

Availability Heuristic and Riveted

People often place a higher belief or value on their self-generated ideas versus the ideas of other people. This is due to the cognitive bias known as the availability heuristic, which is the idea that things that are most easily brought to memory are more probable. This concept, was introduced in class by Professor Jim Davies and is expanded further by his book *Riveted: The Science of Why Jokes Make Us Laugh, Movies Make Us Cry, and Religion Makes Us Feel One with the Universe*. In his book he tries to explain why this bias occurs and what causes it. He also mentions how this bias can manipulate our views on different topics such as religion, diseases, and dangerous events.

In his book, Davies explains how humans have evolved to be able to guess how common something is without the use of statistics or systematic counting. We estimate how often we have seen something by how easily it is brought to memory or how available it is. This works because as we observe something over and over we create links between things in our minds. For example, if a friend of yours tells you that a certain food is bad for you, then you might be better at remembering what food is bad for you by thinking of your friend. As something gets more links to it, then it becomes easier to recall it from memory and in our mind becomes more probable or true. Therefore, as we see something over and over more links are created, this object is easier to recall and we believe it to be more common. This is the essence of the availability heuristic which we use to base our ideas of how true, probable or common something is. This can cause us to leap to conclusions that are not necessarily true. For example if we have an idea about the world that has many links, then regardless of what we will think of eventually we will get to that idea. Since this idea is easy to recall we will believe it's more probable or true even though we have done nothing to verify the idea's merits.

How does the availability heuristic effect worth of self-generated ideas? In his book Davies explains how the easiest way to generate a lot of links is through elaboration. By generating the idea yourself and really thinking about how it relates your life, other ideas, etc many links are created. This causes the idea to be better remembered and therefore have a higher value due to the availability heuristic. This may also explain why the availability heuristic is more extreme with regards to things that are vivid or emotional. Typically memories we as humans dwell more on memories that are emotionally charged, sexual or violent. As a result we begin to create more links between these emotionally charged memories and other things. This results in the events being much easier to recall as well as more available.

A study done by Schwarz and his colleagues proposed the ease of retrieval explanation, which states that the availability heuristic strength is determined by ease of examples coming to mind rather than the number of examples (Schwarz et al, 1991). This study was done by asking participants to recall six or twelve examples of their assertive or unassertive behavior, then the participants were asked to rate their own assertiveness. The results indicated that the participants rated themselves more assertive after describing six examples of assertive compared with unassertive behavior, but rated themselves as less assertive after describing twelve

examples of assertive compared with unassertive behavior condition. This is believed to have happened because thinking of twelve examples is harder than six (Schwarz et al, 1991).

While humans method of guessing how common something is without the use of statistics works well when we are only using our sensory perception as input, the same method does not work as well when we reason about what we are told, read and see on video. This is in part due to the old-brain/new-brain split as explained by Davies in his book. The old brain acts more on an intuitive basis using precoded rules, while the new brain acts as a general purpose learner. Due to survival needs we evolved to trust one another, as a result we have good evolutionary reasons to believe stories that people tell us. While we may have evolved some form of lie detection there has not been enough time to evolve some sort of lie filter for videos. The result is our old brain and potentially part of our new brain believes anything we see on video as if it was happening right in front of us. This causes us to form memory and links about things that did not in fact happen to us, but we treat it as if it did. As a result, due to the availability heuristic we can easily recall things that media communication has shown us. In addition to the fact that the ease of remembering examples is more important than the amount of examples, as explained above, results in a few well publicized examples giving us a very skewed vision of what the world really is. Davies presents a few examples of this happening in his book. Due to news reports talking about breast cancer, women in their forties vastly overestimate their chances of getting breast cancer. Another example given by Davies was that during the 1980s and early 1990s people were very worried about their children being sexually assaulted in day care centers. This was due to several broadcasted examples making the problem seem more common than it actually was.

While the availability heuristic may be a relatively simple concept to understand, the impact it has on our lives is staggering. The fear of male caregivers being child molesters has had a crippling effect on men's ability to get jobs as childcare workers. With news being filled up more and more by crime people believe that the crime rate is rising, when in reality it is not. Unknowingly people can be swayed to believe or disbelieve something just by the media doing several stories about a topic. Understanding the availability heuristic and being able to spot it may allow people to not be as easily swayed, as well as allow them to evaluate ideas on their merit instead of on how easy the idea is to recall.

References:

Schwarz, Norbert; Bless, Herbert; Strack, Fritz; Klumpp, Gisela; Rittenauer-Schatka, Helga; Simons, Annette (1991). "Ease of retrieval as information: Another look at the availability heuristic". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 61 (2): 195–202.