

# TOWARDS 20/20 VISION

## CLEANSING THE LENS

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### INTRODUCTION

*“To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion - all in one.”* John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*

Quality of research analysis depends a great deal on the clarity of vision and skill of the researcher. While there have been changes over the years in methodologies and use of technology, quality of analysis continues to be quite heavily dependent on the researcher’s ability. Just as a professional musician is dependent on an ability to hear and discern differences in pitch, the qualitative researcher is dependent on an ability to see clearly and discern shades of difference in what they see/perceive. Being able to see through a clear lens without distortions - clear “20-20 vision” - is essential.

### “20/20 Vision”

What indeed is 20/20 vision? “20/20 vision” would involve the following:

- a. Focus and Perspective:
  - Zoom in to perceive detail
  - Zoom out to see broader themes and patterns
- b. Texture and Proportion:
  - Good colour composition with shades and nuances
  - Sense of proportion and balance in representation of the picture
- c. Insight: a widely debated concept, largely the ability to “see” something new and exhilarating, that could be a game changer
- d. Foresight: ability to see ahead and literally visualize the future

But over a period all of us develop some flaws in the “lens” which prevent us from being fully effective as observers and analysts. Many of these ‘vision’ problems act as impediments to our seeing the truth in an unbiased, undistorted manner. We all have, or develop, different flaws to differing degrees.

This paper takes the view that if we can understand these “vision issues”, we could find interventions to overcome these, helping each of us to discover a pathway to 20/20 vision.

This paper therefore has two parts:

- The Flawed Lens
- Cleansing the lens: towards 20/20 vision

The insights around the “the Flawed Lens” evolved out of 20 In Depth Interviews - 15 amongst researchers who have been in the industry for 3-20 years across agencies, and 5 amongst research users, across Mumbai, Bangalore and Delhi.

The first part of the interviews with researchers was projective in nature, requesting they share their observations of quality of analysis in general. After this, the interview turned inward as they discussed areas of personal comfort, discomfort, where they struggled, and what they felt on top of. A list of descriptive statements was also provided to them for self-rating, used more to stimulate discussion than as a straightforward assessment.

Suggestions on Interventions have evolved through these discussions, and also through interviews with professional trainers / psychologists. Findings were supported by a survey of literature relating to Perception and the understanding of Biases.

## THE FLAWED LENS

Seven types of problems emerged through this analysis:

- a. The Unfocused Lens
- b. The Blurred lens
- c. The Distorted Lens
- d. The Coloured Lens
- e. The Clouded Lens
- f. Blinded by the Light
- g. The Distant Lens

### a. The Unfocused Lens

*“Where the telescope ends the microscope begins. Which of the two has the grander view?”* Victor Hugo

Finding the right focus is a challenge that many have discussed. We need to be able to zoom in to see detail, and at the same time, stand back and join the dots to see the broader narrative. The reality is that very few have the natural ability to do both. Some of us have a tendency to detail, while others find it far easier to ‘helicopter’ for a broader picture.

#### ***Myopia (Short sight)***

Myopia is a condition where we are so lost in detail as to be unable to see the big picture, a failure to connect the dots and understand meaning in a larger context.

In research, this problem is very significant to clients, left by themselves to wade through the micro-narratives, and to piece together a bigger meaningful story and implications for the business.

*“A lot of what we get from research agencies is reporting and not analysis. “  
“what should be in the appendix is presented as findings.”*

Here are some characteristics of myopia:

- *Loss of focus:* Lose sight of the original query, fail to frequently ask what the observations mean for the broader objectives. *“...in trying to make sense of the data, I sometimes lose the big picture – I forget the point of the research and get bogged down by details.”*
- *Loss of context:* Blinkered/ Tunnel vision: The picture is framed in such a way that the context is missed, due to poor peripheral vision and disinterest in ambient detail.

A client shared an experience where he decided to visit shops at the same time that his agency was conducting focus groups on a brand of interest. He was unable to find this brand in any of the shops visited- yet the agency reported the brand was the most consumed by the youth and trendy- a discrepancy that could not be reconciled. The researchers failed to do a simple ambient check, which could have challenged the perspective emerging from the primary research. This is a case where the frame of reference was very narrow indeed and little effort was made to understand context.

Myopia represents a certain frame of mind and attitude:

- *Staying safe, reluctance to “fly”:* Reluctance to take a risk and move beyond facts into the daunting realm of inference, which is ambiguous and open to question, is an attitudinal block. There is a tendency to cling to reporting facts that are real and indisputable. (This is also reinforced by agencies that encourage detail orientation in the interests of getting robust findings, and don’t place as much emphasis on drawing broader insights.)
- *Lack stamina to push for meaning:* Some lack the stamina or the inclination to push for answers to questions such as “why” and “what does it mean”, till deeper and broader understanding is obtained, beyond the articulated and obvious answers.
- *Seduction of small data:* Some love the process of data collection, and uncover a wealth of information through their talent for consumer interaction. They prefer to share these rich experiences, and make less of an effort to ladder these up to broader inferences.

Beyond these, time constraint is a very big contributor to Myopia. It is difficult to see the big picture until we are able to distance ourselves from the data, to get broader perspective and meaning. Often this sort of time and space is just not available.

Myopia is a serious problem with tenderfoot researchers who are still learning to grapple with voluminous data. Those with a tendency to Myopia may face this throughout a career, and would need to make a conscious effort to work against it.

