

Search Me First

Self-Deception and Bias • Psalm 139:23-24 (NIV)

THE SITUATION

That one finished the survey way too fast, so it probably shouldn't count. This subgroup is strange. Question nine was worded badly, so maybe it comes out.

You love this hypothesis: students will pay more for sustainable packaging. You wrote the survey, defended it in class, and the results are mixed. For the last hour, the supportive responses have looked solid while the conflicting ones earn a second pass. Each call is defensible on its own. All of them broke in the same direction.

You could define confirmation bias on an exam, and it didn't make you immune.

BIBLE ANALYSIS

Every one of those calls came from the person who wants the hypothesis to hold. A gauge that reads two points high returns reasonable-looking numbers all day, wrong in the same direction every time, and it cannot catch its own error. David prayed about that problem: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts" (Psalm 139:23, NIV). Twenty-two verses of confessing that God already knows him completely, and then he asks for the search anyway, because he cannot audit himself.

So the gauge gets checked against something outside itself. Humility turns into procedure: cleaning rules written before anyone sees the data, anonymous review, disclosed exclusions, a teammate assigned to attack the conclusion you prefer. The doubt lands on the researcher, and it admits that sin reaches past the survey respondents.

The drift reaches past the dataset. Leaders should ask who is missing from the meeting and what the incentive structure is doing to the report. Endless suspicion of your own motives checks nothing, while a neighbor with permission to overturn your conclusion checks something.

The respondent whose answer cut against you, the one whose survey you were ready to set aside, deserves the standard you gave the answers you liked. David's prayer would be terrifying if God were only an examiner with a clipboard, but he prays to the God who formed him and holds him. Christ knows the whole file and carried its guilt to the cross. Pride, fear, and manipulation may all be exposed in you, and those who trust him have nothing left to protect by hiding.

ACTION PLAN

The Decision. The data is still open on your laptop, so start with the judgment call you would have made differently if the response had cut the other way. Report the finding as mixed, because it is.

Have a teammate review your judgment calls, and if that review overturns your conclusion, say so in writing.

The Inner Person. Somewhere in the last three weeks this hypothesis became personal. Being right started to mean being credible and worth the team's respect. Confess that attachment as specifically as you would confess anything else. Your hypothesis is not you, and revising it costs you pride and touches nothing Christ promises to those who trust him.

Try This. Before you touch the data again, write your exclusion rules on one page and date them: what makes a response too fast, what makes a subgroup too small, which questions get dropped. Then hand the page to a teammate whose job is to argue that you are wrong. Thank that person for every legitimate hit.

THREE TAKEAWAYS

- Sin reaches the researcher, so the audit has to come from outside.
- Humility becomes real when the rules go on paper before the data comes in.
- Grace lets you face a hard finding without hiding or coming apart.

APPLY IT

Which exclusion from the last hour would you reverse if that response had supported you?

PRAYER

Searching God, expose the motives and biases we cannot see in ourselves. Forgive us for bending our methods toward the answer we wanted. You sent your Son to carry the sin we can name and the sin we cannot, so we have nothing left to hide. Lead us by your Word into the truth, and make our procedures honest enough to welcome correction. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

Going Deeper. John F. Brug, *Psalms 73-150, The People's Bible* (Northwestern Publishing House), on 139. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), on original sin and repentance.