



Bias Bite #4: Availability Heuristic/Bias

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Bias Bites are written for administrators to help teachers explore their cognitive limitations through suggested protocols that can be implemented in school-wide meetings and other professional development opportunities. The following activities guide teachers to explore the availability heuristic, which is our tendency to make judgments based on how easily examples come to mind rather than on actual frequency or probability. While this cognitive shortcut helps us make quick decisions, it can also lead to overestimating the likelihood of memorable events and underestimating the less memorable ones. The structured learning experiences in this Bias Bite provide educators with a more thorough understanding of this bias. They also help educators develop greater humility and awareness of their cognitive limitations, fostering more spaces for civil discourse in their schools.



Driving Question

Why do we make decisions on the basis of information that comes to mind easily and quickly?

Materials Needed

- Current data for several global topics of concern (see Activate)
- “Which Are Deadlier: Sharks or Horses?” video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

Bias Description

The availability heuristic is a cognitive shortcut that people use to make decisions and judgments about the future. Essentially, if something can be recalled quickly, we assume it is more common or likely to happen. Our brains use heuristics or “rules of thumb” that help them make decisions more easily and quickly. The brain likes to save energy, so it makes decisions quickly using easily recalled information. This shortcut can lead us to think that things that come to mind easily happen more often than they really do.

Every bias has its pros and cons. The pros and cons of the availability heuristic are as follows:

- Speed and efficiency. The availability heuristic allows us to make quick judgments and decisions based on readily available information in our memory.
- Biased judgments. Relying on the ease of recall can lead to biased judgments as we overestimate the frequency or probability of events that are easily remembered while underestimating those that are not.

Bias in Action: School-Based Examples

- Teachers might overestimate the frequency of misbehavior in their classrooms because they can easily recall recent incidents, leading them to assume that misbehavior is more common than it actually is.
- A school administrator might base curriculum decisions on easily recalled or memorable teaching methods, thereby overestimating the effectiveness of a particular teaching method or focusing on resources that are easily available instead of those that are best for students.

Professional Development Protocol for School Leaders

ACTIVATE


- Divide educators into groups of 3–5 and have them quickly brainstorm and list as many examples as they can for 1 of the following global topics: poverty, happiness, cancer, and disease.
- Ask each group to estimate the annual number of deaths caused by each event in the United States. Encourage educators to discuss their estimates within their groups.
- Present the actual number of deaths and have groups reflect on their estimates versus the actual numbers.

EXPLAIN

- Show the video “Which Are Deadlier: Sharks or Horses?”
- Introduce the definition of the availability heuristic.
- Explain why the availability heuristic occurs.
 - We can explain the availability heuristic using dual process theory, which states that we have 2 distinct cognitive systems for decision-making, 1 that is automatic (System 1) and 1 that is effortful (System 2). Both are incredibly helpful systems under the right conditions.
 - The availability heuristic is a product of the automatic system, arising from our affective state. Our emotions can alter our perception of the risks and benefits of a certain outcome, swaying how likely we are to choose it.
- Provide examples.
 - Some examples you might share are job market pessimism, neighborhood crime rates, airplane crashes versus car accidents, and so on.
- Share mitigation strategies.
 - Actively seek out diverse sources of information when making decisions rather than just relying on personal experiences or recent events. These sources can include research studies, expert opinions, and data analytics.
 - Actively seek out information that contradicts your initial impressions. If you're relying on a handful of vivid examples, search for data, research, or other experiences that provide a more balanced perspective.

DISCUSS

- Divide educators into groups and discuss scenarios using the following guiding questions:
 - What is the relationship between this bias and other biases?

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- How can the availability heuristic show up in schools for different stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, families)?
 - Under what conditions or in what situations are we most susceptible to this bias?
 - How could one recognize when this bias is affecting them?
 - What are some strategies to overcome this bias?
 - What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve civil discourse?

SYNTHESIZE

- Revisit the driving question and have participants respond.