### ***Hyperopia (long sight)***

Hyperopia is the opposite issue to Myopia. The “Hyperopic Observer” quickly carves out a story or draws inferences from a cursory glance at facts and may leave out detail and supportive evidence. Users are by and large happy to receive well-etched and quickly constructed sketches, but the more discerning wonder if these are perhaps not too impressionistic. *“Sometimes findings appear impressionistic and lack the rigor of analysis.”*

Working with theories and hypotheses and then examining data for support is an accepted method of analysis. Historically, virtually every great scientific discovery has been ‘discovered’ first, and the evidence to support it has come later. The problem is if the diligence with which supporting evidence is sought is low, leading to shaky findings.

As in the case of Myopia, Hyperopia also represents a frame of mind: a love for bigger narratives, and impatience with detail.

There are three types of Hyperopics:

- *The Storyteller*: Storytellers are intuitive, are inclined to theorize first, and then seek validation. They are disturbed by anomalies and outliers in what they observe and lose sleep not just from worry about error, but also from having to let go of pet theories and exciting narratives. Selective cognition is a very real danger as they may ignore important facts that do not fit into their stories. More conscientious “Storytellers” eventually force themselves into the rigour of detailed analysis and are able to turn out rich and engaging outputs.

*“Analysis came naturally to me....I could pick up bits and pieces, understand the story....I look at presentations as story telling sessions – they need to be engaging, vibrant, energetic and meaty.”*

- *The impatient observer*: These observers leap to conclusions from a superficial reading of what they see to draw quick and facile inferences. This happens often with fresh researchers, but could persist even with seasoned analysts.
- *The overconfident observer*: Those with many years of experience may develop a tendency to ‘shortcut’, basing their analysis on understanding built from prior work, with some additional observations picked up from the research.

Beyond these, the pressure of deadlines could lead to broad sweep findings without deeper analysis. Incidents involving such hyperopic behavior could haunt conscientious researchers for years after the project is done. *“I just put down what I felt from what I saw.... But was I right?”*

Today, the pressure from clients to ‘tell a story’ is very high, and there is impatience with detail. In such a situation, hyperopic tendencies could intensify with positive feedback from clients (and from within the agency as well), on concise and well-crafted storylines.

Myopia and Hyperopia are representative of the two systems of thinking proposed by Daniel Kahneman. The Myopic perspective coincides with System 2 which is more empirical, while the Hyperopic approach coincides with System 1 which is intuitive. A happy combination of the two is of course ideal.

### **b. The Blurred Lens**

*“Why do two colors, put one next to the other, sing?”* Pablo Picasso

To paint a picture with texture, depth and nuance, we need a fine sense of shade, contrast and harmony, to classify and contrast intelligently.

Two issues arise here:

- Colour Blindness: difficulty in seeing the shades of differences
- Colour Hypersensitivity: overly sensitized to variations

#### *Colour Blindness*

*“Colour Blindness is partial or total inability to distinguish specific colors.”*

Those with low sensitivity to shade differences in the data are the Colour Blind. This could arise from inadequate sensitization to context, tonality, language, body language and other non-verbal cues, and this greatly hampers the nuancing and richness of the emerging picture. (This condition is rarely self diagnosed, usually pointed out by others.)

#### *Colour Hypersensitivity*

At the other end from the Colour Blind is the highly tuned in observer who detects so many subtle differences as to feel disorientated, unable to figure out where to start, and what to regard or disregard. This can be quite paralyzing.

*“What I really find difficult in analyzing data is that it can be looked at through a number of lenses. What decides which lens to go with?”*

*“My biggest frustration is not being able to start – cannot see the story in its entirety so can’t figure out where to start”*

Myopia is a defense action against this sensory overload, and the observer may resort to reporting all the different fascinating pieces and nuances picked up, without attempting to integrate all of it.

But this high degree of Colour Sensitivity can also be an asset to a team - fine sensitivity can help uncover new insights even in highly researched categories.

Over a period, Colour Sensitivity is honed and becomes intuitive, with a fine eye for contrasts, harmonies and anomalies. Eventually most develop strong skills in this area.

*“It’s easy for me to identify buckets to categorize information under. I’m good at parsing information into individual bundles that make sense.”*

### **c. The Distorted Lens**

*“And if the band you’re in starts playing different tunes  
I’ll see you on the dark side of the moon.” - Pink Floyd*

*“The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.” - William James*

#### **Astigmatism: The problem with disproportionate analysis**

‘Astigmatism’ results when we see the picture in a distorted manner, some parts receiving disproportionately high weightage compared to others.

The best examples of Astigmatism are found in media reports where, in the interests of telling a juicy story, the media tends to blow up some parts of the evidence while underplaying others.

Researchers, even those with many years of experience, may find certain pieces of evidence more powerful or personally exciting than others, and may give undue importance to these when they draw out the picture.

*“Sometimes a researcher may pick one part of the findings and blow it up out of all proportion.”*

Astigmatism also results from some real issues and confusions that we face when tackling large and complex studies. In large and multilayered projects involving large teams, the analyst could get confused:

*“Too many variables and I often get jammed ... men/women, cities, SEC, occupation/lifestyle etc. ... juggling between too many data points and I feel the data is spread too thin”*

**Astigmatism in large studies: Integration Confusion**

- Distortion from Multiple Eyes: Ragged Representation

Multiple team members come with different perspectives, approaches and competence levels. It is difficult to clearly sift the layers of possible biases introduced by multiple eyes, from the 'real uncontaminated observations'. We may rely more on some pieces and less on others leading to a lopsided treatment of the input.

