

## **Addressing Resistance to Mixed-Income Communities**

### **Through Empathetic Planning Techniques**

Aly Andrews, Project Management Advisors, Inc.  
Sydney VanKuren, Farr Associates

Imagine a young woman who wants to move back to her hometown to care for her ailing mother: Despite having a steady job and a college education (and the accompanying student debt), she cannot find any rental apartments near transit and must reluctantly purchase a condo that she cannot really afford. On the other side of the country, imagine an aging man active in his community: He cannot afford his mortgage payment and manage the upkeep of his home, but lacks options to downsize and stay in the neighborhood that he loves.

Engaged, productive individuals like these are facing this tough situation every day; they have a meaningful reason to live in a community, but there are too few choices for them there. A lack of choice creates spatial inequalities in urban environments. This spatial inequality is seen across the country, from wealthy communities looking to exclude renters (and the perceived stigma that comes with them) and homogeneous communities actively opposing newcomers of different races and ethnicities; to legacy or shrinking communities experiencing population decline and economic disinvestment; and everything in-between.

These issues are well known to planners and have received much attention—yet they persist. Why is it so difficult to both create and sustain communities with a mix of incomes, rental versus owned homes, and racial and ethnic populations? One reason is that humans are hard-wired to expect no change and, if change does occur, to go into a kind of high alert and resist it. People’s willingness to embrace change—even essential change—directly affects our ability to achieve diverse, inclusive, and equitable communities. In particular, community residents often perceive people of different races and incomes as “others” or “different” and view their presence as change, and therefore a threat, to their environment.

Because plans for mixed-income development frequently meet with community opposition to change, it is essential to understand the factors that can lead to biases and how those biases inform community resistance to inclusive mixed-income communities. Planners, property managers, service providers, community organizations, and others

involved with mixed-income communities can then take steps to counteract these biases and “even the playing field.” The technique proposed here to encourage more inclusive, equitable mixed-income communities is called empathetic planning, which is defined as planning that elicits empathy from community members during a public-engagement planning process in order to move community planning goals forward.

### ***Understanding Heuristics and their Impact on Community Change***

Communities often identify long-term goals such as “sustainable economic growth in the form of more fair-wage jobs,” or “healthy, walkable communities.” While these goals are universally understood as “desirable,” planners in these communities often face members unwilling to accept the planning changes necessary to achieve these goals (e.g., an economically and racially diverse resident workforce population; and dense, mixed-use development, respectively).

Why is this? Our evolutionary past has shaped the stunning range of ways in which we perceive and respond to change. As individuals, we are for change when it fits our worldview, when it is in our self-interest, or when our peer group sees it in the same way. We are against change if it is imposed on us, if it is perceived as leaving us worse off in any way, or if it occurs too fast.

An understanding of the most common biases we experience—and the complex and nuanced ways in which we perceive change—is essential to making better decisions and for diverse communities to thrive. While we often think of human brains as being “logical,” research by Nobel Prize-winning psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky instead reveals a brain that often gets things wrong. We each want to believe that we (that is, our brains) make rational decisions, but limited, conflicting, and/or unavailable information forces our brains to rely on shortcuts that bias our decisions. To make decisions with limited or conflicting information, our brains rely on heuristics, defined as “simple procedure[s] that [help] find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions,”<sup>1</sup> often by substituting a simpler question. This process occurs without us being aware of the substitution our brains have made.

For example, if you wanted to determine the circumference of a circle, your brain is likely to replace the indeterminate number pi (3.1415 . . .) with the number 3 and to round up slightly. Or, rather than go through the laborious process to determine which political candidate’s position is in your best interests, you may instead vote for the person you consider more likeable—or perhaps the person your friend is voting for. The mental

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013), 98.

errors caused by these simplified information processing strategies are called cognitive biases.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to heuristics that affect almost everyone, our receptivity to change also varies with age. Put simply, as youths we embrace change before we have the wisdom to judge its merits; and, as seniors with the wisdom to judge the merits of change, we may begin to lose interest in it. Across cultures, adolescents exhibit a triad of routine behaviors: “(1) increased novelty seeking; (2) increased risk taking; and (3) a social affiliation shift toward peer-based interactions.”<sup>3</sup> The “adolescent brain continues to mature well into the 20s,”<sup>4</sup> suggesting that novelty seeking and risk taking—traits that favor change—may play an outsized role during this period. Other research has identified three age-related developments that make us, on average, more resistant to change as we age: (1) decreased intellectual curiosity;<sup>5</sup> (2) reduced tolerance for ambiguity, leading us to seek closure;<sup>6</sup> and (3) higher self-esteem when expressing attitudes that avoid risk and uncertainty.<sup>7</sup>

