

## For what we don't understand

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

**W**e see what we expect to see. For example, if we're interested in a certain type of car, "suddenly" we see many more of these cars than before. This bias confirms the correctness of our interest, hence it's called confirmation bias. In itself this isn't a problem, in looking through our "rose-tinted glasses" we see our version of reality confirmed more firmly than it actually is. It may help us to feel confident about ourselves and our choices.

However, also journalists and (other) academics (professionals and scientists) are only human. Things can go wrong there. From childhood I have an interest in people who are different, perhaps precisely because it became clear when I was still very young that I myself was a bit different. I became interested in people with for instance (misunderstood) talents, deviant social "understanding", extreme shyness and social anxiety, extreme tics, very busy behaviour etc. Meanwhile I stored many biographies in my head: inventors, artists, scientific geniuses and even dangerous criminals. (I have very little interest in sports.)

When unusual things happen, there must be someone to honor or to blame. Often, incomprehensible and bad behaviour is related to unusual or atypical persons. Half a century ago - when most car drivers were still males - a car accident was related to gender (women). Moreover, criminal behaviour became related to cultural backgrounds, race and, more recently, mental conditions like ADHD. At present, such behaviour is increasingly related to "autism". In the Netherlands, for example, a 13-year-old boy murdered both his parents. In America, a 19-year-old school shooter killed 17 pupils. In both cases, almost immediately one was speaking of strange behaviour and autism. Just pay attention, it happens constantly. Until 15 years ago, it was often assumed that perpetrators suffered from psychopathy, later borderline personality disorder and then hyperactivity (ADHD). In the Netherlands, in 2002 the suspicion turned to autism when politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered by a person who should suffer from Asperger syndrome. To my own great dismay, because it came close to myself. I realized how awful this verification error can be. Was I a potential killer, according to public opinion? Almost immediately I realized what it must feel like to have a different cultural background and to be seen as a criminal beforehand ...

We want to neutralize threatening things as quickly as possible so that we can safely continue our lives. Our inborn confirmation bias helps with this. The deviant is interpreted in a label that we think we understand, and then we see it continuously confirmed. It's just like the cars from the introduction. If something criminal occurs, first we search for minorities (cultural background, psychopathology). If possible, we verify our prejudices. We do not falsify. The greatest leaders of the last century - for example Nelson Mandela, Gandhi and Obama - were not white people! For both people from completely different cultural backgrounds, and people with a psychopathological diagnosis, often extra effort is required to successfully connect with society. Stereotyping and prejudices surely do not help.

Through falsification, confirmation bias can be unmasked. The statistics of insurance companies show irrevocably that men drive cars no better than women. On the contrary, relatively men are far more often involved in accidents than women. When I was young, autism was seen as an intellectual disability. My career falsifies this idea. A new prejudice is emerging: the combination of being autistic and having a good job indicates intelligent strength. There are lots of atypical people who make a difference in a positive sense. These examples falsify thinking in disorders. However, citing these examples without changing theorizing about "differences" (still "understand" them as disorders) is certainly not without risk.

Often atypical people do need support to connect with the others, or society. And not only autists. Even women, not atypical at all, sometimes need support. Even though women do better than men on average in countless aspects like school and in traffic, they are still heavily under-represented in top positions. Every day psychologists, psychiatrists and teachers do lots of good work for people who are atypical. But ultimately a theory based on confirmation bias should be falsified!