

SAMPLE TEXTBOOK SUPPLEMENT

Intended audience: college students

Potential courses used in: Introduction to Psychology, lower-level Social Psychology or Cognitive Psychology

DAILY PROBLEM SOLVING WITH HEURISTICS

We often take shortcuts in our decision-making processes. We don't have the time to properly analyze each situation that occurs in our daily life. Therefore, we use mental shortcuts to help us make decisions. In many cases these mental shortcuts, or heuristics, are fairly accurate. Unfortunately, when we rely on heuristics, we do not consciously think about the information surrounding the options. When this happens, we tend to base our decisions on assumptions.

There are three common heuristics. One is the representative heuristic, which looks at how we classify things based on whether or not the sample is similar in some way to the choice population (Matlin & Farmer, 2015). We tend to focus on certain characteristics and ignore others as we use this heuristic in decision-making. This can lead to errors in judgment, as people make assumptions from a smaller sample and generalize it to a larger population.

We use the availability heuristic when we rely on information that is more available because it is more likely, more frequent, or more sensational in some way (Matlin & Farmer, 2015). This information sticks in our minds more and comes to mind quicker when we make a decision. Unfortunately, this can also lead to biased judgments based on assumptions developed from incomplete information.

The anchor and adjustment heuristic occurs as



individuals estimate various quantities in their daily lives, such as how long it takes to get to work when there is construction, how many copies to make of a flyer, or how long an assignment will take to complete (Matlin & Farmer, 2015). An individual would start with an initial estimate, or anchor value. Since this is an estimate of an unknown value, it is possible that it will need to be adjusted as the individual gets closer to the real answer. The problem with this is that people are often reluctant to move as far as they might need to from their original estimate.

THINK ABOUT THIS:

You only have a little time for lunch and need to go somewhere close. The only restaurants that are close are a fast food restaurant and a chain restaurant that is a bit more expensive. You are trying to eat healthy and cut calories. Which do you choose? Many would opt for the chain restaurant, thinking that it would have healthier foods than the fast food restaurant. This would be based on the representative heuristic. The assumption is that because some of the fast foods are high in fat and fried, they are all higher in calories and less healthy. Yet this is not always the case. The fast food restaurant could serve salads that do not have as many calorie-laden items as the chain restaurant. This decision would also be based on the availability heuristic, as people rely on the information most readily available – that the fast food is high in fat and grease. Since most fast food advertising is based on hamburgers and French fries, this creates the impression that burgers and fries are all there is to choose from. Using the anchor and adjustment heuristic, you would see that the anchor estimate for the fast food restaurant would need some adjusting based on the menu options. Yet most people still rely more on that first impression of the two restaurants and adjust sparingly.

Matlin, M. W., & Farmer, T. A. (2015). *Cognition* (9th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



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HEURISTICS ACTIVITY LOG

For this activity, keep a log throughout the week of when and how you and others use each of these heuristics. Explain the reasoning process you believe occurred for each example and identify whether the person relied on solid information or assumptions. The examples can be from your own decisions or the decisions of others you observe, including in the news or other forms of media. Use the chart below to fill in the information. Use additional pieces of paper if necessary.

Once you are done, look back at your examples and analyze them. Then complete the reflection questions on the last page.

Representative Heuristic	Availability Heuristic	Anchor and Adjustment Heuristic



HEURISTICS ACTIVITY LOG REFLECTION

Which heuristic did you find easiest to identify?

Why do you think this heuristic was easiest for you to identify?

Which heuristic was most difficult for you to identify?

Why do you think this heuristic was most difficult for you to identify?

Choose one of your examples. Explain how the heuristic(s) impacted the decision, and how that decision might have been different without the use of the heuristic.

