

**Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth:
Decision-Making about Acquisitions at Community Historical Organizations**

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to describe acquisitions policy at community historical organizations through a decision-making perspective. Five curators from community historical organizations in King County, Washington, were interviewed about their decision-making processes regarding gifts offered for collections. These processes were analyzed through the lens of behavioral economics, which describes the machinery of human decision-making and the biases and errors to which it is prone. The research showed that curators utilize intuitive heuristics, are prone to some intuitive biases, but rarely regret the decisions they make about acquisitions. Further, mission and storage were the greatest factors in making decisions. Findings inform the field's approach to decision-making, not just with respect to acquisitions but all facets of museum decision-making.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Collections are the heart and soul of museums – they are their defining attributes and their reason for being.¹ Museum collections absorb two-third of a museum’s operating budget. As such, the development of collections is of significant concern.² Museum professionals make up to a hundred decisions about what objects to acquire a year. Museological literature offers guides to develop mission and policy that will facilitate good decision-making, but it does not offer a description about how decision-making is actually performed in the field. Sound decision-making about acquisitions is important, because the remedy for poor acquisitions – deaccessioning – is still controversial.³

While mission and acquisitions policy are offered as guides for decision-making in museums, humans are susceptible to irrationality. The field of behavioral economics, the study of human judgment and decision making, offers a language to describe the errors of judgment and decision-making made by humans’ cognitive machinery. In many cases, the errors in judgment are invisible to the human mind. The language of behavioral economics can be used to understand the judgments made by museum professionals in relation to acquisitions: their irrational biases but also their expert intuition. This is not an attempt to catch museum professionals behaving badly. Rather, it is an attempt to see how their intuitive judgment utilizes the tools they are given by the field of museum studies – mission and acquisitions policy – and how these judgments lead to good and bad decisions.

As the behavioral economist Dan Ariely writes, “irrationality is commonplace” but,

¹ Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, *The Manual of Museum Management*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD:

² Lord and Lord, 91.

³ John E. Simmons, *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies*, (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museum, 2006), 51.

it does not necessarily mean that we are helpless. Once we understand when and where we may make erroneous decisions, we can try to be more vigilant, force ourselves to think differently about these decisions, or use technology to overcome our inherent shortcomings.⁴

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe acquisitions policy at community historical organizations from a decision-making perspective. The questions that drove this study were as follows:

1. What are the intuitive heuristics and biases that museum professionals use when making decisions about collections gifts?
2. What are the factors that affect whether museum professionals will accept an acquisition?
3. How do museum professionals define the success of their acquisitions?

Significance

This study offers a guide for museum professionals to connect behavioral economics with the museum field. Very few guidelines exist for decision-making, especially with small institutions. This study demonstrates what we can learn from looking at decisions through a body of literature such as behavioral economics. This study will initiate museum professionals to engage with behavioral economics and utilize it to make better decisions, not simply about acquisitions, but, possibly, about all aspects of museum work.

⁴ Dan Areily, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 322.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study is based on two categories of literature: museological literature about mission & acquisitions policy, and literature from a field called *behavioral economics*, which is the study of human judgment and decision-making. The first part of the literature review is taken from museum policy manuals and other books that offer a clear and comprehensive view of the best practices of museum mission and acquisition policy, the two systems that guide acquisitions decision-making. The books and articles summarized in this section are “Evolving a policy manual” by Arminta Neal, Kristine Haglund & Elizabeth Webb; *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections* by Marie C. Malaro & Ildiko Pogany DeAngelis; *The Manual of Museum Management* by Barry Lord & Gail Dexter Lord; *Museum Administration: An Introduction* by Hugh Genoways & Lynne Ireland; *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy* by Marie C. Malaro; *Registration Methods for the Small Museum* by Daniel B. Reibel; and *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies* by John E. Simmons.

The second part of the literature review, based on behavioral economics, is taken from two books: *Predictably Irrational* by Dan Ariely and *Thinking, Fast & Slow* by Daniel Kahneman. These books were chosen because they consolidate many of the concepts of a large field, and put these concepts in clear language that is comprehensible to the lay-person.

Behavioral economics is the lens through which this study is analyzed.

Mission and Acquisition Policy

Museum collections are groups of objects kept together because of a relationship based on the similarity in their nature, their being collected by a common individual or group, or their association with a person, place, or event. Museums may have only one collection, or they may

have several.⁵ Those making decisions about acquisitions at museums are often curators with roots of knowledge in artifacts and archival documents of their particular discipline.⁶ Curators make decisions based on their intimate knowledge of a museum's collection.⁷ For curators to succeed at acquisitions, they must be inspired, dedicated, patient, and opportunistic and must possess extensive knowledge of their subject and their collections.⁸ Ultimately, curators and other museum staff are offered two guides by museological literature on how to make acquisitions decisions: mission and acquisitions policy.

How well a collection is managed is dependent on how well the collection leads to the achievement of the museum's mission.⁹ Before developing an acquisitions policy, a museum must be certain its mission defines the kind of collection it wants.¹⁰ A museum's mission is a well-written statement that conveys the primary purpose of the museum, for the staff and board, but also for the public.¹¹ The mission statement is the museum's "words to live by", focusing and inspiring the employees, board & visitors.¹² For small museums, simple mission statements are adequate.¹³ Good mission statements for small museums are generally those that confine the museum to the collection of objects related to the history of the region.¹⁴ The mission statement ought to be broad enough to encompass all of the possible activities in which a museum may

⁵ Daniel B. Reibel, *Registration Methods for the Small Museum*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 8.

⁶ Lord and Lord, 77.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Reibel, 10.

¹¹ Genoways and Ireland, 22.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Reibel, 10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

wish to conduct.¹⁵

A good mission statement facilitates intelligent collecting by setting the boundaries of the museum's collecting.¹⁶ Objects outside the mission of the museum should not be collected.¹⁷ The scope of collecting, which is contained within a museum's acquisitions policy, is defined by the museum's mission statement, and guides a museum in its selection of objects to acquire.¹⁸ In the scope, the range and limits of the collection are defined in relation to the museum's mission.¹⁹ The scope is just one part of acquisitions policy. Acquisition policy describes the acceptable methods of acquisitions and refers to any other policies that dictate acquisitions.²⁰ Acquisitions policy ought to offer a qualitative statement of the object of the collection.²¹ The acquisitions policy, through its scope, offers specific guidance about where artifacts must be from and where they must have been used in order to be acquired.²²

The acquisition policy, like all other policies that a museum may develop, is the instrument by which the museum regulates the fulfillment of its functions and the achievement of future conditions of quality.²³ An acquisitions policy offers board and staff clear direction, and confidence in their collections decisions.²⁴ The acquisition policy ensures the quality of a collection, and keeps decision-makers accountable.²⁵ The acquisition policy not only instructs what to collect but what not to collect. As a public document, it can be invoked in dealings with

¹⁵ Genoways and Ireland, 22.

¹⁶ Marie C. Malaro, *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 44; Reibel, 9.

¹⁷ Genoways and Ireland, 179.

¹⁸ Simmons, 39; Genoways and Ireland, 17.

¹⁹ Lord and Lord, 85.

²⁰ Simmons, 39.

²¹ Lord and Lord, 85.

²² Reibel, 86.

²³ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁴ Malaro, 44.

²⁵ Reibel, 60.

prospective donors in order to resist long-term loans, restricted gifts, and other donations that do not fit within the scope and mission of the museum.²⁶ The acquisition policy outlines the methods by which objects can be acquired, including gifts, bequests, and purchases.²⁷ The acquisitions policy also states how the museum should collect in order to steer clear of legal and ethical issues.²⁸

The acquisitions policy is part of a larger collections management policy that guides board and staff to avoid legal and ethical problems that result from irresponsible collecting.²⁹ The collections management policy prevents haphazard collecting.³⁰ The collections management policy does not prevent all possible problems, but serves as a guide for staff.³¹ The collections management policy consolidates the standards that acquisitions decision-makers must follow to protect the museum's mission and resources.³² These standards, put down in writing, are approved by the museum's board, and are required reading for the museum's staff, and ought to be enforced.³³

These standards include the museum's position on ownership of the collection.³⁴ These standards should ensure that museums get title and possession of all objects they acquire, that the objects are free and clear of donor restrictions, and documentation proving they own the

²⁶ Ibid., 90.

²⁷ Lord and Lord, 86.

²⁸ Arminta Neal, Kristine Haglund, and Elizabeth Webb, "Evolving a Policy Manual," in *Collections Management* (London: Routledge, 1995), 178; Simmons, 39.

²⁹ Malero, 44.

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Marie C. Malero and Ildiko Pogány DeAngelis, *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2012), 47.

³² Malero, 44; Lord and Lord, 61.

³³ Malero, 49.

³⁴ Lord and Lord, 86.

objects.³⁵ The collections management policy ought also offer procedures. Procedures are specific and quantified instructions on how to carry out the policy.³⁶ The policy should include procedures that must be followed when acquiring objects and who should make the decisions on acquisitions.³⁷

Museums are committed to maintaining their collections as a public trust, providing conscientious care, and this commitment should be stated in the collections management policy.³⁸ Museum professionals ought to be aware of this when acquiring objects, thus why it should be stated in its policies.³⁹

Behavioral Economics

The second portion of literature that this study is based on is from a field called behavioral economics, also known as judgment and decision-making.⁴⁰ As mentioned above, the view of behavioral economics that this study takes is from two books, *Predictably Irrational* by Dan Areily, and *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, two books that synthesize the findings of the field for the layperson. Behavioral economics is a field which emerged in contrast to the field of economics. According to Areily, economics is based on the premise that as humans, “we are capable of making the right decisions for ourselves.”⁴¹ In other words, that we are rational. Rationality, according to Areily, “provides the foundation for economic theories, predictions, and recommendations.”⁴²

³⁵ Reibel, 25. Neal et al, 30.

³⁶ Lord and Lord, 62; Reibel, 12.

³⁷ Malaro and DeAngelis, 52.

³⁸ Lord and Lord, 85.

³⁹ Malaro and DeAngelis, 54.

⁴⁰ Areily, xviii.

⁴¹ Ibid., xix.

⁴² Ibid.

According to Areily, and Kahneman, behavioral economics states that this is not so. Kahneman states that “there is overwhelming evidence that Humans cannot be [rational]” because they are susceptible to, as Areily puts it, “irrelevant influences...and other forms of irrationality.”⁴³ According to the field of behavioral economics, standard economics is flawed because it is based on how people should behave instead of how they actually behave: irrationally.⁴⁴ Normal people consistently make systematic errors, which behavioral economists tie not just to human emotion but also to the machinery of cognition itself.⁴⁵ Kahneman suggests that his work does not imply that humans are irrational, simply that we “are not well described by the rational-agent model” of economics.⁴⁶

Areily, however, takes it a step further, that human judgment and decision-making are irrational, and that they are predictably so – that is, that they make systematic errors in judgment and decision-making in ways that can be predicted.⁴⁷ He writes that we “are all far less rational in our decision making than standard economic theory assumes. Our irrational behaviors are neither random nor senseless—they are systematic and predictable. We all make the same types of mistakes over and over, because of the basic wiring of our brains.”⁴⁸ However, this is not a moral failing, simply a failing of the human mind.⁴⁹

Behavioral economics acknowledges the complexity of life, and the difficulty that complexity creates with respect to making decisions since, according to Areily, “multiple forces simultaneously [exert] their influences on us” which “makes it difficult to figure out exactly how

⁴³ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 411; Areily, 318.

⁴⁴ Areily, 317.

⁴⁵ Kahneman, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁴⁷ Areily, 310, xx;

⁴⁸ Areily, 317.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 305.

each of these forces shapes our behavior."⁵⁰ Complexity makes people inconsistent in evaluating the information available to them in making decisions.⁵¹ According to behavioral economics, most of what influences people's decision making is invisible to them, going "on in silence in our mind."⁵² Our mind filters the sense data available to us in decision environments and merely represents reality to us – we make our decisions based on this representation, not on reality itself.⁵³ Because we think we're making our decisions based on reality, we have the impression that we're making fully informed decisions, when in fact we're not. As Areily puts it, "we generally believe we have precise and well-articulated preferences, but in reality, we only *think* that we know what we want."⁵⁴

With nearly every choice humans make, there is some uncertainty.⁵⁵ As a result, understanding the irrationality behind our decisions is important in order to improve how we deal with that uncertainty.⁵⁶ The flawed, irrational machinery of human decision-making is not always wrong, and often leads to satisfactory outcomes.⁵⁷ Mistakes, however, are common, and even affect experts.⁵⁸ However, the concepts of behavioral economics that identify systematic and predictable errors in judgment can help us become more aware of the irrational influences that negatively impact decision-making, and these concepts are expected to improve decision making leading to improvements in life expectancy and quality.⁵⁹

Kahneman divides the cognitive machinery that makes decisions into two different

⁵⁰ Ibid., xxi.

⁵¹ Kahneman, 224-225.

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ Areily, 321.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁵ Kahneman, 270.

⁵⁶ Areily, xix.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 321.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 321, 166.

systems. System 1 describes intuitive thought, and is responsible for many of the irrationalities that lead to errors in decision-making.⁶⁰ System 2 is more deliberate and can correct System 1's errors.⁶¹ However, System 2 is only engaged when a search for an intuitive solution fails because System 2 – that is, the System of deliberate thought – is lazy.⁶² It takes effort to switch from intuitive thought to deliberate thought, and mental effort is aversive to the human mind.⁶³ The human mind is much more attracted to cognitive ease than cognitive strain. In fact, experiencing cognitive ease is a pleasant feeling.⁶⁴ Cognitive strain is a feature of System 2 - deliberate thought - while cognitive ease is a feature of System 1, our intuition.⁶⁵ As a result, we rely more on intuition than on deliberate thought. When we resist our intuition, we feel conflicted.⁶⁶

Thus, in order to avoid the strain of resisting intuition, intuitive judgment is guided by heuristics and biases. Heuristics are simple mental procedures that help people make difficult decisions. The word *heuristic* comes from the same root word as *eureka*.⁶⁷ While they are useful in simplifying the decision-making process, they are flawed and can lead to errors.⁶⁸ Because of the flawed mechanics of human decision-making machinery, we are prone to biases. Biases are intuitive preferences that lead to violations of the rules of rational choice.⁶⁹ Behavioral economists have identified and named the heuristics and biases of intuition that lead to errors in decision-making. First, heuristics will be examined, and then biases of intuition.

⁶⁰ Kahneman, 13.

⁶¹ Ibid., 28.

⁶² Ibid., 13, 64.

⁶³ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 65, 66.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 366.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Heuristics

As mentioned above, heuristics are mental procedures produced by intuition that simplify decision-making. However, they have their flaws, which will be illustrated below.

Substitution

The essence of intuitive heuristics is when we answer an easier question instead of the difficult one with which we're faced.⁷⁰ The answering of one question in place of another is the heuristic called *substitution*.⁷¹ Substitution is done intuitively in order to avoid the cognitive strain of thinking over a difficult question. An example of this is when people are asked to evaluate a candidate for political office. Instead of thinking about all of their values and opinions about the issues, and investigating if the candidate's values and opinions match up, people make a simpler assessment: they ask whether they like the candidate, and use that to make their decision instead.⁷² While they do not answer the intended question, they produce a quick answer and do not activate the cognitive strain required for deliberate thought.⁷³ Substitution also occurs when people are asked to reconstruct former beliefs. Instead of searching their memory to figure out what their former beliefs were, they "retrieve the current ones instead."⁷⁴ Likewise, when asked to evaluate their overall happiness, people will simply substitute how they feel at the moment instead of thinking about how they feel in their life in general.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

⁷² Ibid., 91.

⁷³ Ibid. 243.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 103.

Representativeness

Another heuristic of intuitive judgment is called *representativeness*. When individuals are asked to predict an outcome, instead of weighing all of the existing evidence, they will imagine an outcome that is representative of their past experience.⁷⁶ For example, if someone is asked whether a person with tattoos is likely to be a professor, the person will check to see whether their image of a professor corresponds to the person with tattoos, instead of thinking about the person's credentials. This heuristic is useful in simplifying life and often accurate, but not "statistically optimal."⁷⁷ That is to say, prediction by representativeness is often wrong.

Affect heuristic

Another heuristic that affects decision-making is known as the *affect heuristic* and is a form of substitution. Initially proposed by the psychologist Paul Slovic the affect heuristic is when "people let their likes and dislikes determine their beliefs about the world" without much deliberation and reasoning.⁷⁸ Emotion plays a large part in behavioral economists' understanding of intuitive judgment and choice.⁷⁹ In the case of the affect heuristic, people substitute the difficult question of what they think about something with the easier question of how they feel about it.⁸⁰ As Kahneman writes, "The affect heuristic simplifies our lives by creating a world that is much tidier than reality."⁸¹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 150-151.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 103, 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁸¹ Ibid., 140.

Availability heuristic

The *availability heuristic* is yet another heuristic involved in intuitive decision-making. The idea behind the availability heuristic is that the mind can only calculate decisions based on information readily retrieved from memory.⁸² As Kahneman writes,

An essential design feature of the associative machine is that it represents only activated ideas. Information that is not retrieved (even unconsciously) from memory might as well not exist. System 1 excels at constructing the best possible story that incorporates ideas currently activated, but it does not (cannot) allow for information it does not have.⁸³

This means that when assessing a question, even if you know all of the facts, only the ones that readily come to mind – that are available in memory search – are useful in coming to a decision.⁸⁴ Intuition will make confident judgments based only on what is available to memory, neglecting the notion that there may be evidence missing. One can't know what they don't know. Furthermore, people tend to make decisions on information that is available to them, even if they know that the information isn't good. People understand that "worthless information should not be treated differently from a complete lack of information" but the availability heuristic makes that principle difficult to apply.⁸⁵

The availability heuristic leads to flawed decision-making because critical information may not come as readily to mind as less important evidence. In fact, according to Kahneman, "Personal experiences, pictures, and vivid examples are more available than incidents that happened to others, or mere words, or statistics."⁸⁶ So, when making a decision, because of the availability heuristic, we tend to calculate based on our own experiences or the vivid stories that

⁸² Ibid., 7.

⁸³ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 130.

we have heard rather than statistics or less vivid but more relevant accounts of others, even if, somewhere in our mind, we know the statistics and relevant accounts. Likewise, dramatic events will be more readily available to us when thinking about a problem, even if dramatic events are rare.⁸⁷ If an event is covered in the media, that will make it even more available to our memory.⁸⁸ We tend to assess the importance of issues by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory.⁸⁹ So when asked if it is safe to travel to California, and the media has been focusing on a recent California earthquake, we are more likely to say that it is not safe, because an image of earthquakes in California will come readily to mind, even if the odds of an earthquake happening are very low.

Humans make decisions based on limited but available information that comes easily to mind, and treating what is available as if it is all there is to know. We construct stories based on available information, and if the stories seem plausible, we believe them.⁹⁰ This is the nature of the availability heuristic. As a result, our intuitive predictions are often overconfident and overly extreme.⁹¹

Market norms vs. social norms

Dan Ariely has identified that people will behave differently based on whether they are operating under market norms or social norms. Ariely conducted an experiment where he sold Starburst candies on a college campus in order to test if decreases in price resulted in increased demand. At one point, the price of Starburst dropped to one cent and demand increased. He then dropped the price to zero. More students came to his booth when Starburst was free. However,

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 316, 8.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁹¹ Ibid., 192.

when the price was one cent, each customer took on average 2.4 more Starburst than when it was free. That is to say, students took fewer Starburst when they were free than when they were priced one cent.⁹² He found that demand increased when priced lowered, but when the price was zero, the theory of demand did not apply, because people were no longer operating under market norms, but social norms.⁹³ When price is not involved in an exchange, “social norms become entangled.”⁹⁴

What Areily found was that when money is involved, and market norms are in play, people act more selfish, more self-reliant, and unfair.⁹⁵ To activate market norms, people only need to think about money.⁹⁶ But when social norms operate, people are less selfish and more caring.⁹⁷ Hence, people took fewer Starburst when the price was zero – they were concerned about taking more than they should.

The difference of market norms and social norms is illustrated by the example of lawyers. Lawyers are willing to volunteer their time when asked to perform services pro-bono. When offered \$30 to perform the same services, they refuse. When money is mentioned, they want to be paid their market rate. This is because, once money is mentioned, market norms enter their thinking, and social norms depart.⁹⁸

⁹² Areily, 108-109.

⁹³ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 83, 107.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 79.

Areily notes, “When social and market norms collide, trouble sets in.”⁹⁹ When market norms enter into social exchanges, the relationship is often damaged, and the social norm goes away for a long time and is hard to get back.¹⁰⁰ Areily offers this warning,

You can't treat your customers like family one moment and then treat them impersonally--or, even worse, as a nuisance or a competitor--a moment later when this becomes more convenient or profitable. This is not how social relationships work. If you want a social relationship, go for it, but remember that you have to maintain it under all circumstances.¹⁰¹ (p. 87)

In other words, professionals need to be cautious about how they act in a professional setting, as the norms can change, and people have different expectations when operating under social norms than when they are operating under market norms.

Biases of Intuition

Above, intuitive heuristics have been outlined. Below, the biases of intuition are explained. As mentioned previously, biases are intuitive preferences that lead to violations of the rules of rational choice.¹⁰²

Associative coherence

According to Daniel Kahneman, because of *associative coherence*, people have a tendency to “exaggerate the consistency and coherence of what we see.”¹⁰³ To illustrate this point, Kahneman asks the question, "How many animals of each kind did Moses take into the ark?"¹⁰⁴ Most people will not see anything wrong with this question, and if asked, will tend to

⁹⁹ Ibid., 77.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 84, 85.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰² Kahneman, 10.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 73.

attempt to answer it. However, Moses did not build an ark. Noah did. Kahneman explains it this way,

The idea of animals going into the ark sets up a biblical context, and Moses is not abnormal in that context. You did not positively expect him, but the mention of his name is not abnormal in that context. You did not positively expect him, but the mention of his name is not surprising. It also helps that Moses and Noah have the same vowel sound and number of syllables. As with triads that produce cognitive ease, you unconsciously detect associative coherence between 'Moses' and 'ark' and so quickly accept the question.¹⁰⁵

Once an idea is activated in our memory, other associated memories will come together to create a coherent story.¹⁰⁶ Not only that, but our associative system suppresses doubt and ambiguity.¹⁰⁷ Because of that, the completeness or quality of information we receive matters if we can create a coherent story to match it together.¹⁰⁸ As Kahneman puts it, our intuition is “machine for jumping to conclusions.”¹⁰⁹ As a result, we often make incoherent choices based on faulty evidence out of which we are able to create a coherent pattern.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, we will feel confident in incoherent choices created from coherent stories because subjective confidence is merely dependent on the coherence of the story.¹¹¹

Confirmation bias

Because of their tendency towards associative coherence, people fall prey to *confirmation bias*.¹¹² If we intuitively believe something is true – for whatever the reason - we are more likely

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 87-88.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 357.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 264.

¹¹² Ibid., 81.

to believe arguments that support that belief, even if the arguments are unsound.¹¹³ Furthermore, the machinery of deliberate thought will search for confirming evidence to test our hypothesis instead of searching for evidence to the contrary.¹¹⁴ One type of confirmation bias is known as the *halo effect*. This happens when someone makes a favorable first impression and all subsequent actions of that person are judged as favorable. We will actively seek evidence to confirm our first impression.¹¹⁵ Consequently, our first beliefs and impressions about something are difficult to alter, even if those beliefs and impressions are faulty.

Anchoring

Due to the tendency towards confirming first impressions, humans are susceptible to the bias known as *anchoring*. This happens when “people consider a particular value for an unknown quantity before estimating that quantity.”¹¹⁶ The estimates are reliably close to the number that people considered.¹¹⁷ The particular value they initially considered is known as an anchor. Initial prices for something – say, apples – will influence what we are willing to pay for apples in the future, even if the price happens to be arbitrary.¹¹⁸ This flies in the face of the assumptions of traditional economics, which states that what people are willing to pay is driven by the amount of supply of that product, and the demand for that product. Rather, what people are willing to pay was influenced by the original prices for that product.¹¹⁹ The original price is an anchor, no matter how arbitrary.

Anchors can appear reasonable to us. When asked a difficult question that we cannot

¹¹³ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 3-4, 82.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Areily, 32.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

answer, the anchor is a plausible guide.¹²⁰ The problem is that random anchors are just as effective at influencing us as potentially informative ones.¹²¹ For example, Dan Areily asked his students to bid on certain items and to put the first two digits of their social security numbers at the top page of their bids. The students with the highest-ending social security numbers bid higher than the ones with the lowest-ending social security numbers.¹²² Any number we are asked to consider before estimating will have an anchoring effect, even when we do not believe it will be informative.¹²³ "[A]nchoring is a case of suggestion," Kahneman writes.¹²⁴ Our intuitive machinery takes the suggestion of an anchor and, because of associative coherence, "tries its best to construct a world in which the anchor is the true number."¹²⁵

Priming

Another intuitive bias produced by suggestion is known as *priming*. Priming is the notion that our thoughts and actions are influenced by the environment of the moment, whether we want them to be or not, and whether we know it or not.¹²⁶ For example, in an experiment, young people had to put words together from a jumble of letters and then walk down a hall. The young people who had to construct words with an elderly theme walked down the hall slower than those who did not. The young people were primed by the elderly-themed words and they were not even aware of it.¹²⁷ Priming works, even when the stimuli that functions as the prime is

¹²⁰ Kahneman, 125.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Areily, 30.

¹²³ Kahneman, 120, 125.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 122.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 123.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 53.

unnoticed.¹²⁸ This is because the associative machinery that is affected by priming works without our conscious awareness.¹²⁹ Due to associative coherence, our intuition takes arbitrary stimuli and creates a story around it. This is why, when people are reminded of old age, they walk slower. This also accounts for the effects of placebos. If people are primed by the notion that a pill will make them feel better, they will feel better, even if the pill has no medicinal qualities. Our behavior is affected by sensory phenomena, even sensory phenomena outside of our conscious awareness.¹³⁰

Oaths are one type of prime. Oaths act as reminders to professionals to regulate their own behavior.¹³¹ However, occasional swearing of oaths are not enough for people resist temptation. Rather, oaths and rules must be recalled at the moment of temptation or just before.¹³² In experiments, students who were reminded of the Ten Commandments before being asked a question were more honest than those who were not reminded of the Ten Commandments.¹³³ Because of the priming effect, keeping moral benchmarks in the immediate environment are effective in keeping people honest.¹³⁴

Fear of regret

Another bias that decision-makers fall prey to is the *fear of regret*. Of regret, Kahneman writes,

[R]egret is “accompanied by feelings that one should have known better, by a sinking feeling, by thoughts about the mistake one has made and the opportunities lost, by a tendency to kick oneself and to correct one's mistake, and by wanting to

¹²⁸ Ibid., 225.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹³⁰ Areily, 228.

¹³¹ Ibid., 285.

