challenge for us as community members is to fight

our anchoring bias. You hear this sometimes in the conversations right? Comments like “I thought they said there would be apartments, not townhomes” or “Where’s the dog park, I thought there was supposed to be a dog park?” That’s judging each new iteration of the plan based on the anchor of the first bit of information you received. We can provide more helpful feedback as a community, however, if we ditch the anchoring bias and evaluate the perks or the problems of the plan we’re currently looking at instead of comparing it to earlier drafts. See, that wasn’t too scary! That’s anchoring bias.

Let’s do just one more, and then we’ll call it for the day. Let’s talk about decline bias, or declinism. I’m going to quote Dr. Christopher Dwyer here, and I’ll link the article he wrote in the transcript, but he sums this one up really well. He says, quote, “Declinism refers to bias in favor of the past over and above ‘how things are going.’” End quote. We run into this one a lot when we hear about how Berthoud used to be. I think it’s especially challenging for us when paired with anchoring bias. “Berthoud used to have only 3,000 people, but now…” Let me challenge you to consider when you’re thinking about changes in our community, whether the change is a decline, is progress, or is just a change. It may be possible that not everything here is in decline, especially when there are so many residents, people who have been here for a while and people who are brand new, who want to do everything they can to make this community thrive.

So now you may be thinking, great, so what do I do? I’ve been telling people lately that the library exists to help people think better, so let me help you think better. Three things that will help. First, being able to identify these different biases when they come up truly is a good part of the battle. Since your brain wants to use these biases as shortcuts so you don’t have to think things through, the easiest way to counter them is to think things through. Your first thought doesn’t have to be your final one one, so give yourself the chance to consider whether

you've really thought through this or if your brain is just reacting. If that's all you do, you will have done yourself a world of good, but if you want to think even better, expand your circle or your sources of information. The more you hear people who agree with you, the faster your brain will move through these shortcuts, and the more you reinforce the bias. So find people or information sources you don't agree with automatically and listen. And please, please, please understand that there is a difference between listening to respond and listening to understand. When you're listening to understand why people think differently than you about something, without feeling compelled to come up with a snappy comeback, you may not change your mind at all, but at least you'll know that you've consciously thought it out instead of relying on a cognitive bias. Third and last, maybe for some the most difficult, is to learn to rely on long-form media when you're forming your arguments. The problem with a 20-second spot on the evening news or a headline on facebook or a meme is that they all rely on the same shortcut thinking that your biases do. But very often all we've managed to do is simplify issues that need to be examined in all their complexity in order for us to have truly well-thought opinions. So watch the feature-length documentary. Your library card gives you access to thousands, some of them online, so let us know if you're not sure how to access those. Download the full book and listen to it during your commute. Read the 20-page article instead of the 3-page one. Does it take longer? Sure it does. But it also helps you avoid many of the mistakes caused by cognitive biases.

One thing not to do? Don't use your knowledge of biases as a weapon. If, during a conversation, you can say something like "I realized I was assuming x, but when I thought about it more I discovered it's actually y, so now I think z," that can be helpful. Pointing out your own assumptions can help other people think through theirs. But if you say, "That sounds like you're

committing a fundamental attribution error, so your thinking is biased,” you probably won’t change anyone’s mind. Or make any friends. So remember you don’t know what’s going on in anyone else’s mind, but you can take control of what’s happening in yours.

Thanks for listening again today. Remember that if you need any advice about processing information we’re happy to help, and if you need any medical or legal or financial advice we’re happy to direct you to a professional who deals with those things. You can get in touch with me, Amie, about this episode or anything else that strikes your fancy by emailing me at podcast.bclld@gmail.com or by calling the library at 970-532-2757. Let’s all indulge ourselves in some deliberate thinking as we work to build this community together, and as always, I’m proud to say this is Berthoud.

12 Common Biases that Affect How We Make Everyday Decisions by Christopher Dwyer, Ph.D.
Accessed at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/thoughts-thinking/201809/12-common-biases-affect-how-we-make-everyday-decisions> on April 28, 2021