

Thinking Without Thinking: Malcolm Gladwell's Thin-Slicing Explained

From assessing whether to trust a new acquaintance to examining whether a situation is potentially dangerous, people constantly make split-second judgments and decisions about the situations and people around them. To make these quick decisions accurately, it takes critical thinking, self-awareness, and an individual's intuition. Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink* is about those quick in-between seconds and the power of thin-slicing.

1. First, explain what Gladwell means by “thin slicing.” Give a clear definition in your own words with a page citation. An example might be helpful as well.

In chapter one, Malcolm Gladwell introduces the concept of "thin-slicing." Thin-slicing refers to the unconscious process to draw accurate conclusions based on limited knowledge (Gladwell, 2005, p. 23). Gladwell discusses the medical researcher Wendy Levinson, who recorded hundreds of conversations between physicians and their patients (Gladwell, 2005, p. 41). Half of the recorded physicians had never been sued, while the other half had been sued at least twice. Levinson found that the doctors who had never been sued spent approximately three more minutes with each patient than those who had been sued. The doctors who were not sued made the patients feel more like individuals rather than cases. Nalini Ambady, a psychologist, further analyzed the recorded conversations to get a more in-depth look at Levinson's data. She picked out the ones just between surgeons and patients. She then filtered out the high-frequency sounds from the speech, essentially "garbling" the content while preserving the intonation, pitch, and rhythm. Using a Gottman-style analysis, Ambady assessed the surgeons' warmth, hostility, dominance, and anxiousness. Through this, she could predict which surgeons had been sued and which had not. She found that if a surgeon's voice sounded dominant, they tended to belong to the sued group. In contrast, if the voice conveyed less dominance and more concern, the surgeon typically fell into the non-sued group (Gladwell, 2005, p. 43). Although Ambady and Levinson

both demonstrate how thin-slices can be useful, they aren't doing thin-slicing. Thin-slicing is an unconscious cognitive process where thoughts, decisions, and judgements arise spontaneously without intentional evaluation.

2. Second, discusses the insight Gladwell provides about when thin slicing is most useful and when it can lead us astray.

According to Gladwell, thin-slicing is most useful when these insights come from true experts with extensive experience and deep knowledge in their field. Gladwell discusses how the Getty Museum almost bought an ancient Greek kouros statue for \$10 million. Despite studying the authenticity of the kouros' for fourteen months, and all results leading to it being real, multiple experts "thin-sliced" the statue and could instantly sense something wasn't right about it. Frederico Zeri, an art historian, was the first to examine the statue. With just one glance for a few seconds, he immediately knew it was fake based on his intuition from that thin-sliced moment (Gladwell, 2005, p. 6). Separately, Evelyn Harrison, an expert in Greek sculptures, knew something didn't look right within the first few seconds of seeing the statue (Gladwell, 2005, p. 5). Zeri, Harrison, and all the other experts who examined the kouros knew that it was not authentic based on their intuitive impression that something felt off within the first few seconds. The kouros was revealed to be a clever modern forgery after more tests. The experts' ability to thin-slice allowed them to accurately judge the statue's authenticity based on a small window of time and limited data.

Another type of expert skilled at thin-slicing that Gladwell highlights is pattern recognition specialists. During World War II, morse code patterns were created and used by British interceptors to decode what was being said, who was saying it, and where it was coming from (Gladwell, 2005, p. 27-28). The interceptors could identify the radio operator's fists after only listening to a few characters. Gladwell states that fists are a part of an individual's

personality and are expressed automatically and unconsciously in the use of morse code (Gladwell, 2005, p. 29). The British interceptors were able to come up with descriptions of each operator's fists and styles, allowing them to identify geographic locations based on where the operators were broadcasting from and could report valuable information back to help create an order of battle (Gladwell, 2005, p. 28). The translation of coded messages occurred automatically in the operators' minds, without conscious and deliberate effort. Through subconsciously training themselves to recognize and decode patterns from small slices of the coded messages, the Morse code operators were able to quickly and accurately relay information to commanders.

