**Heuristics and Social Cognition: How Unconscious Processes Affect Our Judgement**

Jaime M. Locklear

Department of Psychology, Old Dominion University

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Prof. Jennifer Muth

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**The Heuristics**

A heuristic is one of the ways people make decisions and judgements about situations. As opposed to algorithms, heuristics rely on biases based on one’s schemas of certain groups and social situations. The first heuristic is the representativeness heuristic. When using this heuristic, one will make judgements about individuals based on their perceived resemblance to a certain group. The next heuristic, the availability heuristic, can sometimes be confused with the representativeness heuristic. The availability heuristic is used to make judgements about situations based on how easily certain information can be brought to mind; this coincides with the ease-of-retrieval effect.

These last two heuristics are slightly more complicated. The anchoring and adjustment heuristic involves using a known variable as an “anchor” and making adjustments based on that. One may find that this heuristic is similar to bargaining. The final heuristic is the status quo heuristic. This heuristic applies in situations where one convinces themselves that they believe that the way things have always been is better than anything else.

**Examples**

# The representativeness heuristic often applies in situations where one is meeting someone for the first time and is trying to decide who they might be. Imagine a person is going out with someone that her friend set her up with. Upon meeting her date, the person notices that he has a full sleeve of tattoos, drives a motorcycle, and has a very muscular build. From these observations, she may deduce that her date is a risk taker with a job that requires heavy lifting. Though these deductions may or may not be true, the representativeness heuristic has allowed her to form an opinion of her date even before getting to know him.

# The availability heuristic can apply in situations that deal with personal safety. If a college student has recently binge-watched a true-crime series on Netflix, she will more readily be able to think of criminal activity that could be dangerous to her. As she walks across campus from her late class, she may remember the show she just watched and be more concerned for her safety because she thinks it is likely that she will end up in a dangerous situation. The next day she might decide to ask one of her male classmates to walk her to her dorm to avoid possible danger.

# Though the anchoring and adjustment heuristic is most commonly applied in situations like negotiating the price of a car or a house, it can also be applied to other real-world situations. Every bowler has a strike line that they use to try and knock down all ten pins on the lane. When there are pins left after the first throw, the bowler must make an adjustment in order to knock down the remaining pins. Bowlers use their strike line as the anchor and adjust their position based on where the remaining pins are on the lane.

# The status quo heuristic can be seen in politics as the incumbent advantage. When a current senator runs against a candidate with similar years of experience in public office, the current senator almost always wins. This phenomenon is seen from local elections all the way to the presidential election. People simply prefer how things are to how things might be.

# Drawbacks

# As with any other reasoning tool, each of the heuristics has disadvantages. Since the representativeness heuristic relies on stereotypes, it often overlooks base rates, which is the frequency with which certain groups appear in the total population.  Use of this heuristic can lead to forming harmful stereotypes and making unfair judgements about people. The availability heuristic can often lead to inaccurate judgements about the probability of events. Decisions depend on the amount of information one can think of while in a certain situation. This can contribute to risky decision making or paranoia.

# The anchoring and adjustment heuristic is often used by businesses to manipulate customers. Big discounts bring high prices down to market value, convincing people that they are getting a good deal. It can also be harmful when the anchor a person is using is not actually as true as it seems. The status quo heuristic is especially harmful. People may avoid necessary progressive social change or try to fit in with others simply because it is the way things have been. Because they can all lead to dangerous outcomes, it is important to be cautious when using heuristics to make decisions.