ABOUT THIS BOOK

How do we make decisions—good and bad—and why are some people so much better at it than others? That’s the question Malcolm Gladwell asks and answers in the follow-up to his huge bestseller, The Tipping Point. Utilizing case studies as diverse as speed dating, pop music, and the shooting of Amadou Diallo, Gladwell reveals that what we think of as decisions made in the blink of an eye are much more complicated than assumed.

Drawing on cutting-edge neuroscience and psychology, he shows how the difference between good decision-making and bad has nothing to do with how much information we can process quickly, but on the few particular details on which we focus. Leaping boldly from example to example, displaying all of the brilliance that made The Tipping Point a classic, Gladwell reveals how we can become better decision makers—in our homes, our offices, and in everyday life. The result is a book that is surprising and transforming. Never again will you think about thinking the same way. (From the publisher.)

Gladwell is also the author of The Tipping Point, Outliers, and What the Dog Saw.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever had a feeling that a couple’s future is successful or doomed just by witnessing a brief exchange between them? What do you think you’re picking up on?

2. Many couples seek marriage counseling from a therapist, a priest, rabbi etc. But do you think a couple about to get married should go and see John Gottman, the psychologist who can predict with a 95% accuracy whether a couple will be together in 15 years just by watching an hour of their interaction? If you were about to be married or could go back to before you were, would you want to see Gottman and find out his prediction?

3. The central argument of the chapter is that our unconscious is able to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience. This is called ‘thin-slicing.’ What kinds of phenomena, if any, do not lend themselves to ‘thin-slicing?’
4. Gottman decodes a couple’s relationship and predicts divorce by identifying their patterns of behavior. Can we change our natural and unconscious patterns of behavior? Would awareness of these patterns with our partner be enough to avert an inevitable break-up?

5. Do you think you could hire someone by ‘thin-slicing’ the candidate during a brief interview? Or do you think this would only work for certain kinds of jobs or perhaps, only certain kinds of people?

6. The psychologist, Samuel Gosling, shows how ‘thin-slicing’ can be used to judge people’s personality when he uses the dorm room observers. Visualize your bedroom right now. What does it say about you?

7. If scrolling through someone's iPod or scanning their bookshelf can tell us more about that individual, what other kinds of ‘thin-slicing’ exercises could reveal aspects of their personality?

8. Art historian Bernard Berenson or billionaire George Soros are examples of practiced ‘thin-slicers’ who have made highly pressured snap judgments based on nothing more than a curious ringing in the ears or a back spasm. What kind of physical, inexplicable cues have you or others you know of experienced which led to successful decision-making?

9. Priming refers to when subtle triggers influence our behavior without our awareness of such changes. An example of this occurs in Spain where authorities introduced classical music on the subway and after doing so, watched vandalism and littering drastically decrease. Can you think of situations when priming occurs?

10. Should we introduce priming in schools to encourage better behavior or more diligent work patterns? What about the service industry? Could employers prime their staff to be more polite to customers?

11. If an individual’s behavior is being influenced unbeknownst to them, when can priming become manipulative? How is it different from the controversy a few years back when cinemas used subliminal advertising during previews to ‘encourage’ people to buy from the confectionary stand?

12. The Iyengar/Fisman study revealed that what the speed-daters say they want and what they were actually attracted to in the moment didn’t match when compared. What does this say for on-line dating services? Can we really predict what kind of person we will ‘hit it off’ with? Is it better to let friends decide who is more suited for you as opposed to scanning profiles that correspond with your notion of what you think you are looking for?

13. Does your present spouse/partner fit the preconceived idea of whom you imagined yourself ending up with? Have you dated someone that was the antithesis of what you thought you found attractive? Is there even a point of asking someone, "what's your type?"

14. The Warren Harding error reveals the dark-side of ‘thin-slicing’—when our instincts betray us and our rapid cognition goes awry. Looking at the example of that 1920 presidency, can we say that this type of error is happening today in political elections? Do you think this explains why there has never been a black or female president?

15. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) shows that our unconscious attitudes may be utterly incompatible with our stated conscious values. So like car salesmen who unconsciously discriminate against certain groups of potential customers or businesses that appear to favor tall men for CEOs, do you find it plausible that we are not accountable for these actions because they are a result of social influences as opposed to personal beliefs?

16. Do you buy the argument that we are completely oblivious to our unconsciously motivated behavior (like the disturbing IAT results that show 80% of test-takers have pro-white associations?) Is this just a convenient excuse to justify our biases?
17. Riper believed that strategy and complex theory were inappropriate and futile in the midst of battle, "where the uncertainties of war and the pressure of time made it impossible to compare options carefully and calmly." What other 'work' spaces discount rational analysis and demand immediate 'battlefield' decision-making?

18. Can one ever really prepare for decisive, rapid-fire scenarios? Is planning for the unpredictable worthwhile or a waste of time and energy?

19. If improvisational comedy is governed by rules and requires practice like any other sport, could anyone be a stand-up comic or performer? Or, will some people always naturally be better at thinking on their toes and more adept at unleashing spontaneity?

20. Riper says, "When we talk about analytic versus intuitive decision-making, neither is good or bad. What is bad is if you use either of them in an inappropriate circumstance." But is decision-making all about the circumstances or more about the personality of the decision-maker i.e. do circumstances have more impact on decision-making if you are a more cerebral, logical individual versus an indecisive, instinctual one?

21. In the cases of Kenna's music and the Aeron chair we see that first impressions can often lead us astray. What we initially judge as disapproval may just be a case of confusion or mistrust for something new and different. How can we distinguish a decision motivated by fear of the unknown from the ones that stem from genuine dislike towards something? Are we better off leaving it to the experts to tell us what we should like?

22. What if we have personal investment in the new product or person? Can we or how do we separate our emotional involvement from our intuitive judgment?

23. Do you believe our unconscious reactions come out of a locked room that we can't ever truly see inside? Can we ever know ourselves wholly and understand the motivation and reason behind our every move? If an individual claims to completely know how their mind works, are they incredibly self-aware or just delusional? And if we can't totally get behind that locked door and fully 'know' why we react the way we do, is psychiatry an over-priced and limited exercise?

24. The Diallo shooting is an example of a mind-reading failure. It reveals a grey area of human cognition; the middle ground between deliberate and accidental. Do you think the shooting was more deliberate or accidental?

25. Mind-reading failures lie at the root of countless arguments, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings. Often, people make excuses for a sarcastic or hurtful remark as "just joking." But if there is no clear-cut line between deliberate and accidental do you agree, "There is always truth in jest?" Do you think when we misread others and get irritated we are in fact only recognizing something in that person that we don't like about ourselves?

26. Eckman and Friesens' work of decoding facial expressions reveals that the information on our face is not just a signal of what's going on inside our mind but it is what is going on inside our mind. But what about politicians or celebrities and other figures constantly in the public eye? Do you believe they are always feeling their expressions or are they just camera-savvy posers who defy Eckman and Friesens' expression theory? How about extremely stoic individuals? Do they have diminished emotions in keeping with their limited expressions? Have you ever been 'two-faced' or watched someone else speak badly about another individual only to then turn around and greet them with a warm, gushy hello? Is that 'friendly' expression false or an attempt to make amends?

27. Autistic patients read their environment literally. They do not, like us, seem to watch people's eyes when they are talking to pick up on all those expressive nuances that Eckman has so carefully catalogued. What do you make of individuals who avoid eye contact during conversation? How do you think this affects their ability to understand or interpret the speaker? Could this explain how lying is often signaled by averted eye-contact?
28. Have you ever experienced a 'mind-blind' moment? A moment where conditions were so stressful or confusing, your actions seemed to be the result of temporary autism? If 'mind-blindness' occurs at extreme points of arousal, could this explain why people 'lose their heads' in the heat of the moment and say something they don't mean or cheat on spouses etc?

