

**Making Observations of Psychological Processes in Everyday Life [Student Handout]****[02] Cognition****A. Introduction**

Humans minds are virtually always at work and they always have work to do. Ask us about it and we typically give one kind of answer, but even when we always have

something to say, but there's good reason to believe that despite efforts to be honest and accurate we never give *complete* answers—if only because we don't actually know what our minds are doing, let alone how they do it. Uncomfortably, much psychological research converges on the conclusion that what we say about such matters represents much more what we'd like to think, how we'd like to feel and what's going on at the moment than what's really happening.

We can train our Type 2 thinking systems to work reasonably well. At the same time we can set up different kinds of social procedures—the scientific method is probably the most famous, but by no means the only one—that effectively compensate for our personal limitations and support much better decisions and actions. Nonetheless, a great deal of research in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century showed that the norm is very different. Indeed, Kahneman and Tversky won a Nobel Prize for their demonstration of systematic and pervasive biases in normal thinking in people of normal intelligence.

**B. Questions to Guide Your (Re)Search**

[1] Most of the cognitive biases we know about happen so seamlessly and provide answers that seem so reasonable—not to say inevitable—that we don't notice they're happening. As is often the case it's easier, in general, to perceive them operating in other people. How often can you detect a friend or relative falling into biased ways of thinking, such as happens with a confirmation bias, or the patting-themselves-on-the-back that accompanies a hindsight bias?

[2] Type 2 thinking is what we start doing when we run out of ideas. It can be a powerful tool but we have to learn how to use it and like any skill it takes time and effort to get it running well. That leads to dilemmas where Type 2 thinking intrudes when it shouldn't and actually gets in the way. What is happening when people 'think too much' about something? What sorts of things cause them to do so?

[3] One of the most frequent pieces of advice that self-help books provide is to 'trust your gut', which is just another way of urging people to pay attention to their Type 1 thinking and take it seriously. How often do people normally 'trust their gut'? What sorts of things happen when they don't? What sorts of things cause people to *not* 'trust their gut'?

[4] Thinking takes time and effort—brains use at least three times more energy per unit weight than any other part of the body—so we all take pains to decrease how much work we have to do in thinking about things. A common way this happens is that Type 1 thinking concludes that something can't be known, done or resolved, even though it can be. How often do people stop thinking before they should?

**Key Concepts**

- Type 1 & Type 2 Thinking
- Heuristics (availability, representative, etc)
- Cognitive Biases (confirmation, hindsight, etc)
- Cognitive miser
- Confabulation