The recognition of how age affects our receptivity to change poses a dilemma for community planners and others seeking public input. Many proposals for community change are first introduced in neighborhood meetings, which, as a practical matter, are attended by three types of people: the civic-minded, the passionate, and those who have time to attend. The passionate category includes people on both sides of an issue; however, the loss-aversion heuristic indicates that opponents of change are twice as emotionally committed as proponents.<sup>8</sup> Meetings that skew either younger or older may embrace or reject change out of step with the proposal’s merits. Should we honor the effort of those people who bothered to show up to a meeting, by assuming that room to be representative of the larger community? Or should we adjust our conclusions to compensate for age-related perceptions of change? When the changes we need to get to a

---

<sup>2</sup> Richards J. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1999). Available at [www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis](http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis); accessed August 3, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Sara B. Johnson, Robert W. Blum, and Jay N. Giedd, “Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no. 3 (2010): 216-21.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Blum, and Giedd. “Adolescent Maturity and the Brain”

<sup>5</sup> Brent W. Roberts, Kate E. Walton, and Wolfgang Viechtbauer, “Patterns of Mean-Level Change in Personality Traits across the Life Course: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies,” *Psychological Bulletin* 132, no. 1 (2006): 1-25.

<sup>6</sup> John T. Jost, Jack Glaser, Arie W. Kruganski, and Frank J. Sulloway, “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition,” *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 3 (2003): 339-75.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Van Hiel and Lieven Brebels, “Conservatism Is Good for You: Cultural Conservatism Protects Self-Esteem in Older Adults,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 1 (2011): 120-23. [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886910004320](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886910004320); accessed July 3, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “Loss aversion,” [Behavioraleconomics.com](http://Behavioraleconomics.com), accessed July 3, 2017, [www.behavioraleconomics.com/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/loss-aversion/](http://www.behavioraleconomics.com/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/loss-aversion/)

preferred future require action by those in power today, but have large implications for the next generations, who should make those decisions?

Heuristics and biases are particularly applicable to planning because public participation inherently asks people to make quick judgments in uncertain situations. Research helps explain why people default to “no” when asked if a particular change or proposed design is suitable for their community. Faced with an impossible question to compute, the brain substitutes the question at hand—“What types of housing are appropriate for this area of your community?”—with easier ones they can solve for: “Do I want that type of housing near me? Do I want the type of people whom I associate with that housing as neighbors?” The brain does not have time to analyze whether its associations are stereotypical and discriminatory; it makes the best decision possible with the information at hand.

Table 1 (p. 5) summarizes some of the most common heuristics that community members are likely to apply when making decisions in community meetings, and the extent of bias they may cause.

### ***Empathetic Planning: A Strategy for Addressing Heuristics***

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person, usually based on experience, context, emotions, goals, and motivations.<sup>9</sup> Empathetic planning acknowledges that heuristics and cognitive biases are a factor in how community members engage in planning and compensates for them by eliciting empathy from community members as part of the community engagement process. Specifically, empathetic planning incorporates exercises that help participants feel empathy toward those impacted by their preferences. The idea is to have people who oppose change recognize that the “others” being affected by their preferences are actually more like themselves than they realize. In fact, their opposition to change might be excluding the very people that they want and need in their communities in order to achieve long-term sustainability goals.

Empathetic planning offers a method to “level the playing field” in communities that have already identified positive goals such as greater health and happiness, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and increased economic development. When people in these communities are considering proposals that help meet their goals (for example a higher-density, mixed-income development near transit), there may be some opposition. If so, it

---

<sup>9</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. “empathy,” accessed Aug. 2, 2018, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld)