¹³² Ibid., 289-290.

¹³³ Ibid., 284.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 285.

undo the event and to get a second chance.” Intense regret is what you experience when you can most easily imagine yourself doing something other than what you did.¹³⁵

Fear of regret leads decision-makers to conventional and risk-averse choices.¹³⁶ The bias against regret is partially a result of the affect heuristic and partially the result of the availability heuristic. The affect heuristic, the heuristic that guides decisions through emotion, causes people to anticipate the emotional pain that will be caused by regret if they make a bad decision.¹³⁷ Because of the availability heuristic, various risks come easily to mind when contemplating a decision. Thoughts of danger are fluent and vivid and exacerbate the fear of regret.¹³⁸ Furthermore, because of the ease with which unlikely but scary outcomes come to mind, people overweight improbable outcomes when making decisions – leading to poor decisions.¹³⁹

In institutional settings, fear of regret is even more extreme, leading to bureaucratic and risk-averse solutions.¹⁴⁰ However, risk-averse preferences are not bound by reality.¹⁴¹ In fact, the most influential people are typically risk-seeking instead of risk-averse.¹⁴² Despite this fact, people are typically biased against regret.

Hindsight bias

A bias that feeds into fear of regret and risk-aversion is known as the *hindsight bias*. Hindsight bias is when people evaluate their processes of decision-making not based on the

¹³⁵ Kahneman, 36.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 349.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 347.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 138-139.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 321.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 368.

¹⁴² Ibid., 256.

soundness of the process, but on whether the outcome was good or bad.¹⁴³ Hindsight bias increases feelings of regret and makes people more risk-averse.¹⁴⁴ Hindsight bias is what makes decision-makers in institutional settings the most risk averse, adhering to standard operating procedures that are difficult to second-guess.¹⁴⁵ However, hindsight is illusory because it underestimates the role of chance in events.¹⁴⁶ The way to avoid hindsight bias is to either be as thorough as possible, or completely casual when making decisions.¹⁴⁷

Loss aversion

Another bias that decision-makers are vulnerable to is *aversion to loss*. People are more averse to losses than they are attracted to gains.¹⁴⁸ As Kahneman puts it, "giving up a bottle of nice wine is more painful than getting an equally good bottle is pleasurable."¹⁴⁹ Loss aversion is so strong that we merely have to think about giving up our possessions to begin mourning the loss.¹⁵⁰ Loss aversion leads to bad decisions.¹⁵¹ One of the reasons it leads to bad decisions is because of a concept known as virtual ownership, when we feel ownership before we actually own something.¹⁵² For example, if an auction bidder bids a high amount for something and keeps increasing their bid they begin to think of themselves as owners of whatever they are bidding. As a result, they will keep bidding higher and higher to prevent losing their position.¹⁵³ Loss

¹⁴³ Ibid., 203.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 352.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 352.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 283.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 293.

¹⁵⁰ Areily, 174.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 175.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 176.

aversion tends to lead people to overvalue what they possess.¹⁵⁴ People tend to be even more loss averse towards things they have put a lot of effort into, such as a large sofa which requires hard work to move into their home.¹⁵⁵ If a person brings a sofa home to try it, and put a lot of work into it, they will begin to view it as theirs and will be reluctant to take it back, even if it is not the right sofa for them.¹⁵⁶ This is why salespeople often encourage people to take products home to try them. Once we begin to feel like we own something, returning it will be viewed as a loss.¹⁵⁷ Loss aversion leads people to keep things they do not need.

Sunk-cost fallacy

One manifestation of loss aversion is known as the *sunk-cost fallacy*. When we have invested time and money into a project, a plan, or a relationship we are less likely to abandon it, and will continue putting resources into it, even when better investments are available.¹⁵⁸ An example of this would be driving into a blizzard to see a concert simply because we already purchased the tickets. We are afraid to abandon going to the concert even though it will be a challenging and possibly un-enjoyable affair because we have already sunk costs into it.¹⁵⁹ In order to make good decisions, according to Kahneman, “sunk costs should be ignored.”¹⁶⁰

Narrow framing

Another bias that humans are vulnerable to is *narrow framing*. That is, we think of each decision we make, even in a sequence of decisions, separately, rather than as a comprehensive

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 182.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 177.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Kahneman, 345.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 371.

set of decisions.¹⁶¹ As we know, our decisions are rarely bound by reality; rather, they are bound by their frame.¹⁶² Broad framing tempers people's emotional reactions to losses, and increases willingness to take risks.¹⁶³ People make more rational decisions when using broad frames. One way to frame decisions broadly is to think of the long-term impact of a decision instead of thinking of its short-term impact.¹⁶⁴ Another broad frame is known as the outside view. The outside view involves assessing a problem by considering information from other cases than the view offered by the present case one is considering.¹⁶⁵

Another type of broad frame is joint evaluation, the comparison of two sets.¹⁶⁶ This is in contrast to the narrow frame of single evaluation. When making a decision with a narrow frame – that is, thinking only of the situation that you are deciding in the moment – makes us more reliant on emotional judgments, which are faulty. Finding a situation to compare the decision to, allows us to make more stable decisions.¹⁶⁷ Making explicit comparisons between situations slows down our thinking and makes us less reliant on faulty intuition.¹⁶⁸ For example, when giving birthday gifts, we make decisions about what gift to give a person in that moment, rather than as one in a series of gifts we will give throughout the year. As a result, one might give a more valuable gift to their neighbor than they gave their grandmother, even though they value their grandmother more. A way to give a more appropriate gift to their neighbor is to think, “What kind of gift would I give to my grandmother?” and make a decision relative to that. This is a way to frame the decision broadly.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 336.

¹⁶² Ibid., 367.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 339.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 242.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 245-249.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 361.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 354.

The *planning fallacy* is a consequence of narrow framing. Decision-makers fall prey to the *planning fallacy* when forecasting the results of long-term projects. The planning fallacy describes plans that are “unrealistically close to best-case scenarios” and “could be improved by consulting the statistics of similar cases.”¹⁶⁹ As a result of narrow framing, people often make plans that are overly optimistic and as a result fail to deliver projects within the budget and on time.¹⁷⁰ The planning fallacy can be avoided by using a broad frame. In this case, that would involve using distributional information from similar ventures, and comparing it to the forecasts of one’s plan.¹⁷¹

Expert intuition

Even experts – in all fields – are vulnerable to these biases of intuition.¹⁷² However, there are circumstances when the intuitions of experts are trustworthy.¹⁷³ If an expert acquires a skill in an environment that is sufficiently regular to be predictable, and can learn these regularities through prolonged practice, their intuition will often be correct.¹⁷⁴ In fact, expert intuition can appear strikingly accurate.¹⁷⁵ This is because, as one becomes more skilled in a task, “its demand for energy diminishes.”¹⁷⁶ However, expert intuition is only trustworthy if the environment is sufficiently regular, and the expert has had a chance to learn its regularities.¹⁷⁷ In these cases, the associate machinery recognizes situations and generates fast, accurate decisions.¹⁷⁸ Situations

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 250.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 252.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 251.

¹⁷² Ibid., 140.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 243.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

provide cues, and memory recognizes those cues and responds appropriately.¹⁷⁹ When skill is developed, it takes the place of heuristics, which we now know to be faulty.¹⁸⁰ However, “true experts know the limits of their knowledge.”¹⁸¹ That is to say, they know the limits of their decision-making powers outside of environmental regularities.

Summary

Museological literature offers advice on how to create mission statements, policies and procedures that guide the process of acquiring objects into permanent collections. However, this literature does not demonstrate what the decision-making process looks like in reality. Behavioral economics, the study of human judgment and decision-making, offers insight into how human beings actually make decisions. Further, it shows what heuristics they utilize to simplify their decision-making, and to which biases human decision-makers are prone. Behavioral economics fills in the gaps created by museological literature with respect to decision-making.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 237.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 239.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study used semi-structured interviews to *describe acquisitions policy at community historical organizations from a decision-making perspective*. The process included a selection of organizations for the study, conducting interviews with collections managers and curators at each organization, and coding the interview data for intuitive heuristics and biases. Five different collections managers and curators from five different institutions were interviewed. This chapter describes the study's methodology.

Sampling & Sample

The sample was developed using the following criteria:

- Organization is a member of the Associated King County Historical Organizations, an organization in King County, Washington.
- Organization has at least one professional staff member but no more than five
- Staff member interviewed is the person primarily responsible for making decisions about acquisitions.

The Associated King County Historical Organizations (AKCHO) website was consulted to identify museums in the region that could participate in in-person interviews. The website of each museum was reviewed for number of staff. It was important that the museums have a small staff but at least one professional staff member. This was because it was believed that small museums could most benefit from this research, but a professional staff member could offer a greater depth of information. Museums with at least one staff member but no more than five were contacted by phone or email, and the first five museums to respond favorably were selected to interview. No more than five museums consented to an interview.

The five participants were all female. All were college graduates. All but two had Master's level training in Museum Studies or a related field, but the other two had certificates in Museum Studies. Three were collections managers, one was a curator of collections, and one was a museum manager.

Data Collection

The interviews took place over two weeks in March of 2016. The interview guide in Appendix A was utilized to conduct the interviews. The interviews were recorded using a smart phone and stored on a password-protected computer. They were transcribed using Nvivo. Participants were told that they, nor their institutions, would be identifiable by this study. Any identifying information in their responses is obscured. In this study, the participants are referred to as Participant One through Participant Five. They are all collections managers or curators. The important part is that they are all primarily responsible for making decisions about acquisitions at their institutions.

Data Analysis

Interview data were coded by identifiable intuitive heuristics, biases, and concepts identified by behavioral economics, as outlined in the literature review. First, codes were identified from the literature of behavioral economics. The codes included were chosen because they had the greatest application to the museum field. Then, examples of those codes were selected from the interview transcripts. See Appendix B for the coding rubric.

Limitations

Due to the small size of the sample, and the fact that the sample was limited to King County, Washington, makes the data difficult to generalize. Further research into decision-making at museums is necessary to generalize about the field.

Chapter 4: Results

There are three parts to this analysis, aligned with each of the three research questions. The first part outlines the heuristics and biases discovered in the responses of the participants. The second part discusses the factors that determine whether the participants acquire an object or collection into their permanent collection or reject the object or collection. The third part discusses how the participants define the success of their acquisitions.

1) What Are the Intuitive Heuristics and Biases That Museum Professionals Use When Making Decisions About Collections Gifts?

To answer this research question, participants were asked a series of questions about how they make decisions about what collection gifts to accept (see Appendix A for interview guide). Their responses were then analyzed according to the coding rubric (see Appendix B) in order to understand how pervasive each heuristic and bias from behavioral economics was across the five participants, and how each heuristic and bias manifested among them. Across all the data, 15 heuristics and biases were observed, including substitution, representativeness, availability heuristic, affect heuristic, market norms vs. social norms, associative coherence, confirmation bias, anchoring, priming, fear of regret, hindsight bias, loss aversion, the sunk-cost fallacy, narrow framing, and expert intuition. The heuristics and biases are presented and analyzed here in the order of how many of the five participants reported instances of them.

Market Norms Vs. Social Norms

As outlined previously, people have different expectations when operating in different norms. In market norms, which are the norms in place when money is involved, people behave

more selfishly, self-reliantly, and unfairly. Within social norms, people are less selfish and more caring. All five participants had to negotiate between market and social norms.

Participant One was cautious about maintaining market norms when dealing with potential donors. Potential donors viewed Participant One's museum as somewhere they could expect social norms. Participant One stated that she was cautious about treating their donors like family, saying, "It is about having boundaries and it is about having a backbone. 'Cause people will badger you." Participant One wants to maintain market norms, because if she relied on social norms, people would expect the museum to do whatever they asked. However, Participant One's boss had a harder time maintaining market norms. Of this, Participant One said,

[W]hen our Executive Director is out in the community and fundraising and relationship-building, something he's very good at, there's a huge overlap between, like, you know, he doesn't have a collections sensibility, that's not his responsibility, so people will just give him things and he won't think about it in terms of, "This is a collections gift." So there isn't necessarily the documentation that should be happening. Also I might not even know that it came in until I wander in to his office and like, "Oh this is cool, where'd that come from? Oh, Chamber of Commerce gave you that? Is it for us to keep or are you borrowing it for a project? Oh, we're to keep it? Gee, that should really be in the collection."

The Executive Director, in attempting to build relationships with the community, used social norms, and as a result, would accept collections gifts as a favor without consideration of their necessity and purpose.

Later, Participant One mentioned that there were times when she tried to use social norms to get community members more involved, but acknowledged the difficulty of doing this with respect to acquisitions, saying,

What I would do with something like that and we have had kind of those things happen I mean, there is the cultivating piece that you do up front and then it's kind of inviting them to be part of it. "So glad you thought of us, you know, I'm sure there are a lot of things that we would love to be able to accept. But just so you know up front we have very little space and so even if I want to take a lot of things we're gonna really have to just be really - maybe you can help me pare

down, what are the most significant things?" Because they know the stories behind the stuff and I might see it one way, and it's like, "I'd love to come over. I can schedule a visit with you and we can look at this stuff together. You know, if that's not possible, I can look through it real quickly and maybe just figure out some of the things that seem to jump out." And the conversations do kind of stay like that. It's like I always try really hard to make sure they understand like it's a huge responsibility for us to accept this thing that you're giving us forever.

In order to get community members to contribute to their organization, Participant One used the social norm of treating the cultivation process as a social exchange, but acknowledged that made it more difficult for the donor to understand the challenges of accepting collections gifts.

