

Psychology of Thinking (CPSY308), Section 3J0, Winter 2017

Assignment Outline — Due March 31 — Worth 25%

The purpose of this assignment is to get you to find examples of course concepts in everyday life. This course is filled with tools and labels that help us understand when and how people (including us) are demonstrating poor thinking (e.g., unfalsifiability, confirmation bias, representativeness heuristic, endowment effect, denying the antecedent, availability heuristic, motivated reasoning, ego depletion, gambler's fallacy...).

Instructions: Find 5 (five) examples you have encountered of poor thinking, and for each example

1) State and describe in your own words and using your own illustrative examples the tool or term from the course that is being demonstrated. For example,

Concept 1: Unfalsifiability describes a condition where one's beliefs cannot be properly put to the test (and so cannot be falsified) due to ambiguity, lack of specificity, lack of available technology, lack of consistency, or having a theory-of-everything that could describe anything in retrospect but could therefore predict nothing. Examples include "the weather will change soon" (unfalsifiable because neither "change" nor "soon" are specific enough to be wrong—they can only be shown *correct*) and "aliens built the pyramids" (unfalsifiable because we lack the technology to check the entire universe for wonder-building aliens—it can only be shown *correct*, if they were to land and take credit). Unfalsifiability is a problem because it prevents us from learning when we are wrong. We can of course still be correct when we hold an unfalsifiable belief, but in the event that it is wrong there will be nothing to show us we are wrong. Since the vast majority of human learning is learning from mistakes, unfalsifiability can be a huge roadblock to personal and epistemic development.

Concept 2: Confirmation bias refers to our tendency to see what we want to see, what we expect to see, or even what makes us feel better. We attend more to things that confirm our beliefs than things that could change or challenge them, making us bad at keeping track of disconfirming instances and good at explaining away the ones we do notice as exceptions. Anyone who has watched refereed sports with a die-hard fan has experienced the referees being called "blind" or "biased" when they make decisions against the fan's team (or fail to make decisions in their favour) and "correct" when they make decisions in their team's favour (or fail to make decisions in the other team's favour). The bias being confirmed in this case is that the fan's own team is morally above drawing penalties (or "just playing the game") while the opposing team is morally inferior (being given or trying to gain an unfair advantage). Confirmation bias is a problem because it prevents us from keeping accurate track of reality. It makes us feel better about our beliefs, but at the cost of accuracy.

Concept 3: The representativeness heuristic refers to our tendency to apply our judgements about one thing to other things that we perceive as being similar or of the same category. The heuristic saves us time because we simply apply whatever we learned about some previous similar thing in the category (or the category itself) to the new thing we have placed in that category (rather than learning something new or solving a new problem). One example might be assuming that a seven-year-old you have not met will not want to sit quietly and read a book, either because your own seven-year-old does not or you think that any human in the category "seven-year-old" has this property. The heuristic can save us time and is often useful and correct, but can also make us wrong (e.g., when our classification or beliefs about the group are wrong) and can be an unfair and lazy way to make judgments.

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2) Introduce and describe the example you have found (be as brief or as long as you think is required to communicate the example clearly). For example,

Also, if the example is from an internet video publicly available (Youtube, CNN, vlogs) include a direct link, if it is from a comment section or social media (Facebook, Youtube, Reddit) include a screenshot (using print screen or windows snipping tool), and if it is from print media try to include an image (picture or scan). If your example is just something recalled from television (e.g., a sit-com, news), your life, or a conversation, then no such provenance is required, but it is expected that *at least* one of your five examples will have this sort of “proof” or documentation.

Example 1: During his campaign against Clinton, Trump would claim that polls showing him with a lead were evidence of his “movement” being successful, while polls that showed Clinton in the lead were evidence of media bias or tampering.

Example 2: Trailer #2 for the Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson movie *Baywatch* contains the following dialogue:

Officer: “Even if you were police, what you did would still be totally illegal”

The Rock: “Okay, well, I mean, it’s a good thing we’re not police then”

(Source: <https://youtu.be/tb6KpoxaAFg?t=1m20s>)

Example 3: Beneath a Youtube video about vaccine conspiracies was this comment:

 vaccinations and flu shots! what do you think is in them? why are they FREE, when we have to pay for everything else? think about it? what are they putting in you? dont get them, or let your children get them

Reply •  

3) Clearly explain how the example you described is a good representation of the tool or term, and some consequences (actual or hypothetical) of this example of poor thinking. For example,

Explanation 1: Trump’s theory explains everything but predicts nothing. There is no outcome that could disprove his idea of poll tampering or his idea of the dominance of his movement. The consequence is not just that he cannot learn if he is incorrect, it is also that intelligent listeners will see he does not care about or know how to pursue the truth and the less savvy listeners will be stuck in a self-confirming loop where every possible poll outcome is a demonstration of the accuracy of their beliefs. This may be strategically brilliant on Trump’s part, but with regards to the truth it both demonstrates and perpetuates poor thinking.

Explanation 2: The Rock’s response shows selective attention to the Officer’s initial admonishment. Wanting to absolve himself of responsibility or escape punishment, he hears “it is illegal for police officers to do what you did” rather than “it is illegal for everyone, even police officers, to do what you did”. This could also fall under self-serving bias. It is confirmation bias because he is selectively attending to the bits of reality that stand a chance of confirming that his actions were correct or that he should not be held responsible for them. Consequences of this poor thinking include 1) he is wasting the good grace of the officer (demonstrating that you are unreasonable does little to motivate others to negotiate or compromise with you), 2) he is failing to learn (that what he did was illegal), and 3) he is showing a lack of basic intelligence regarding how universal affirmatives work.

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Explanation 3: The comment assumes that because vaccines belong in the category of “free things” they are undesirable or harmful. It is unclear whether the argument is based on a universal affirmative (all free things are bad) or a particular affirmative (some free things are bad) but the former is implied. This is the representativeness heuristic causing a misapplication of classical categorical reasoning: It is not clear that vaccines belong in the category of “free” (since health care is funded by taxes), it is not clear that the category of free things is indeed an indicator of undesirability or harmfulness (e.g., roads are free in the same sense and are not considered an evil), and it is unclear that if freeness *were* such an indicator it is such an indicator *in this case*. The consequences are not just the specific poor decision to not vaccinate yourself and your dependents, but also the presumed belief reinforcement that would come from making and accepting the general premise: Stating that what is free is undesirable or harmful could reinforce your belief in that statement and lead to other representativeness errors for that category (e.g., not trusting public parks, ignoring public health advisories, even paying more for services under the assumption that cost is goodness or quality). In this case, representativeness at best permitted lazy thinking.

There are two general approaches to this assignment: You could select reasoning errors that you like and spend a few weeks looking out for good examples, or you could keep a look out for (and save) things that sound like thinking errors and then figure out which concept each demonstrates. Using the same concept (e.g., unfalsifiability) for more than one example is discouraged, but if you have very good and notably very different examples then go ahead.

Formatting (Microsoft Word or equivalent program)

Roughly 5-10 pages (1-2 per example) double-spaced, 12 point font, 1” margins. Cite in APA. The real-life examples you find do not require formal citation (but if you are planning to continue to graduate work or media studies it would benefit you to learn and use the correct formal citation).

Suggested order: Concept 1, Example 1, Explanation 1, Concept 2, Example 2, Explanation 2, etc.

Submission

Submit to turnitin (on D2L, Assessments→Assignments) before March 31, 11:59pm.