LOOKING FOR TRUTH IN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE
Looking for truth in personal experience

What is the most common reason that people give for believing in something?

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

• Personal Experience can be characterized by the following statements:
  • I saw it with my own eyes
  • I could feel its presence
  • I know what I experienced, you can’t tell me that I am wrong.

• Personal Experience can be a reliable source of information in certain situations; however, when used alone, personal experience can mislead us in unexpected ways.

• Fortunately, enough is known about how personal experience works that it is possible to teach people how to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with relying on it.

• The first step is to learn a simple but powerful fact:
  
  **Just because something seems real doesn’t mean that it is!**
Looking for truth in personal experience

You brain is in the construction business!

• Your personal experience is not a 1:1 representation of reality.
  • In fact, you perception of reality (Personal Experience) is constructed by your brain.

• The raw materials used in this construction process include:
  • What is currently happening in the environment.
  • What we have learned in the past in similar situations.

• This fact has benefits and drawbacks.
  • One benefit is that we can think of novel solutions to old problems and solve novel problems with known solutions.
  • One drawback is that what we perceive through personal experience often doesn’t match reality.

• The implication are:
  • Personal experience alone is often not enough to establish the truth or actuality of an experience.
  • Everyone will have experiences that seem paranormal or supernatural.
Looking for truth in personal experience

**SENSORY ACTIVATION**
EG: lights, sounds, smells, tactile, etc...

- I could see it with my own eyes...
- I could feel its presence...
- I could smell it in the air...

**PERCEPTION**
EG: How we behave in relation to our sensory activation

- it must have been an alien spacecraft!
- it was his ghost I was feeling!
- it must have been big foot!

Determined by **contemporary** events

Determined by **historical** events

Personal Experience
REASONS TO DOUBT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

1. Errors in Judgement & Perception
   - Established Belief/Disbelief
   - Expectancy Effects
   - Confirmation Bias

2. Sensory Input/Signal Detection
   - Color Constancy
   - Auto-Kinetic Effects

3. Vague Situations
   - Visual Pareidolia
   - Auditory Pareidolia
Once a person accepts a belief as true that belief becomes resistant to change:

- The believing person will often discount or ignore conflicting evidence when they encounter it in the future.
- Resisting the will to believe or disbelieve without good evidence is one way to avoid this problem!
The Millerites were followers of William Miller (1818). Miller became popular for devising mathematical methods for predicting the second coming of Christ using the biblical book of Daniel.

- He concluded that Christ would return to Earth on a specific date:
  - 4/23/43
  - 1/1/44
  - 3/21/44
  - 10/22/44 – This failed prediction was the final blow to the Millerite movement.

- The church of William Miller split,
  - some members formed the Adventist movement,
  - others formed the Jehovah's witnesses.

- Both groups continue to claim that “the end of the world is at hand”
  - No longer do they make specific predictions about when it will happen.
EXPECTANCY EFFECT: This occurs when people see what expect to see regardless of what is real.

Research has shown that when people expect to perceive a certain stimulus (see a light or hear a tone) they often do perceive it – even when no stimulus is present.

The expectancy effect is notorious for causing people to misinterpret natural events as being supernatural.

The double-blind experiment was developed to control for expectancy effects in research.

The “FLASHING LIGHTS” experiment:
- Subjects were told to walk along a corridor until they saw a light flash.
- Some subjects stopped, saying that they had seen a flash.
- There was no flashing light used in the study.
RENE' BLONDLOT

1849-1930
Member of the French Academy of Sciences
Respected Physicist at University of Nancy in France
He is famous for “discovering” the N-Ray.
- The presence of N-Rays could be detected by the human eye.
- N-Rays were emitted by certain metals but not wood.
- They were reported to increase the brightness of a spark.
- When N-Rays were present, they helped the eye see better in dim light.
- When they were directed at an object coated with luminous paint, it became brighter.
- Other members of the French Academy of Sciences soon confirmed his discovery.
• Blondlot's results could not be replicated by other researchers.
• American scientist R. Wood, traveled to Nancy to investigate further.

• RESULTS
• If Blondlot was told that the lead sheet was in place, he reported a decrease in illumination.
• If Blondlot was told that the lead sheet had been removed, he reported an increase in illumination.
• Expectations affected the perceptions of Blondlot and his colleagues.
CONFIRMATION BIAS – When a person only looks for evidence that confirms their belief and ignores, discounts, or fail to look for evidence that disconfirms their belief.

• One way that the confirmation bias happens is when you accept a belief as true without evidence and then only go in search of evidence to support it.
• Another way that the confirmation bias happens is when you are shown data that are contradictory to your established belief and you ignore, discount, or fail to consider those data in future decisions.

