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Unconscious Social Behavior

Contributors: John F. Kihlstrom

Edited by: Byron Kaldis

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Psychological explanations attribute social behavior to the individual's mental states—the thoughts, feelings, and desires that cause the individual to act in a particular way toward others. While the cognitive revolution in social psychology appeared to emphasize the role of conscious cognition in social interaction, a recent trend has been to underscore the role of *unconscious* cognitive processes automatically evoked by stimulus inputs and executed outside phenomenal awareness and voluntary control. However, claims that social behavior is dominated by unconscious processes, such that “free will” plays little or no role in human experience, thought, and action, go beyond the presently available evidence.

The earliest psychological theories of social behavior, put forward in the 1920s and 1930s, were couched in a version of stimulus–response behaviorism that made no reference to consciousness. This attitude carried over into the “golden age” of experimental social psychology, in the 1950s and 1960s, which emphasized social influence and the power of the situation to influence the individual's experience, thought, and action. However, the cognitive revolution in experimental psychology gave rise to an alternative cognitive perspective, which emphasized people's *perception* of the situation, their goals, their expectations concerning the consequences of their actions, and so on. Although it was rarely stated quite so clearly, the implication of the cognitive perspective in social psychology—like the cognitive perspective in psychology generally—was that the percepts, memories, and thoughts that mediated social behavior were consciously accessible to the actor, guiding his conscious choices and actions.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, cognitive psychology reawakened an interest in unconscious mental life with the distinction between *automatic* and *controlled* processing. Controlled processing is conscious and deliberate; it consumes cognitive resources and involves serial processing. Automatic processes, by contrast, are inevitably evoked by the appearance of particular environmental stimuli; once evoked, they are incorrigibly executed, in a “ballistic” fashion; they consume few or no cognitive resources; and they do not interfere with each other or with controlled processes, thus permitting some degree of parallel processing. Automatic processes are reflex-like in some respects, but they are not necessarily innate: In principle, any process, no matter how complex, can be automatized if it is practiced diligently enough. Whether they are innate or acquired, automatic processes are unconscious in the strict sense of the term; they operate outside conscious awareness and are independent of conscious control.

The automatic/controlled distinction was quickly imported into social psychology, with a number of prominent investigators arguing that much of social behavior occurs automatically in response to certain cues, without mediation by conscious, deliberate thought. Within cognitive psychology, there is a general consensus that every task has both automatic and controlled components, and considerable effort has been devoted to measuring their differential contributions to performance. In social psychology, however, a view has developed that social cognition and behavior are overwhelmingly governed by automatic processes—with one theorist invoking classic “Ivory Soap” advertisements to assert that behavior is 99.44% automatic and another asserting that that free will is so severely compromised by automaticity that, *pace* Descartes, we are automatons after all.

Automaticity has been dubbed “the new unconscious”—the “old” unconscious being the “monsters from the Id” (a phrase from the 1956 science fiction film *Forbidden Planet*), envisioned by Sigmund Freud and other proponents of classical psychoanalysis. But the basic idea was anticipated by William McDougall's “hormic psychology,” which argued that social behavior was motivated by a set of basic instincts that operated unconsciously, as well

as by the “behavior viewpoint” of Floyd Allport, that social behavior reflected unconditioned or conditioned responses to social stimuli. The embrace of automaticity does not exactly revive Skinnerian behaviorism, however, because the new theorists adopt the central dogma of the cognitive revolution—that cognitive, emotional, and motivational states and processes intervene between the environmental stimulus and the organismal response. But when the intervening states and processes are automatically evoked by environmental stimuli, the embrace of automaticity looks more and more like behaviorism with a cognitive face.

In fact, nothing in the literature justifies the assertion that automatic processes dominate social cognition and behavior. Most of the published research constitutes demonstration experiments that merely show that automaticity plays *some* role in social interaction. But many of these experiments involve a very loose operationalization of automaticity, relying on fewer than the four canonical features listed above. The few comparative experiments published to date reveal much more of a balance between the automatic and controlled components of processing—except in special circumstances, such as very narrow response windows, where controlled processing simply cannot come into play. Nothing in the literature supports the idea that social behavior is wholly, or even largely, driven by automatic processes—much less, as some have concluded, that conscious will is an illusion and introspection only gets in the way of adaptive behavior.

Acceptance of the concept of automaticity has helped legitimize the concept of unconscious mental life, but it does not exhaust the possible unconscious determinants of social behavior. In the conventional view, automatic processes operate on conscious mental contents—percepts, memories, thoughts, and the like—to generate other conscious mental contents. We are aware of *what* we think, even if we are not aware of *why* or *how* we think it. Beginning with the study of implicit memory in amnesic patients, however, it has become clear that mental states—percepts, memories, the knowledge acquired through learning—can influence ongoing experience, thought, and action in the absence of phenomenal awareness. Indeed, the “Implicit Association Test” has been promoted as a means of assessing unconscious attitudes and beliefs that can result in prejudice and aggression directed toward social outgroups. Although the idea of unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and goals remains controversial, widespread acceptance of implicit memory, perception, and learning in the cognitive domain implies that the notion of implicit emotion and motivation should not be dismissed out of hand. Because the lack of conscious awareness precludes conscious control almost by definition, any effects of unconscious thoughts, feelings, and desires must be mediated by automatic processes.

John F. Kihlstrom

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See also

- [Behaviorism in Psychological Explanation](#)
- [Consciousness](#)
- [Determinism](#)
- [Free Will in the Social Sciences](#)
- [Implicit Bias and Social Cognition](#)
- [Unconscious](#)

Further Readings

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