

Notes on Chapter 13 of Thinking, Fast and Slow

Chapter 12 was about the availability bias. Things that are easier to recall are assumed to occur more frequently. So, personal experience is weighed heavily. Recent events and newsworthy events are assumed to occur more frequently than they probably occur.

Chapter 13 is titled *Availability, Emotion, Risk*. Availability explains disaster preparedness. After a flood makes the news homeowners in an area will stockpile supplies and reinforce their foundations. As time passes and the flood memory becomes more distant homeowners in the area become complacent. Because accidental deaths make the news more often than death due to disease many people think that deaths due to accidents occur almost as often as death due to disease. (It is closer to 5-6% of deaths.)

Further coherence affects our opinions. If someone has a negative opinion of a new technology for generating power for instance, reading about its benefits also changes opinions about risks. Similarly reading about its low risks increases perception of its benefits.

Availability and coherence can have a great impact on public policy debate. It can cascade as the media picks up on the story and the same arguments and incidents are repeated increasing availability in viewers. The health risk of alar on apples is given as an example. Alar caused cancer in mice given massive doses. Apples crops were destroyed and alar banned. However, it probably posed little risk to humans and since people ate fewer fruit it may have actually hurt public health overall. On the other hand it may have focused public attention more broadly on the environment leading to other gains. So, it is difficult to tell sometimes whether the cascade leads in total to good or bad outcomes overall.

I'm not sure where this falls for helping teaching or other aspects of my work. I think it would be difficult to create a cascade affect. I guess this serves as a reminder to me to remind people in meetings that their anecdotes should not stand alone and should be compared to data about student success and the factors that contribute to it when decisions are made.