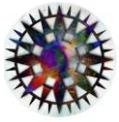


Heuristic Thinking

Decision making is generally approached in two ways; with thoughtful, rational thinking and/or based on a gut feeling” (Cherry, 2019). In his book *Blink*, Gladwell (2019) examines the latter, writing that the unconscious makes hundreds of decisions about complex matters in the blink of an eye and makes the argument that snap decisions are often superior to those made after a thorough assessment and evaluation of the situation at hand.

While heuristics can reduce the burden of decision-making and free up limited cognitive resources, they can also be costly when they lead individuals to miss critical information or act on unjust biases” (Sussex Publishers. 2021). Consider, for instance, a young man who had been sexually abused by his father. Despite his inner desire to join the school orchestra on an overnight trip, led by his male music teacher, he refuses to go decrying; ‘men can’t be trusted to care for kids.’ When pressed by a friend to reconsider, the teenager becomes hostile and threatens to quit the orchestra altogether. If the young man were to think things through rationally, if not for a polarized, implicit mental image of men, fueling a cognitive bias and leading to a hasty judgment, he might have been able to resolve any quandary he may have about his care and safety. Importantly, this young musician may be altogether unaware of the correlation between his trauma history with his father, and his refusal to attend what he might otherwise have considered a safe and pleasurable activity. “Cherry (2019) outlines common heuristics including the following:

- The availability heuristic involves making decisions based upon how easy it is to bring something to mind. When you are trying to make a decision, you might quickly



remember a number of relevant examples. Since these are more readily available in your memory, you will likely judge these outcomes as being more common or frequently occurring. For example, if you are thinking of flying and suddenly think of a number of recent airline accidents, you might feel like air travel is too dangerous and decide to travel by car instead. Because those examples of air disasters came to mind so easily, the availability heuristic leads you to think that plane crashes are more common than they really are.

- The representativeness heuristic involves deciding by comparing the present situation to the most representative mental prototype. When you are trying to decide if someone is trustworthy, you might compare aspects of the individual to other mental examples you hold. A sweet older woman might remind you of your grandmother, so you might immediately assume that she is kind, gentle and trustworthy. If you meet someone who is into yoga, spiritual healing and aromatherapy you might immediately assume that she works as a holistic healer rather than something like a schoolteacher or nurse. Because her traits match up to your mental prototype of a holistic healer, the representativeness heuristic causes you to classify her as more likely to work in that profession.
- The affect heuristic involves making choices that are strongly influenced by the emotions that an individual is experiencing at that moment. For example, research has shown that people are more likely to see decisions as having higher benefits and lower risks when they are in a positive mood. Negative emotions, on the other hand, lead people to focus on the potential downsides of a decision rather than the possible benefits.

According to research by Strange and Takarangi (2015), heuristic responses to trauma triggers are rooted in memory distortion. "Memory distortion for traumatic events appears to follow a particular pattern: people tend to remember more trauma than they experienced, a phenomenon referred to as memory amplification" Memory amplification is a failure in people's source monitoring framework. "Put simply, the *source* monitoring framework states that memory distortion occurs because we do not store our memories with a label specifying the origins of each individual detail. Generally, this approach is an appropriate use of our capacity-limited cognitive resources, and we employ simple heuristics to judge the origins of a particular detail or entire memory" (Strange & Takarangi, 2015). Memory amplification "carries real



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consequences: the more amplification people demonstrate, the more likely they are to report the re-experiencing” symptoms associated with PTSD, such as intrusive thoughts and images”

(Strange & Takarangi, 2015).

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