Participant Two also acknowledged the boundaries of social norms and market norms were difficult to navigate in the donor cultivation process. However, Participant Two saw difficulties when donors treated donating collections as a market exchange. Of this, Participant Two said,

The most trouble we've ever had is sometimes people call us on the phone and it's when they want us to buy things and they usually get mad when we say no, but that's so far out of what we do, there was a lady who called and said she had a five-hundred year old book and I was like, "I'm pretty sure that's not from here then." And she was really mad when I said we don't have a budget for that. And she's like, "Oh museums buy stuff all the time," and I was like, "Correct but we are not the Met so you may wanna try some place bigger or some place that book actually pertains to."

Here, donors saw giving to collections as a market exchange, and as a result, acted as selfish maximizers who wanted money in exchange for their gift.

Participant Three tried to see donor relations as strictly in the realm of market norms. When asked if the relationship with a donor was a factor in determining what acquisitions to accept, Participant Three said,

No, not that either. It's historical content of that family to the area. I try to avoid anything that is political, personal relationships. There have been times, multiple times that people will come to me and say, I will give a lot of money to the museum but I would like you to store this. No.

Participant Three did not want to let social norms affect what she would and would not accept. She is acted selfishly on behalf of the institution, as people do in market exchanges, maximizing the reach of the museum's resources by not accepting things the museum did not need. Paradoxically, Participant Three was cautious that potential donors did not see the process as a market exchange by not attaching a monetary value to any of the items in their collection, saying,

And I'm always like, they can fire me, and it's fine and the next person can put a value to it, but on my watch, on my role I will not give anyone anything a monetary value to anything that we got. Why? Because well we take things for a reason and we are not taking it for business transactions.

Participant Three did not want money to be involved when donors approached the museum with objects because it obfuscates the purpose of the exchange. So, Participant Three wanted to treat the process with market norms, selfishly maximizing the museum's resources, while she wanted donors to view the process with social norms.

This is exemplified when Participant Three said,

One of the first things I did coming in, I took everyone's keys and changed the locks. I did that because it was common that a board member came, "Oh, I had a presentation to give and I thought that I can actually use this object to present this." They were taking things away from the collections. So only two keys can get in here and I want to keep it like for the museum too. So I made a lot of adjustment and I think I make a lot of people unhappy with me, and my boss is protecting me from so many mean people. Not mean, but they have their own agenda, they have their own way of looking at things. And I've been lucky enough I'm able to implement thing like no monetary value to things, taking the keys away, having the policy that is so open that actually allows me to do this. If it was more specific, more multi-tier, I think I would be having some conflicts because there would be some conflict of interest right there. But having it like this, I'm not having any conflict of interest, because I'm disengaged.

By thinking of their relationship with donors in terms of market norms, Participant Three sees themselves as able to be more disengaged and free of conflicts of interest.

Participant Four viewed the process in the same way, saying that by treating donor relations in terms of market norms, she avoided being pressured to do things that are outside of the interests of the museum. Of this she said,

When I was a grad student back in the 80's and Dan Porter at Cooperstown was teaching a class about museum administration and he was quite adamant that you need to be able to say no to donors. They won't respect you if you don't! I didn't always agree with Dan or his approach but that does come back to mind when someone is trying to get me to say yes to something that I shouldn't. I'll give him credit. He got that through my skull.

By treating the acquisition process as a market exchange, Participant Four is able to say no to collections that do not fit the scope and mission of the museum.

Participant Five also saw the acquisitions process as a market exchange, and tried to avoid accepting gifts only to maintain positive relations with a donor. Participant Five said,

I really, really try not to do that just because I don't necessarily think it's a good precedent to set. But there have definitely been some times for mainly for the donor relations where it's kind of, we're a little bit looser with thing. The way that the collecting scope is worded there is some little thing where it's like, "Or if it contributes to the regional or national history," kind of thing. And so that, you know you can put a lot of stuff under that little sentence but... yeah generally I try not to take too much stuff that isn't directly mission-tied. We also don't have a lot of space for stuff....

Participant Five sees treating the acquisition process in terms of social norms as a dangerous precedent to set. Participant Five went on to say that accepting something simply on the basis of donor relationships would be a potential source of regret.

Associative Coherence

As defined in the literature review, associative coherence occurs when people construct a specific story about ambiguous evidence. All participants used associative coherence when determining what objects to collect. The story that they can construct based on the objects and who owned and used them is a large part of how they determine what to take.

Participant One stated that because of her broad mission, it was almost too easy to accept whatever was offered. In fact, because of associative coherence, Participant One thought the organization could benefit from a more narrow scope. However, Participant One resisted associative coherence when thinking about accepting a chandelier that she did not believe would be a good fit, saying,

Well, as much as anything I think that chandelier kind of fits that spot. Because I could make the argument for it pretty easily. And I could make the argument against it pretty easily. So it's sitting in a gray area in the annex. That's how I've resolved it. It's not resolved.

While the chandelier issue is unresolved, she resisted utilizing the broad scope of the mission to create an argument for keeping it without reservation.

Participant Two also relied on constructing stories about artifacts, saying that when offered a gift she asks, “[W]hat [regional] story does this artifact tell?” Based on the story she can construct, “that right there usually separates the good from the bad.” Associate coherence allows Participant Two to construct stories about which artifacts she would like to keep.

Participant Three also used associative coherence to determine which objects to accept into their collection. As mentioned previously, Participant Three’s inclination is to keep everything, and will try to come up with an argument for why to keep objects. Participant Four also asks, when determining what to accept, “What kind of story can we tell with it? Does it really fit the mission?” Participant Four utilized the mission and associative coherence to construct a story around the objects presented to them by donors.

Participant Five also admitted that their scope is broad, saying,

We do have a scope. It is kind of a broad scope though but it's mainly our area that we cover is large so we do all of [the surrounding region] and then pretty much anything contributes the story of the culture or history of [the surrounding region] from the native people to now.

The scope is broad and Participant Five went on to say that makes it easy to construct a story around objects that are offered for donation saying,

But there have definitely been some times for mainly for the donor relations where it's kind of, we're a little bit looser with thing. The way that the collecting scope is worded there is some little thing where it's like, "Or if it contributes to the regional or national history," kind of thing. And so that, you know you can put a lot of stuff under that little sentence but... yeah generally I try not to take too much stuff that isn't directly mission-tied. We also don't have a lot of space for stuff so we have to...

Here, Participant Five said that a lot of objects could fit under their scope, and as a result makes it easy to accept things. However, she is limited by space.

Narrow Framing

Narrow framing occurs when people make decisions without comparing the circumstances of that decision to the circumstances of other decision. When a person makes their decisions only based on the circumstances of the moment, and does not view that decision as part of a comprehensive series of decisions, they are conforming to a narrow frame. Broad framing is when people compare their situations to similar situations of others, or views the current decision facing them as part of a series of other decisions in order to make a decision relative to the series. Broad framing is a more statistically optimal way to make decisions.

Participant One made decisions from a broad frame. In the instance of some objects that were acquired to memorialize 9/11, Participant One used the broad frame of relative judgments to determine what to do with the objects, saying,

And so I'm still trying to figure out how to deal with that and one of the things I would love to do is convince some enterprising young thesis student to look at how does the Vietnam Memorial deal with these things, how does the 9/11 Museum in New York deal with these things. How do these other kinds of memorials - where they collect this stuff - how do they deal with these things?

The objects are taking up too much space in their collection, and not all of them are relevant.

However, she used the broad frame of comparing her circumstances to those of other museums to determine what to do with the collection.

Participant One also demonstrated decision-making from a broad frame in implementing the survey process to deal with large collections that are offered for donation. Of the survey process, she said,

It applies big or little but if it's even a couple boxes worth like going through it and kind of doing a really rough outline of like, ok, how much is here? What are the kind of big themes that are here. What are the kind of big groupings of material types that are here? What are the sizes of things that are here? So you can kind of get an idea from the very get-go, like, ok, how much of this is relevant to our mission scope and our collecting scope and not being so afraid to not accept everything. Like, you don't have to keep the donation in its entirety unless there's something chronological about it or something like that and even then you just note it. Not being so afraid to pare down a donation to like what are the parts of it that you really need to keep. So, but doing the survey is like looking kind of broadly and staying at a broad level. It's very easy to start flipping through and you kinda start to kinda look into a folder. No. Look at what the big picture [is].

This big picture approach to collections is a broad frame because it does not just treat the collection as an all-or-nothing proposition. Rather, the collection is compared to the scope and mission, and the contents are viewed thematically, rather than as individual objects to be evaluated separately.

Participant One also used a broad frame in thinking of the consequences of their decision in the long-term, not just from the perspective of the moment, saying their goal is “to approach things like, I'm making a model to be sustainable into the future. I'm making a model for when I am not here anymore. Whatever I do I need to leave so that somebody else could pick it up and very intuitively figure out what do.” Her educational background also supports her broad framing. She does not think of things only from a museological perspective, but from a non-profit management perspective. She attributed this to her education, saying,

I have a pretty strong policy background. I also did the non-profit management program and that's been really principle in talking to my board, in being able to talk about, "What does the law require? What do our own policies require?" Being able to do financial analysis of how much of our resources are we actually putting into our mission-based programs of which collections is a big one.

Her educational background allowed Participant One to avoid a narrow frame, as does her reliance on a network of other collections managers that she often consults. Participant One said,

Well, I specifically asked [another collections manager] about the institutional records thing, I was like, "Do you guys have policy? What do you recommend?" And she told me that they didn't really specifically have a straight policy but here was she managed it. The other thing is that I'm a forum moderator for the [local collections] forum and so there's a whole body of people there that I can reach out to. I'm also a member of the local registrar's committee for Washington State and again it's a group of people you can ask questions of. So there are some really good resources for talking to but I've found that that's less common in this size institution because you'd have to know those networks existed.

By reaching out to other museum professionals, Participant One can get an outside view of her decisions. As Kahneman mentions, the outside view is an example of a broad frame.

Participant Two also gets an outside view, by making decisions in conjunction with their Executive Director, saying, "If I am unsure about it I take it to the Director and we'll make decisions together sometimes." However, Participant Two has made themselves vulnerable to narrow framing by eliminating their reliance on their acquisitions committee. Participant Two said,

I think it is really interesting how I notice a lot of places have acquisition committees that are made up of board members and part of the reason we have not done that is because there is such a long lag time in between – somebody will bring something in, you have to accept it in temporary custody and then gather things up and I know some places do it quarterly and so you're waiting sometimes three months to present it to the acquisitions committee and then, you know, I would be making a recommendation on that stuff anyway and then they would have to say, "Yea or nay", and then getting all of that stuff they don't approve back, especially if it's things that I immediately know, "No, we cannot take this."

Because of the inconvenience involved in consulting the collections committee, Participant Two

has stopped consulting them. As a result, she makes decisions from the narrow frame of the inside view, whereas the collections committee could offer an outside view.

However, Participant Two did utilize broad framing in that she considered the long-term consequences of her decision-making, specifically with respect to cataloging contemporary events for long-term preservation. She said,

I mean we keep digital archives of everything that we've done since we've been here. But none of it is accessioned into the permanent collections, it's kind of a separate thing.... Yeah, they're taking a bunch of modern day digital photographs because we don't sew ourselves in with time because we know something that happened yesterday will be really important down the road. We've taken, we've accessioned pictures of buildings being demoed, like, historic buildings coming down and things like that. Fires of historic buildings.

Participant Two does not narrowly see her job as protecting and preserving what has happened in the past, but she also takes pains to preserve contemporary documents and photographs for future use.

Participant Three also used the broad frame of the outside view by participating in the StEPS program, implemented by the local organization 4 Culture. StEPS allowed Participant Three to compare her collections practices with the best practices from around the country. She acknowledged this by saying, "Now with the StEPS that's another- this is not personal. This is what's applicable to anywhere in the country." She even recognized the value of taking an outside view, saying,

I'm part of the 4 Culture group which I've been extremely close to the development process of the StEPS program. So it's been beneficial for me to see that I'm seeing from the outside, from a King County aspect, to an institution who wants to improve the conditions of multiple museums to actually me applying it in my everyday role in the museum. So, I've been adding more than I need, like in StEPS they ask you, do you have this, do you have this, do you have this?

The program and its participants offer the broad frame of the outside view.

However, Participant Three was limited by a narrow frame in acquisitions decisions

because she eliminated her collections committee due to limits on time. She said,

There should be a collections meeting which actually I applied, we actually applied that for the first year when I was truly... but I realized a couple things. One, is that we aren't gonna ever take that once the museums open right at this point because we don't have, we're trying to operate as a historical society while we're trying to open a new museum at the same time with only one paid staff that is not even full time. It's hard to move forward with those conditions and once again this is not something that we should be doing it but we doing it for us to actually keep moving forward. Once the museum is, once that mark is bridged, then we'll be again applying a collections management... committee.

She narrowed her frame by eliminating the collections committee, at least temporarily. However, she also fell prey to the planning fallacy, which states that people are often too optimistic when planning, and ought compare their circumstances to other institutions that have gone through similar circumstances. If Participant Three were to compare her case to Participant Two, she would recognize that she is unlikely to start implementing a collections committee even when she opens up her new museum building.

Participant Four acknowledged their narrow frame when discussing the differences between how she sees artifacts and how her husband views artifacts, saying,

It's interesting because my [spouse is] an engineer and [my spouse] looks at the mechanical parts of our collections very differently than I do. And I've learned from listening to [my spouse] talk about them and seeing which things [my spouse] gets excited about either in our collections or if we go to another museum or somebody's exhibit and I'll be saying, oh yeah, I've seen tons of those, and [my spouse will] say oh yeah but this is really cool, look at how this one works, and see how that one's different. It's educational for me to see that other cast of mind look it and be able to appreciate object as object instead of object as vehicle for story. Or [my spouse will] see the different story line...see the evolution of the invention instead of the personalities of the inventors.

