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Blink: the power of thinking without thinking by Malcolm Gladwell

Discussion questions used at SPL November 8 & 9, 2016 (taken from the Reading Guide supplied by the publisher)

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. Roper 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?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Title: Malcolm Gladwell/Blink

Q&A w/author taken from a website: <http://gladwell.com/blink/blink-q-and-a-with-malcolm/>

website address: <http://gladwell.com/blink/>

Author Biography:

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/126-blink-gladwell?start=1>

Biography in Context Contemporary Black Biography link:

http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/BiographiesDetailsPage/BiographiesDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Biographies&currPage=&scanId=&query=&source=&prodId=BIC1&search_within_results=&p=BIC1&mode=view&catId=&u=lom_mspl&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CK1606003738&windowstate=normal&activityType=&failOverType=&commentary=

Suggested Readings:

<http://gladwell.com/blink/suggested-reading/>

Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious by Timothy Wilson – MelCat request

Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions by Gary Klein – MelCat request

Intuition at Work: How to Use Your Gut Feelings to Make Better Decisions at Work by Gary Klein – MelCat request

Intuition: Its Powers and Perils by David Myers – MelCat request

The Seven Principles for Making Marriages Work by John Gottman – MelCat request

Pervasive Prejudice? Unconventional Evidence of Race and Gender Discrimination by Ian Ayres – MelCat Request