

Episode 074: The Unconscious

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**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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There are no conflicts of interest for this episode.

This week I interviewed Dr. Joel Weinberger and Dr. Valentina Stoycheva who recently published a book “[The Unconscious: Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications](#).” We discussed their book and even their unconscious reasons for writing a thrilling, deep dive into the unconscious. This book was graduate level in detail, deep, thoughtful, articulate, sometimes very theoretical, and definitely worthy of reading and contemplating.

The article below will cover some of the terms and studies that we discussed, and how they might relate to doing psychotherapy.

An overview of the unconscious

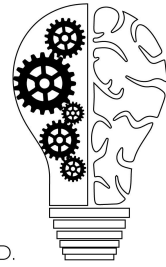
The unconscious can be defined as processes that occur in the mind automatically and are unavailable to introspection ([Westen, 1999](#)). Although these processes may completely slip in under our conscious awareness, they can often manifest themselves in many observable ways. The unconscious can also have a large influence on the processes of conscious mind ([Morsella and Bargh, 2010](#)).

Although the idea of the unconscious mind has largely been ignored or minimized in Western thinking (especially as behavioral and cognitive therapy took over a large amount of academic thought), it is important to pay attention to these processes as they can help explain people’s behaviors, and can potentially play a key supporting role in psychotherapy today.

Perhaps an underlying theme is that the unconscious is adaptive to help us, however, our brain has not evolved for many of the situations and challenges we face in our modern age, but rather for the Pleistocene era, full of small tribes, no technology, and danger at every corner.

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Physicality can shape our mentality

Embodied Cognition

Embodied cognition refers to the idea that higher thought processes often occur in parallel with more primitive body functions, such as sensory or motor functioning ([Wilson, 2002](#)). Evolutionarily, sensory functions and motor functions were laid down first, and evolved into higher functions.

An example of embodied cognition is a study done by [Williams and Bargh \(2008\)](#), where they found that participants would judge a person's personality differently, based on whether they were given a hot or cold beverage to hold. The results of the study showed that a participant who was holding a hot cup of coffee was more likely to rate the target person as higher in warm personality characteristics than if they were holding a cold cup of coffee.

Upon meeting a potential voter, a politician may deliberately choose to give this person a warm cup of coffee as opposed to cold. In this way, the politician is tapping into the unconscious, and making the voter associate this politician with warm feelings.

(Dr. Puder always recommends a first date being a coffee date...maybe show up early and order their favorite hot drink and hand it to them when you first see them?)

Another illustration of the parallels between higher thought processes and primitive body function can be found in a study carried out by [Bargh, Chen, & Burrows \(1996\)](#). In this study, participants were found to walk slower after being exposed to written words associated with an elderly stereotype. Examples of these words include old, careful, rigid, and walker. The findings of these studies demonstrate examples of how unconscious thought processes can manifest themselves in observable ways.

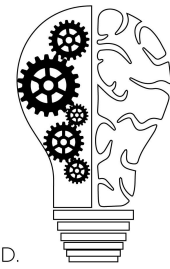
Although it may have been adaptive to have our brain place us in categories of "us versus them," that may lead to prejudice and bigotry.

All behavior has meaning

Attribution Theory

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Attribution theory suggests that humans are often unconsciously motivated to assign causes to their own behaviors and the behaviors of those around them ([Heider, 1958](#)). **People tend to understand behavior as either being environmentally or dispositionally caused.**

A study conducted by [Jones and Harris \(1967\)](#) suggested that people tend to attribute the actions of others to personality characteristics rather than to the situation they find themselves in. In this study, participants were asked to read an essay about Fidel Castro, then told to rate how favorably they thought the authors felt about Castro.

Some participants were told that the author's position on Castro was predetermined by a coin toss prior to writing it. Others were told that the author's position was of their own personal opinion. Surprisingly, participants were found to rate how favorable they thought the author's position was similarly in both groups, despite what they were told the author's motivation was.

Participants were unable to see the influence of situational constraints placed upon the authors, suggesting that **when it comes to the actions of others, observers tend to place precedence on the personality traits of the action performer.** This phenomenon was later coined the "fundamental attribution error" ([Ross, 1997](#)).

Another study carried out by [Baumeister, Bratslavski, Finkenauer, and Vohs \(2001\)](#) further suggests that people tend to place greater emphasis on negative information when interpreting other's actions rather than positive information. Attribution theory is just one example of how unconscious processes can influence the conscious mind.

Subconscious and first impressions

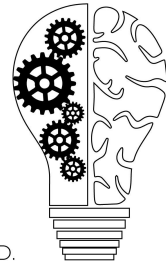
The importance of association

In his work with political consulting, Dr. Weinberger describes how he uses non-verbals to explore an individual's immediate reaction to a politician. Typically, a person will have multiple reactions to politicians (both positive AND negative), and these sets of associations can tell the unconscious story.

Nonverbal communication and verbal communication come from the same source. Broca's region (which is classically thought of as being devoted to speech) has been shown to also

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underlie face and mouth movement as suggested by [Bookheimer \(2002\)](#), [Nishitani et al \(2005\)](#), and [Rizzolatti \(2004\)](#).

This has enormous clinical implications in terms of interpreting patients, as well as in terms of establishing rapport. Effective reading of nonverbals helps a provider know how to give effective and accurate feedback.

Emotions, particularly negative ones, are often the most prominent aspect of our experience

Unconscious processes may also affect how we experience situations through our emotions. Until relatively recently, prominent psychologists (e.g., LeDoux, 1996; Zajonc, 1980) believed that cognitive and affective processing operate independently of one another, with affective processing being faster. This has been labelled Affective Primacy, and it is now controversial.

What is not controversial is that emotionally charged experiences tend to be more salient than more neutral experiences, and that negative emotional experiences are particularly so. A study by [Niu, Todd, and Anderson \(2012\)](#) found that when participants were presented with complex scenes, the emotionally charged aspects of the scenes (both positive and negative) were more attended to than were other informative or visually salient aspects of those scenes.

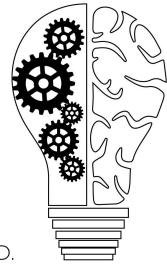
Further, negatively charged aspects of the scenes were attended to more than were positive aspects of the scenes.

Thus, the tendency to fixate on negatives (e.g., a disappointment vs. an achievement) can be normal rather than a learned emotional bias, as many therapists seem to believe. It is therefore important for therapists to realize that their patients' attention to and discussion of negative experiences is not necessarily pathological. Although it is still important to point out cognitive distortions and errors that such negative biases may lead to, it may be even more important to provide the person with emotional experiences that can help him/her to deal with, and even counteract, these normative tendencies.

Conclusion

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The unconscious is not bad—it just is. Sometimes it helps us, sometimes it hurts us. It was built to be adaptive, and the “gut checks” can help us survive. But we must also remember that our unconscious was built for a time very different from our own. Negatively charged things will get more of our attention.

Dr. Valentina Stoycheva mentioned the importance of longer term therapy, because older knowledge does not disappear, it just needs to be supplanted by newer, more adaptive behavior, which has to be practiced and practiced, in order to make the conscious unconscious, and use better coping skills automatically.