

## Module 3: Schemas

In the previous module, we mentioned that frames activate our internalized schemas that generate meanings for a situation or problem and in turn, lead to a response or solution. Schemas are memory structures located in persons. They are entrenched visual, aural, tactile, olfactory, kinesthetic and other multimodal neural associations developed via repeated embodied experiences be it perceptual, sensorimotor, or interactional and stored in long-term memory. Schemas are cultural because they are learned and may be shared and distributed across persons, provided they have similar life histories and experiences.

Please read about a fictitious person named Nitin. Nitin spends a great amount of time pursuing what he calls novel, exciting experiences. He has already climbed the Annapurna peaks in the Himalayas, shot the rapids in Rishikesh in a kayak, driven in a demolition derby and is currently learning how to pilot a chopper. He has risked injury, and even death, a number of times. He is also in search of new excitement as I speak - thinking, perhaps, he should do some skydiving or maybe cross the Atlantic in a sailboat. Nitin is well aware of his ability to do many things well. Other than business engagements, his contacts with people are rather limited. He felt he doesn't really need to rely on anyone. Once Nitin makes up his mind to do something, it is as good as done, no matter how long it might take or how difficult the going might be. So does Nitin seem to be an attractive, adventurous sort of person or an unappealing, reckless sort of person?

If several minutes before you read that paragraph you had been exposed to words like self-confident, independent, persistent, you would likely have rated him as an attractive, adventurous sort of person. That's because those set of words conjure up the schema of an active, exciting and interesting person. Instead of that set of words, if you had read words like conceited, aloof, stubborn, you might have assessed him as an unpleasant, reckless or even self-destructive person. Because that set of words calls up a schema of an unpleasant, self-centred person concerned only with his own pleasures. Would you believe me if I told you Nitin was a top flight corporate lawyer or business school faculty member who taught senior executives in organizations? I didn't think so. The picture instantly conjures up a schema of a person who doesn't remotely resemble a high powered lawyer or faculty member.

Schemas guide our understanding of the world and drive our perceptions of the world. They are ubiquitous and are always operating, often completely unconsciously, on raw sensations and experiences to determine what we see and believe. For example, people are more likely to vote for increased taxes for education if the polling place is a school. That brings up all kinds of schemas about school and studying and the importance of education. If you want someone to like you, hand them a cup of chai or coffee, they will perceive you as warmer.

In helping us understand the world, schemas prompt us to behave appropriately. We have schemas for persons, social situations, self and events. For house, family, civil war, insect, introvert, party animal, policeman, doctor, fast food restaurant, fancy restaurant. We should behave differently toward policemen than toward doctors and we should behave differently in fast food restaurants than in fancy restaurants. So these kinds of schemas are mostly useful.

However, schemas can also intrude in a way that is not very helpful. Stereotypes, in particular, can lead us to troublesome and disturbing behaviors. Consider this example, where a pair of Columbia Business School professors took a Harvard Business School case study about a venture capitalist named Heidi Roizen and changed her name to "Howard" in half of the classes taught. The professors then surveyed the students about their impressions of Heidi or Howard. While both Heidi and Howard were rated as equally competent, students said they found Heidi less humble and more power hungry and self-promoting than Howard. What did Heidi do differently? Nothing. The answer is clear because both case studies were exactly the same. The only variable was the protagonists' names which led the students to interpret their actions differently.

Research confirms this observation, showing that the same behavior is interpreted differently when observed in a man or a woman - resulting from gender stereotypes. Our schema for what is considered masculine and feminine in our culture can lead to stereotypes about how we expect men and women to behave and the roles we expect them to fill. Our stereotype of men holds that they are providers, decisive, and driven. Our stereotype of women holds that they are caregivers, sensitive, and communal. Women who don't meet this stereotype are seen as less likable than men portraying the exact same behavior. So people liked Howard, and disliked Heidi, who violated our stereotypical expectations of women. In such case, our culturally defined schemas and induced gender stereotypes could manifest in our work environments in a manner that is detrimental to the progress of women.

Schema shape not just perception but also memory. In one study, students watched a video of a husband and wife having dinner together. Some of the participants were told that the woman was a librarian and some were told that she was a waitress. Then after seeing the videos, students were asked a number of questions about what they'd seen. If they thought they had seen a librarian, they tended to remember she had been drinking a glass of wine. If they thought she was a waitress, they tended to remember she had been drinking a glass of beer. If she was a librarian, they remembered her mentioning a history book. If she was a waitress, they remembered her mentioning a romance novel.

So schemas have a profound effect on what we see, what we hear, what we remember, and how we behave. They determine rubrics, stereotypes and worldviews that influence judgment. It is important for us, to be aware of their role in decision-making, including that they might limit adaptation, change and new learning, thereby leading to sub-optimal decisions and outcomes. Now that we have an understanding of frames and schemas that influence our representations of common situations, let's move forward and discuss another important cognitive process, heuristics, that are rules of thumb for reasoning and their role in intuitive thinking and decision-making.