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Conscious vs. Unconscious Determinants of Behavior

Jennifer Vrabel and Virgil Zeigler-Hill
Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA

Synonyms

Automatic; Controlled; Postconscious; Preconscious; System 1; System 2

Definition

Conscious vs. unconscious determinants of behavior can be defined as two distinct but overlapping systems of learning and memory that explain and predict human decision-making, thoughts, and behaviors.

Introduction

To what degree are individuals aware of the information that they are processing at any given moment? If individuals are unaware of these processes, then are they able to control their behaviors? Research suggests that both conscious and unconscious processes exert influences on behaviors. This entry will provide a brief overview of unconscious and conscious processes including the connections these processes have with an array of outcomes.

Conscious vs. Unconscious Mind

The notion of unconscious mental processes was popularized by Freud (1901/1960) in order to account for the possibility that repressed emotions might influence daily thoughts and behaviors (see Evans 2008, for an expanded discussion). Freud believed that the unconscious mind was the primary motivator, guide, and determinant of human behaviors. This belief contributed to Freud's influential model, which proposed that the mind has distinct unconscious structures (Wasserman and Wasserman, 2016). However, Freud's ideas concerning unconscious processes received relatively little empirical scrutiny over the years (see Bargh and Morsella 2008, for a review). Furthermore, the limited research that did investigate unconscious processes initially concluded that these processes were weak and limited. As a result, unconscious processes were often considered to be mere shadows of "real" conscious processes (Bargh and Morsella 2008, for a review). Consequently, conscious processes have often been considered to be the primary determinants of human behaviors (Bargh and Morsella 2008).

This negative view of unconscious processes has been challenged during recent decades (e.g., Bargh and Morsella 2008). For example, the operational definition applied to unconscious

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processes in the earliest studies has been criticized by some scholars for being unnatural and restricted. In addition, the strategies used in early research to detect unconscious mental processes were relatively weak and may have simply been insufficient to detect them. As a result, there was a general lack of knowledge of the mechanisms governing unconscious processes. New approaches and advances in social cognition research over the past few decades suggest that many aspects of our decision-making, thoughts, and behaviors are, in fact, strongly influenced by unconscious processes (see Bargh and Morsella 2008, for an expanded discussion). These new approaches have often adopted perspectives from evolutionary theory, which focus on the naturally occurring mechanisms (e.g., intuitions, gut reactions) of these unconscious processes.

It has been argued that the unconscious mind – or *System 1* – evolved first and tends to act as a behavioral guidance system (e.g., Bargh and Morsella 2008; Evans 2008). For example, unconscious mental processes guide us toward adopting the behaviors of others when we are in unfamiliar situations (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001). This is a potentially adaptive strategy when surrounded by strangers. In contrast, the conscious mind – or *System 2* – evolved later and requires access to our central working memory (Evans 2008) which is the part of short-term memory that is associated with executing complex tasks (e.g., active learning, reasoning, awareness; Wasserman and Wasserman 2016). However, working memory is extremely limited. For example, research has found that individuals can only retain approximately 2 s worth of speech while listening to others. Thus, humans must be wary of the amount of mental effort needed to carry out such complex tasks because their cognitive capacity can quickly become overwhelmed by these demands. However, humans are able to rely on unconscious processes – which are relatively "automatic" – that allow them to engage in well-learned behaviors with relatively little cognitive difficulty and effort (Wasserman and Wasserman 2016).

Automaticity

There are actually a number of benefits that stem from the brain's limited cognitive capacity (Wasserman and Wasserman 2016). For example, imagine if you were constantly aware of the process of searching for each specific word while speaking with another person. To our advantage, we do not actually consciously experience much of this search because we rely on automatic processes. This basic notion of automaticity describes thought processes that are capable of occurring without conscious guidance (i.e., the process must be unintentional, involuntary, effortless, autonomous, and occur outside of conscious awareness; see Bargh 1989, for a review). In order for a process to become automatic, the process must be extensively practiced (Wasserman and Wasserman 2016). That is, an individual must frequently engage in a desired behavior or task in order for it to become automatic. As a result, many of the behaviors and cognitive processes that we frequently experience may eventually become at least somewhat automatic.

Preconscious vs. Postconscious Automaticity

Automaticity can be separated into two distinct domains. First, *preconscious automaticity* refers to unconscious processing of information from one's environment that then affects behavior or judgments (Lakin 2006). Emerging research has discovered that preconscious automaticity plays a significant role in how we form impressions, behaviors, and attitudes, (e.g., Lakin 2006). For example, activating traits concerning "helpfulness" has been found to increase altruistic behaviors (Macrae and Johnston 1998), and presenting individuals with categories that have a stereotypical connotation (e.g., elderly) has been shown to elicit stereotype-consistent behaviors (e.g., walking more slowly; Bargh et al. 1996; cf. Doyen et al. 2012) and attitudes (e.g., conservative attitudes; Kawakami et al. 2003). Second, *postconsciousness automaticity* occurs after an individual engages in conscious deliberation in

order to decide on a particular thought or behavior (Bargh et al. 2012). For instance, after one engages in conscious thought about a particular judgment (e.g., comparing the merits of a selection of apartments), he or she will intend to make the best-informed decision (e.g., select the best apartment to rent; see Bargh et al. 2012, for a review). However, research has shown that if, while deliberating, an individual directs conscious thought elsewhere for a considerable amount of time, he or she often produces better quality judgments (e.g., actually chooses an objectively better apartment; see Bargh et al. 2012, for a review). This pattern of results may be explained by the combination of processing mechanisms that make up the conscious and unconscious mind. That is, when the conscious mind's ability to deliberately make decisions is accompanied by the unconscious mind's capacity to weigh various options (i.e., compare their complex combinations of attributes), solving complex tasks is more effective than when either system is deployed alone (see Bargh et al. 2012, for a review).

Conclusion

The purpose of this entry was to provide a brief overview of the conscious and unconscious mind. As indicated, these distinct thought processes are crucial components to our understanding of human decision-making, thoughts, and behaviors. Although our understanding of unconscious processes remains somewhat limited, it is now clear that both conscious and unconscious processes play a role in our decision-making, thoughts, and behaviors. Research on these systems continues to improve and advance our understanding of these processes. As a result, the unconscious mind has been redefined and is no longer considered to be the shadow of the conscious mind. Conscious and unconscious processes are unique, but they function together as an integrated system that guides daily life.

Cross-References

- ▶ Conscious, Preconscious, and Unconscious
- ▶ Externalizing Behaviors
- ▶ Implicit Association Test
- ▶ Implicit Attitudes
- ▶ Implicit Egotism
- ▶ Implicit Measures of Personality
- ▶ Implicit Self-Esteem
- ▶ Implicit Theories of Intelligence
- ▶ Internalizing Behaviors
- ▶ Personal Unconscious
- ▶ Self-Collective Unconscious-Consciousness Scale
- ▶ Self-Consciousness
- ▶ Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA)
- ▶ Unconscious Personality Processes

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