*"Taking a download or debrief post the session is equally critical.....one has to understand what has happened, ask the right questions, discount moderator bias and frame of mind ...project leader having a perspective.... is critical here."*

- Over-representing the majority

In the struggle to reconcile disparate input, analysts sometimes just give up if the "one theory to rule them all" does not readily present itself. The natural inclination is to give weightage to the larger themes and the majority perspectives, while leaving out the less represented ideas - the 'minority report'.

*"Majority wins – we lose out on the minority perspective, because we only see the larger picture, and therefore knowingly or unknowingly end up suppressing the minority voices in our data."*

*"Doesn't help that sometimes outliers act like red herrings and lead you off track. I have trouble picking up a thread that makes sense, and following it from start to finish."*

- "Do-It-Myself" syndrome: Over-representing my own observation

The "Do It Myself Syndrome" is a barrier to accepting that which has not been personally observed by me or under my supervision. The researcher may give primacy to work they have done personally, or personally supervised, over inputs from others.

*"I have trouble unifying information in my head if I have not done the fieldwork myself. Transcripts and debriefs are helpful but only to a certain extent. It's a bit like flying blind because you haven't seen and heard things for yourself and have to rely on someone else for information."*

**Astigmatism in Merging multidisciplinary data**

Today, use of multiple methods and sources has become the norm. Analysts and marketers alike are integrating inputs from multiple and disparate sources: different methodologies within qualitative research, qualitative and quantitative research, as well as inputs from online sources and social listening, sales figures, channel feedback, informal peer group networks as well. Each source has its own characteristics, advantages and watch-outs.

Merging these requires finely honed skills in the area of slicing, combining, integrating and fine judgment on what to leave in, and what to discard.

Each source has its own characteristics, advantages and watch-outs. This needs a fine understanding of what each piece of research is expected to deliver, and limitations of each. Online, there is also the issue that the face presented in social media may not be the real face of the respondent. Since social media analysis is still in many ways in its infancy, the researcher has no real guidelines as to what he should take seriously and what should be discounted.

Merging data involves:

- finding points of convergence
- merging in proportion.

Finding points of convergence is the easier part, but issues arise where it comes to merging and assigning proportion. There are currently no clear norms or guidelines for triangulating inputs where it comes to multi-disciplinary studies and the process usually becomes intuitive with evidence-to-evidence judgment, and all sorts of biases may come into play.

The perspective can shift alarmingly from person to person, as each has a different vantage point and 'merging principle'.

All of these may result in a picture, which while correct in essential features, may be disproportionate and misleading. The question of astigmatism in analysis requires setting up of conventions, norms, and discussion and probably cannot be tackled entirely at an individual level.

**d. The Coloured Lens**

*There is nothing more difficult for a truly creative painter than to paint a rose, because before he can do so he has first to forget all the roses that were ever painted.* Henri Matisse

As humans, we are constantly evolving and learning, and our experiences colour our vision and the way we see the world. Colouring happens on two fronts:

- *Personal experience:* culture of origin, education and life experiences influence our perspectives in overt and subtle ways. We bring our life insights into play, sometimes quite consciously, when we analyse.
- *Professional experience:* When we work with a category for a while, we tend to form perspectives, which we add into the contextual framework for analysis in subsequent studies in the same area.

There are many who believe that a slightly coloured lens is not really a bad thing. Cultural understanding, for instance, is seen as a 'good bias'. A natural understanding of culture implies an understanding of an entire system of verbal and non-verbal codes that would be unavailable to one without a similar background, leading to superior contextual analysis.

Similarly, prior experience with a category establishes a strong context, and new developments in the category / market can be perceived in sharp relief against this backdrop understanding. Clients often request 'category experienced' researchers on their projects for this reason.

But there is another side to this.

### ***"This I Already Know" (TIAK) Syndrome***

The TIAK syndrome is one where our belief that we "already know" a category or culture makes us blind to what we see before us.

Nassim Taleb in *"The Black Swan"* believes that we all suffer from the Confirmation Bias: a tendency to see evidence that confirms our belief, rather than that which disconfirms it. *"We all have a natural tendency to look for instances that confirm our story and our vision of the world. These instances are always easy to find."*

With the TIAK syndrome, we are likely to selectively notice evidence that supports the perspective we already have formed rather than that which disconfirms it.

Daniel Kahneman, in a similar context, describes the WYSIATI (What You See Is All There Is) rule – *"The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little."*

The researcher who has dealt with a category for a long time, registers just enough in each subsequent work to reassure herself that her beliefs about the category still hold. She looks for evidence that confirms, rather than that which disconfirms this prior construct.

The recent oil crisis is a case in point where the signs of the impending problem were there for all to read, but even the most experienced in the business failed to connect the dots to understand what was in the offing - due to certain established lines of thought.

The TIAK syndrome is a very serious problem as it limits the vision, and objectivity is compromised.

The TIAK syndrome affects agencies, as it may push clients to switch to new agencies in order to get in a fresh perspective.

### ***Fading colour: Tired Eyes***

Sometimes we end up dealing with a particular subject - with the same client or category - for years. After a point there is a tendency to feel jaded. Interest levels drop as studies blur into sameness, and we cease to see anything new.

*"I feel bored." "When it's a category I have been working on for a while, I tend not to go through my data in such detail. Whereas if it's a new category I try harder to understand and find insights."*

This leads to a glazing over of vision as tired eyes are unable to register more than a generic impression of what we see, and strongly impacts output.

**Clash of Colour: Cross-study Confusion**

There is another problem that arises with familiarity with categories / brands. While the outputs from research studies ostensibly belong to the client who has paid for it, in reality qualitative analysts carry much of the input and understanding in their heads. There is therefore confusion when called on to do a similar research, sometimes for a new client. There is difficulty in placing older thoughts and findings aside to take in a new set of observations.

*“Value-free interpretative research is impossible. This is the case because every researcher brings preconceptions and interpretations to the problem being studied.”* Denzin

**e. The Clouded Lens**

*“I shut my eyes in order to see.”* - Paul Gauguin

*“The hardest thing to explain is the glaringly evident which everybody has decided not to see”.* - Ayn Rand

Clouding of vision is a problem that has been discussed at length by those we met.

**Fogged at the start**

The clear eye at the start is most likely to lead to insight at the end. Very often, the starting point is fogged as there are multiple stakeholders, each with a different perspective, or just a lack of clarity as to what is required.

*“The brand insights team head thought it was a Triggers & Barriers research, the brand team wanted a particular space explored.. the marketing head says past research have thrown up insights and we need to dig deeper and understand which to take forward. ... We pushed for meetings and clarity and that’s what saved us.”*

Getting the starting point right requires concentration and effort, so there is clarity on objective, and all interested parties share the same perspective and point of focus.

**Clouded by information**

Most studies begin with hypotheses based often on the marketers’ own views and beliefs, built over years of market experience. With the best of intention, the client often transfers much of this perspective to the researcher, who is usually happy to have this input, in order that he uncover “new news” rather than rediscover what is already known.

There are a couple of problems with this:

1. The structured understanding has a tacit message that this is not to be upset unless there is very strong evidence to the contrary
2. The researcher could subconsciously develop a bias in favour of the perspective provided, and could fall into the trap of coming back with enough observations to confirm that this perspective is correct. *“Even in testing a hypothesis, we tend to look for instances where the hypothesis proved true.”* Nassim Taleb

The biases have a way of entering the process at various stages: during design, line of questioning, stimulus introduced, choice of respondents and then, finally, in the analysis.

*“If a needle in a haystack were the evidence required, there may be a tendency to seek the needle – then it may get amplified to prove a point.”*

*“Sometimes casual conversations with the client end up affecting the way we analyse the data.”*

One of the clients interviewed expressed herself strongly against “over-briefing” and clouding the mind at the start.

*“I think we just provide too much information at the start of the research, and we cloud the researchers vision. I think it is important to be minimalist in what we provide - need to keep the mind light when the study is started, and the objectives simple.”*

**Clouded by Client Perspectives**

Marketers who have been working on a category for a long time develop strong constructs on the market and their brands, and often suffer even more from the TIAK syndrome than researchers. The Confirmation Bias is even stronger in their case since they have so much more invested in this perspective on which many marketing decisions have been made.

*"I have seen clients just outright rejecting findings saying they don't believe it if it does not tie in with their understanding."*

The problem can be quite a big one when dealing with large multinational clients who have evolved constructs and even an entire vocabulary around their understanding. Researcher findings are accepted only if they find a place within this framework, sometimes using the same jargon.

*"They read into the findings what they want to read, pick up facts selectively that fit their theories."*

Going against accepted beliefs in the company requires impeccable data and strong conviction (and courage) on the part of the researcher.

*"If we have something to report that goes against the accepted belief, the client immediately starts to question the data. 'Are you sure about this? Is your data correct?'"*

### **Clouded by Self Doubt**

Self-doubt and lack of confidence are issues that cloud the vision.

There is a very real problem of integrity at the level of data collection across the industry to different degrees across geographies.

Additionally, there is the worry particularly in qualitative research, since it involves small samples, about whether the sample sizes are large enough to support disconfirmatory evidence.

Inability to trust their eyes and what they see, impacts the confidence levels of researchers who are unable to make strong statements and take a stand, especially when observations contradict accepted beliefs. Researchers therefore tend to discount disconfirmations, categorizing these as 'outriders'. The result is a tendency to report conformist data and brush aside the non-conformist data.

Clouding is, at the base, a confidence issue. The researcher ceases to trust his eyes fully, and may accept the supremacy of another point of view. This compromises the impartiality and sense of balance in the picture that emerges.

### **f. Blinded by the Light**

*"You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus." - Mark Twain*

### **The Quest for the Holy Grail and Narrative Fallacy**

Today, clients feel the need to learn something new from every study, come away from research presentations feeling enlightened. The emphasis is on the big powerful emerging narrative that significantly advances understanding with every study.

*"Everyone is looking for the Holy Grail. The One Big Insight that the study has to deliver."*

Today researchers feel anxiety around being able to deliver that one big takeaway that will really excite the audience.

