



Bias Bite #9: Affect 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 focus on the affect heuristic, which is our tendency to make quick decisions based on current emotions rather than on objective facts. While this cognitive shortcut allows one to make fast, efficient decisions, it can also lead one to make distorted judgments and irrational choices. 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 rely on our current emotions when making quick decisions?

Materials Needed

- “Heuristics and Biases in Decision Making, Explained” video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

Bias Description

The affect heuristic refers to our tendency to base decisions on emotions rather than solid facts. Although this approach enables us to arrive at conclusions swiftly and effortlessly, it can also lead to distorted reasoning.

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

- Speed and efficiency. The affect heuristic allows us to make decisions quickly and easily, saving time and cognitive effort. Emotions can drive action and motivate us to make decisions, even when we might not feel like it.
- Distorted judgment. Emotional responses may result in biased decisions, leading to irrational or suboptimal choices based on feelings rather than facts.

Bias in Action: School-Based Examples

- Students may be perceived as “bad” if they are frequently disruptive, leading teachers or peers to overlook their strengths because of frustration with them.
- Teachers may judge students on the basis of past experiences with similar students, which can result in unfair treatment or expectations.
- New school policies (e.g., dress codes, technology use) can lead to emotional reactions that can influence how stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, families) respond, sometimes leading to resistance based on feelings rather than facts.

Professional Development Protocol for School Leaders

ACTIVATE

- Ask educators to think of a time when they made a decision emotionally. Then have them turn and talk with their partners about what happened and what the outcome was.
- Tell a story about when, as an educator, you based a decision on emotions rather than on facts. Be sure to include details about what happened, your emotions, and what the


impact was.

EXPLAIN

- Show the video “Heuristics and Biases in Decision Making, Explained.”
- Introduce the definition of the affect heuristic.
- Explain why the affect heuristic occurs.
 - We can explain the affect 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 affect 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.
 - Public health campaigns have used the affect heuristic to deter people from engaging in unhealthy behavior by sharing scary or disturbing information. For example, in some countries, anti-smoking campaigns place information about the consequences of smoking and pictures of diseased gums and lungs on cigarette packages. A survey found that the more negative emotions people felt in response to these warning labels, the more likely they were to cut back on smoking or even quit altogether.
- Share mitigation strategies.
 - Actively seek out information and arguments that challenge your initial emotional response. This action can help you move beyond initial knee-jerk reactions.
 - Collect and analyze relevant data and information before making a decision. This activity can help ground your judgment in objective evidence rather than in emotions alone.
 - Employ frameworks like the cost-benefit analysis or decision matrix to structure your thinking and weigh facts rather than just emotions.
 - If you feel emotionally charged about a decision, take a break before making a choice. The break will give you time to cool down and consider things more rationally.

DISCUSS

- Divide educators into groups and discuss scenarios using the following guiding questions.
 - In what situations can the affect heuristic be helpful? Harmful?

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- How can this 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 the bias is affecting them?
 - What are some strategies to overcome this bias?
 - What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what way can our awareness of this bias improve civil discourse?

SYNTHESIZE

- Revisit the driving question and have participants respond.