

Shrink Rap: Probing the Unconscious Mind

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Psychologically, there are essentially two types of people: those who believe in and take seriously the existence of the unconscious mind, and those who don't.

Believers accept that their decision-making and behavior may be motivated by impulses, cues, thoughts, or feelings of which they are barely conscious. Believers attempt to decipher meaning in the texture and timing of jokes, slips of the tongue, instances of forgetting, dreams, symbols, fantasies, and childhood experiences. They believe that probing this material will help reveal unconscious meaning and motive, both in themselves and others. They appreciate the metaphor of the mind as an onion, which may be unpeeled layer by layer in the search for multiple levels of meaning.

In contrast, non-believers tend to devalue or minimize their past as a crucial determiner of present behavior patterns. Their way of freeing themselves from their past is by blocking it from memory or refusing to look too closely at it. They prefer focusing on present and future practical decision-making, and may have little or no curiosity in looking at the "why" that motivates them. They tend to appreciate the world in more concrete and rational terms and aren't interested in searching for unconscious meaning. They don't like the notion that their behavior could be shaped or controlled by forces beyond their own awareness.

Non-believers interpret the existence of something as slippery as the unconscious mind with skepticism or outright rejection. They prefer to adopt hard-wired brain explanations for decision-making processes and behavior over those relating to the subjective and elusive unconscious. Rather than as an onion, they view the mind more like a solid rubber ball, where the surface is no different than the core.

Recent research suggests, however, that the unconscious mind is not only alive and well, but far more active, purposeful and independent than previously known. The brain appears to use the same neural circuits to execute an unconscious act as it does a conscious one.

Researchers are looking at a model that sees the unconscious mind first weighing in on whether to act, and then interacting with the higher-level, conscious regions of the brain later. But the relation of the brain to the mind is complicated enough that no research has yet pinpointed the exact neural regions that support conscious awareness. And it may never be able to do so, as consciousness may ultimately surprise everyone and end up not being located in the brain at all.

It requires a steadfast courage to accept that we may not be anywhere near as in control of our moment-to-moment decision making as we'd like to believe. One implication of the recent studies is that we need to pay close attention to various environmental cues, realizing their potency in affecting our thinking and behavior.

We also need to keep in mind that an unconscious goal may be more powerful than a conscious, intentional one. This is because we have no way of controlling or moderating intentions to which we don't have conscious access.