The Perfect Score

In Spanish class this year I learned about the Latin American tradition of the Quinceañera, a rite of passage for girls with beautiful jewelry, traditional dances, and big pink gowns. It reminds me of the Indian rite of passage – the SAT. The process is the same. Instead of jewelry and dance classes, I have practice tests and SAT classes. Instead of a sparkling pink gown, I have crippling anxiety about my entire future and worth as an Indian depending on one test. So you can imagine my dismay when my History teacher insisted that my quest for a perfect SAT score “didn’t really matter.” From that moment on my friends and I began to doubt everything that woman said. George Washington was the first president of the United States? King George begs to differ. We were convinced: she was wrong! And when she inevitably did slip up it only cemented what we already knew to be true, and kept me from ever considering that, maybe, **we** were wrong. And it seems as though I’m not alone. We are all susceptible to selective thinking, otherwise known as confirmation bias. As Dr. Raymond Nickerson, of Tufts University states, “people find it easier to believe propositions they would like to be true [rather] than propositions they would prefer to be false,” using what we see to confirm what we already think. And all we have to do is look to the cliques in the cafeteria or our current polarized government to see how this type of behavior only entrenches harmful rhetoric in our beliefs, leading to an ever-more-fragmented society. So today, let’s first go over the rubric and explore why we only hear what we want to hear, then lets open some practice tests and focus on how this bias leads to a false perception of reality, before finally learning some new study strategies and uncovering what we can do to drop this divisive process and earn the perfect score.

When I was young, I had the virtues of standardized testing sung to me. On Sundays, while Christians went to mass, us Hindus went to class. And starting from there I was constantly surrounded by certain groups of people that were just like me. And that’s OK, it’s healthy to pursue common interests with your friends and build a sense of community - but this also raises my first concern: it makes it far too easy for us to ignore ideas that don’t fit with our own. Take Twitter for example. I follow my family, I follow my friends, and I can neither confirm nor deny that I follow several members of the Kardashian family. So when my cousin, my best friend, and Kim all tweet flawless pics of North West and their #blessed family, it only reinforces my belief that yes, Kanye West should be our next president. Who cares that my mom thinks it’s crazy! I mean, I say it’s true, and my friends say it’s true, so that proves that it’s true...even if it’s not true at all. Political scientist Matt Grossman of Michigan State University qualifies this effect as an “echo chamber” which causes us to rely on media more likely to echo our own ideas, increasing our ideological divide and entrenching our bias. It’s how MSNBC can frame Black Lives Matter as a protest for peace and racial equality, while Fox News reports it as a radical and unsafe fringe movement. And we ignore the identities and experiences of anyone who doesn’t think just like us**.** Simply put, Confirmation Bias gives us an easy way to win, to always be on the right side - but only at the expense of the ideas of others.

When I started practicing in earnest, it became clear to me what my History teacher’s real problem with the SAT was: she just didn’t understand the material! It’s silly, I mean who doesn’t remember Pythagorean geometry? But unlike my teacher, we aren’t generally ignorant. The implications of this problem occur when we allow our side to become the only side - causing our potentially false opinions to spread. I have grown up with parents born in India where there is an ever-present conflict between Hindus and Muslims. And that is all I have ever known. I was led to view Muslims in a negative context, especially when it came to the hijab. As a female, I believe in female empowerment and equality, and have always viewed the hijab as a symbol of subjugation and sexism - and as I grew up stories about women in Muslim countries restricted from working, voting or even driving served to confirm my beliefs. And my opinion, based on nothing but the opinions of my parents, relatives, and friends, is exemplary of how we still see a severe disconnect between India and Pakistan, Hindus and Muslims, 68 years after the partitioning of India. In the first 18 months that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been in office, formal diplomatic talks between the two nations have already been cancelled. Twice. These deeply-held yet never-challenged beliefs are how we end up entrenching hateful ideas into our society. Ideas like “Palestinians are terrorists,” like “transgender women are just predators,” like “all black men are dangerous.” These are wildly disparate issues of racism, misogyny, and homophobia but they share one thing in common, confirmation bias makes them harder to solve. It creates a world where we are unwilling to consider any side but our own, since it is the only one we ever hear. And in the process those of us in positions of power trap others in a world of violence, poverty, and silence. It is a continuous cycle that results in a world that is broken.

I’ll admit, once you start thinking a certain way, it’s difficult to stop. But how can we address confirmation bias when it’s so deeply ingrained? We need to learn how to embrace the surprises that come our way.Charlie Toft, a high school teacher from the Phoenix Union High School District, told his students to keep a Surprise Journal where they were to record the moment that they were surprised, why it was surprising, and what this told them. Surprises like, “it took us longer to get to school than I thought” or “my mom really was right about that smell.” If we all took this approach just imagine what we’d learn! Surprise, it’s not cool to discriminate against someone for their race! Surprise, women really are capable of changing tires! Surprise, Hillary’s emails were not a global cover-up for al-Qaeda! My surprise came when I met Laela, a fellow orator, friend, and a very proud hijab wearer. When I asked why she wears her headscarf, she said that not only does the garment symbolize her faith, but she is able to change the colors, patterns, style, and the material. She takes the hijab and makes it her own. Now, instead of seeing it as a symbol of repression, I see the hijab as something I can relate to - a symbol of choice and empowerment. And that is more beautiful than any expression of feminism I have ever seen. By allowing myself to actually listen to someone else’s point of view, my entire perception of over 800 million women changed. Imagine… if we all allowed ourselves these surprises, the barriers we have built between each other could finally begin to fall.

Now that my senior year is ending, I’m realizing that actually - my teacher was right. The SAT is just a piece of what makes up my high school experience. And everyone is different - some of my peers are going to enlist after college, others are planning on going straight into the workforce, while most of them were working for college money...which doesn’t sound like a bad idea. As the great hairstylist Albert Einstein once said “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” We need to close this large gap in our logic and truly listen to everything that comes our way. We might not all earn the highest SAT score, but if we spend more time learning about each other than we do about diameters, maybe we can all finally come together and make our score - I mean world - a little more perfect.

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