Although thin-slicing can be helpful, it can also lead to errors in judgment. Gladwell discusses two main types of errors that can come from thin-slicing. The first one being the Warren Harding Error. This error refers to the tendency to make flawed judgments based on first impressions (Gladwell, 2005, p. 76). He gives the example of how car salespeople are prone to the Warren Harding Error. Many Salesmen make quick judgments based on superficial qualities such as appearance, confidence, race, and gender. Gladwell discusses Bob Golomb, the sales director of the Flemington Nissan dealership in central New Jersey. Golomb "tries to treat every customer exactly the same because he's aware of how dangerous snap judgments are regarding race, sex, and appearance" (Gladwell, 2005, p. 91). As a result, Golomb has "sold about 20 cars a month, which is more than double what the average car salesman sells" (Gladwell, 2005, p. 89).

Another way thin-slicing can lead to errors in judgment is through the storytelling error. The storytelling error is the idea that when an individual's conscious mind is blocked, the adaptive unconscious is working to find a solution (Gladwell, 2005, p. 71). In a speed-dating study by psychologists Iygnar and Raymond Fisman, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their preferences for romantic partners four times - before the speed dating

starts, after the evening ends, a month later, and six months after the speed-dating evening (Gladwell, 2005, p. 64-65). The results were shocking. Iygnar and Fisman found that what speed-daters say they want with what they are actually attracted to at the moment doesn't match (Gladwell, 2005, p. 65). The original preferences the participants wrote down changed throughout the speed-dating process, highlighting the discrepancy between the conscious mind - what people believe they want - and the adaptive unconscious - what they want unconsciously.

- 3. Third, explain what Gladwell means by "mind reading" and how this is different/same from thin slicing. Here also answer the 3 questions below to discuss why Gladwell discusses the Diallo shooting and Ekman's work in the process of explaining how mind reading can be done most accurately.**
- **What is the biggest takeaway from Gladwell's discussion of the Diallo shooting?**
 - **What types of things interfere with accurate "mind reading"? (there are 2 main things Gladwell discusses)**
 - **Thinking about Ekman's work described in Chap. 6 of Blink and the prior discussion of who is good at "thin slicing," what do we have to do if we want to be able to accurately use powers of rapid cognition?**

Gladwell uses the term "mind reading" to refer to the ability to accurately read and interpret people's thoughts, feelings, and intentions based on thin-slicing their facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues (Gladwell, 2005, p. 195). Mind reading is not the same as thin-slicing. Thin-slicing applies to making decisions on the fly based on limited information across different environments. In contrast, mind reading is solely based on other people's nonverbal cues to make a decision, relying heavily on an individual's ability for rapid cognition.

Regarding the Diallo shooting, four police officers shot and killed an unarmed Black man based on a split-second decision. They based their rapid judgment on their unconscious biases rather than evidence of an actual threat that resulted in taking an innocent man's life. Gladwell claims that when an individual fails at mind reading, they are mind-blind (Gladwell, 2005, p.

214). In the Diallo shooting, the officers failed at recognizing facial cues - that Diallo was scared and had no intent of violence. Their lack of intuition of facial cues lead to Diallo's death.

Gladwell states that high physiological arousal and lack of time can interfere with accurate "mind reading." During high physiological arousal, an individual experiences high-stress levels, causing the body to release adrenaline and enter "fight or flight" mode. In this state, an individual's thinking becomes less rational, and decisions are made more by instinctive reactions than by clear reasoning (Gladwell, 2005, p. 226-227). Although in the case of the Diallo shooting, it might seem like an act of racism, Gladwell suggests that the four officers were likely in a state of high arousal, causing them to rely on narrow, poorly-formed schemata and unconscious biases rather than viewing the situation as it is.

The biggest key takeaway from Gladwell's discussion about the Diallo shooting is that when we become mind blind, we stop taking in information and act immediately on that without continuing to take in information. Gladwell says that we all have an unconscious bias that when in a state of high arousal, individuals fall back onto those basic instincts (Gladwell, 2005, p. 231). When thin-slicing isn't practiced with good intent, the loss of human life can happen, such as in the Diallo shooting, and it's important to slow down and think about the potential consequences.