**Table 1: Typical Heuristics and The Biases They May Cause<sup>10</sup>**

HEURISTIC	DEFINITION	POTENTIAL BIASES
<b>1. Loss Aversion</b> <i>("Loss is worse than gain")</i>	Most people prefer to avoid a loss rather than acquire an equal gain, and they value the magnitude of the loss as twice the value of the gain.	People who are given incentives to meet a goal up front, and then told they must give back the incentive if they fail to meet the goal, are significantly more likely to meet the goal than people given the incentive only after meeting the goal.
<b>2. Framing</b> <i>"Glass half empty vs. glass half full")</i>	People respond differently to the same choice depending on how it is framed (i.e., how they perceive and comprehend the situation).	When option A is presented in a favorable light and option B is not, people tend to choose option A over B. If option B is presented more favorably than A, people are likely to choose B instead.
<b>3. Anchoring</b> <i>("Planting information")</i>	Information, even totally unrelated to the question at hand, can seed thoughts and affect conclusions.	Asking people to guess the answer to the problem "1x2x3...x8 = ?" yields significantly lower numbers than asking the same question but ordering numbers "8x7x6...x1 = ?" despite the answer to these questions being the same: 40,320.
<b>4. Diversification</b> <i>("Seeking variety")</i>	People are more likely to diversify when asked to make a simultaneous choice than when making sequential choices.	When asked to choose 6 snacks for the next 3 weeks, people tend to diversify their snack choices significantly more than when they are asked in each of 3 separate weeks to pick 6 snacks.
<b>5. Decoy</b> <i>("Choosing between similar options")</i>	When given a choice of three options, people tend to choose one of the two most similar to each other.	If people are given a choice of A or B and then C is introduced, and C is similar to but not better than B, people will prefer B.
<b>6. Representativeness</b> <i>("The risk of relying on a small sample size")</i>	People often interpret what they see in a small sample size as representative of a larger sample size.	People will extrapolate what they typically see around them on a daily basis to other people or areas they are not familiar with.
<b>7. Availability</b> <i>("Ease of recollection")</i>	When something is easier to recall, it sticks out in people's memories as seemingly more common than it actually is and therefore has a disproportionately large impact on decisionmaking.	When asked which is more common, A or B, people tend to identify the option they remember most easily—even if the alternative actually is more common.
<b>8. Status Quo Bias</b> <i>("Stay the course")</i>	People tend to stick with what they already know.	All else being equal, people tend to choose the default option rather than analyze the costs and benefits of alternatives.
<b>9. Escalation of Commitment</b> <i>("Justifying additional investment")</i>	After committing resources to something, people tend to use the initial commitment as justification to commit additional resources, regardless of whether it would be more prudent to withdraw commitment.	A community that has invested heavily in option A is less likely to choose the more beneficial option B if the choice involves abandoning A.

may be beneficial to make the biases explicit and let people in the community decide whether and how to correct for them. Often, the act of examining a situation from

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix for examples of images used to demonstrate these heuristics. Images credited to Douglas Farr. *Sustainable Nation: Urban Design Patterns for the Future*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2018.

someone else's perspective shows people that their perspectives are not very far apart, or may have been close at an earlier point in time. This can help community members identify people with differing viewpoints as part of their "tribe," rather than someone to treat as an outsider.

Empathetic planning is *not* about manipulating community members. It is about leveraging behavioral science to help members of a community overcome subconscious heuristics to reach the community's self-identified goals. It is about getting members of the public to become self-aware of their own framing—and putting that framing aside—to make decisions for the future of their community. As planners, we know this is important: Planning decisions related to community-vision projects tend to be on decades-long timelines, and although current community members participate, the impact may apply more directly to future generations and/or people other than the participant.

It is worth noting that professional planners benefit from empathetic planning, too. Understanding how a person's brain solves a difficult problem (i.e., by replacing it with an easier one) can help planners better anticipate how a community is likely to react to a proposal, understand why some community members are so averse to change, and be prepared to facilitate tense discussions successfully. Ideally, planners who use empathetic planning techniques will also experience empathy toward current and potential community members during the planning process.

Moreover, planners have their own heuristics and cognitive biases that influence their work. When crafting a polling process, for example, planners may demonstrate "optimism bias" by "consistently overstat[ing] expected success and downplay[ing] expected failure."<sup>11</sup> By using empathetic planning techniques, planners can better understand potential pitfalls and compensate for them. This topic is revisited in the last section on implications for policy.

### ***Using Empathetic Planning to Address Heuristics***

Empathetic planning can be applied in many ways. Farr Associates<sup>12</sup> is actively adjusting the technique and has so far used it as a public engagement technique in conjunction with image preference surveys to help community members define the community character that they deem appropriate. The guidance and examples that follow, drawn from our experiences, illustrate how empathetic planning can be combined with familiar public outreach methods to address some of the common heuristics identified

---

<sup>11</sup> "Persuasive Patterns Card Deck," Brain Utilities ApS, accessed Aug. 3, 2018, <https://shop.ui-patterns.com/product/ui-patterns-card-deck/>

<sup>12</sup> Farr Associates is a firm of optimistic architects and planners in Chicago who are passionate about urbanism, sustainability, and leading by example.

earlier. As the examples show, empathetic planning has enabled us to subtly transition community conversations from focusing on specific building types and density to describing the kind of community residents want—discussions that more accurately addressed social infrastructure, community character, and culture. Put another way, the conversations have shifted from being about *form* to being about *people*.

**Loss Aversion.** Experts observe “that the pain of losing is psychologically about twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining.”<sup>13</sup> The effect of this heuristic is that the human brain becomes a terrible appraiser of potential changes, routinely miscalculating the relative value of what could be gained or lost. Thus people will go to great lengths to oppose a new, high-quality housing project that would replace a terrible but familiar one, even if the community has much to gain from the project, because they perceive the change as a loss. With empathetic planning, public participation exercises can leverage loss aversion to help build consensus. For instance, group exercises can start by giving each group an incentive, such as a voucher for free ice cream, up front that participants keep if they meet the goal of reaching consensus but must give back if they do not reach consensus.

A subset of the loss aversion heuristic is the “endowment effect.” This effect centers on property ownership: Residents often value something they own (e.g., a single-family home, a car) more than something they do not own (e.g., a small condo, transit options, access to a diverse mix of land uses and mixed-use buildings). Thus when participants in a long-term community planning meeting are asked what sorts of housing should be available in their community in the future, responders are likely to assign more value to the types of housing they currently own than to those that they do not own. This translates into a belief that other people want what they have, and therefore an assumption that the supply of what they currently own should grow to meet an imagined demand. In this way, the current community’s ownership characteristics could limit future community members’ choices. The empathetic planning process can address this situation by clearly articulating the bias and reminding people who resist the change of a time in their lives when they couldn’t afford the housing they now have and needed the proposed alternatives.

**Framing.** People respond differently to the same choice depending on how it is framed. How questions are worded and presented can lead to drastically different frames of mind—and, therefore, drastically different preferences. For example, imagine a community meeting about a 100-unit mixed-income development proposing 40 percent low-income units and 60 percent market-rate units. The planner could ask, “Do you approve of a mixed-income development that has 40 percent low-income units?” or the

---

<sup>13</sup> “Loss aversion,” Behavioraleconomics.com

planner could ask, “Do you approve of a mixed-income development that has 60 percent market-rate units?” The difference in framing between these two questions does not affect how many low-income versus market-rate units will be available. However, people do not answer equally in favor of each. The framing heuristic suggests that people will be more likely to choose the option that prioritizes what the community values. In communities that seem hesitant to introduce mixed-income projects, framing the question in terms of how many market-rate units are included may result in more support than the same question framed in terms of how many low-income units are included.

**Anchoring.** The typical brain is biased in favor of the first information received on a given topic. Therefore, the order in which information and questions are presented can skew participants’ answers. Even information unrelated to the topic at hand can have an impact. In research experiments, for example, when researchers first ask subjects how old their parent is and then ask for the answer to a complicated math problem, subjects tend to respond with a relatively large number, but when researchers precede the math problem with a question about how old the subject’s child is, subjects tend to respond with a relatively smaller number.

Empathetic planning can leverage this heuristic to anchor participants’ thinking about a particular aspect of inclusive, mixed-income development. For example, in 2016 Farr Associates’ urban design studio worked on a regional transit-oriented development planning project in the Chicago metropolitan region in which we surveyed public-meeting participants in three adjacent communities for their preferences on building types and development density. This project included an image preference survey in which residents were shown images of urban developments and asked whether each development type was appropriate for their community. Often, such real-time preference polls begin with a warm-up question (e.g., “What is your favorite type of food—pasta, meat and potatoes, dessert?”), which planners use to solicit information about the audience’s characteristics and habits. However, it is important to note that these questions are not neutral by default and could very easily influence respondents’ decision making throughout the rest of the survey. For example, asking an audience of mostly middle-aged Caucasian men about their favorite food—and hearing everyone in the room answer similarly—may give people a false sense of community homogeneity.

Farr Associates used the warm-up question as a chance to anchor people’s thinking about what types of people use different housing types. We asked the question: “What was your first home as an adult?” Possible answers included a friend’s couch, a room in a parent/family member’s home, a shared apartment, an apartment alone, or an owned condominium or house. This question reminded participants that, though they may now live in an owner-occupied, single-family home and oppose multifamily rental housing, at one time they may have needed that housing option. As expected, 52 percent,



56 percent, and 62 percent of respondents from each of the three polled communities answered that they first lived in a rented apartment after leaving their childhood home. We cannot know exactly what effect this attempt at anchoring had on the survey responses, because this was not a controlled experiment and we posed the question to all three communities involved in this project. Perhaps it achieved our goal of eliciting a positive experience with diverse housing types. This question also might have prompted participants to think about other people they know who are at the “first-home-as-a-young-adult” stage and recognize that single-family homes are not perfect for all households all the time.

Not every question should aim to be anchoring. In fact, sometimes it is important to actively avoid anchoring. In the Chicago example, for instance, after the warm-up question we carefully avoided questions that posed an “A or B” dichotomy (e.g., “Which development is better, type 1 or type 2?”) in favor of evaluating each option individually, because we have found that A or B dichotomies tend to anchor people’s responses by providing extra context. In other words, people may choose B simply because they like B *more* than A, even though they may find both A and B perfectly acceptable for their community.

**Diversification.** The diversification heuristic suggests that people are more likely to diversify when asked to make a simultaneous choice than when making sequential choices. For example, imagine a project that covers a large portion of a community. If a planning or urban design team asks the community, or even the client or steering committee for the project, to choose what types of housing are most appropriate across the whole community all at once, people will seek more variety and diversify their choices more than if they were asked the same housing choice questions about one subdistrict this week and another subdistrict next week. The act of choosing all at once offers the brain a chance to see bias toward a particular answer, whereas when the question is asked over and over, people often don’t see the pattern in their selection of a narrower set of responses.

A substantial amount of research shows that a bias toward diversification may be sub-optimal in some cases (e.g., when investing finances in individual savings plans). However, encouraging diversification in communities where diverse housing choice is an explicit goal (e.g., places with people aging in place, diverse places experiencing racial and/or economic disparities, etc.) could help communities offer a wider selection of housing types on the spectrum between single-family homes to multi-family high-rises (aka Missing Middle housing options).

This same heuristic suggests that people are more likely to diversify across a larger portion of a community, or multiple areas, than a smaller portion or single area. Proposals for a single site elicit feelings of finality, as if there is only one opportunity for

that site. In contrast, projects that involve a larger area allow people to understand that they can put “a little over here, a little over there.” One way to trigger this heuristic is to make an analogy between diversity in a community’s housing and diversity in breakfast menus. Imagine explaining to a community: “Think of diverse housing types the way you think about breakfast: you may want cereal most days, and you may not want quiche today, but you probably want quiche this weekend. So we are going to put some quiche over here. Because most of us have breakfast every day, having something different every now and then is not so scary.”

**Decoy.** Architects and planners often present several different schemes—typically, three—to a client for consideration before pursuing final project design. However, research shows<sup>14</sup> that when two of three presented options are very similar to each other, responders tend to pick one of those two similar options. When this happens, designers may be unintentionally skewing the choices made by their clients. Of course, most designers have a preferred scheme, based on project constraints, personal tastes, and other priorities. Imagine a case in which an architect presents three schemes: one that is a solid choice; a second that is completely different from the first; and a third that is very similar to the second design but with insignificant differences, and was only included to give the client a greater choice. The decoy heuristic dictates that the client is most likely to pick the first of the similar options that was presented. Empathetic planning seeks to remove this bias from decision making by offering three completely different schemes.

**Representativeness.** Community members often assume that what they experience in their immediate surroundings (e.g. a lack of parking) represents what everyone else in their community experiences. Empathetic planning combats this heuristic by using community-specific anecdotes as well as research examples in planning discussions. The anecdotes and examples remind participants that, while the room may be occupied by people who appear similar demographically and economically, other community members exist who are different and therefore have different housing choices available to them, and those people must be represented even if they aren’t physically in the room. It is ideal to have a name and a face associated with these diverse experiences, because seeing someone’s face and hearing them express their experiences and emotions significantly increases the biological and neurological levels of empathy that observers experience.<sup>15</sup>

Farr Associates encountered this situation in public meetings held as part of the regional transit-oriented development planning project in Chicago mentioned earlier. After the audience revealed a strong preference for owner-occupied multifamily housing

---

<sup>14</sup> Kahneman. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

<sup>15</sup> Yudhujit Bhattacharjee, “The Science Behind Psychopaths and Extreme Altruists.” *National Geographic*, January 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/08/science-good-evil-charlottesville/>.

developments but against the same type of development if it were rental-occupied, a young woman who looked as if she could be the relative of anyone in the room stood up and declared that, by strongly preferring owner-occupied housing, the audience had excluded her. She revealed that she had moved back to the community, her hometown, to care for her ailing mother. Despite having a steady job and a college education (and the accompanying student debt), she could not find any affordable rental apartments near transit. She reluctantly ended up purchasing a condo that she could not afford so she could be near her mother and the transportation needed to keep her job. After this testimony, the project team again asked participants their preferences. While people still preferred owner-occupied housing, fewer opposed the rental-occupied housing option.

The project team concluded the polling session with a final trio of slides. The first slide contained a chart of median incomes by profession, showing how much (and therefore what type) of housing different individuals could afford. The second slide asked whether participants know anyone working in the professions listed in the chart, and the third slide asked for which of those professions housing should be affordable.<sup>16</sup> People's responses on which professions' housing should be affordable directly mirrored which professions they knew people in. For example, if 8 percent of people said they knew food prep employees, 8 percent of people indicated that food prep workers should be able to find housing affordable to them within the study area. The correlation between responses about knowing and providing housing for each employee type suggests that anchoring people's thoughts on the actual people behind a housing type, rather than a hypothetical tenant whom they don't know, may result in people responding more favorably to providing those folks with affordable choices in their community.

Because this was not a controlled study, we have no metric with which to measure the effect our slides had on the outcome of the exercise; however, we believe that reminding responders of the people behind housing types is a powerful way to communicate the need for diverse housing choices within a community.

**Availability.** When people who face a decision recall information from memory to help make that decision, some memories stick out and are easier to recall than others, regardless of their relevance or accuracy in the current situation. Those easier-to-recall memories have a disproportionately large impact on decisionmaking, even if they are not accurate. For example, community members' understanding of their neighborhood's characteristics, such as crime levels, may be disproportionately influenced by what the media reports on and how often the community members consume those media. Community members in an area where a violent crime occurred in the past may be more

---

<sup>16</sup> In this context, "affordable" referred to having any type of housing choice without paying more than 30 percent of one's income on housing.

likely to think crime is a current issue of concern, even if recent crime statistics show an increase in safety. This distinction between perceived and actual crime is important, because the urban design and policy solutions are different for each. Empathetic planning addresses this heuristic by providing accurate, relevant data and discussing how the proposed planning project may influence those findings.

**Status Quo Bias.** People often prefer to keep the conditions with which they are familiar when faced with changes that are hard to imagine or understand, such as a proposal to have different types of housing to accommodate more economically, racially, and socially diverse households in the community. This bias often plays out in the form of opposition to new, mixed-income housing that would introduce lower-income residents and residents of color into a higher-income, predominantly white neighborhood. The existing residents may be sympathetic to the concepts of equity and inclusion but equally (or more) driven to preserve the status quo. Empathetic planners can counteract this heuristic by making the choices transparent and discussing the implications with decision makers.

**Escalation of Commitment.** Community members (including municipal staff) may reject a sustainable best practice if it entails altering something in which the community or municipality has invested money. For example, community members may not want to include in a master plan a recommendation to move curbs and reformat the roadway if the street in question was just repaved. Or, politicians may choose to patch a deteriorating highway, even if tearing it down and constructing a new and different route would provide better roads and reconnect low-income neighborhoods with higher-income communities and resources, simply because of the city's historic investment in the roadway. Empathetic planning can address this by informing participants about the economic concept of a sunk cost: a cost that an ongoing project has incurred and can no longer be recovered, and therefore should not be considered when making future investment decisions. Empathetic planning also ensures that the stories of all affected communities contribute to the decision-making process—which, in the example above, would include how construction of the original highway divided and cut off a community and how re-siting the road could lead to a more vibrant future.

Empathetic planning could have much wider applications than the examples given here. For example, any community outreach facilitator, such as a planner or developer, might find empathetic planning useful in public engagement workshops and exercises. Participatory art, which often already has an empathetic component, is another great application; for example, artist Candy Chang, whose installations examine “the dynamics

between society and the psyche,”<sup>17</sup> often provides ways for community members to connect with each other’s humanity (Figure 1).

Figure 1.



A sample of Candy Chang’s participatory art exhibits. Clockwise from top left: “Street Notes”; “Before I Die”; “Post-It Notes for Neighbors”; and “I Wish This Was.” Source: Farr, 2018.<sup>18</sup> Copyright Farr Associates.

In all applications, however, it is important not to use empathetic planning techniques to manipulate an audience to agree to what planners want. Instead, planners should acknowledge that audience members come into a meeting with heuristics affecting their judgments and decisions. With that knowledge, it is up to planners and other facilitators to decide how to address the heuristics and whether (and how much) to

<sup>17</sup> Candy Chang, accessed December 4, 2019, <http://candychang.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> Farr, *Sustainable Nation: Urban Design Patterns for the Future*.

compensate for the cognitive biases they create. Some planners might be most comfortable simply educating community members about these biases and letting them compensate as they see fit. Others, as in the examples presented here, attempt to compensate for the biases by leveraging the very heuristics that cause them in the first place in an attempt to obtain honest, accurate feedback about community preferences.

Empathetic planning is not a silver bullet for overcoming opposition to inclusive and equitable development. Sometimes communities will still discriminate. Democratic participatory engagement processes such as the ones discussed here can easily be commandeered to serve those who organize to block diverse, equitable communities. It can be difficult if, even after the removal of cognitive biases that result from heuristics, the community reveals that it still does not want certain types of people in its community. However, this empathetic planning model lays a strong foundation for inclusivity by framing discussions around people—people whom those in the opposing group likely know and love—and in the best terms for those involved.

### ***Implications for Action***

**Implications for Policy.** Community planning is only one application of the empathetic approach; another might be “empathetic policymaking.” Policymakers need to be aware of cognitive biases and the role these shortcuts play in their work. For example, the status quo bias may cause policymakers to keep applying the same processes and pathways to diverse situations. The desire to look for patterns can blind policymakers to the fact that each community is different, and one policy or planning solution does not fit all.

Similarly, when public participation is not representative of a community (e.g., only 10 people show up to a public meeting), policymakers may become vulnerable to the availability and/or anchoring heuristics and subconsciously give those voices a larger-than-necessary influence.

It is important to remember that a multidisciplinary team of people working on a policy meant to benefit mixed-income communities will likely all come to the table with these cognitive biases at work. By recognizing this and acknowledging an attempt to put them aside, policies can more directly benefit those they are supposed to help and avoid unintended consequences.

If a policy is up for a public vote, voters are also susceptible to these same biases. A policy that recognizes how people are likely to react, and can counteract those reactions, may have more success on election day. It is interesting to note that the Trump Administration policy that every additional regulation needs to result in the removal of two other regulations directly addresses the loss aversion heuristic. The loss of one

freedom (i.e., whatever the regulation applies to) is outweighed by the gain of two more (i.e., the removal of two other regulations).

The application of empathetic policymaking could also apply to a campaign effort supporting the policy. Because voters also are susceptible to biases, a policy that involves voting for a tax increase (which often triggers the loss heuristic) could be coupled with a campaign that frames the benefits gained as double the value of the tax (thereby balancing out the loss aversion heuristic).

**Implications for Research and Evaluation.** Future applications of empathetic planning should include efforts to measure effects. We collected anecdotal findings that empathetic planning reduced resistance to transit-oriented design in a regional planning project in the Chicagoland region, but we do not know exactly how our questions triggered empathy or whether our questions were the reason respondents favored housing types they had previously opposed.

It may be useful to incorporate knowledge about negotiation techniques into empathetic planning, to help community members identify and explain their wants, needs, and underlying motivations for supporting or opposing a particular plan or design. According to former hostage negotiator Chris Voss, people feel most comfortable starting with “no.”<sup>19</sup> After saying no, people are more comfortable revealing what they actually want, because they feel they are in a position of power. It is interesting to think about applying this idea to survey questions. What are the effects of getting to “no” with a room full of neighbors divided on a community issue? How can that be incorporated into the wording, order, and discussions of survey questions and other planning tools? Hearing “no” for an answer also positions planners in a position of being able to ask “why not,” which can help uncover the biases that are influencing people’s thinking and choices.

**Implications for Development and Investment.** Planners and urban design professionals who are trying to develop equitable, inclusive mixed-income communities should understand how heuristics and cognitive biases influence public engagement and choices both for and against proposed changes. In particular, planners should:

- Take community participants’ biases into account when articulating choices and posing questions;
- Begin preference surveys with a question that neutralizes biases (e.g., by eliciting positive experiences with diversity);
- Offer three totally different schemes to reduce bias in participants’ selection process;
- Use specific-area or comprehensive plans as opportunities for diversification, as they present a greater variety of choices over a larger portion of the community;

---

<sup>19</sup> Chris Voss and Raz, Tahl, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It* (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2016).

