

Blink and You'll Miss It:

A Book Review of
BLINK: THE POWER OF THINKING WITHOUT
THINKING. By Malcolm Gladwell. Back Bay Books,
2007. 296 pages. Hardcover \$14.99

Lauren Koong

You may have experienced a gut feeling or an instinctive notion that completely contradicts what logic and facts are telling you. This feeling comes from a fast-paced thinking that operates opposite to our careful decision making. In *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell uses a journalistic form of writing to explain this rapid cognition process that occurs in our brains. He provides insight on how we cognize the world around us, how each instantaneous decision made in a blink of an eye operates. In this book, Gladwell explicates how our subconscious minds gather information from our past experiences and actions, allowing us to make those split-second decisions. This part of the brain that allows us to leap to conclusions, called the “adaptive unconscious,” (Gladwell, 2019) acts like a computer that processes data for us, allowing us to function as humans. This unconscious decision-making allows us to make choices in microseconds, without needing to think through all the options first. According to Gladwell, we are able to make snap judgements, like how competent a professor is at teaching, in two seconds. He introduces several variables that may encourage these “first two seconds” (Gladwell, 2019) of subconscious thought, such as emotions, prejudices, time, and depth of information. While these variables allow our subconscious to make decisions and warn us when our conscious cannot, they can affect how we perceive a situation in either a beneficial way or not. Gladwell engages his readers with his quest to prove how and why the “power of our adaptive unconscious” (Gladwell, 2019) can be both a strength and weakness when approaching a novel situation, and how it is possible to retrain our unconscious to help us. By compiling a diverse range of stories focusing on this backstage mental process, Gladwell weaves a strong argument for his conclusion.

Gladwell introduces this concept with a story of a flawlessly-preserved kouros, or an ancient Greek statue, about to be purchased by the Getty

Museum for \$10 million. After performing a fourteen-month investigation, complete with background checks and a thorough examination by a geologist, the Getty had more than enough evidence on paper to prove the statue was unfeigned. The Getty decided to buy it.

However, Italian art historian Federico Zeri took one look at it and decided “it didn’t look right.” (Gladwell, 2019) Something was wrong. More of the world’s experts in Greek sculpture laid eyes upon this kouros, only to feel the same “wave of intuitive repulsion” (Gladwell, 2019) that Zeri felt. Their instincts were correct; the statue had been forged.

It is here where Gladwell’s first lesson lies. He maintains that it only takes seconds for people to subconsciously use their knowledge to make judgements and decisions based on the problem at hand, especially for experts who are well-versed in their fields. In the case of the kouros, it took two seconds for Zeri to see what the Getty team had failed to discover in fourteen months. Gladwell argues that in our minds, there is a subconscious part that filters through a steady stream of information, data and details, and allows us to come to instantaneous conclusions. Our unconscious uses this processed information to act in ways our conscious decision making would not.

This rapid cognition process is constantly happening in our daily lives. Without consciously thinking about it, decisions are constantly being made for us. We see a car rushing toward us and we jump out of the way. A light turns red and we stop. When we meet someone for the first time, we are able to thin-slice the small amount of information given to us about them and extrapolate a first impression, which is often extremely accurate about that person as a whole. Gladwell brings up a study about students rating their professors to prove his point. Psychologist Nalini Ambady gave students three ten-second videos of a professor, with the sound off, and asked them to rate the effectiveness of the teacher. When the videos were cut to five seconds, and even two seconds, the ratings stayed consistent. Ambady then compared these quick judgements to evaluations from students who had the same professors after a semester of classes, and found their ratings were almost identical. “A person watching a silent two-second video clip of a teacher he or she has never met will reach conclusions about how good that teacher is that are very similar to those of a student who has sat in the teacher’s class for an entire semester,” Gladwell writes. Regardless of how fast we make them, these judgements made by thin-slicing can be every bit as accurate as decisions made after cautious deliberation.

