

Thin slicing in psychology and philosophy



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Thin Slicing is a term used by psychologists and philosophers, but what does it mean? According to Malcolm Gladwell, "It's the tendency that we have as human beings to reach very rapid, very profound and sophisticated conclusions based on very thin slices of experiences." Blink is a book by Malcolm Gladwell explaining this theory of thin-slicing. In the book Gladwell tells us many different stories that have to do with thin-slicing. The book has examples of successful thin-slicing, examples showing how it works and what it accomplishes.

It also has stories teaching us, the reader of thin-slicing and how it isn't all that great and completely accurate as well. Some stories that can teach us lessons, which we can learn from not to make the same mistakes over and over. This book is about the unconscious mind and how we don't know it but it affects us at every moment whether we notice or not. How the unconscious mind picks up patterns from small amount of information or experiences and we make snap judgments based on those patterns.

Which most of the time we don't notice, unless of course you have trained your mind to recognize these patterns, which there's an example of in the book. All this thin-slicing has its pros and cons I believe Gladwell's theory is correct; all his examples are backed up by his theory of thin-slicing. He gives evidence to how it works both positively and negatively. The theory of thin-slicing is that we have the ability as human beings to instantly identify specific patterns from within small amounts of experience or information, and we make instant or snap judgments based upon those patterns.

What does this mean; it means that our unconscious holds on to information from previous events. From that information our unconscious recognizes

certain patterns from the past and catches similarities in current experiences or events and reacts. This reaction although it may sound a bit complicated happens in mere seconds. We don't recognize what is going on, it happens without us being able to explain it. The book defines it as, " the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience. Its rapid cognition, the unconscious reacts from recognition to previous patterns in mere seconds; this is what makes it so amazing. At the same time snap judgments from thin-slicing can be very problematic, as we learn from the book in its examples. The first story in the book being a positive one teaches us how thin-slicing works instantly, without being able to explain it. The book starts off at the Getty Museum on its early days, when it was starting off. It wanted to gain some kind of recognition so it made its first big art purchase.

It was a 10 million dollar purchase, so the museum took caution. They hired lawyers to check all the paperwork and records of the statue. This statue of a kouros was said to be thousands of years old. There was even a geologist who took samples of the statue and ran it through many different tests and machines. They all concluded that the statue was the real deal and made the purchase in the fall of 1986. This kouros was going to be a great occasion, with stories on the New York Times, and other magazines. A few weeks after the kouros was put on display was when the truth came out.

One by one different art experts doubted the statue. They couldn't explain why at the time, but their immediate reaction to the kouros was just a hunch that something wasn't right. Why though? What did these experts see what all the other people missed when looking at the statue? They were all

intuitively repulsed by this kouros at first sight of it. Eventually all the paperwork and records didn't fit, they all came to the conclusion that the kouros was a fake. The art experts were taking part of thin-slicing.

They knew something wasn't right the first time they saw it, their hunch was that something wasn't right, but they couldn't explain what it was. This example of the Getty museum showed successful thin slicing. The "love lab" is John Gottman's successful way of determining if a couple is going to be together 15 years from now. He does this by videotaping each person he just has them sit in a room; he measures their heart rate, movements, and has them have a conversation. He then analyzes these videos second by second, looking at every emotion.

His method of determining such an important conclusion is based on SPAFF; it's a coding system that has many categories corresponding to all emotions. His success rate is incredibly accurate, by analyzing a couple for an hour his prediction has 95% accuracy if the couple will be married 15 years later. If he watches them for 15 minutes his percentage is about 90%, and with only three minutes of analyzing the accuracy of his predictions are still very impressive. The "love lab," is an example of how thin-slicing works correctly.

Our unconscious is Gottman analyzing those videos, second by second looking at every emotion in the couples. The only difference is that our thin-slicing is done unconsciously, automatically, and in mere seconds. Our unconscious finds patterns in very minute amounts of events or information. Just like with the "love lab" our thin-slicing has a high rate of accuracy. This process makes it possible to gather information to make an important

decision in such a short amount of time, it's almost instantaneously. Thin-slicing can also be wrong, which we'll see in the following examples.

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is an example of the dark side of thin-slicing. This test was made by psychologists. This test brought forth a profound observation, which was that we make connections much more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already related in our minds than we do between pairs of ideas that are unfamiliar to us. The book gives us an example of the IAT tests, the gender and race ones. These tests use mental associations which we are used to and then flips it around, an example is the gender test, first it shows names of both sexes and you have to choose whether the name is a female or male.

That part is easy enough and done pretty fast, it then gives you two more choices: career or male and female or home then words which are associated to either list. Then the last part where it gets tricky is when it switches home and career, so the choices are male or home and female and career. This part of the test takes people a little longer to choose. This test also has a race version in which the choices are European American or bad and African American and good, then switches the good and bad. The results of the race IAT are that more than 80% have pro-white associations.