Regarding Paul Ekman and Friesen's work described in Chapter 6, to be able to use powers of rapid cognition, individuals must understand facial cues. He did hours of research, videoing people's facial expressions. He claimed that there are 43 different muscle movements of the face and over 10,000 facial configurations (Gladwell, 2005, p. 201). These units can be used together in various ways to elicit emotions. The work of Ekman and Friesen shows that the information conveyed by facial expressions does not simply hint at the thoughts and feelings

occurring in our minds - it is those very thoughts and feelings being outwardly expressed (Gladwell, 2005, p. 210)

Gladwell explains that police officers undergo specialized training to operate in high-pressure situations of physiological arousal. This training refines their ability to thin-slice scenarios and make split-second decisions (Gladwell, 2005, p. 226-227). Gladwell also mentions Gavin de Becker, who runs a security firm in Los Angeles. De Becker introduces the concept of "white space" - the physical distance between the protected client and a potential assailant (Gladwell, 2005, p. 230). The more white space there is, the more time the bodyguard has to react and "mind read" the potential threat (Gladwell, 2005, p. 231). With greater reaction time, bodyguards can analyze subtle cues and determine whether the person poses a real danger. This is the second thing Gladwell highlights as interfering with accurate mind reading: when we feel we don't have enough time before we must act on our mind reading judgment.

4. Fourth, offers connections between the social cognition/perception topics/processes we have been discussing in class (Chapter 6, Trenholm & Jensen, 2013) and *Blink*.

One connection between the concepts discussed in *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell and the social cognition topics covered in Chapter 6 of Trenholm & Jensen is the idea of naive realism. Naive realism assumes that individuals see the world objectively and that their perspective represents the whole truth (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013, p. 149). In *Blink*, Gladwell examines how people can sometimes make accurate split-second decisions based on thin slices of information picked up from minor cues and details. However, he also highlights how these unconscious judgments can be heavily influenced by deep-rooted stereotypes, prejudices, and personal biases that people are unaware of. The naive realism bias described in Trenholm & Jensen helps explain why people struggle to recognize that their quick, intuitive judgments and first impressions,

while sometimes very insightful, can also be affected by their viewpoints and implicit biases which we are often unaware we have (Gladwell, 2005, p. 214).

Another connection between the concepts discussed in *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell and the social cognition topics covered in Chapter 6 of Trenholm & Jensen is the idea of personality attribution. Personality attribution is the process by which individuals infer stable personality traits from an individual's behavior across different situations (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013, p. 147). People quickly attribute personality traits such as conscientiousness, openness to experience, friendliness, assertiveness, etc, to others based on their behavior. The personality attribution process happens automatically and unconsciously based on small data slices. Gladwell highlights the potential power and the risks of making these rapid personality judgments based on limited information. On the one hand, experts can sometimes make insightful inferences. However, snap judgments can also be at risk of errors, biases, and overgeneralization.

5. Last, discusses the implications of the research discussed in *Blink*. How could you use what you learned so far in *Blink* to better understand situations where you “thin slice” and to be aware of when it might help you and when it might be a problem?

Based on the insights from Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*, I can apply the concepts of thin-slicing and rapid cognition to better understand situations where I make split-second judgments and to be more aware of when this process might be helpful or problematic. For instance, thin-slicing could be beneficial in situations that require a quick decision, such as in specific professional or social settings, allowing me to rely on my intuition and experiences to make informed choices.

However, from a young age I've struggled with experiencing big emotions. If I feel angry, I experience a level of rage that exceeds what most people would feel. These big emotions have made it challenging for me to cope, and it can take days for me to return to a normal emotional

state. Even to this day, I still struggle with taking control of my emotions. Through Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*, I learned about the concept of thin-slicing, which might become problematic for me when I'm in a state of high physiological arousal brought on by my big emotions. My ability to process information quickly and make accurate split-second judgments is hindered during these times. When experiencing such heightened emotions, making important decisions or conversing with others is probably not the best idea.

Taking what I have learned from *Blink*, I can apply it in my life by taking the time to slow down and think about my decisions more deliberately rather than acting impulsively in the moment. A split-second decision made by my heightened emotional state could escalate into a dangerous, maybe even deadly, situation. Moving forward, I will be more aware of situations where I might thin-slice and recognize when this process might be helpful or potentially problematic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink* makes us reflect on the process we go through to make those split-second decisions. It's important to recognize that individuals participate in thin-slicing in their everyday interactions, whether making decisions or assessing situations. *Blink* prompts individuals to be more mindful about the influences that shape our choices.

References

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Trenholm, S. & Jensen, A. (2011). *Interpersonal Communication*. (7th ed.) New York, NY: Oxford