While thin-slicing is not a new concept, Gladwell adds to our understanding of this unconscious process. Subtle cues, whether it be physical, mental, or emotional, can easily sway this rapid cognition. Gladwell gives an example of a scrambled sentence test that used words consistent with the elderly, like “Florida” or “wrinkled,” (Gladwell, 2019) to prime the subject with subliminal messages of old and aging. Without realizing it, participants walked slower after taking the test, unaware of

this change. Similarly, when the examinees were primed to be rude and told to talk to an experimenter who was in a conversation, they interrupted after approximately five minutes of waiting. In contrast, 82 percent of the examinees that were primed to be polite never interrupted the ongoing conversation, waiting patiently instead. These faint messages that we do not intentionally pick up on hold a powerful sway over our unconscious behavior. While we need this process of thin-slicing to function through life, it is not always beneficial, especially when we live in a world of stereotypes.

They are subconsciously ingrained in us since birth. We associate the good-looking with the good. Using the example of Warren G. Harding, Gladwell proves his point. Our unconscious thin-slicing sees a tall and handsome man, and assumes he is wise and intelligent before he speaks. Harding, who is often considered our least competent president, is evidence of how our adaptive unconscious can lead us astray.

Gladwell reminds us of a man named Amadou Diallo, an immigrant from Guinea, who was outside of his apartment around midnight when a police car drove past. Seeing what they thought was suspicious activity, police officers Ken Boss, Sean Carroll, Edward McMellon, and Richard Murphy pulled the car up to Diallo's stoop. Scared, Diallo ran into the hallway, where the policemen gave chase. Diallo reached into his pocket and Carroll saw a black object in his hand. Similar to how Zeri immediately recognized the kouros as a fake, Carroll immediately recognized the object in Diallo's hand as a gun. He shouted to the others and opened fire, his partners joining in. When the gun smoke cleared, Carroll and McMellon had each fired an entire clip. McMellon had been shot, but Diallo had been killed; his body riddled with bullets and his hand still clutching the black wallet he had pulled out.

Why were they unable to process what was happening? Why could they not see the terror on Diallo's face or that the wallet was not a gun? Gladwell uses this example to show how our rapid cognition process is not an always correct fail-safe method for decisions. Under high stress environments, like a shooting, our mind filters out information, allowing us to focus on the task at hand, narrowing our attention and turning us "mind-blind." (Gladwell, 2019) So when Carroll, McMellon, Murphy, and Boss, inexperienced officers that were new to the Street Crime Unit, drive past Diallo, a small black man, in the middle of the night, their unconscious is already priming them. Time is now measured in milliseconds and as Diallo, a black man in the South Bronx, turns to pull a black object out of his pocket, they must make a fast decision. They are no longer looking at the whole situation, at the complete picture. They are mind-blind, only focused on the object in Diallo's hand, locked into what Carroll perceives as a gun. Instinctively, he starts firing, and when a fellow officer falls backward, he takes this to corroborate the report that Diallo was shooting. The entire incident took less than ten seconds, but "packed inside those few seconds were enough steps and decisions to fill a

lifetime.” (Gladwell, 2019) Their subconscious took over to make those decisions, but influenced by stereotypes, lack of time, and a high-stress environment, their rapid cognition led them astray.

However, Gladwell strives to convince the reader that our powers of unconscious cognition can be trained to solve this problem. By confronting the subtle bias and prejudice that influences our unconscious, we can take conscious measures to overcome this. By taking control of the environment where our rapid cognition takes place, we can control our unconscious. Many people assume that what happens in those two seconds cannot be swayed, when Gladwell persuades the reader that by learning what our first impressions mean and where they come from, we can undermine the subconscious bias. In the case of the death of Diallo, it is important for the law enforcement to be cognizant of the unconscious bias carried in their minds, and

In *Blink*, Gladwell argues that unconscious thought, or “thinking without thinking,” hence the title, overpowers the conscious, logic-driven thought. Although he is not an expert of the brain, he uses a mélange of stories, studies, and research to support his point. From speed dating to Pentagon war games, Gladwell offers many insights into the world of snap decisions, unlocking the “rapid cognition [that takes] place behind a locked door” for his readers. (Gladwell, 2019)

References

Gladwell, M. (2019). *Blink: the Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. New York: Back Bay Books.