

## EXCERPT



### ***The Unbiased Self*** *The Psychology of Overcoming Cognitive Bias*

March 11, 2025 | \$22, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0976-5

Much of human behavior can be explained by the desire to be right and to feel good about ourselves, but this tension can make us vulnerable to bias. By thoughtfully integrating the social sciences with biblical perspectives, Erin Devers offers practical guidance on how to perceive the world more accurately and love others more generously.

## We Want to Be Right and We Want to Feel Good About Ourselves

Since I began teaching social psychology in 2007, I have told students on each first day that social psychological research can help us explain approximately 95 percent of human behavior with one of two possible explanations. Students then proceed to quiz me on any number of strange human behaviors they have witnessed, with questions ranging from “Why did people storm the Capitol?” in the spring semester of 2021 to “Why did the Duggars decide to have so many kids?” My answer to the “Why do they do this?” question is either people truly believe they are doing the right thing (Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor, *Social Cognition*), or the behavior builds their self-esteem (E. Aronson, “Dissonance, Hypocrisy and the Self-Concept,” in *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*), or sometimes both explanations contribute to the behavior (L. Festinger and E. Aronson, “The Arousal and Reduction of Dissonance in Social Contexts,” in *Group Dynamics*). I have students repeat “We want to be right, and we want to feel good about ourselves” over and over during the course of the semester to remind them that these are the most common explanations for human behavior. These two motives contribute to bias, and recognizing these motives is the first step to pursuing a less-biased self. Most students enter the class assuming that bias is something to do with racism and does not affect them, but bias, defined as systematic error in thinking (Jennifer L. Eberhardt, *Biased*), is much broader than racism, and it affects all of us.

On one of my favorite podcasts, *Hidden Brain*, Shankar Vedantam shared the story of a young man who came from a rural part of Pennsylvania. He had many advantages in childhood, but those advantages did not include a family history of Ivy League graduates. When he was accepted with early admission to Harvard University in the fall of 2016, it was life-changing good news for him and his parents. He received notoriety in his small town, and the possibilities that awaited him defied imagination.

When he was given the opportunity to meet his fellow classmates from Harvard’s class of 2021 by participating in a group chat, he was eager to start making friends. This eagerness was in part fueled by his sense that he did not quite feel worthy of his admission or equal in caliber to the other students. His involvement in the main group chat of the new admits led to the sharing of memes. To get more validation from the other participants in the chat, the memes he and the other group members posted became more and more provocative and offensive over time. In retrospect this young man from rural Pennsylvania felt anxiety even when he was posting them because his eagerness to be liked was tinged with sick feelings of guilt. When Harvard got wind of the behavior in the group chat, the newly admitted students had their admissions revoked. Only by that time it was April, and the possibility of applying to other colleges had passed. The shock and sadness of the parents of these students was only paled by the depressed feelings experienced by the students themselves.

During class, I pause at this moment in the storytelling and ask my students to make predictions of what thoughts will pass through the mind of the rejected Harvard student from Pennsylvania. Many students think he will blame Harvard. Based on the pressure to maintain self-esteem, it would make sense to discount the severity of his behavior and blame Harvard. He can tell himself, “I am still a good person. There is something wrong with Harvard.” In this case though, I urge the students to consider the magnitude of what happened and what would be the best way for this no-longer Ivy League student to think about this event.

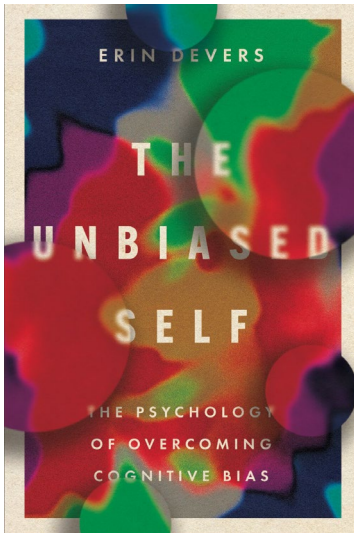


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Actually, the young man does not blame Harvard. He even says that if he had been a member of Harvard's admissions staff, he would have done the same thing. He learned that he needs other people to point out when he is making a mistake because he now knows that he is capable of making mistakes that have big consequences. He applied to colleges the next year and made the risky decision to include the description of his revoked admission to Harvard in his application essays. He applied to many Ivy League schools, and on the day that he was rejected from all of them, his parents came to show their support in the face of the bad news. He was accepted to a few colleges and was on the waitlist for one.

When he was finally admitted to a nearby school, his dad accompanied him on a campus visit. He and his dad were wandering in an academic building when they saw someone who was making copies. This man approached them to ask if they needed help. When they described that they missed the tour, and only had until five to make a final decision on whether or not to enroll in the fall, the man took them into his office. The young man and the professor went on to have a deeply nerdy conversation about physics. The father describes that at one point in the conversation, the professor stopped, got down on his knees with clasped hands, and said, "Please, enroll here." In that moment, the father was nearly teary because after all the rejection and regret, someone saw the value in his son. When they got home from the visit, the father decided to send an email to the chair of the physics department to convey what a wonderful professor is in his department, only to find out that the man they had met was, in fact, the chair of the physics department.

What is the message of this story for my students and for us? We are all the Ivy League reject. The bias to feel good about ourselves leads all of us to do things that we regret later. We are sinners. We want to be liked as a quick boost to self-esteem, and sometimes we will do what is not right to get that boost. The beauty of the young man's story is that he learns several important things. He learns that he is vulnerable to bad behavior. Like him, we are all vulnerable and we are all susceptible to the bias that comes from wanting to feel good about ourselves. He also learns that he needs others to help slow down his thinking. We all need others to help slow down our thinking. We need others to help point us towards what is righteous especially when our self-esteem is on the line.