*"Not having anything to say is a very real problem. The clients who have done a lot of research in the past are in most cases always aware of the findings even before commissioning. They have more or less seen it all. To find meaningful insight in such a situation is near impossible and kind of de-motivating."*

The emphasis on big insights puts pressure on observers to look for the 'stories' in what they see. But evidence is not always able to assemble itself into a neat narrative. In his book, *"The Black Swan"*, Nassim Taleb discusses the concept of Narrative Fallacy, our inclination to "weave an explanation" between observations, "forcing a logical link, an arrow of relationship, upon them." When there is pressure to present 'big bang findings' and deliver breaking news, the researcher is pressured to forcibly locate connections, and thinking could become forced, flawed and fallacious, leading to false insights and conclusions.

### **The Eye on the "Sexy Story"**

*"Today we have to tell stories. Sexy stories."*

Not only is the emerging narrative expected to be strong, it is also expected to be exciting. Observations typically lend themselves to multiple storylines. It is possible to create many different equally plausible narratives around the same



evidence. Narration of history is coloured by the vantage point. It is possible to create completely different and equally absorbing stories around the same evidence – all the stories would have the quality of insight – that is, they would have a sense of “rightness” to different sets of people. The same facts could be played up or played down, depending on the vantage point. A case in point is the classic clash of perspective on militants– terrorists or freedom fighters? The interesting and acceptable story may be different in different countries. Which is the right one?

Big data analytics is a case in point where highly granular behavioural data could be pieced together to identify broad and significant patterns through a series of correlations. However, the danger here is that given the vastness of the data, the starting points and hypotheses could easily influence the interpretation of the data. Based on judgment, some correlations may be accepted and some discarded, and a story that the researcher seeks to tell may get told.

The analyst who picks the perspective could fall into a trap of picking one that is most likely to excite the audience. Other less exciting narratives, though equally relevant, may be ignored in the process.

### **“Dark Data”**

The other issue is the bits and pieces that don’t fit into the one big strong narrative that captures everyone’s imagination. Again, because of the emphasis on storytelling and connecting dots, these out-of-place parts tend to be lost in the shadow, left to languish unperceived by those blinded by the Big Insight.

### **Too Much Imagination (TMI)**

With the emphasis on the need to hear something new, there is a tendency to take ‘leaps of faith’ from the observations. The natural Storytellers do so with alacrity and may come up with interesting hypotheses and scenarios, and perhaps read more into what they see than warranted.

*“I attended a presentation which an agency made to one of my clients and I was taken aback by the leaps of faith and theories and hypothesis that had no link with the TG.”*

Most presenters do qualify these forays as ‘hypotheses’ and not ‘findings’, but the danger is that some of these “hypotheses” may capture the imagination of the audience and become difficult to disconfirm if later proved wrong.

The word insight has multiple interpretations but all agree that the feeling of ‘rightness’- the ‘aha’ feeling, is a strong test of the insight. The ‘aha’ concept is rooted in the Type 1 intuitive method of thinking described by Daniel Kahneman, a method prone to error and misinterpretation. It is possible to be misled by the ‘aha’ feeling into accepting narratives that feel right, but may actually be false.

### **“Sunshine in a bottle”**

For the researcher, the ultimate satisfaction comes in seeing insights translated into action by the client. The feeling that the research has a very real and tangible role to play in marketing decision making acts as a confidence builder and adds to the overall keenness, and retains the sparkle in the eye.

*“Mostly, however, if something that has been worked on is taken forward and can be tangibly seen, it is the best part. This however, rarely happens but when it does, it is like sunshine in a bottle.”*

### **g. The Distant Lens**

*One sees great things from the valley, only small things from the peak.” - G. K. Chesterton*

At very senior levels, on ground involvement with primary research diminishes, and perceptions of consumers filter through the lens of others who are in touch with ground reality, literally. The detachment may lead to some level of illusion, where beliefs and perceptions have not been recently challenged by any primary work. Perspectives can petrify.

Around this time, researchers take on a more consultative role and are treated by clients as experts on consumers. Researchers may be called in for strategy meetings and

- their advice on the ‘consumer’ taken
- there is a subtle expectation of their being able to predict trends based on what they see across categories

The importance of their role, coinciding with distancing from the consumer could lead to disconnect at various levels.

*The Flawed Lens: A Symptom Chart***FIGURE 1. FOCUSING AND PERSPECTIVE**

Type	Issue	What it is	Symptoms
Unfocused Lens	Myopia	Condition where the researcher is so lost in detail as to be unable to see the bigger picture	Highly granular data, inadequate take outs, thin on insights
	Hyperopia	Focused on the big picture, not interested in detail Does not root findings adequately in data	Broadscape perspectives, but low detail or granularity. Data supports not provided
Blurred Lens	Colour blindness	Inability to see the shades of differences	Under-slicing of data leading to lower insight, tends to lump data together
	Colour hypersensitivity	Overly sensitized to variations	Over-slicing of data leading to lower insight , tends not to integrate data
Distorted Lens	Astigmatism	The Astigmatic treat data unevenly, some parts receiving disproportionately high weightage compared to others.	Over emphasis on some parts, individual pieces of data given undue importance, excited by certain parts of the data

