

Cognitive Bias



What is Cognitive Bias?

Cognitive bias refers to the systematic patterns of deviation from rationality, where our perceptions, decisions, and judgments are influenced by subjective factors rather than objective facts. In the context of assistance and therapy dog training and provision, cognitive biases can affect how handlers, trainers, and other professionals perceive situations, make decisions, or interpret behaviours of the dogs or people they work with.

These biases often operate unconsciously, which means that individuals may not realize they are influencing their decisions. Cognitive bias can impact the training process, interactions with clients, and overall outcomes for both the dog and the handler.

Examples of Cognitive Bias

- **Confirmation Bias:** A trainer may focus only on signs that support their belief that a particular dog will succeed in training, ignoring behaviours that suggest otherwise.
- **Halo Effect:** A handler may assume that because their dog is well-behaved in one setting, they will automatically perform well in all other situations, overlooking potential challenges.
- **Attribution Bias:** A trainer may blame a dog's failure to learn a task on the dog's personality (e.g., calling them stubborn) rather than considering other factors, such as environmental conditions or training methods.
- **Overconfidence Bias:** A handler may overestimate their ability to handle a challenging situation with their dog, leading to unnecessary risk or frustration when the dog's behaviour doesn't match their expectations.

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The Impact of Cognitive Bias

Cognitive biases can lead to poor decision-making, misunderstandings, and potentially harmful consequences in training and service provision. Here's how bias might manifest in the field:

- 1. Impact on Training Effectiveness:** Bias can cause trainers or handlers to overlook crucial aspects of a dog's behaviour, leading to ineffective or even counterproductive training methods. For example, confirmation bias may result in a trainer ignoring warning signs of behavioural issues, which could eventually harm the dog's progress and welfare.
- 2. Impaired Judgment of Dog Behaviour:** Cognitive bias can distort a handler's perception of their dog's capabilities. If a handler experiences the halo effect, they might assume that their dog is suited for all types of assistance tasks, neglecting to assess the dog's true strengths and weaknesses. This can lead to frustration when the dog is unable to meet expectations in certain scenarios.
- 3. Inaccurate Assessments of Handler Needs:** A handler may exhibit a bias toward thinking their relationship with their dog is perfect, which can cause them to dismiss concerns or avoid seeking help when they face difficulties. Similarly, a trainer might underestimate a handler's emotional or physical needs based on a first impression, rather than considering the complexity of their situation.
- 4. Training Environment Misjudgments:** Environmental factors such as noise, distraction, or even the weather can influence a dog's behaviour. Overconfidence bias might lead a handler to push their dog too hard in a challenging environment, thinking their dog can handle it, when in fact they are not prepared for the stress.

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How to Manage Cognitive Bias

- 1. Awareness and Education:** The first step in managing cognitive bias is awareness. Trainers, handlers, and others in the field need to recognize that everyone is susceptible to bias, and they must actively work to counter it. This can be achieved through education about cognitive biases, their effects, and how they can influence decision-making. For example, a trainer might attend workshops or training sessions about cognitive bias and learn about specific biases they are prone to, such as the confirmation bias. This awareness can help them avoid over-focusing on only positive signs during training.
- 2. Seeking Objective Feedback:** To reduce the impact of bias, it is essential to involve multiple perspectives when assessing a dog's behaviour or the progress of a training plan. Asking for feedback from colleagues, other trainers, or even clients can provide a more balanced and accurate view. For instance, if a handler is struggling with their dog's behaviour, involving a second trainer to assess the situation and offer feedback can help to identify any blind spots or biases that may be influencing the handler's judgment.
- 3. Utilising Data and Structured Assessments:** Objective data and structured assessment tools can help minimize the influence of cognitive bias in training. Using measurable criteria for tracking a dog's progress, such as behaviour checklists, training logs, and standardized tests, can help ensure that decisions are based on facts rather than personal interpretations. For example, when evaluating a therapy dog's performance, a trainer might use a checklist of specific tasks to assess, such as "response to commands," "calmness in public," and "reaction to distractions," rather than relying on subjective impressions.

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4. Encouraging Reflective Practice: Reflective practice involves regularly reviewing one's decisions, actions, and outcomes to identify areas for improvement. Trainers and handlers should take time to reflect on their own biases and how they might have impacted their decisions. Keeping a reflective journal or discussing challenges with colleagues can help individuals notice patterns of bias in their decision-making. For example, a handler might reflect on a recent training session and consider whether they overestimated their dog's abilities in a particular environment. This reflection allows them to adjust their expectations and create a more appropriate plan for their dog moving forward.

5. Standardising Training Procedures: Establishing clear, standardized training procedures can help reduce bias. When training is structured and consistent, it minimizes the chance of making assumptions about a dog's behaviour or progress. This can include having set criteria for when to progress to more complex tasks or when to revisit foundational skills. For example, trainers may decide not to advance a dog to higher-level tasks until they have reliably performed simpler tasks in different environments, rather than moving them on prematurely due to bias toward their potential.

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Why is Managing Cognitive Bias so Important?

- 1. Improves Decision-Making:** Reducing cognitive bias leads to more rational and informed decisions. When handlers and trainers base their decisions on objective data and broader perspectives, they are more likely to make effective choices that benefit the dog and the handler.
- 2. Enhances Training Outcomes:** By managing bias, trainers can tailor their training methods more effectively to the unique needs of the dog, rather than relying on assumptions or previous experiences that may not apply. This leads to better outcomes for the dog and handler, as the training plan will be more appropriate and individualized.
- 3. Promotes Fair and Unbiased Assessment of Dogs and Handlers:** Managing cognitive bias ensures that handlers and dogs are not unfairly judged or underestimated. By considering all factors and avoiding personal biases, trainers can provide a more accurate and fair evaluation of a dog's abilities and a handler's needs.
- 4. Builds Trust and Credibility:** When trainers and handlers manage bias, they create an environment of fairness and objectivity, which builds trust within the team. Handlers are more likely to feel confident in their trainer's ability to assess their needs and help them succeed, and the dog will benefit from consistent, thoughtful training.
- 5. Supports Professional Growth:** Understanding and managing cognitive bias helps individuals in the field become more self-aware and reflective in their practice. This promotes professional growth, as trainers and handlers learn from their experiences and continuously improve their approach to training and working with assistance and therapy dogs.

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Cognitive bias is an inherent part of human decision-making, but it's important to recognize how it can affect training and provision in the assistance and therapy dog sector. By becoming aware of the biases that may influence their work, trainers and handlers can take steps to minimize their impact. This involves seeking objective feedback, using structured assessments, and engaging in reflective practice. Managing cognitive bias is not only essential for the success of the training process but also for ensuring fairness, improving outcomes, and fostering professional growth in the sector. By actively managing cognitive bias, we can create better, more effective working relationships with our dogs and ensure that both animals and handlers thrive.

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