Why is this so, and what does it mean? The book explains that our attitudes towards race and gender operate on two levels. First our conscious attitude which is what we choose to believe. What the IAT measures though is something else, it's our second level of attitude on an unconscious level. On this level are our immediate, automatic associations that just come out, we don't even notice these. These unconscious attitudes weren't chosen by us,

we may not even be aware of these. This is data our unconscious crunches from past experiences or information we've seen on TV, book, movies, etc.

From all this data we unconsciously form opinions of race and gender, which is what the IAT measures. This teaches us that thin-slicing can also have negative conclusions, and may not always be right. The IAT also discovered that the results mean we tend to act differently with certain races, its little things we don't notice we do because they are done in an unconscious level. This is bad because it makes us discriminate, on an unconscious level, without us even knowing so. Another example of thin-slicing reactions we don't notice. The Millennium Challenge was a war game exercise by the U. S. in 2002 which cost 250 million dollars. This war was made up of blue team which was the U. S. and red team which was the enemy run by Paul Van Riper a retired Marine Corps Lieutenant General. This war game was used by the pentagon to test new ideas about military organization and experiments. Blue team had greater intellectual resources they had an advantage over red team. In the end the winner was the red team. How did this happen, Van Riper didn't have any advantage over blue team and their resources. He did however have his past experiences to help him. Blue team had all these resources, they had too many resources.

All these resources which were supposed to be an advantage ended up being their demise, they were over thinking every move they made. On the other hand Van Riper acted instantly and won. The mistake blue team made was that they forced their commanders to stop and talk things over figure out what was going on. The war games didn't demand for logic, it demanded for action. This is an example of the unconscious finding patterns in chaos and

just reacting, thin-slicing in action. Thin-slicing might sound good for the most part, but there is also much wrong with thin-slicing.

Not everything can be thin-sliced, and work out, an example of this in the book is a rock musician known as Kenna. He had a new sound and it was unlike anything ever heard before. People in the music business loved him, and recommended him he got a record deal and so on. The only thing left for Kenna was to have his music on the radio, sounds easy enough if musicians, producers, and people in the business liked his stuff. Kenna's single was put through a test to see how people were going to react and if he would be successful. His song was tested with people, and ended up being a failure, no one liked him.

This is thin-slicing gone wrong, where our first impression isn't the right one. Kenna's song was tested with people who only heard a clip of the song, not the whole song. Just a clip of something they had never heard before something completely new, it was something unrecognizable, and no one liked it. All the music pro's on the other hand loved it; they were experts in music and knew that Kenna was something different. Just that thin-slicing never let Kenna be the star he could have been. Another lesson we can learn from thin-slicing comes from the shooting of Amadou Diallo. This man was shot down 41 times by 4 police officers. This took place in the Bronx after midnight, the event in the book is said to have only taken 7 seconds to happen. This is when snap judgments went wrong; these four officers reacted and killed an innocent man. These four officers were driving around patrolling as part of the Street Crime Unit. The thing is that they were driving around in an unmarked car in plainclothes. They saw Diallo standing outside

his building and thought he looked suspicious so two got off and went to go talk to him.

They went up to Diallo and he tried to go inside his building. They kept telling him to freeze and pointed their guns at him; he then reached into his pocket and pulled out something that one of the officers saw as a gun, which ended up being a wallet. So much went wrong here, these cops didn't bother to see Diallo or as the book says read his emotions. This is something we, under normal circumstances, have the ability to read other people's emotions through facial expressions. However we lose this ability under too much stress, pressure, or fear.

Gladwell's theory about thin-slicing indicates that it is not enough to make certain conscious changes in attitudes or values, but must also acknowledge the subtle influence that can alter our subconscious, thereby undermining our conscious attitudes. He argues that by taking control of the environment in which thin-slicing happens, one can also control thin-slicing and prevent/lessen the mistakes made. He makes a good point of this throughout his book; he gives us many examples of how thin-slicing can work positively and negatively. He shows how it's not always right, but how we can work on it to correct it.

The aeron chair is an example of this, thin-slicing made people look at the chair and hate it. It was something new; they had never seen anything like it so they rejected it. Once they got to try the chair though they experienced it and found out that they actually really liked the chair. The same with Kenna's music, thin-slicing made people dislike his music. Thin-slicing, snap judgments, all of this has its good and bad. Gladwell's book shows how the

theory of thin-slicing works, good and bad examples of it, and shows us how things can go wrong in the blink of an eye. How our unconscious affects us at all times whether we realize it or not.

How we can notice when our snap judgments are wrong, and makes us realize we need to pay more attention to how we act. Our unconscious works in amazing ways and the process of thin-slicing only makes it a much more amazing thing. It can however be a bad thing as well. This book shows us how this is so, and how we unconsciously act a certain way, are attracted to certain things, and so on. Blinking like thin-slicing is done unconsciously but blinking unlike thin-slicing is noticed by us, but after this book I will try to notice my thin-slicing and try to notice when I unconsciously act.