Here Participant Four acknowledged the narrow frame of her museological perspective in that others can see the different utility of artifacts. Participant Four benefits from an outside view.

Participant Five also demonstrated narrow framing when illustrating an acquisition she made, saying,

So, with the mom's roller-skates, this was actually a guy that called last week, he had two pairs, he had his mom's roller-skates and he had his dad's roller-skates and so his dad grew up in [this region], used the roller-skates to skate at the [local roller rink] in town which is a great story. 1950's. Good shape. His mom moved here in the 60's and her roller-skates that she wore when she was in high school she used when she was growing up in Illinois. By the time she moved here she wasn't really roller skating anymore, she just had these roller-skates. So in that case, the person I was talking to, he's a regular donor, so he was kind of like, okay. So I was like, "Okay, so, your dad's roller-skates, we're definitely interested in those because they're used at the [local roller rink], lived in [this area], went to [the local high school], we have this whole great [regional], easy story." Mom's roller-skates if they were coming as a stand-alone, we'd be like, probably gonna pass on the mom's roller-skates because they don't have the clear [regional] connection. But I ended up taking both because they were paired with her husband's roller-skates and that was kind of the story there.

Here, Participant Five was susceptible to the narrow frame of short-term thinking. If she thought more long-term, she may not have wanted to accept the mother's roller-skates as they had no local story to tell. And as has been demonstrated, museums often collect things they may no longer need in the future.

Participant Five acknowledged the planning fallacy, a result of narrow framing, when discussing the development of their museum's book collection. She said,

The idea was that [the museum] would one day have this facility where we would have a [research library]. Great. That has yet to happen and we have all these books and people keep bringing us more books so it was just kind of a way to control that thing because that was another one where the President before had been like, "If you're at Half Price Books and you see any book on Washington State history you buy it and you bring it in for the library" kind of thing so this was a way to like, kinda, it's like no that's not how we do it anymore. So we obviously like still collect history books and do that it's just now there's a little bit more control.

The museum's administration was overly optimistic about the fact that they would one day have a facility that could support a research library. However, that never came to fruition and they were stuck with a book collection to which they are no longer adding much. The museum's

administration could have benefitted from comparing their circumstances to other museums' circumstance to avoid narrow framing.

Expert Intuition

Expert intuition is when someone makes a fast accurate decision in an environment that they have had experience and practice working in, and recognize the regularities of that environment. All participants demonstrated expert intuition in their responses.

Participant One mentioned that their organization recognized the need for expertise when developing their by-laws, saying,

An interesting thing at this organization is that their by-laws actually require them to have a curator. And the policies that the board has passed over the years are that that curator has to have professional training. And so they basically require somebody who either has a Certificate or a Master's in Museum Studies or Museology.

As a result of the stipulation in their by-laws of requiring a trained curator, Participant One's organization benefitted from expert intuition, and Participant One demonstrated this expert intuition when mentioning a textiles collection she was offered. She said,

I recently had a visit with a woman who had a number of textiles and when I get contacted I often will try to have people send me photos. Or if there's some way I think it's going to maybe be an iffy accession possibility I will go visit them off-site because the moment it comes on-site there's a stronger chance that they could leave it behind and I'd still have to deal with it. And that we don't have the space for that, you know, we're tiny.

Because of her experience with the regularities of the collections environment, Participant One expertly recognized the probability that once something comes on-site, it is harder to get rid of.

Participant Two also demonstrated expert intuition in recognizing quickly which objects she wanted and which ones she wouldn't, saying, "Most of the things that walk in the door it's real apparent like, 'Oh yeah we want that,' or 'Mmm, sorry. Have you tried X place?'" Because of

her experience with the regularities of the acquisitions process she makes intuitive judgments, and based on her responses, Participant Two does not often regret what she accepts, indicating her intuitive judgments are often correct. Participant Two acknowledged that her experience has honed her intuitive judgment, saying, "I think initially when I started here I didn't want to make anybody mad and you didn't know who everybody was and I wasn't as confident in the history as I am now. So, you just get better at it after ten years." After ten years of experience, Participant Two familiarized herself with the regularities of their environment, and recognizes when things don't fit into that pattern.

Likewise, Participant Three demonstrated expert intuition, in that she recognizes when something is not a museum quality item, saying, "[T]hings from the collection that I say, "No, this is not a museum quality item", what I do is I first recognize it, acknowledge it because there are all these gaps in the collection." Their familiarity with their collections environment allows them to recognize irregularities when objects come in that are not museum quality.

Participant Four, the most experienced of the collections professionals interviewed, demonstrated the most examples of expert intuition. In fact, Participant Four's boss has even commented on their expert intuition, mentioned in the following response:

And it's funny because [my boss] will comment sometimes on some of my habits that are actually pretty good and I'll say, "Ah yes but I did it wrong before and I don't have to repeat that mistake." There have been things that were here when I got here that I wished none had taken and, so, I have repatriated things.

Participant Four's experience with the regularities of the collections environment has allowed them to recognize when something is not worth keeping. Participant Four was as generous in their assessment of their boss as their boss was in their assessment of them, noting,

the longer I'm in the field the more I respect the fact that [my boss] figured this out a lot younger than I did. Staff resources only go so far and you can only get so much out of your volunteers and she said, you know, if we, even if we could have

an all new modern building if we still have the same size staff we have we'd need roller-skates and we wouldn't get anything done. Well we do need more space than we have but a huge, without coming up with the skeletal, structural funding for a bigger staff we really can't handle a much bigger museum. And to add another building is to make a bigger place.

Participant Four and their boss have both recognized the limitations of their staff-size, and don't intuitively jump at the chance to expand because of these limitations.

As mentioned previously, part of expertise is recognizing the limits of one's expertise, which Participant Four does readily. Participant Four chose not to evaluate a collection for acquisition because the collection was outside of their area of expertise. She said,

Oh dear, there was a fellow who had inherited his father's railroad collection. And I'm not sure he would have wanted to donate it but he definitely was looking for help with assessing it and deciding what to do with it. And I knew I didn't have the expertise. The one person I know who might, flatly didn't want to touch it and I wound up referring him to that person's best advice source and that was as far as I could go with it. The material was not from [this region]. He was up in Everett and had collected I think from all over. That would have been beyond our resources even if he'd decided to just move it out and donate it. I think he was probably going to want money for it before he was done, though.

Participant Four acknowledged the limits of her expertise and directed this collection elsewhere.

Participant Four also acknowledged the limits of her expertise when she discussed consulting her records to make sure she was not duplicating collections saying, "I don't pretend to know everything we have." In fact, at the end of their interview, Participant Four stated, "We try to be thoughtful, we try to be careful, but we won't get all of it right." By saying she will not get all of it right, she demonstrated her awareness of the limits of her expertise, and in doing so, proved her expert judgment.

Participant Five demonstrated her expert intuition when recognizing when something was not right for her collection, saying,

we ended up not taking the sign but it was one where it was like if we had had the capacity to store it and to move it and do all of that we would have totally taken it

in but just because of kind of how we, where we are right now, it just wasn't realistic, it wouldn't have been responsible from a collections management perspective to take this thing on that we can't take care of.

Because of Participant Five's experience, she recognized the limits of her collection's resources and rejected this acquisition. She went on to say that she would have liked to take it, but did not because she could not justify it, saying, "Just because it's cool, that's not enough of a reason to take it and add it to the collection, so I guess that's more a personal regret, not necessarily an organizational regret." Here, she used her expert intuition, avoiding the affect heuristic.

Participant Five also acknowledged the limits of her expertise in saying she would consult others when something potentially dangerous was offered to her. Of this, she said,

Probably if we were getting something that had, like, some kind of, like if it was, like, had the potential to be dangerous, like it had weird paint or some kind of bizarre material involved, then I probably would seek out who knows about that and ask them what the pros and cons are.

Here, Participant Five acknowledged the limits of her knowledge, and recognized when to seek outside judgment.

Availability Heuristic

As mentioned previously, the availability heuristic is a heuristic which people utilize when making a decision that utilizes only the information that comes to readily to mind, but feel confident that the available information is accurate and complete. Dramatic events and events recently and repeatedly covered in the news will come to mind more readily. Four of the five participants reported instances of the availability heuristic.

Participant One demonstrated the availability heuristic at work in their decision-making with respect to the collections management policy, saying,

Well, I know the policy pretty well so I don't specifically come back and necessarily read it unless there's something like the institutional records where I'm

not really sure exactly where that falls. Most things, I know the policy well enough that I can tell pretty quickly if it's gonna be a good fit.

Here, Participant One claims to know their Collections Management Policy well, and does not refer to it when making decisions about acquisitions. However, intuition utilizes only that information which comes readily available to mind but with the confidence that what comes to mind is all there is to know. Participant One may believe that all aspects of the policy will come readily to mind, while other aspects of it may not be readily available.

Participant One also demonstrated that their board uses the availability heuristic when thinking of relevant factors in acquisition policy. Of this, Participant One said,

The other one that's kind of helping me with the acquisitions piece is copyright. Because my boss and my board are terrified of copyright violations because it's been in the media. They've heard of this and well all of the things we improperly accepted we have copyright issues with. And so they didn't take it very seriously until they started wanting to give permission to other groups to use photos and things like that. We can't give them permission if we don't own it.

The board uses the availability heuristic when thinking of what's important to consider when acquiring objects, in this case copyright. Copyright comes readily available to their mind because it has been covered by the media.

Participant Two also claimed to have their collections management policy "pretty well internalized" and as such does not refer to the policy when making acquisitions decisions. Like Participant One, Participant Two can only make determinations based on what aspects of the policy come readily to mind, though will feel confident that she thought of all there is to know. Participant Two went on to report that she was not sure what procedures were stated in her policy, saying, "I would have to read the policy again because I honestly don't know if it stipulates what the procedure is." Participant Two was assured of her knowledge of the policy, but admitted she does not know it all. In fact, she mentioned that she did not know what the

recent changes to the policy were, saying “It was nothing too major because if I can’t remember it off the top of my head [it wasn’t important]”. The availability heuristic allows people to remember the most dramatic information readily, but Participant Two cannot bring minor changes to the policy to mind. This is the availability heuristic at work.

Participant Three also reported vulnerability to the availability heuristic. When asked how many objects were in her collection, Participant Three said, “Honestly I don’t know. I’m still discovering everything.” As a result, when determining if something she was considering acquiring was already in her collection, she may be vulnerable to the availability heuristic. Some things will come readily to mind, but maybe not everything, and Participant Three may still feel confident that she remembers everything. However, Participant Three said that when someone calls or e-mails and mentions that they have something they would like to donate, Participant Three conducts research to make sure she does not already have that item. Participant Three said,

A lot of times what I do is just, when I'm not sure, a lot of like emails or phone calls, like, "Yeah, why don't you come at this time, let's set up a date..." and then before the date I'll kind of check real quickly, double check, do you have copies of that? Do we need this? And really study, do we need to have that? I do have a gap of time that I can actually, before, and when I'm really insecure or unsure about something, like, "Just drop it here and I'll contact you."

Participant Three, by checking her collection when offered something that she may already have, protects herself against the availability heuristic.

Participant Four also demonstrated use of the availability heuristic, when discussing the possibility of accepting potentially toxic agricultural equipment as demonstrated by the following exchange:

Participant 4: I will say, also, I can see where there could be a conflict between policy and mission, like if somebody, today, if somebody offered me an arsenic sprayer, I probably would say, you need to talk to the Hazmat people. The truth is I've got one in the collection. And I know people who freak when they see it and I've known people in other collections, workers who didn't want to go anywhere

near the agricultural pesticide equipment.

Researcher: Yeah, that makes sense.

Participant 4: Well, it does and it doesn't. I don't want to sound too casual about it and I try to buy organic when I can and I'm an organic gardener myself but my father did agricultural work for sixty-odd years. His uncle farmed from his boyhood until his nineties. They worked with all that stuff. I never saw any detriment to their health from having done so. So do I want to go and lick the thing? No. Am I trying to store it carefully and keep it under plastic so nobody casually handles it? Absolutely. Would I take on in now? Probably not. But did I kick it out of the collection when I saw it? I said, no this is part of the story. We need to treat with respect and care but we need to keep it.

Here, Participant Four feels assured that the agricultural materials in their collection are not harmful because the examples of their relatives unaffected by agricultural chemicals come readily to mind. However, Participant Four also seemed aware that what comes readily to mind is not all there is to know when she said, "I didn't have to consult anything other than my records to make sure I wasn't duplicating collections because I don't pretend to know everything we have." Participant Four does not rely on the availability heuristic when determining whether she is duplicating collections in the acquisition process.

Loss Aversion

Loss aversion suggests that people are afraid to give things up, even if those things are not useful to them, or are causing more harm than good. Participants One, Two, Three, and Four all demonstrated some aversion in their decision-making.

Participant One, in discussing a chandelier that was brought onsite, that was not museum-quality, and potentially toxic, says it is difficult to convince their boss to get rid of the chandelier because of the boss' aversion to loss. Participant One said,

So it makes no sense to maintain a difficult artifact, one that's potentially toxic. And I know that politically it is - it'd be an uphill struggle to get both my boss and our board to understand why we wouldn't want to accept it but I know that the moment that it goes off-site it's like we've accepted it. So it lives in a crate in the annex. I very slowly kind of chip away at it with my boss so that when I

eventually make a move on it, he won't be surprised and he will also understand, because right now it's visible, it's like in the way all the time. It's like, So you understand how in the way it is right? This isn't something you want to have to deal with for all of eternity so you maybe would understand why we don't want to accept this so now we still struggle with, "What do you do with it?" It's not salvageable as a chandelier. So right now he has a little bit of an idea, he's like "Well maybe whoever takes it the restaurant will want it on display, you know put it in a little..." I'm like, yeah sure.

