Assignment 1 - Heuristics: Influence Factors and Pitfalls

Brianna Sheppard

Old Dominion University

Psychology 304

The basic idea of heuristics is that they are mental shortcuts in which people come to conclusions or judgements about a number of events, instances, or decisions. The human brain is always processing information, often times subconsciously. Because of this, and the unending number of decisions that have to be made on a daily basis, heuristics are strategies implemented by the brain to help filter through this overwhelming amount of information. The idea of heuristics are fascinating, and through many research studies, psychologists have been able to name a number of different strategies that humans use; each with their own influences and pitfalls (Baron & Branscombe, 2012).

The representative heuristic is the idea that if an individual fits certain criteria, the brain will infer that this person belongs to a specific group; very similar to stereotypes. The criteria could be anything that an individual has associated with a group; background, personality, profession, age, the list goes on. The brain keeps a tally of all these minute indicators, and tries to force them within a specific, predetermined set of parameters. The availability heuristic is when the brain makes inferences based on how readily specific information can be recalled. As long as a specific event is in fact, recalled, the more likely people are to believe it to be a regular happening, regardless of whether it is true or not. Further, there are two subcategories of the availability heuristic: ease and amount, each which hold more weight, depending on the situation. If the situation is more emotional, and based on feelings, the *ease* of recalling a memory will be more important. If the event is more complex, the brain will weigh the *amount* of specific instances more heavily (Baron & Branscombe, 2012).

The easiest way to describe heuristics are through more concrete examples. Suppose there is a woman at the grocery store. She is dressed in many layers, she rides a bike, and is

carrying some type of bag -- with lots of random stuff in it. From these couple of clues, the brain may jump to the conclusion that she is homeless. This is an example of the representative heuristic. Sometimes these judgements can be correct; after all, certain criteria are associated with specific groups for a reason. However, they are not always correct. The biggest error arises because the brain will ignore the *base rate*, which essentially is ignoring the population statistic (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). The second pitfall is gambler's fallacy. Simply put, these events or decisions throughout daily life are rarely dependent of each other. The problem with representative heuristic is that, for a majority of the time, most of these events are independent of each other (Proctor & van Zandt, 1994).

As for the availability heuristic -- suppose you go to the bank. You go up to the teller line, and ask to withdraw money from your account. The teller asks for your ID. You were surprised because in your most recent memory (the easiest to recall), you did not need an ID. Perhaps, the last time, you were helped by a different teller, one who knew you by name. But because the memory is so prominent in your mind, you assumed that this is who it would always be. At first glance, it makes sense that these types of judgements would be correct. Nevertheless, they are often incorrect. The drama of a particular situation may make it easier to recall.

There are two other heuristics that deserve an explanation, and those are the anchoring and adjustment heuristic and the status quo heuristic. The anchoring and adjustment heuristic is that humans make decisions by first forming judgements based on evidence that is already available to them; in particular, any initial influence. In the case of anchoring and adjustment, a single, initial influence will skew the way in which the brain sees the event (Proctor, 1994). As the name suggests, the status quo heuristic is all about not rocking the boat. Thought process and

decision making will easily fall into the pitfall that if something has been around for a longer time, or has largely remained unchanged, it will be the superior of any other options (Baron & Branscombe, 2012).

One of the simplest ways to illustrate the anchoring and adjustment heuristic is pay negotiations. After extending an offer of employment, many companies will inform the interviewee of their starting pay. Now, the interviewee could either take this starting pay, or start a negotiation with the HR rep (or whoever is offering the employment). If the new hire does start negotiating, all of their counter-offers will be heavily influenced by that first pay offer. In fact, the amount they are willing to settle on will be less than if the HR rep did not extend the first number. lling into the status quo heuristic.

The anchoring and adjustment heuristic is incredible powerful. Studies have shown that even when people are aware of the effect, and in turn try to make more accurate adjustments, they are still affected by that first, original number. As is the case with all heuristics, anchoring and adjustment takes place to conserve mental processing. Ultimately, they are trying to find the most reasonable and logical solution. The brain automatically identifies that first number as the most reasonable and logical suggestion; because of this, it sees no reason to try and identify more solutions.

The status quo heuristic can be found in many areas and events. Take for instance that there is a company who has been using the same processing software for the last 15 years. Then suddenly, the company hires a new CEO (same industry; different company), and he enters with the knowledge that there is a better, more efficient processing software, and he decides to make the switch. He receives some push-back from the employees who have been with the company

the longest. In their minds, the old software still works, and because they have been using for so many years, it must be the superior option. These employees are operating under the status quo heuristic. And like the anchoring and adjustment heuristic, the status quo heuristic is also very influential. Numerous studies have shown that participants will choose an older object or idea as superior, even if they are essentially the same, the only thing different being the "age" of the product (Baron & Branscombe, 2012).

Heuristics are very important, and incredibly fascinating; they greatly reduce the overload of information that is seen on a daily basis. And by identifying them, social psychologists can see just how much effort is put into processing everyday information. However, while heuristics save time and mental energy, because of human error, these heuristics come at the price of mistakes (Proctor & van Zandt, 1994).

References

Baron, R.A. & Branscombe, N. R. (2012). *Social Psychology.* Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson

Proctor, R. W. & Van Zandt, T. (1994). *Human factors in simple and complex systems.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon