# Spotlight Effect

## Idea In Short

The spotlight effect is a cognitive bias that causes people to think that they are being observed and noticed by others more than they actually are. People experience this bias because they naturally see everything from their own point of view first, so they struggle to imagine how they look through other people's perspective.

Once, I had to fly to London for a 1-day meeting with a client. I arrived early and grabbed a coffee with my team when the disaster struck. A few drops of coffee spilled over my tie and I didn't have a spare. Though I quickly removed the coffee stains, I felt that everyone in London noticed the coffee stains the entire day. I'm sure you have similar stories to tell. However, according to research on the spotlight effect, I was probably quite wrong. Similarly, many consultants may find these scenarios familiar. You might be that odd person in a suit at the client site, while your client counterparts are in casual attires. You join your client team for lunch, only to have them wait and watch while you pay for your lunch, while they have already paid theirs with their company cards. Your desk at the client site might be in a see-through cubicle right at the centre of client's office with all eyes on you. You might be pulling an all-nighter and the client team is leaves for the day with everybody (including the cleaning personnel that's the last to leave) wishing you a nice evening. If these scenarios sound familiar, you'll also agree that in these situations, you'll feel quite observed, sometimes all day long.

## Spotlight Effect - The phenomenon

Spotlight Effect refers to the phenomenon wherein people tend to believe that they are at the centre of attention of everybody's universe. Sometimes, such beliefs can cause people to suffer immense social pressure as they mistakenly feel they are continuously scrutinised by those around them. A set of studies by Thomas Gilovich1 and colleagues gave the spotlight effect its name.

## Evolutionary origins

Basically, spotlight effect is the result of egocentrism. We all are the centre of our own universes. However, this doesn't mean that we are arrogant, or value ourselves more than others. Rather, we place our we use our own experiences and perspective to evaluate the world around us. This includes how other people perceive us. However, other people are other things that matter to them more. Back in the day when we lived in tribes, we needed some social monitoring to make sure we didn''t get kicked out of the group. That primal instinct and awareness has carried over to today's world. It is a human cognitive bias that all of us have.

## Recommendation

When you find yourself mortified about the impression you''ll make on clients, relax.When you think that you''re being observed, you''ll more likely be more afraid to think outside the box or challenge the client. But, if you realise that no one is really thinking about you all that much, you''ll be much less afraid to speak your mind. Likewise, the clients won't linger on any minor faux-pas you made during presentations. You''ll also stop obsessing so much about how you appear to others. Remember that others simply don''t pay much notice as you think they do. This is not to say that people don''t notice you at all! On the contrary, people don't process information about you as deeply as you do. In other words, while you''re ruminating, people have likely moved on. Have you ever been in a such a spotlight situation? How did you feel? Share your comments.

## Summary

- The spotlight effect is a cognitive bias that causes people to assume that they are being observed and noticed by others more than they actually are
- We experience the spotlight effect because we are so used to seeing things from our own perspective that we tend to anchor other people's viewpoint to our own
- Being aware of the spotlight effect can help you reduce its impact