**FIGURE 2. FOCUSING AND PERSPECTIVE**

Type	Issue	What it is	Symptoms
Coloured Lens	- TIAK Syndrome - Personal colouring - Discoloured lens	- Condition where the researcher is blind to new information in an oft research category/ consumers	- Emotional: sense of boredom, overconfidence - Rational: does not generate incremental insight - Loss of interest, feeling of being jaded, tired
Clouded Lens	- Fogged at the start - Clouded by information - Clouded by client perspective	- Objective setting at the start may fog the vision - Excess of information or strong client perspectives may fog vision	- Emotional: Overwhelmed by data, lack of clarity on objectives, strong perspective on the matter at hand prior to start - Rational: tendency to consciously or subconsciously ratify hypotheses
	- Clouded by doubt	- Mistrust of data	- Tend to discount outriders, anomalies as data errors
Blinded by the light	- Forced Narratives - TMI	- Forcibly fit data into patterns - Seek the narratives from the start rather than let the data provide its own stories - Tendency to hyperopia at an advanced stage	- Forcibly tries to join dots to form a narrative - Ignores outriders - Looks for 'exciting' stories - Hypotheses not strongly anchored in data
Distant lens	- Distant lens, fading connect	- Distanced from primary data - Could lead to petrification of thoughts	- Strongly held beliefs - Increasing variation between beliefs and perceptions, and what data from primary research shows

**CLEANSING THE LENS: TOWARDS 20/20 VISION**

Perfect 20/20 vision is rarely to be found. Each of us is differently abled - gifted in some areas, not so good at others. Problems in the "lens" may also develop along the way, ranging from difficulty in seeing broader patterns, to more serious issues such as bias that could distort vision. The issues discussed so far exist in differing degrees with most of us, some getting sorted out without much intervention, but some persisting to become chronic issues that never quite get resolved.

The first step to achieving 20/20 vision, is self-awareness. It is important for us to develop reflexivity, a meta-perspective on our own personal biases and ability to see. This can be quite a challenge as it is difficult to step out and perceive our deeper prejudices and vision quirks without some external help.

There is a case for agencies to evolve a systematic process to help researchers periodically look inward and attempt self-analysis.

There are four broad areas where agencies can help:

- a. Refocusing the lens: to address the issues of focus and perspective: skills training and monitoring
- b. Cleansing & Un-clouding the lens: Tackling biases and refreshing vision
- c. Seeing the light: Help clarify insight
- d. Reconnecting: Address issues of distancing faced by advanced level researchers

### **a. Re-Focusing the lens: Skills training and monitoring**

Getting the balance right between detail and overview, maintaining perspective and keeping the eye on the objective are skills that require training and constant monitoring.

#### ***Myopia***

Tackling myopia involves tackling a certain frame of mind- an unwillingness to take risks to rise above data. Myopics need to be helped/pushed out of the thick undergrowth to take a wider perspective, and be encouraged to take more risks in drawing inferences or forming hypotheses.

Myopic researchers in general show high self-awareness and are already actively trying to solve the problem themselves.

*“One of the things I struggle with is detail orientation. I have to fight the urge to get caught up in details and stay with the big picture.”*

The following could be done to help:

1. Push for bigger answers: a need to push Myopic researchers to answer questions such as ‘so what’ and ‘why’ till they are forced to connect more and more dots to arrive at increasingly larger frames of reference
2. Other eyes: find “other eyes” who can look at their data and help them refresh their vision, or provide starting points to build their narratives and take outs
3. Create context consciousness: persuade researchers with tunnel vision to broaden their peripheral vision and actively look at context, ‘loosen up’ their frame of vision.
4. Distance for analysis: need to distance themselves from the data and figure out the patterns. There is a need for a break from the project to clear the mind and then re-engage with the data with refreshed vision.

#### ***Tackling Hyperopia***

The reluctance to look at detail arises from fear of disconfirmation, worry that the data will not support their storyline. At the same time, they may read the data to fit in with their story, arising from the confirmation bias.

Hyperopics need to be trained to look harder for proof of evidence before they put out their theories. They are usually less prone to self-diagnosis and need to be sensitized to the issue more strongly.

The following can be done to help:

1. *Push for evidence*- do not accept the theories at face value, but demand the data back up in the form of verbatims, visuals, video, etc. This would create a data consciousness amongst the researchers and eventually, this would become a habit
2. *Myth busting*: need for challenges and contrary storylines suggested by peers
3. *Provide time*: Hyperopic researchers need time to build up the body of evidence, and also time to discard old theories and pick up new ones that fit the data better

*Finding perspective through peer help and mentoring*: Finding focus by and large is not an easy task and researchers need help both in diagnosing the issue as well as in finding their way out. Setting up of strong mentoring and peer support systems is bound to help.

*Can there be a corrective lens?* During the time that researchers are learning to get the right focus, an “adjustment factor” needs to be applied to the work.

#### ***Mixed teams***

Eventually most researchers reach a state of happy equilibrium, though some will probably always tend towards detail and some towards the bigger picture in their analysis- the Eagles and the Moles.

Agencies in forming project teams could take this into consideration in team composition, playing to individual researcher strengths and getting an output that is rich, insightful and well narrated.

#### ***Tackling Colour Blindness & hypersensitivity: Honing the ability to see contrast, developing comfort with ambiguity***

*Colour Blindness* is tackled first through sensitization to the problem since this is rarely self-diagnosed. Intensive training on learning contrast, through sensitization to ambient colour, background colour, cultural context, non-verbal cues and so on would help tackle colour blindness.

However, it must be recognized that this problem, if it persists, implies a need to shift profession, as a base level of colour sensitivity is essential in research.