Because of loss aversion, Participant One had difficulty convincing her boss to let go of the artifact. Participant One, aware of loss aversion, is cautious in letting objects that she likely would not want to acquire come on-site. Of this, she said,

I recently had a visit with a woman who had a number of textiles and when I get contacted I often will try to have people send me photos. Or if there's some way I think it's going to maybe be an iffy accession possibility I will go visit them off-site because the moment it comes on-site there's a stronger chance that they could leave it behind and I'd still have to deal with it. And that we don't have the space for that, you know, we're tiny.

Participant One wants to visit potential donors off-site, because, due to loss aversion, once it comes on-site, it's like she already owns it and will have a harder time getting rid of it.

Participant One also hired an intern to put in a survey process in order to combat loss aversion, saying,

So her internship with me was on creating a survey process for us and coming up with a way to manage it. I have been really satisfied with what that's accomplishing for us and it's the kind of thing that I would hope that any organization looking at a big accession would do a survey of the accession first before legally accepting ownership, or not accepting ownership but before legally putting it into their collection. You know there's that halfway mark of where somebody may have signed a deed of gift but it hasn't actually been accessioned yet. That's the space where you can pare it down or even before. I have a box of the personal papers of a family's grandpa. Some of the stuff is relevant I mean he was a local legislator. Some of the stuff is relevant but we accessioned the whole box without looking through it.

Before accessioning anything, Participant One has a built-in process that pares down accessions so she does not get stuck with large collections that will later be difficult to get rid of due to loss aversion.

Participant Two also acknowledged loss aversion, saying, "The longer something is here, the less likely it is getting back to where it needs." Participant Two fights against this by weeding out potential acquisitions before they ever come through the door, saying,

Most everybody that comes in the door, you know, and a lot of people I've kind of trained people at this point. They'll call me first to ask which is great because if I can save them a trip or tell them, "Yes, definitely come down," that's fantastic. Sometimes people will call and give them their email address and I'll email them all of our forms so that they can kind of figure out on their own or they'll email me a picture and so that's great too. So getting out in front of it like that helps a lot too. If I can get them our information so that they can even read it before they talk to me so that they know kind of what our rules are, what we're looking for. Most people are not looking to stick us with stuff. They just have a hard time throwing stuff away. They don't want to see things go in the dumpster.

Participant Two acknowledged the loss aversion of their donors by saying that they have a hard time throwing things away. Participant Two fights against her own loss aversion by having people go through the paperwork before they bring something in to the museum, ensuring only museum quality collections come through the door.

Participant is most susceptible to loss aversion. She acknowledged her loss aversion, saying, "I hate to throw things away, I hate to do that." She advocated for collections that she no longer had space for, like the building models mentioned previously, which are too large to fit into her new museum. Of these, Participant Three said,

I'm fighting for them. I'm fighting for... and I'm still fighting for it, and I'm still working with the architect to see if we can put them on the ceiling. I'm still fighting for it. I don't regret them. When I see there's something that is, it's like a puzzle, if I can find a way to keep those I will keep them. I'm not regretting them. I think that I will feel good about myself knowing I tried my best to keep as much as we can. This is a private institution, this is not like funds from the government or like, oh, and so this is really an effort to save as much as we can.

Participant Three is fighting to keep these objects that do not fit due to loss aversion. She mentioned this again when mentioning scrapbooks in her collection that are in poor condition, saying,

Now, I just got all these flashes in my brain of like, like scrapbooks are like so full of dried plants and it's organic and we don't have a climate control and I took it because of the historical aspect of it but then what is it telling us, this scrapbook full of dried plants. We don't have a climate control and that's one of the, right away. It's such in poor condition that yes I have regretted it but I'm still somehow fighting for it.

This collection, which she regrets taking, she is still fighting to keep because she is so loss averse.

Participant Four also acknowledged her loss aversion, saying, “the sentimentalist in me would like to keep everything,” but she also acknowledged that she cannot keep everything, saying, “but there’s a budget.” She also mentioned the loss aversion of her donors saying, “It’s interesting, people who have items of greater value, or greater perceived value, are often more coy as donor or as sellers because that’s the other factor.” As mentioned previously, loss aversion causes people to overvalue what they already own, and in the case of Participant Four’s donors, this affects their willingness to donate.

Substitution

As mentioned previously, substitution is a heuristic in which an individual intuitively answers or solves a simpler question or problem instead of the more difficult question or problem they are presented with. Three of the five participants demonstrated what could be seen as substitution in their responses.

Participant One used substitution to determine whether to acquire some murals that were in need of care and storage, and the community was excited about them. She did not accession them, but was planning on taking them eventually, because as she said, “I know that’s gonna be

called for again because it's being called for now." Participant One used substitution to determine the murals' value. Participant One substituted the question, "Will these be valuable to keep in perpetuity?" with the question, "Do people think these are valuable now?" Participant One also mentioned that her time with the National Park Service was formative and that she often used her National Park Service experience to answer difficult questions, such as whether to accession her museum's institutional record archive, saying,

We're in the process right now, very much leaning toward accessioning the institutional record archive. And that was based on my experiences with the National Park Service. They accession their administrative records in their museum collections and it's really because it's the easiest way to search it and keep it organized.

While Participant One may have had valid reasons for her institutional record archive, she substituted the question of "What is best for my organization?" with "What would the National Park Service do?"

Participant Two also used substitution in her decision-making. In dealing with potential donors on the phone, she utilized substitution to determine whether she might have artifacts of regional value, saying, "I mean, the people that call us on the phone to buy things I'm not even convinced are from here necessarily. I don't know who they are, they're not people that have relationships with us." While Participant Two self-reported that she has a very small acquisitions budget, she did not even try to cultivate a potential donor relationship with these people who called, thinking they have nothing of regional value. She substituted the question of "Are these people from the area?" with the question, "Do I have a relationship with them already?"

Participant Two also utilized substitution to determine whether a collection that was being offered was of value, as illustrated by the following exchange:

Participant 2: Because of [a recent exhibit] somebody who was a descendant of [a well-known local family] who had [a local drug store] donated a ledger that's yay

thick that has all of [a well-known local doctor's] prescriptions glued into it. Just pages and pages and pages and it's not in super shape but I couldn't say no and it was crazy awesome that an exhibit we did brought stuff out of the woodwork.

Researcher: Why could you not say no?

Participant 2: We don't have, I think we have some pictures from [a local drug store] but we have nothing else from them and the connection to [the well-known local doctor], I mean, he's one of probably top ten influential people in [this town]. He opened the first hospital, he delivered thousands of babies, I mean, he was a man about town. He was very, very important. There's a street named after him now and so and we also don't really have a lot of pharmacy history at all just in general let alone associated with [the well-known local doctor] so, I mean, it's not terrible condition but it's fragile.

Here, Participant Two took a collection that was in somewhat poor condition because of the connection to someone well-known in the area. Again, Participant Two may have valid reasons for taking the collection, but Participant Two demonstrated the use of substitution when she substituted the question of "Is this collection right for us?" with "Is this collection associated with someone who is well-known?"

Participant Three utilized substitution in a similar way. Participant Three had this to say about a doll house collection they acquired from the 1930s that was in poor collection: "Like for example, I just took a doll house from the 1930s that is in really poor condition but I took it because that is the family or that person we have a road named after that person." Like Participant Two, Participant Three substituted the question, "Is this collection right for this institution considering its poor condition?" with "Is this collection associated with someone well-known?"

Affect Heuristic

As mentioned, the affect heuristic is at work when people use their emotions to make a decision instead of deliberation and reason. It is a form of substitution in that it asks, "How do I feel about something?" in place of the more difficult question, "What do I think about

something?” Three of the five participants demonstrated some reliance on the affect heuristic in their responses.

Participant One demonstrated affect heuristic when discussing an acquisition she was considering at a previous institution. The acquisition was rejected by Participant One’s superior, which Participant One understood. However, Participant One went on to say,

And I know that they said there's a storage question and I was like yeah but we could also set it up in the display because we have a whole big area there that it would fit and it fits with the display. And it just, that one broke my heart a little bit. They would have paid shipping to send it. I just sort of disagreed with that one.

Saying that the decision broke her heart, Participant One suggested that her desire to acquire this particular object was guided by how she felt about it, not what she thought about it.

Participant One also testified that a collection that was taking up too much space in her storage was being kept, despite the possible irrelevance of some of its contents, because of how her board and staff felt about the person who donated the collection, saying,

It's another single accession of the [community member's] papers. [This community member] was one of the founders of this organization and we still have a couple of folks on the board, and my boss, who knew [this community member], who is now passed away. So it's very emotional for them to think that we would possibly not keep something that [this community member] had touched. He was a father figure to many of them. And he was a man of standing in the community but everything in [this community member's] papers, I mean, he wouldn't even have kept it. Like, looking at his notes and his - he was pretty clear on, like, you don't collect everything, but it's their memory of him. How could you dare not keep it?

Participant One’s board and staff are possibly using the affect heuristic to decide the importance of this collection. Their feelings are substituted for thinking in determining what to do with the large collection.

Participant Two also used the affect heuristic when deciding to accession a rather large item, despite a lack of storage. This situation is illustrated by the following exchange:

Participant 2: Typically we don't take big stuff, we just do not have the room. Our off-site is absolutely full, so but there have been times when we've broken that because it was absolutely an amazing artifact.

Researcher: For example?

Participant 2: The biggest one that we've accepted was the Magic Egg Cleaning Machine which is longer than this six-foot table and it's a little bit narrower but it's probably four feet, five feet high. It was created and patented from [this town]. It was found by a junk company cleaning out a farm in [an adjoining region] and it's in really decent condition and it's a crazy rare unique artifact from [this region]. So even though it was big and it came with no money we took that one.

Participant Two was amazed by the artifact, and felt it was crazy rare. Here, Participant Two substituted her feelings for deliberate thought and accepted a gift, which, as Participant Two reported, there was no room for.

Participant Three was also guided by the affect heuristic, which manifested in her inclination to keep everything that is offered. Participant Three said,

[M]y first inclination is to accept everything. And I'm like a lawyer trying to come up with an argument so why should we - actually there's a lot of times that I've talked to them, give me something, give me a reason of why we should keep it and they say, "Well this from my family," like yeah it's from your family but your family is not from here so give me a reason. Give me an argument, a reason, so no my first inclination is save things.

Participant Three is guided by an emotional desire to keep everything. This feeling guides Participant Three's tendency to try to find an argument to keep whatever she can.

Representativeness

As outlined in the literature review, representativeness is a heuristic in which an individual attempts to assess the probability of an outcome based on how well the situation corresponds to the representation of that outcome they have in their mind. Stereotypes are a type of representativeness. Two of the five participants interviewed demonstrated the use of representativeness in their decision-making.

Participant One utilized representativeness when determining whether to go to a patron's house to look at a potential donation:

[S]he said she thought there was a bridal gown in there, and it was like, well, and the woman who she got it from is still alive and she's 97 and has a good memory. So that right there is, you know there's a chance there's something good there, but when I got there and I visited her off-site, I just went over to her house, because when I got there, there was maybe one or two things out of a huge bundle that was, you know, if the original owner could remember what they wore they would be very useful that way. And the downer was that the woman I was visiting to look at them had acquired them, you know, to wear, like, so, she had like cut skirts off of some gowns and stuff to make like long kind of more like hippy kinda skirts and stuff and then decided she didn't want to wear 'em. Wanted to know, well then some of the ones she didn't do that to she tried to repair because she didn't want to give them to me without, you know- [them being in good condition].

Here Participant One calculated the odds of this being a quality donation based on her mental picture of a good donor, in this case an elderly woman, still living, with a good memory.

However, Participant One was disappointed when the representation she had in her mind did not correspond with reality.

Participant Three often used representativeness in her decision-making. Participant Three's use of representativeness shows up in her optimism over how well she will be able to implement better collections management systems once her new museum building opens. Of this, Participant Three said,

Right now, the goal, and it will be improving, and they have been talking about this for years, they have a strategy, they know what's happening, this is not like a permanent status condition, they know that once they reach a lot of money to have the museum, it's way different when you have already an established museum, you have an established building, it's way different when everything is there, and it's just making some adjustments here and there. When you have an operating institution, causing expenses, keeping up with things, being active to all the different things, and opening up a new museum, so there's like two different components. Once we reconcile those two and establish an institution it will be so much easier for us to implement the right systems. Right now, we're just in kind of a survival mode, like, okay, what are our priorities? We know it's only going to last for a short period, it's not gonna be a permanent, long term..."

Participant Three indicated that she believes that the institution will pull itself out of survival mode and implement the right systems once she opens up the new museum building based on a representation in her mind of how an established museum functions.

Representativeness also shows up in Participant Three's tendency to save as much as she can from her collection, putting a lot of effort in trying to acquire and keep as many collections as possible. For one, Participant Three said, "This is a private institution. This is not like funds from the government...and so this is really an effort to save as much as we can." Based on a representation in her mind of how public institutions operate – with lots of funds to purchase quality acquisitions – Participant Three collected as many free acquisitions as possible. This behavior is enforced by another example of representativeness in Participant Three's thinking. Participant Three said,

Because, you go to like a retirement home and they throw away everything, all the precious... you go to homes and houses, they give it to the garage sales, Goodwill, throw them in the garbage, so as a community, as a population in general they tend to throw things away. And what is my role? Trying to keep them.