- Include community-specific examples of diverse experiences and contexts in planning discussions, to remind participants of all the perspectives that represent the community.

Universities, continuing education providers, and advanced certification programs should consider including behavioral science into their curricula to ensure that the next generation of planners is informed and competent about using empathetic planning techniques. It is important to understand that people's responses can be irrational or illogical. Such training could result in a better understanding of why people behave the way they do, which in turn could result in more choices about inclusive, equitable mixed-income communities being made with the most sensible decision making possible.

**Implications for Residents and Community Members.** Communities exposed to empathetic planning may have greater expectations about what they should demand from governmental and planning professionals who are trying, with good intentions, to create opportunities for positive change but may do so with more conventional methods. When communities start demanding something different, it can raise questions that encourage planners to re-evaluate their ways.

A community meeting that discusses heuristics might be one of the first times in which residents are confronted with their own racial biases. It also may be one of the first times they heard first-hand accounts of how fellow community members experience discrimination. Through experiences with empathetic planning, members of communities can start to ask questions, learn about their own ignorance, and start to develop conscious awareness that leads to anti-racist actions. Since most people are not actively racist or discriminatory, and many see themselves as allies, empathetic planning is one way to invite dialogue around these issues.



## References

- Behavioraleconomics.com. "Loss aversion." Accessed July 3, 2017. [www.behavioraleconomics.com/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/loss-aversion/](http://www.behavioraleconomics.com/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/loss-aversion/).
- Bhattacharjee, Yudhujit. "The Science Behind Psychopaths and Extreme Altruists." *National Geographic*, January 2018. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/08/science-good-evil-charlottesville/>.
- Brain Utilities ApS. "Persuasive Patterns Card Deck." Accessed Aug. 3, 2018. <https://shop.ui-patterns.com/product/ui-patterns-card-deck/>.
- Candy Chang. Accessed December 4, 2019. <http://candychang.com/>.
- Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.
- Farr, Douglas. *Sustainable Nation: Urban Design Patterns for the Future*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2018.
- Heuer, Richards J. *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*. Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1999.
- Johnson, Sara B., Robert W. Blum, and Jay N. Giedd. "Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no. 3 (2010): 216-21
- Jost, John T., Jack Glaser, Arie W. Kruganski, and Frank J. Sulloway. "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition," *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 3 (2003): 339-75.
- Merriam-Webster, s.v. "empathy," accessed Aug. 2, 2018, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld)
- Roberts, Brent W., Kate E. Walton, and Wolfgang Viechtbauer. "Patterns of Mean-Level Change in Personality Traits across the Life Course: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 132, no. 1 (2006): 1-25.
- Van Hiel, Alain and Lieven Brebels. "Conservatism Is Good for You: Cultural Conservatism Protects Self-Esteem in Older Adults." *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 1 (2011): 120-23.
- Voss, Chris and Raz, Tahl. *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It*. New York, NY: Harper Business, 2016.

# Appendix

## Availability (ease of recollection)







R _ _ _ _ _	_ _ r _ _ _
Rabbit	Tornado
Race	Forget
Rain	?
Regret	?
Rice	?
Rocket	?
✓	✗

## Anchoring (multiplying numbers)




$$8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = ?$$

$$1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7 \times 8 = ?$$

## Naive diversification (picking snacks)

Chosen each week	Chosen up-front
 A B C A B C  A B C A B C  A B C A B C	 A B C D E F  G H I A B C  D E F G H I
3 options A-C used	9 options A-I used

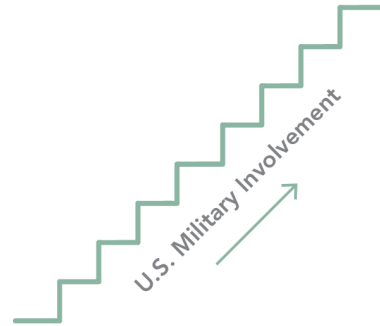
## Decoy (choice of three)

A	B	C
	OR	
OR	OR	
✗	✓	✗

**Representativeness**  
(the risk of relying on a small sample size)



**Escalation of commitment**  
(justifying additional commitments)



**Status quo bias**  
(stay the course)



**Loss aversion**  
(loss is worse than gain)

