

■ **hindsight bias** the tendency to believe, after learning an outcome, that one would have foreseen it. (Also known as the *I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon*.)

Actually, notes writer Madeleine L'Engle, “The naked intellect is an extraordinarily inaccurate instrument” (1972). Our intuition can lead us astray.

1. Imagine (or ask someone to imagine) folding a sheet of paper on itself 100 times. Roughly how thick would it then be?
2. A rope is placed around the Earth at the equator. How much more rope would have to be added for the rope to be 1 foot above the Earth all the way around? (See page 22 for the answers.)

Our notions of common sense similarly err. We’re all wise after the fact, presuming that we could have foreseen what happened.

Did We Know It All Along? Hindsight Bias

OBJECTIVE 1 | Describe *hindsight bias*, and explain how it can make research findings seem like mere common sense.

“Life is lived forwards, but understood backwards.”

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, 1813–1855

“History is written through a rearview mirror, but it unfolds through a foggy windshield.”

Samuel Berger, President Clinton’s national security adviser, in testimony before the 9/11 Commission, 2004

“Anything seems commonplace, once explained.”

Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes

How easy it is to seem astute when drawing the bull’s eye after the arrow has struck. After each stock market downswing—after the bursting of the dot-com bubble, for example—investment gurus say “the market was obviously overdue for a correction.” After the first World Trade Center tower in New York was hit on September 11, 2001 (9/11), commentators said people in the second tower *should* have immediately evacuated (it became obvious only later that it was not an accident). And after physicians receive case information *plus* an autopsy report, they find the cause of death to be self-evident—something they presume they easily could have foreseen, knowing the symptoms. But *before* the arrow strikes, the stock market drops, the terrorists attack, and death occurs, these results are anything but obvious. Causes of death, for example, are not so clear to doctors told the same symptoms without the autopsy report (Dawson & others, 1988). Finding that something has happened makes it seem inevitable. Psychologists Paul Slovic and Baruch Fischhoff (1977) have called this 20/20 hindsight vision **hindsight bias**, also known as the *I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon*.

This phenomenon is easy to demonstrate: Give half the members of a group some purported psychological finding, and the other half an opposite result. Tell the first group, “Psychologists have found that separation weakens romantic attraction. As the saying goes, ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’” Ask them to imagine why this might be true. Most people can, and nearly all will then regard this true finding as unsurprising.

Tell the second group just the opposite—that “psychologists have found that separation strengthens romantic attraction. As the saying goes, ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder.’” People given this untrue result can also easily explain it, and they overwhelmingly see it as unsurprising common sense. Obviously, when both a supposed finding and its opposite seem like common sense, there is a problem.

Such errors in our recollections and explanations show why we need psychological research. Just asking people how and why they felt or acted as they did can sometimes be misleading—*not* because common sense is usually wrong, but because it is after the fact.

Non Sequitur