*Colour hypersensitivity* arises from a very fastidious approach to theming, where the researcher is unable to classify unless there is a very high degree of commonality between the observations.

There is a need to help the researcher develop tolerance for ambiguity and imperfection, which goes with the territory in qualitative analysis. Perfectly matched colours are impossible to find, and classifying based on broad similarities and patterns is more the norm.

### **Tackling Astigmatism and Distortion**

Astigmatism is a more complex problem to tackle, one that all of us face to differing degrees. Astigmatism will need to be tackled on multiple fronts:

#### *Learning data democracy*

The principles of democracy- acceptance of diversity and the idea of proportionate representation, where every voice, however small, has a say – are important in creating a balanced output. Steady vision, and a fair and proportionate treatment of all that we perceive, are important. This is less a skill, and more a philosophy that needs to be developed early on in a career.

#### *The Kaleidoscope*

Trouble in pulling together perspectives from large teams can only be addressed through development of trust and familiarity within the team. More interaction and discussion, so there is understanding and comfort with different points of view, will go a long way in smoother integration of output.

*“If I have not done the fieldwork or been part of the fieldwork, I feel the need to speak with the researcher who moderated the sessions. ... This becomes imperative for the project especially if the researcher moderating and working on the analysis are different”*

Once there is trust, the emerging picture can only be enriched through the use of different lenses and myriad perspectives. *“Focusing on what is learned by degree of convergence rather than forcing a dichotomous choice- the different kinds of data do or not converge- typically yields a more balanced overall result.”*-Patton.

A positive attitude to multi-researcher teams as tempering each other’s biases, rather than adding to biases, would help in forming a balanced holistic picture.

### **Developing norms for integration**

There is a broader need to lay down norms for integrating input from different types of research so that it does not become overly dependent on the intuition of individuals. The integration will possibly need a layering approach:

- the contextual data as the background colouring
- the foreground
- the relief features

It would help in providing a sense of framing, colour composition and proportion at the outset of the analysis, with all researchers involved following the pattern.

### **b. Cleansing and Un-Clouding the Lens**

Over a period, our lenses face a build-up of bias. Also, the excess information we carry in our minds from our own experiences and client input, cloud vision. Vision is also clouded by self-doubt and anxiety.

It is important to go through a periodic “cleansing of the lens” ritual to refresh our vision, regain confidence and bring the sparkle back to the eye. Agencies need to invest in providing the means to do so.

### **Tackling personal bias**

Total freedom from bias is impossible, even undesirable. But it is important to recognize our biases and to compensate for them when we analyse.

Exposure to myriad perspectives on different topics could be a way to stimulate thought and self-examination, in internal group discussions. Companies could arrange for these as well as informal meetings with PUM (People Unlike Me) with a view to helping people to understand and challenge their own perspectives.

This can be done at the start of specific studies where their cultural context may be useful, as well as a barrier in understanding. It could also be contemplated as a regular exercise to be conducted with researchers periodically, to challenge beliefs.

### ***Tackling the TIAK (This I Already Know) Syndrome***

The blindness to facts that we develop when we think we already know, is a difficult block to tackle. The clouding of the mind by client perspectives and theories may compound this.

There is a need to keep the mind light while retaining relevant data so that the learning from each study is incremental beyond what is already resident knowledge with the client.

This is where we required a servicing of the lens, one that helps shed the layers of supposed knowledge that blocks the vision, so that we can see clearly once again.

Professional trainers have suggested some rituals, which could help refreshing the lens:

#### *Clearing the cupboard:*

When moving from one study to the next, a researcher needs to refresh the mind and remove the leftover clutter from previous studies.

An interesting ritual here is a mental 'clearing the cupboard'. The exercise involves a process of writing out all perceptions gathered over the study, and consciously setting them aside for a fresh start. Having done this, the researcher sets out onto the next research with the cupboard bare once more, ready to receive fresh input.

This may be a symbolic act, but it is one that makes the researcher mindful of the TIAK problem, which may lead to conscious effort to relook at things with fresh eyes.

The Cleaning the Cupboard exercise proposed earlier might be important applied to the start of each study, or at least periodically after every few studies in the same category.

*Constantly seeking change:* The second issue of dismissing disconfirmatory evidence needs a frame of mind that consciously looks for anomalies. Researchers need to be oversensitised to change over validation, in order that the current belief structures are challenged.

*The Challenger:* Another way to tackle the build up of bias is to set up a "challenger" who provides a counterpoint, and helps the researcher question his own beliefs. Having had his mind open up, he is able to take a fresh perspective on the next set of observations. "*You prick yourself so much with the thorn of data that all your biases drain out*"

The second pair of eyes would help the researcher relook at forming beliefs and shake them up. "It is good to get a fresh pair of eyes to look at your data and figure out different perspectives."

### ***Tackling fatigue***

Fatigue is a problem experienced by researchers especially if on the same type of studies over a long period. The researcher feels saturated, bored and unable to absorb any more as the eyes glaze over.

#### *Detoxing through debriefing:*

A mental 'unburdening' may be called for once every few studies, on such continuous research.

This would involve a debriefing, to a peer or a senior, who is not part of the team- a method in use in counseling. This is a way to lighten the load, flush out the toxins of bias that are building up, and help the researcher proceed with the next study to the topic with a light mind.