Participant Three is motivated to acquire and keep as many collections as possible based on a representation of the community's tendency to get rid of nearly everything they own.

Participant Three collects testimony of donors who are offering gifts, but only from those who are offering gifts that seem likely to have a story behind them. Of this, Participant Three said,

Sorry but you have to tell me the history of every single object and then that way it's not just the personal but the history of it was so rich that it took me two weeks just to get all of the information. Should we do that with all the objects? Probably, yeah, probably we should that and get all the information as possible but then what is the line between the history of a pencil when it's not truly life changing. What is the line? And sometimes it's just the story and what is great about what we got here too is that when I see that we have a potential story-telling that could be significant, we have oral histories and that's what I do.

Participant Three gets a rich, detailed history of some collections, but has a representation in her mind of what those collections look like, as demonstrated by the phrase, “What is the line between the history of a pencil when it’s not truly life changing?” Participant Three uses a representation of what constitutes “life-changing” when determining of which gifts to get accounts.

Confirmation Bias

As already mentioned, confirmation bias occurs when someone believes something to be true and seeks evidence to prove it true, while ignoring evidence to the contrary. Participant One used the confirmation bias known as the halo effect to garner the support of her board, saying, “I used to work for a legislature. I'm used to legislators making decisions based on reports so I write a lot of reports. And I do lots of charts. I do a lot pretty graphics to show, ‘This is what's happening.’ I do a lot of pictures.” By creating a quality, visually-appealing presentation, Participant One gets the board’s support. The board will see the quality of the presentation and based on that first impression will attempt to confirm that what Participant One is showing them is right and sound.

Participant Three is particularly vulnerable to the confirmation bias because her first inclination is to accept everything and will seek evidence to confirm that inclination and admits as much in a quote already referenced,

No, my first inclination is to accept everything. And I'm like a lawyer trying to come up with an argument so why should we - actually there's a lot of times that I've talked to them, give me something, give me a reason of why we should keep it and they say, "Well this from my family," like yeah it's from your family but your family is not from here so give me a reason. Give me an argument, a reason, so no my first inclination is save things.

Participant Three is looking for an argument to confirm her inclination to accept collections.

Anchoring

As already mentioned, anchoring occurs when people are asked to estimate a quantity and a quantity is suggested as a solution, arbitrarily or not, and their estimation is based on that quantity. Participants One and Three demonstrated anchoring.

Participant One used anchoring when considering the renegotiation of the regional boundaries of her collection and a neighboring institution's collection. Participant One said,

We also have in [this neighborhood] area some crossover with [another institution] and I don't know, like, [the other institution's curator] and I keep saying we're gonna sit down and catch up and it's got to do with the way that [their city] and [our city] have been about [this neighborhood], unincorporated King County. [Their city] was going to annex it and then they decided it was too expensive and didn't do it. Now [our city]'s talking, not for the first time, about annexing it. Well, half of [this neighborhood] is already within [our city] limits. And so, I don't know what was in the original board's mind when they set the parameters but they've always collected to that point. So we do have some early stuff but the ongoing? I don't know.

In determining where the new boundaries of collecting will be, related to the boundaries of another organization, the anchor is the original boundaries set out by the founding board, boundaries which could very well have been arbitrary. As a result, the new boundaries may not be based on reality, but on the original, potentially arbitrary or obsolete boundaries determined by the founding board.

Participant Three showed susceptibility to anchoring when accepting a collection offered by one of her donors. Participant Three said,

One time I was so impressed that we got this lady comes and like, "Oh my family has been here for three generations and this and this", but she's offering two hundred objects and I even told her, like, we're probably we're gonna take like five objects out of this. That was not the case. There's only been a few cases in almost ten years that I've been shocked and that was one of them. Not only did we take five, we took, like, ninety or a hundred objects.

Here, Participant Three wanted only to accept five or so objects but ended up taking many more, possibly up to one hundred. This is because the number of objects offered, two hundred, had an anchoring effect. The decision of how many objects to accept was influenced by the original anchor of two hundred objects.

Priming

To restate, priming occurs when a decision is influenced by stimuli in the environment at or just before the moment the decision is made. Participants Two and Three were primed by their collections policies when making decisions about acquisitions.

Participant Two stated that the collection policy influenced her decision-making when offered large acquisitions, saying,

We do have a stipulation in our policy that talks about whether or not we can care for the object and so that does weigh heavily on whether or not we accept it. If somebody's trying to donate us a Sherman tank and they're not also donating a million dollars with it for it's care then that's not happening.

The collection policy, which she is exposed to repeatedly, primes her, so that when she is asked to accept large objects, remembers the stipulation that she can only accept objects for which she can care.

Participant Three put the AAM Code of Ethics in her collection policy to prime board members against unethical decision-making. Likewise, Participant Three keeps an abridged summary of the collection policy above her desk in order to prime herself against making decisions contrary to policy.

Hindsight Bias

As mentioned, hindsight bias occurs when people evaluate their decision-making not on the quality of the process but on the outcome. Participants Two and Five demonstrated hindsight bias in their responses.

Participant Two showed hindsight bias when evaluating a decision she made about acquiring a Victrola machine and the records that came with it, saying,

Here's a good one that I'd forgotten that I kinda wish we hadn't accepted. It was a bequest and this happened fairly early on when I started here and the director also so we were not as on firm footing that we were with our confidence and that sort of thing and so at the that time we really didn't feel good about turning down a bequest and so it was a Victrola which are not small and which was fine. We already had one but this one was a different style and so now we have two. The part that ticked me off about it was all of the records that came with it because that killed my entire budget for supplies because I had to buy all of those sleeves and so that was rough. And in retrospect I would have accepted the Victrola and probably turned down the majority of the record collection.

In hindsight, Participant Two wishes she had not accepted the record collection, but she had nothing to say about the soundness of the process that led her to that decision.

Participant Five mentioned that there are items in her collection that she wished she had not been accessioned that had been accessioned before she started work at the museum. She said,

I've definitely found things that were accessioned long before I got here that made me reconsider the collections policy but I don't think that there's been any incoming stuff that made me rethink it.

Here she evaluated the process of collecting based on the outcome of the decisions – objects she did not think were right for the collection - but not on the process itself. As she mentioned, she has not regretted any of the things she has accessioned so the process as outlined in the collection policy is likely sound.

Sunk-Cost Fallacy

As previously stated, the sunk-cost fallacy is a form of loss aversion. It occurs when someone refuses to abandon a project, and even puts more resources into a project, because they have already put a lot of resources into that project. Only Participant Four was a victim of the sunk-cost fallacy. She described a time when the institution was determining whether to abandon a train caboose that was suffering a lot of condition issues, but they decided to repair the caboose and keep it because of all of the resources they had already put into it. Of this, she said,

We've had to have some real soul-searching about our railroad cars, plural. And we hit the point about four years ago with the caboose that it was either the money needs to be found and a major restoration needs to be done or we need to be done with this artifact. Because we can't keep it indoors and it was leaking horribly. We wound up keeping it. It's been restored.

Instead of abandoning the object, the museum put more resources into it because of all the resources they had already put into it.

Fear of Regret

As mentioned before, fear of regret is when a decision-maker is averse to making a risky decision because of the anticipated pain of regret. Participant One and Participant Four both mentioned regret, though it was unclear whether fear of regret was a motivating factor.

Participant One, as mentioned previously, was saddened by an acquisition that a supervisor rejected at a previous institution. Because fear of regret is the result of the anticipated pain of regret, this instance may weigh heavily on her decision-making. However, Participant One did not mention any acquisitions she made simply because she was afraid of regret. Participant Four mentioned that she will sometimes “regret that we took something just because of how much work it is to process” but she went on to say that she did not believe it hurt the institution.

B) What Are The Factors That Affect Whether Museum Professionals Will Accept An Acquisition?

Another question driving this study, beyond the question of intuitive judgment, was “What are the factors that affect decision-making about the acquisition of gifts?” That is, what factors determine whether a community historical organization will accept a gift or not? Participants were asked a series of questions about how they make decisions about what collections gifts to accept. Across all the data, ten factors were identified. The largest factors were mission, storage, gaps in the collection, and funding. Other factors were policy, legal and ethical concerns, sustainability, ownership, and staff resources. These factors are analyzed by their frequency mentioned by the participants.

Mission

All five of the participants stated that mission was a factor when determining which collections gifts to acquire. Participant One stated that the mission stipulates that the museum’s collection tell stories specific to her region. So when presented with collections to acquire, she asked, “Does it tell something specific to the story of the Duwamish Peninsula?” If it did not, she rejected it. In fact, she stated she has never “accepted something that I didn’t think fit within the mission.” She has been “fairly hard line about that.”

Participant Two’s museum’s scope is tied to her mission, which requires that her collection tell regional stories. When deciding on whether to accept a collection, Participant Two asked, “What [regional] story does this artifact tell? And that right there usually separates the good from the bad.” Participant Two mentioned that she has turned down interesting artifacts because they lacked a connection with the region. Alternately, she eagerly accepted a collection that fit the mission well even though it was in less-than-perfect condition.

Participant Three's mission states that the collections have to be representational of the history of the area, and this is a factor that drives whether she will accept something or not. She stated that the "historical content...to the area" is important when deciding whether she will accept something.

For Participant Four, her museum's mission requires that their collection tell the story of their region. Her museum's means do not let her go beyond telling that story. She acquires objects based on "the strictest interpretation of geography and geographic connection" and most of what she rejects, she rejects because it does not fit within the museum's mission. As Participant Four said, "The mission statement is always gonna be key." As a result, provenance is also important. The provenance of the object or collection must be connected to their region.

Like the other participants, Participant Five was most interested in what regional story her artifacts tell, as the mission stipulates that collections tell the story of the region. Participant Five said, "I would say probably most of the stuff that we refuse is because it just doesn't fit the mission." However, she was a bit looser with this when trying to maintain good donor relations, because the broad wording of the mission allows her to be looser.

Storage

All five participants reported storage as a factor. As a result, collections at these institutions are often rejected due to space. As Participant One stated, "We are very full in our collection." They are so full in fact that "if something cool came up" Participant One may have to reject it. She has often had to refer donors to other institutions because she did not have the space to take things.

Participant Two also mentioned the difficulty in accepting large donations because of a lack of space, having stated, “Our off-site [storage] is absolutely full.” However, if the artifact is truly exceptional, she said she may try to find room.

Participant Three also stated that she lacks space to store collections. As a result, Participant Three said, “lately I’m not taking anything because of lack of space.” She said she can accept archival materials that do not take up much space, but she lacks space for larger donations.

Participant Four also reported that a lack of storage has led her to turn down offered collections, along with Participant Five, who mentioned a former motel sign that she had to turn down because of lack of storage, having said, “We have to figure out how we’re gonna get this 500 lb. sign moved to our storage facility where it’s not gonna fit.” Participant Five said her museum’s collections storage is maxed out.

Gaps in the Collection

Three of the five participants stated that filling in gaps in their collection was a factor when deciding whether to accept an offered object or collection into their permanent collection. Participant One stated she would accept an object if it fills in gaps in the collection. However, she was not proactively seeking to fill in the gaps. Participant Three, who has many gaps in her collection, also said that whether or not a donation fills in gaps of her collection affected her collecting. Participant Five said she also asks, “Is it gonna fill in a gap in our collection?” as well as, “Do we already have it?” Participant Five said she often turns things down because she already has it in her collection. She said, “Our big problem is that it’s...stuff that we already have a lot of.”

Funding

Two of the five participants were affected by a lack of funding when collection. Participant One mentioned a potential donor that was sent to her by another institution. However, the donor was asking for money in exchange for the donation. The donation fit within her mission, but because she did not have the money to give the donor, she rejected the donation.

Lack of funds were also a factor to Participant Two when deciding what collections to accept. She stated regretting accepting a collection of records that required too many funds for care. She stated that she would need to consult the board if a large bequest were offered in order to get the funds to process and care for it.

Other Factors

One of the five participants stated that policy was a factor when deciding whether to accept a collection. Participant One said, “We are pretty policy-oriented” when it comes to acquisitions. Her policy stated that she & the institution were “responsible for only collecting within our means - the means as of space and as of funds to preserve and take care of it.”

One of the five participants stated that legal and ethical concerns were a factor that affected acquisitions decision. Participant Three said she was most motivated by the legal and ethical reputation of her museum, and frequently emphasized this point. She said, “I will say that my priority is the reputation. And the ethical approach.” To her, the legal and ethical reputation of the institution trumps all other concerns.

One of the five participants mentioned sustainability was a factor that they considered when deciding on whether to accept something. Participant One said she approaches things as though she were “making a model to be sustainable into the future. I’m making a model for when I am not here anymore.”

Issues of ownership were mentioned by one of the five participants as a factor when making decisions as to whether to accept an object or collection. Participant Four said, “[I]f I don’t have the legal right to a piece I shouldn’t be spending our limited resources on it.”

Staff resources were mentioned as a factor by one of the five participants. Participant Four stated that staff resources are limited, and she has turned down collections for which she would have lacked the resources to provide the proper care.

C) How Do Museum Professionals Define The Success Of Their Acquisitions?

The third question this research sought to answer is, “How do museum professionals define the success of their acquisitions?” In terms of defining the success of acquisitions over time, participants’ responses varied, but success was broadly defined by whether the objects were being used, were being processed in a timely manner, whether they could be stored and cared for, whether the objects filled in gaps in the collection, and whether they generated interest in young people.