To avoid the confirmation bias you must look for **DISCONFIRMING EVIDENCE**.
Looking for truth in personal experience
Errors in judgement & perception (CONT)

THE CONFIRMATION BIAS (cont)
(Class Activity)

1. You will be presented with a three number sequence.
2. There is a rule that these three numbers obey and I want you to try and figure out what that rule is.
3. The only way you can get information about the rule is to propose your own three number sequence.
4. After you respond I will tell you if your three number sequence follows the rule or not.
5. Then you will be given an opportunity to tell me what you think the rule is.

Here are the numbers

2, 4, 8
Looking for truth in personal experience
Errors in judgement & perception (CONT)

THE CONFIRMATION BIAS (cont)
(Filter Bubbles)

Internet services have gotten good at predicting personal preference of each user but people often fail to realize that these services tend to exacerbate the confirmation bias through a phenomena called “Filter Bubbles”.

FILTER BUBBLE – when modern search engines serve the user with personalized searches based upon their browsing habits and preferences instead of whether or not the search results are trustworthy or true.

If you have a history of searching for sites related to natural medicine, holistic/spiritual therapies, yoga, if you type “Vaccines” into a search engine you are more likely to receive non-credible and scientifically invalid links at the top of your results list.

- Conversely if you have a history of searching for sites related to science, engineering, chemistry, physics, psychology, etc, if you type “Vaccines” into a search engine, you are more likely to get scientifically valid links at the top of your results list.

- Internet technology has gotten really good at giving people what they want; unfortunately, what people want, or value doesn’t necessarily correspond to a reality check.

- In this way, these technologies often exacerbate confirmation bias.
COLOR CONSTANCY

• Color Constancy refers to our tendency to perceive colors as being the same or different regardless of relevant sensory input.
Looking for truth in personal experience

SENSORY INPUT/Signal detection

AUTOKINETIC EFFECT

• When we perceive motion even though there isn’t any.
• The Autokinetic Effect is caused by involuntary eye movements.
• The Autokinetic effect may explain why the planet Venus has been mistaken as a UFO.
Looking for truth in personal experience

vague situations

PAREIDOLIA

• A Pareidolia is a type of illusion that occurs when we detect false patterns in vague or formless stimuli.
• There are two common types of pareidolia, visual and auditory.
• The most common form of pareidolia is visual and one of the most common patterns detected are faces.

FACE ON MARS

• It has been reported that there is a photograph of an enormous monument on Mars in the shape of a face.
• The photo is real enough and it was taken by the Viking explorer in 1976.
• Many have suggested that this photo is proof of an extraterrestrial civilization.
• Before one accepts this possibility, one must consider more likely explanations, such as visual pareidolia.
VISUAL PAREIDOLIA & VAGUE SITUATIONS

• NASA claims that the Viking photograph is a trick of light and shadow caused in part by the low resolution of the image.

• In effect, Nasa scientist were claiming that the vagueness of the stimulus give you the impression of a face, but the face really isn’t there.

• In 1999 the Mars Global Surveyor arrived in orbit around Mars.

• The orbital was directed to take a high resolution image of the “Face” on mars.

• Here is the result....

• With a higher resolution image, most people can tell that the formation is just a small mountain.

• That being said, some people persist in the delusion.
Looking for truth in personal experience
vague situations (cont)

OTHER EVIDENCE OF LIFE ON MARS?

• Some people still believe that NASA is covering up evidence for ancient civilizations on MARS because they claim that there are other examples of faces and other strange anomalies on the surface.
Looking for truth in personal experience
vague situations (cont)

WHAT DO YOU SEE?
Looking for truth in personal experience
vague situations (cont)

WHAT DO YOU SEE?
AUDITORY PAREIDOLIA

- Not only do people see form in formless or vague visual stimuli, a similar thing happens when people are faced with an auditory stimulus that is vague or formless.
- The vagueness or ambiguity of a situation functions like a blank canvas for your brain to construct reality.
- To make sense out of a vague stimulus, your brain will call on your past experiences to help make sense out of the situation.
- Remember, your brain is in the construction business!
- In the coming slides, I will play three different audio clips.
- For each audio clip I will do the following:
  - First I will present the audio clip without alteration
  - Next I will present that same audio clip played backwards
  - Last, I will present the same audio clip played backwards with words added to the screen.
Looking for truth in personal experience
tive situations (cont)

WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?

100s Flock to Image of Virgin Mary

Judas Priest – 1990 Lawsuit

Entomologist – Mars Covered in Bugs
SOME CONSIDERATIONS about personal experience as evidence

Just because something seems real doesn’t mean that it is.

Resist the tendency believe or disbelieve without justification.

Before accepting personal experience as a form of evidence, consider the following:

1. Was the experience uncorroborated?
2. Was the experience unique or mysterious?
3. Are there good reasons to doubt the personal experience?

If the answer to any of the above questions is “YES” then susPEND JUDGEMENT