

Breaking the Locks on Your Mental Baggage

We all carry crystalized knowledge that can keep us from being open to new ideas.

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When Donald Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States in November 2016, I was attending UCLA, rightly known as a highly liberal university. Reaction to the election results was more polarizing than I could have ever imagined.

The night of the election, a large portion of the UCLA student body marched in protest of the results, forcing a shutdown of one of the busiest streets in west Los Angeles. The following morning, in my statistics class, our relatively young professor addressed the elephant in the room. “I’m sure it must have been an emotional night for some of you,” he said, and announced our midterm examination was pushed back to the following week. As one of many who’d forgone studying the night before to watch the breathless news coverage of the election results and the night-long protests, I was relieved.

Though I happened to agree with the opinions of my marching peers, I noticed a disturbing trend that night. Differing political opinions were immediately shunned by the larger community; the idea of listening to different perspectives quickly dissipated. If you weren’t aligned with the protestors’ point of view, your opinions didn’t matter nor hold any merit.

Many class discussions in the weeks following the election turned to heated debates, even shouting matches, replacing the normally meager group participation.

It felt to me that any mental flexibility, at least within the political sphere, had been abandoned, resulting in a highly charged and negative atmosphere — not only across the UCLA campus, but across the United States.

We are often told, encouraged, even cautioned to have an open mind, that doing so opens us up to the possibility of new perspectives and may lead us to change our opinion. As we face another election year, the open-mind admonishment is again peaking. But what exactly is required to have an open mind? And is it truly easier said than done?

According to Dr. Marcia Sirota, the foundation of an open mind is formed on the concept of mental flexibility, which she defines as “the capacity to learn, change our minds, and to see things from a different perspective.” (Sirota, 2015) Having an open mind is just one of the pillars in Sirota’s theory of happiness, and this idea is fascinating to me given our current political climate.

The image that immediately comes to mind is Democrats and Republicans fighting each other. Political conversation has devolved into arguments where opinions are shouted without any intention of listening to a counterargument. Where’s the mental flexibility? Would the folks embroiled in those arguments say they’re happy? They certainly aren’t demonstrating an open mind ... and they definitely don’t look happy.

Drop That Mental Baggage

As Dr. Sirota reminds us, “We need to let go of our unnecessary mental baggage, including hurtful prejudices, false beliefs, incorrect attitudes, inappropriate expectations and unrealistic fears.”

This seems simple enough; yet the burden of our mental baggage — and its effects on our thought processes — can make achieving it seem monumental. Much of our mental baggage is the result of using economized thinking or “crystallized intelligence,” which can have certain advantages; it allows individuals to process information more efficiently and make decisions more easily. With a vast amount of knowledge and experience to pull from, along with some increased difficulty processing new information as our brains mature, older individuals tend to rely on this crystallized intelligence

when faced with new or complex information. (Davis, 2018)

The downside is that it can hinder one’s ability to be open to new ideas. Combine economized thinking with age-related declines in intellectual curiosity and information-processing, and the result is increased mental rigidity. (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014)

I remember my own grandmother who, as she aged, became less likely to consider other points of view or new concepts. Getting her to see my perspective was often a battle not worth fighting; her black-and-white thought process and refusal to acknowledge other points of view made her opinions steadfast and unbreakable. Yet in hindsight, I see my own rigid thinking at play here too, as I rejected her thoughts out of hand as “old school.”

Research studies on human behavior show us that anyone can harbor innate

biases or prejudices; and they often repeatedly go unnoticed. One prominent example of unspoken, unacknowledged bias is known as The Police Officer’s Dilemma, as studied by the University of Colorado (Correll et al., 2002), in which a video game assesses how players use ethnicity to discern potentially threatening individuals. Essentially, those playing the game must determine when to shoot an individual based on whether they are “threatening” (in this case, armed).

Results in this and similar studies found that participants will shoot an armed threat more quickly and more often when faced with a person of color. The study highlights how anyone can harbor subconscious biases; and even though *these subconscious biases may not necessarily reflect their conscious beliefs, they still affect their decisions.*

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Popping the Filter Bubble

Self-reflection and self-awareness can bring light to these roadblocks that impede our ability to create true happiness for ourselves and more acceptance of those around us. Conscious self-awareness may be the key to thwarting these subconscious biases and prejudices.

Fortunately for all of us, there are simple steps anyone can take to start this process. Journalist Vaibhavi Patria notes some studies indicate just being more informed on biases reduces the extent to which they can affect your life. Being more informed allows us to avoid decisions based on emotion that results from blindly following implicit biases. (Patria, 2018)

Our biases tend to create a filter bubble, or an environment —

often online, but not always — in which we are exposed only to opinions and information that conform to our existing beliefs. This bubble quickly leads to confirmation bias, where we see so many others agreeing with us that we are more assured of being “right.”

Algorithms on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter help create these filter bubbles as they skew content toward a user’s personal preferences. For instance, a politically conservative Facebook user is highly likely to see more conservative content than liberal content on his newsfeed because the algorithm records more engagement and interest in the former than the latter, and then acts to maximize that engagement. The same goes for

the liberal user, who sees more like-minded posts on their own feeds. This feeds our confirmation bias and, ultimately, undermines mental flexibility.

In an unpredictable world, adaptability makes us more able to complete life’s various and constantly evolving tasks; mental rigidity sabotages our innate capacity to adapt in the face of new challenges.

By making a conscious effort to be open to differing perspectives, we can all add to our crystallized intelligence and help decrease the mental rigidity that may come from it. It’s well worth the effort! I’ve learned that staying open to opinions, ideas and thoughts different from my own has contributed to my own happiness and fulfillment. ♦



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