29. We always wonder how some individuals react to situations that make them heroes like the fireman who ran into the burning building or the ER doctor who operated in the nick of time. Do you think that what separates the 'men from the ' is this ability to control or master one's reactions in moments of extreme stress and arousal?

30. Is this skill accessible? Are you intrigued to practice and believe it is something you could improve?

31. Just as the National Symphony Orchestra members were shocked to find their newly employed horn player was a female, do you think that even as far as we've come with issue of race and gender equality, we still judge with our eyes and ears rather than our instinct? Are our interpretations of events, people, issues etc filtered through our internal ideologies and beliefs? Do you agree that perception is reality? And with this in mind, could improving our powers of rapid cognition ultimately change our reality?

MALCOLM GLADWELL: A long look at snap judgments

BookPage® Interview by Edward Morris

Let others probe the grand sweeps of human history Malcolm Gladwell is resolved to study moments. At least the significant ones. In his 2000 bestseller, The Tipping Point, he examined conditions that sparked trends. In his new book, Blink, which he subtitles The Power Of Thinking Without Thinking, the New Yorker staff writer focuses on the astounding reliability and occasional blind spots of snap judgments. It turns out that we know more than we think we know, even if we don't know why.

Blink has three aims, says Gladwell: "to demonstrate that decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately; to help decide when we should and shouldn't trust our instincts; and to show that snap judgments and first impressions can be educated and controlled."

It was his own unsettling encounters with snap judgments that led him to write Blink, Gladwell tells BookPage by phone from his office. "I had grown my hair longer, he begins, and as soon as I [did that], my life began to change. I started getting speeding tickets and harassed at the airports. Then one day, I was walking down 14th Street, and these police in a big van cut me off and jumped out and surrounded me because they were convinced that I was this rapist who'd been in the area. It's an old story, of course. Many African-Americans have it much tougher than I do. It was just a sort of reminder that there was an awful lot going on in the first couple of seconds. People were seizing on things about me and drawing very, very substantial, non-trivial conclusions. That's what got me thinking that this was interesting."

Exactly how much is going on in that first little moment?

This ability to make rapid and accurate assessment flourishes everywhere, as Gladwell's book illustrates. In one instance, art experts were able to instantly recognize a phony ancient statue even though scientists who had studied it for months were sure it was authentic. In another, a general acting on battlefield instincts during a war game ran circles around his opponents who had tons of pertinent data and fast computers to analyze it. Gladwell
introduces a researcher who can predict the likelihood of a married couple divorcing by eavesdropping on a few seconds of their conversation and noting their facial expressions.

"The thing that really struck me the most from my book," Gladwell says, "was this idea that more information does not necessarily yield a better decision. I've come to take that very seriously. I now no longer feel the need to exhaustively mine every available source of information before making a decision. I now believe that I have to spend more time analyzing what I know rather than going out and adding to what I know."

A good deal of Blink is devoted to what can be gleaned from and induced by facial expressions. "This source often reveals much more than words," the author contends. "I watched one of the [Bush-Kerry presidential] debates with the sound off to try and get a sense of what they were communicating nonverbally. It was quite striking to watch those things because you realize there was so much going on, on that level. . . . They're telling you a lot. I think you learn something profound about people but you only really see it when you remove the distraction of their words. You learn about their self-confidence and level of conviction. I think you learn something about their honesty. All those things are apparent when you cleanse the moment."

Once he had the "blink" concept in mind, Gladwell says, he had no trouble finding examples to support it. "Books like this are kind of organic. You follow certain ideas and see what happens. I could write another book tomorrow on the same topic that would be completely different. There's a kind of freedom in writing this kind of conceptual book [even though] there's not a clear road map."

So how, then, are we to regard our instincts? Well, we ought to take them seriously, Gladwell says. "They can be really good, or they can be terrible and mislead us horribly. But in both cases, we have an obligation to take them seriously and to acknowledge they're playing a role. The mistake is to dismiss them."