Use

Two out of the five participants defined the success of their acquisitions by whether the collections were used or not. For Participant One, a large part of the success of her acquisitions was determined by the ability of researchers to access and use them. This was also true for Participant Five, who said, when asked how she defined the success of her acquisitions, “I guess it probably is the number of people who request [an object or collection], how often it’s accessed.”

Processing

One of the five participants defined the success of her acquisitions by how quickly she was able to process the collections. For Participant One, success in acquisitions means being able to keep up with processing and caring for the collections she acquires, saying,

I guess what I'm looking at right now is if we're able to keep up with them. If, as we acquire things we're actually able to get them housed and recorded and get the data into the database so that they can be used. If they can't be accessed or if we can't find them then it's not successful. We may well as not have acquired them. Our research requests are increasing regularly, and I'm getting a pretty quick crash course in how successful have we been. So if a researcher can come in and find something and when they look up a record if there's something there for it and it's in the spot it says it's in, that's all collections management stuff but it's also part of, like... right now if a researcher comes in and asks if we have something I can't even honestly say if we have it or not because if it wasn't properly processed when it first came through the door.

As mentioned previously, Participant One also defined the success of her acquisitions based on use, and the objects' use is partially dependent on her ability to process the collections she acquires.

Storage and Care

One of the five participants defined the success of her acquisitions by her ability to store and care for what she acquired. Participant Two said,

Initially [success was defined by] having way less than was going on previously to when we got here. When we got here our off-site storage situation was grim. It was in a city owned building that had water issues, pest issues, access issues, I mean, every issue. So we did a C-MAP and a CAP survey fairly early on while we were here, 2007, 2008, and both of them said, "You need new off-site storage immediately," which I knew but I needed them to say that too so that we could have lots of different voices saying, "Please, help them." So we got a lot of 4 Culture money and the board spent the money to buy us a new building that we owned as the Historical Society now and orchestrated a collection move and got it all moved so the space we inhabit now is probably on par with what we had in the city building but doesn't have the access problems, doesn't have the water problems, doesn't have the pest problems. But it got everything into a better state but it didn't really open up a lot of new storage for us for acquisitions so basically really reigning in acquisitions was our main goal for many years. And I think at this point we've just gotten such a good thing going that we keep going with it.

We're still getting really cool good donations and those are the ones we're accepting.

For Participant Two, the question of acquisitions success is basically answered by collecting less, because of her lack of storage.

Filling in Gaps

For three of the participants, filling in gaps was a factor in their collecting, but for Participant Three, she defined success in acquisitions by her ability to fill in gaps. When asked about acquisitions success, she said:

I think the success will actually come once the museum is open. There was a study done, I think before I came in, there was a committee that came in. Everyone was paid, and we're talking about really knowledgeable people in the museum community. It was like multiple people that came all together and they spent three days with us, they got paid because we got a grant, and they were assessing the collections, they were assessing what we got, what we do. And the one thing that everyone kinda mentioned when they left [was] that we've got so many different gaps in the collection, that we need more items, we just need more items.

Generating Interest

One of the five participants defined success in acquisitions as to whether the objects generate interest in young people. To Participant Four, successful acquisitions would keep young people interested enough in the history of the region that they will continue to take care of the objects for generations to come. She said, when asked to define success in acquisitions,

Are the materials stable enough that they are still holding up and do you think they're gonna still be here a hundred years from now? Can we use them for exhibits and to tell story or can a researcher come in and learn from that? [My boss] has a more tactile approach to small-town museum collections than I do. She has more out on the touch table than I might put out but then you turn around and you say okay but if there really are fifty-jillion of these still around and you're still finding them in the antique mall maybe its okay to put this one out. But if I have two of them and one has story and one doesn't the one that doesn't is the one that I want on the touch table. And we've done that with things, we do school kits

and things have come totally unhinged from their provenances are in those school kits. Things that have serious provenance I fight to keep out of them. You know, to some extent I'll never know whether my collecting was fully successful because the proof will be in the pudding four generations down. It is successful already if it gets a significant proportion of the people under 25 interested enough that they still care enough about the resources that historical collections provide to maintain the care and feeding of them in the next generation so that they're still around in a hundred and fifty years. That's part of it right there and that's not just how did we collect but that's how did we communicate what we collected.

To Participant Four, successful acquisitions are partially defined by her ability to communicate about what she has acquired so that young people become interested in her collections.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In this study, acquisition policy at community historical organizations was described from a decision-making perspective. A body of literature, behavioral economics, was laid over the responses of museum collections professionals, with respect to acquisitions decisions. This study demonstrates that museum professionals utilize intuitive heuristics and are susceptible to the attendant biases of intuition when making decisions about acquisitions.

The questions this study sought to answer were:

1. What are the intuitive heuristics and biases that museum professionals use when making decisions about collections gifts?
2. What are the factors that affect whether museum professionals will accept an acquisition?
3. How do museum professionals define the success of their acquisitions?

To the first question, the answer was 15 heuristics and biases – substitution, representativeness, availability, affect, market norms vs. social norms, associative coherence, confirmation bias, anchoring, priming, fear of regret, hindsight, loss aversion, the sunk-cost fallacy, framing, and expert intuition. The biases and heuristics most utilized were market vs. social norms, associative coherence, framing, and expert intuition. The five collections professionals interviewed were not motivated by fear of regret.

With respect to the second question, the factors that affected these particular collections professionals were mission, storage, gaps in the collection, policy, funding, condition of the objects, sustainability, ownership and staff resources. Mission and storage were the largest factors for this set of professionals with all five reporting that it was a factor. With the third question, the responses varied, but this set of museum professionals defined the success of their acquisitions based on whether the acquisitions were used by the public and researchers, whether they could be processed in a timely manner, stored and cared for, could fill in gaps in the

collection, and whether they could generate a sustainable interest from young people. These results demonstrate that defining success in acquisitions is necessary to guide better collecting.

Implications

This study demonstrates that behavioral economics can be applied to acquisitions decision-making. As a body of literature, behavioral economics can be laid over data from museum professionals in a study such as this. The analysis is interesting, and merits further study. In the case of this study, only five museum professionals were interviewed. Researchers can take this study, generate more data, and connect that data to heuristics and biases. However, a greater sample is necessary to make the data more generalizable.

This study also shows that the literature of behavioral economics can be useful for museum professionals to study to make better decisions by becoming aware of their biases. Museological literature offers guides on how to shape mission and policy to guide collecting. Behavioral economics offers a language and an example of how to think about making better decisions, with those tools – mission and policy in hand. This study only looked at smaller institutions, but there is no reason to believe that behavioral economics and its insight into human judgment and decision-making would not have applicability at large institutions as well.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

PART 1: Introduction

Tell me your name and your role at this museum.
How long have you been with this museum?

PART 2: Museum profile

How many objects do you have in your collection?
How many staff do you have that perform care & management of your collection?

PART 3: Gift basics

On average how many collections gift offers do you get a year? On average how many do you accept a year?

Other than yourself, who is involved in making decisions about acquisitions at your site?

Do you have a collections management policy with guidelines about making acquisitions decisions?

Do you have written criteria for making decisions about gifts?

PROBE: Think back to the last time you had to make a decision about a potential gift.

Did you use those written criteria then? Can you tell me how you used them? What about the time before that? Did you use them then?

Are there other criteria that you consider, such as donor's relationship to the museum, publicity, or the quality of the objects being given?

Has a gift ever made you reconsider or change your mission and/or policy? If so can you tell me about that instance?

PART 4: Considerations

Do you have a formal process for making decisions about what collections gifts to acquire?

Walk me through the process of what happens after you are offered a gift.

Tell me what questions you think about when considering a gift of a collection or an object.

What guides your thinking when making decisions about gifts? And does the decision-making process vary depending on the type gift?

Are there circumstances when other considerations outweigh [answer to above] when making decisions about gifts?

Do you ever seek advice when deciding whether to accept a gift?

PROBE: Whose advice do you seek and what kind of advice do they offer?

Do you have an example of a gift you have accepted that in retrospect you question? If so, what was it and why do you wish you had not accepted it?

Have you ever accepted a gift which precluded your ability to purchase other objects or collections you were considering? If so, why?

Have you ever been offered two or more gifts around the same time and had to choose one over the other(s)? If so, how did you make the decision about which one to accept?

Have you ever accepted a gift despite conflicts with mission or policy? If so, why?

PART 5: Gift rejection

Offer me an example of a gift you've recently turned down and tell me why you turned it down.

Has there ever been a gift you've had to turn down due to inability to care for the gift in question? If so, could you describe the circumstances?

Do you have an example of a gift you've had to reject, but did not want to reject?

Do you have an example of a gift you've rejected but later came to regret the decision?
Talk about a time when conflicts with policy meant you had to reject a gift.
Talk about a time when conflicts with mission meant you had to reject a gift.
Can you think of a time when considerations other than mission and policy led you to reject a gift?

PART 6: Conclusion

How do you evaluate the success of your acquisitions over time?
Has a gift ever made you reconsider or change your mission and/or policy?
Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Code	Definition	Example
Substitution	Substitution is a heuristic in which an individual intuitively answers or solves a simpler question or problem instead of the more difficult question or problem they are presented with.	<i>"The people that call us on the phone to buy things I'm not even convinced are from here...I don't know who they are, they're not people that have relationships with us."</i>
Representativeness	Representativeness is a heuristic in which an individual attempts to assess the probability of an outcome based on how well the situation corresponds to the representation of that outcome they have in their mind. Stereotypes are a type of representativeness.	<i>"She thought there was a bridal gown in there, and the woman who she got it from is still alive and she's 97 and has a good memory. So you know there's something good there."</i>
Availability Heuristic	The availability heuristic is a heuristic in which people utilize when making a decision that utilizes only the information that comes to readily to mind, but feel confident that the available information is accurate and complete. Dramatic events and events recently and repeatedly covered in the news will come to mind more readily.	<i>"I know the policy pretty well so I don't specifically come back and read it...I know the policy well enough that I can tell pretty quickly if it's gonna be a good fit."</i>
Affect Heuristic	The affect heuristic is at work when people use their emotions to make a decision instead of deliberation and reason. It is a form of substitution in that it asks, "How do I feel about something?" in place of the more difficult question, "What do I think about something?"	<i>"We still have a couple of folks on the board and my boss who knew [him] who is now passed away. So it's very emotional for them to think we could possibly not keep something the [he] had touched."</i>

Market Norms vs. Social Norms	This code refers to when participants are trying to operate either within market norms, or social norms. People have different expectations when operating in different norms. In market norms, which are the norms in place when money is involved, people behave more selfishly, self-reliantly, and unfairly. Within social norms, people are less selfish and more caring.	<i>"There have been...multiple times that people will come to me and say, 'I will give a lot of money to the museum but I would like you to store this.' No."</i>
Associative Coherence	Associative coherence occurs when people construct a specific story about ambiguous evidence.	<i>"What kind of story can we tell with it. Does it really fit the mission?"</i>
Confirmation Bias	Confirmation bias occurs when someone believes something to be true and seeks evidence to prove it true, while ignoring evidence to the contrary.	<i>"My first inclination is to accept everything. And I'm like a lawyer trying to come up with an argument...give me a reason of why we should keep it."</i>
Anchoring	Anchoring occurs when people are asked to estimate a quantity and a quantity is suggested as a solution, arbitrarily or not, and their estimation is based on that quantity.	<i>"She's offering two hundred objects and I even told her, 'We're probably gonna take five objects out of this. Not only de we take five, we took ninety or a hundred objects."</i>
Priming	Priming occurs when a decision is influenced by stimuli in the environment at or just before the moment the decision is made.	<i>"We do have a stipulation in our policy that talks about whether or not we can care for the object and so that does weigh heavily on whether or not we accept it."</i>
Fear of Regret	Fear of regret is when a decision-maker is averse to making a risky decision because of the anticipated pain of regret.	<i>"Every once in a while I'll kind of regret that we took something just because of how much work it is to proecess but int erms of do I think it's hurting the institution? No."</i>

Hindsight Bias	Hindsight bias occurs when people evaluate their decision-making not on the quality of the process but on the outcome.	<i>"I've definitely found things that were accessioned long before I got here that made me reconsider the collections policy."</i>
Loss Aversion	Loss aversion suggests that people are afraid to give things up, even if those things are not useful to them, or are causing more harm than good.	<i>"It's in such poor condition...but I'm still somehow fighting for it."</i>
Sunk-Cost Fallacy	Sunk-cost fallacy is a form of loss aversion. It occurs when someone refuses to abandon a project, and even puts more resources into a project, because they have already put a lot of resources into that project.	<i>"We hit the point about four years ago with the caboose that it was either the money needs to be found and a major restoration needs to be done or we need to be done with this artificat...We wound up keeping it."</i>
Framing	Narrow framing occurs when people make decisions without comparing the circumstances of that decision to the circumstances of other decision. When a person makes their decisions only based on the circumstances of the moment, and does not view that decision as part of a comprehensive series of decisions, they are conforming to a narrow frame. Broad framing is when people compare their situations to similar situations of others, or views the current decision facing them as part of a series of other decisions in order to make a decision relative to the series.	<i>"It's a good mindset to be in. To approach things like, I'm making a model to be sustainable into the future. I'm making a model for when I am not here anymore."</i>
Expert Intuition	Expert intuition is when someone makes a fast accurate decision in an environment that they have had experience and practice working in, and recognize the regularities of that environment.	<i>"Most of the things that walk in the door it's real apparent like, 'Oh yeah, we want that,' or 'Mmm, sorry. Have you tried X place?'"</i>