

Opinion article

# Evaluation as ‘thinking slow’

## Avaliação enquanto “pensar devagar”

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**HOW TO CITE:** Picciotto, Robert (2022). Evaluation as ‘thinking slow’. *Revista Brasileira de Avaliação*, 11(1), e110422. <https://doi.org/10.4322/rbaval202211004>

### Abstract

In 2002, Daniel Kahneman, a behavioural psychologist, won a Nobel prize for the far-reaching impact of his scholarly contributions on the basic tenets of the economics discipline. His experimental findings about cognitive biases and attitudes to risk have equally significant implications for evaluation theory and practice.

*Keywords:* Bias. Evaluation. Psychology.

### Resumo

Em 2002, Daniel Kahneman, psicólogo comportamental, ganhou um Prêmio Nobel pelo impacto de longo alcance de suas contribuições acadêmicas sobre os princípios da disciplina econômica. Suas descobertas experimentais a respeito dos vieses e atitudes comportamentais sobre o risco têm implicações igualmente significativas para a teoria e a prática da avaliação.

*Palavras-chave:* Viés. Avaliação. Psicologia.

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**Received:** January 20, 2022

**Accepted:** January 20, 2022

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In 2002, Daniel Kahneman, a behavioural psychologist, won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his scholarly contributions to cognitive and behavioural psychology. He had successfully challenged the *Homo-economicus* conjecture of neo-classical economics. By undermining rational choice theory, he had shown that individuals' explicit preferences as revealed by all their actions are not readily explained by pursuit of the most cost-effective method to satisfy personal preferences, i.e., humans are not always driven by self-interest.

Indeed, human decisions are often irrational: pervasive cognitive biases distort judgment. Thus, Kahneman's findings have confirmed and gone beyond those of Herbert A. Simon, a political scientist, economist, and cognitive psychologist, who won the Nobel economics prize in 1978 for his discovery of *bounded rationality*, a theory according to which rational decision making is hindered by cognitive limits associated with social constraints and the costs of obtaining and processing information.

To be sure, Kahneman did not establish that humanity is thoroughly irrational, but he did prove that, even if raw emotions and passions are kept in check, quick, facile, unreflective *System 1* thinking leads to inconsistent and poor decision making, whereas slow, deliberate *System 2* thinking yields far better decisions. Hence, it stands to reason that systematic resort to critical thinking and rational analysis rather than 'seat of the pants' decision making should be actively advocated.

Kahneman's experimental findings also confirm the value of *System 2* thinking put at the service of summative and formative evaluation. In turn, evaluation thus conceived emerges as the disciplined process of conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information generated by observation, as a guide to belief and action.

In other words, 'thinking slow' is a core evaluation competency, i.e., all evaluators should acquire familiarity with recent advances in cognitive and behavioural psychology. Specifically, they should be alert to *System 1* thinking pitfalls, not only when they assess evaluands' decision-making processes but also when they reflect on their own practice, a professional imperative<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, it would be desirable for evaluators to acknowledge that their own mental processes can be distorted by preconceptions, and ignorance of statistics. For example, '*base rate neglect*' illustrates a breakdown from rationality that occurs when interpreting a positive result in low-prevalence population tests. Another frequent failure of judgment is associated with '*the illusion of validity*' which occurs when off-the-cuff judgments are marred by *confirmation bias*.

More generally, quick thinking driven by habit, ideological dispositions, the shrewd 'framing' of evaluation questions, etc. may affect the validity of evaluation findings. This risk is especially pronounced when '*availability cascades*' amplified by *positive-feedback* mechanisms lead to faulty interpretations of events, i.e., when false beliefs achieve prominence and influence simply because they are widely shared.

Of course, the spread of fake news and alternative facts is not always accidental. It may occur in the wake of public relations campaigns, biased press coverage, and/or systematic disinformation initiatives, e.g., when 'single narratives' about the inevitability of suboptimal policies are promoted by vested interests. In such circumstances, principled evaluators are duty bound to speak truth to power, and to bring valid evidence to bear. This is 'slow thinking' evaluation at its best.

### Financial support

Nothing to declare.

### Conflict of interest

Nothing to declare

### Acknowledgements

Nothing to declare.

<sup>1</sup> All professionals involve others in assessing the validity of their work and the quality of their practice, e.g., psychoanalysts are not allowed to practice unless they have undergone psychoanalysis.