*"Crop rotation":* There appears to be a strong case for agencies to give researchers a sort of 'crop rotation' to refresh them so that they re-engage with the category with refreshed eyes.

### c. Seeing the Light

Today, the researcher is pressured to tell big stories and evolve powerful narratives from their research studies. The problems that could arise:

- the forcible joining of dots to find narratives and relationships in the data which could be fallacious
- emphasis on the more interesting narratives, ignoring less powerful storylines
- data that does not fit stays dark
- TMI- too much imagination in analysis

The challenge is to ensure that analysis stays imaginative, but does not tip over into an exercise in kite flying. Agencies need to do the following:

- Robust process: Have robust processes to ensure that all stories are backed with good data, even if all the data is not actually presented to the client. More time needs to be obtained for analysis for validation and contextual query that can support an emerging theory.
- Tell the dull stories too: While it is important to join the dots in the data and bring exciting narratives alive to inspire an audience, it is important that all the stories – however dull - be told.
- Dark data: It is important that the bits and pieces that fit nowhere also be placed in the picture exactly as they appear: mavericks and misfits in the tale.
- Confidence building: Provide support to researchers who feel pressured by the pursuit of the ‘big insight’, and sometimes find data not adding up. Researchers need to feel confident to state that there is no clear emerging pattern, if viable patterns do not emerge.
- Unboxing: In large teams, researchers have also brought up the issue of ‘boxing’ and tunnel vision, where each individual researcher is required to deliver findings within rigidly stated paradigms. There is no room in such studies for random on ground observations, parts that fit nowhere, to affect and enrich the analysis. Unboxing at ground level, lending an ear to on ground experiences and discussion may be necessary in order to uncover new threads of thought.
- Interactivity: help me see what I saw: There is a need for interaction, discussion between team members to help each researcher understand what she “saw”, using sounding boards and ‘other eyes’. This would help provide context, whet latent curiosity, and provide new dimensions that will help enrich vision. This is akin to borrowing a different set of lenses for a moment, which then provides a different context against which to see.
- Flexibility: Finding good insights and narratives require flexibility of approach, to follow up the emerging threads, which may be revealed over the course of research. Owing to time and other constraints, research designs are often rigid and bounded, which may be detrimental to following an emerging insight through, with additional sampling and probes.

### Tackling Client barriers

While clients seem to be ostensibly looking for something new from the research, there is also resistance to ideas that run contrary to accepted beliefs within the company.

*Breaking paradigms with evidence:* It may be important to confront companies with strong video / audio evidence that will cut through disconfirmation barriers. Well-crafted, narrated, visually rich presentations strongly supported with evidence will provoke thought and challenge paradigms of thought.

While they may not immediately find acceptance, they could open windows to new ways of thinking and forming of new beliefs.

*Cleansing the Lens Workshops for clients:* It would be good if a Cleansing the Lens workshop could be organized for clients as well, where they come face to face with their own biases and pre-conceived notions, and learn to set them aside before embarking on new understanding.

Having refreshed their minds, they can engage with emerging evidence with fresh eyes- so even what is supposedly old insight can be viewed with a fresh perspective, in a new context.

#### **d. Reconnecting**

Over time connect with the consumer may grow distant, and we may pick up our perspective second hand from others. There is a need to stay connected with ground realities and readjust the lens as contexts evolve.

Attending fieldwork in order to get a reality check on beliefs and consumer understanding needs to be built in as a habit. This would benefit companies that are increasingly seeing researchers as consultants and valuable partners in the brand building process. This would also make them better mentors and guides for researchers within the agency.

Some level of sharing of perspective between researchers across agency lines may also help the industry as a whole.

#### **CONCLUSION**

*"The real voyage of discovery consists of not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."* - Marcel Proust

The researcher's vision is what unites various threads of thought and provides a balanced, meaningful picture- nuanced yet clear. Producing this requires a combination of good focus, perspective, proportion and vision: a central idea that renders the picture meaningful to the viewer. This picture also needs to be a true representation of evidence, free from personal bias and distortion.

Keeping the lens fit and clear is an ongoing process that requires attention and effort. It is important for researchers to develop reflexivity, to evolve a meta-awareness of the self, perceive issues that arise with the lens and take steps to cleanse and correct these.

This analysis has classified and described the different problems faced by researchers, and has offered direction on how these could be tackled at both individual and organizational levels.

This has been an exploratory effort, and learnings can be taken forward for more formalized interventions that could contribute towards achieving 20/ 20 vision.

In the long term, this would greatly enhance the role of researchers as effective and reliable partners with marketers in building strong and meaningful brands that connect with consumers.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank all the researchers and clients from across agencies and companies, who contributed their time, shared their views and experiences with openness, and helped contour the thoughts in this paper.

Also thanks to Vasudevan Srinivasan of CETC India for his insights and inputs especially on the interventions outlined in the paper

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**APPENDIX - WHAT INDEED IS 20/20 VISION?**

What indeed is 20/20 vision? “20/20 vision” would involve the following:

- a. Focus:
  - Zoom in to perceive detail
  - Zoom out to see broader themes and patterns
- b. Perspective & texture
  - Good colour composition with shades and nuances
  - Sense of proportion and balance in representation of the picture
- c. Insight- a widely debated concept, largely the ability to “see” something new and exhilarating, that could be a game changer
- d. Foresight- ability to see ahead and literally visualize the future