Many things may feel right in the moment, but we want to be righteous (Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*). Beyond just reverting to the bias toward believing we are right, we should pursue accuracy. Just as we are all the Ivy League reject (some of us literally), we can all be that college professor. We are all given opportunities to look at others and restore their dignity. We can see them as God does, as beloved children. We can forgive much because we are forgiven much (Luke 7:47). We are the reject, and we can be the professor. *I hope that all my students can become less biased by figuring out a way to think and do what is righteous even when they must pay with their self-esteem. I hope you can too.*

—Taken from the introduction, "We Want to Be Right and We Want to Feel Good About Ourselves"



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Q & A

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**Erin Devers** (PhD, Indiana University) is professor of psychology at Indiana Wesleyan University. As a social psychologist and educator, she has focused on creative ways to nudge students, fellow educators, and parents toward good decision-making practices. Her work has been published in the *Journal for Personality and Social Psychology*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, and the *Journal for Psychology and Christianity*, among others.

# A Christian Perspective on Overcoming Cognitive Bias

**What led to your interest in social psychology and now sharing about bias and selfishness?**

**Erin Devers:** I want to help people to be less biased, to pursue accuracy. Many social psychologists, I among them, argue that human motivations can be distilled into two major aims: to be right and to feel good about one's self. These two motives can explain a great deal of human behavior. When people continue to believe things that are not true, it is likely either that they have not received accurate information or that holding on to their belief serves a self-esteem maintenance function for them, such as keeping them connected to a social network. These motives also explain the variety or lack of variety in a person's friend network. Both in person and online, people prefer friends who agree with them because it makes them simultaneously feel right and good about themselves. This is just one example of how these two motives operate as the underlying explanations for much, if not most, of human behavior.

In light of the competition between accuracy and self-esteem maintenance motives, the question emerges, "Is it possible to see things accurately and not feel depressed?" Data suggest that depressed clients do see the world more accurately and that the nondepressed are looking at the world with "rose-colored glasses." Inflated self-esteem encourages risk-taking and could be considered adaptive. From this perspective, it would make sense for humans to dismiss accuracy in favor of self-esteem, but the connection between the two—accuracy feeds self-esteem—leads to a more complex competition. In order to sacrifice accuracy for self-esteem, while maintaining maximum levels of self-esteem, the self must not be aware of the trade-off. In order to do this, fast (automatic) thinking must be employed. Automatic thoughts are capable of convincing the self that it is behaving rationally in response to information, without engaging in the controlled process of considering the accuracy of the information; thus, the ability to sacrifice accuracy for self-esteem can take place below awareness.

Nearly every researcher writing about this divide between fast and slow thinking makes a case for humility or intellectual courage because of the recognition that our ways of thinking are prone to bias and can lead to error. Adam Grant argues that a person should try to "think like a scientist" to correct for biased thinking. Social scientists, like many nonacademics, are concerned that people are sacrificing accuracy for self-esteem, a phenomenon which is leading to the rampant growth of conspiracy theories. I share this concern as both an academic and a Christian. Neither scientists nor Christians want to live in a society where truth is a completely relative concept. Likewise, if it were possible, no one would want to dismiss self-esteem in favor of accuracy. Therefore, this book's first goal is to present a model for how Christian faith provides a worldview in which accuracy need not be sacrificed for self-esteem.

The second goal of this book is to apply this model in important social contexts. Cognitive and social psychological research regarding the distinction between automatic and controlled thinking has been conducted in wide-reaching domains such as learning, impression formation, ingroup bias, altruism, aggression, and attraction. As in the context of research on the self, the research on the topics listed above is descriptive in nature. Christian faith informs a more injunctive approach to each of the topics. This book will grapple with the wide gap between the descriptive and the injunctive.



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### **What is your main thesis in *The Unbiased Self*?**

**Devers:** We can be less biased when our identity is rooted in Christian identity. In the fields of cognitive and social psychology, many scholars have written about the distinction between automatic and controlled thinking and strategies to reduce bias. Likewise, many Christians have written on the importance of unbiased thinking and “taking every thought captive” and “setting our minds on things above.” This volume explores the idea that how one defines “the self” is essential in unbiased thinking. While social psychological work on the self describes the biased process by which thoughts about “the self” impact thinking, ideas regarding what should comprise an unbiased self, which is linked to Christian identity, have not been fully examined with consideration given to social psychological processes. Thus, the argument that Christians can and should be less biased because of social psychological processes related to identity is distinctive.

### **Who did you have in mind as you were writing this book?**

**Devers:** This book is designed to be accessible to a wide Christian audience. It could be used as a companion to graduate or undergraduate psychology courses or freshman first-year-experience, discussion-based courses at a Christian school. The writing style is both academic and accessible such that it would not be a textbook replacement but would supplement the existing curriculum. Given that the topics mirror those of a social psychology text, it would most closely fit within a social psychology curriculum. It could also be used as a companion text at a private Christian high school.

Given the popularity of other books on social psychological topics in the general market, this book’s style will appeal to adult Christian nonacademics as well. Beyond books that are purely social psychological, other popular Christian books have been written on related topics but have not used strong empirical support for claims.

### **What do you hope your book contributes to the study of social psychology?**

**Devers:**

1. It provides a model for how Christian faith informs identity such that accuracy need not be sacrificed for self-esteem.
2. It supplies practical, data-informed methods for how fast and slow thinking can be less biased.
3. It celebrates the integration of Christian identity and social psychological findings.



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