Thinking Fast and Slow in Online Labor Markets: A Note on what to Expect when Conducting Economic Experiments on Amazon Mechanical Turk

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Online labor markets, specifically Amazon Mechanical Turk, have become a common platform for experiments in the social sciences. A large, diverse subject pool, relatively low financial incentives, and the possibility to conduct experiments without a lab infrastructure are promising. For simple experimental tasks (e.g., dictator, ultimatum, trust games), behavior observed on MTurk is typically consistent with results from the lab. For more complex experimental tasks (e.g., auctions, markets), MTurk tends to differ strongly from the lab. In general, researchers complain about little attention and noisy data from MTurk participants.

Dual-process theories might explain this phenomenon: Mental reasoning is assumed to comprise two systems: System 1 acts automatically and quickly. It jumps to conclusions and takes decisions intuitively. System 2 is deliberate. It is relatively slow and allocates attention to complex tasks requiring effortful mental activities. It might be the case that workers completing MTurk tasks are typically operating in System 1 mode. On many routine tasks, this is sufficient for high quality work, spares mental capacity, and increases wage rates. On the contrary, a lab environment puts subjects in an abnormal context and might thereby activate System 2. An MTurk experiment tests and supports this hypothesis: Both explicit directions and monetary incentives independently help activating System 2 and lead to higher quality decisions in complex experimental tasks. When conducting MTurk experiments, researchers might consider deliberately triggering System 2 thinking.