

Unconscious Processes & Defense Mechanisms

Dr Simon Boag
C3A 407
Ph: 9850 8024
simon.boag@psy.mq.edu.au

Readings

- See Blackboard for readings

Outline

- (A) 'Conscious' & 'unconscious'
 - (i) *Descriptive* view
 - (ii) *Systematic* view
 - (iii) *Dynamic* view
 - Evidence & application
- (B) Defense mechanisms
 - Types of defenses

What do we mean by the term 'Unconscious'?

- *Confusing array of terms:*
 - Unconscious processes
 - 'The unconscious'
 - Subconscious
 - Nonconscious
 - Implicit processes
 - Automatic processes
 - *Historically:* unconscious processes are controversial

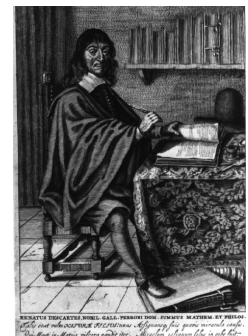
What do we mean by 'Consciousness'?

- 'Consciousness' is a slippery term
- Awake & aware?
- Animals are aware of their environment but are they also conscious?
- *Consciousness:* turning our awareness to our own mental processes
 - 'Reflective awareness'
 - 'Higher-order awareness'
 - 'Metacognition'



Cartesian view of consciousness

- Rene Descartes
- *Consciousness* is one factor that separates humans from animals
- No possibility of unconscious mental processes



Cartesian view of consciousness

“As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me self-evident.... we cannot have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment when it is in us”
(Descartes, 1641/1984, p. 171)

Cartesian view of consciousness

- In knowing something, we know that we know it
- If mentality = consciousness then an ‘unconscious mental process’ is a contradiction in terms (Thornton, 1999)
- However, we can distinguish:
- *Simple-awareness*: awareness of the environment
- *Reflective-awareness*: Awareness of awareness

Unconscious mental processes

- **History**: Theories of unconscious processes developed in 19th C.
- Mostly associated with Freud’s psychoanalysis & defense mechanisms (eg. repression)
- Controversial history; scientific study?
- Unconscious processes now generally accepted (Kihlstrom, 1987)
- However, the term ‘unconscious’ can be understood in a variety of ways

Freud’s theories of unconscious mental processes

- Freud (1915). *The unconscious*
- 3 ways of understanding unconscious mentality
- *Descriptive view*
- *Systematic view*
- *Dynamic view*
- All 3 positions are found in contemporary thinking

(i) The *descriptive* view

- “The oldest and best meaning of the word ‘unconscious’ is the descriptive one: we call a psychical process unconscious whose existence we are obliged to assume—for some such reason as that we infer from its effects—but of which we know nothing” (Freud, 1933, p. 70)
- A mental process is *descriptively unconscious* if we are presently unaware of it but assume that it still exists

The *descriptive* view

- For a mental process to be conscious is simply for that process to be *currently known*
- ie. a mental process that we are presently *attending* to is conscious
- A mental process is unconscious if we are not currently aware of it
- ie. **Everything** that we are not currently aware of is *descriptively unconscious*

Conscious & unconscious

- How many beliefs are you currently aware of?
- We can distinguish *having a belief* from *being aware of having a belief*
- A belief does not become conscious until attention is turned to it
- We can possibly have beliefs that we never turn our attention to

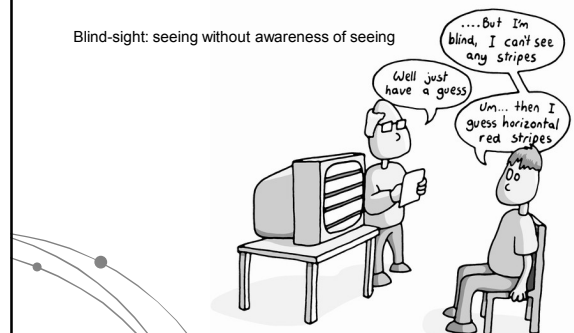
“... every mental process exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase and that it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious phase, just as a photographic picture begins as a negative & only becomes a picture after being turned into a positive: nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one”

(Freud, 1916-17, p. 295)

Can we know things without knowing that we know them?

- The distinction b/w ‘knowing’ & ‘knowing that we know’ (or having *knowledge of*) can help us understand:
- Tip-of-the-tongue experiences (Brennen et al, 2007)
- Blind-sight
- Alzheimer’s dementia & implicit learning
- Subliminal perception (‘Perception without perception’)

Blind-sight: seeing without awareness of seeing



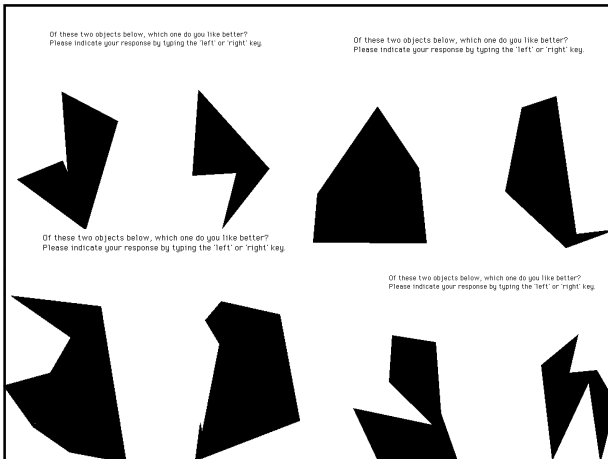
Subliminal perception: Some findings

- *Subliminal perception* studies
- Presenting stimuli so quickly that they cannot be ‘consciously’ identified
- eg. tachistoscopic presentation under 5ms



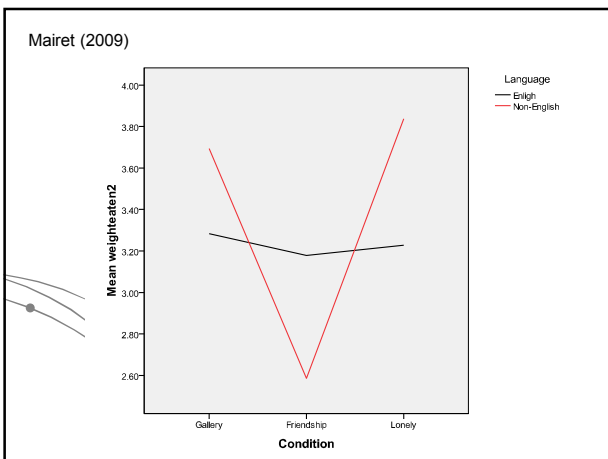
Subliminal perception: Some findings

- **Mere exposure effect:** Mere repeated exposure to a stimulus increases attractiveness (Kunst-Wilson & Zajonc, 1980)
- Subliminal exposure (1ms) to abstract polygons
- Ss then shown old/new pairs & asked to choose preferred polygon
- Ss significantly preferred subliminally presented stimuli (old > new; $p < 0.01$)



Subliminal perception: Some findings

- *Influence on eating* (Meyer & Waller, 1999; Waller & Barter, 2005)
- *Experimental* grp presented with 'abandonment stimuli' (eg 'lonely') for 4ms
- *Control* grp: neutral stimuli (eg 'gallery')
- Afterwards measured eating behaviour (amount of crackers eaten)
- **Results:** Significantly more crackers eaten in 'abandonment' grp compared to control




SPA Research

- Lloyd Silverman (1960s-1980s)
- Present stimuli (4ms) such as MOMMY & I ARE ONE (MIO) vs PEOPLE ARE WALKING
- **Theory:** Activate 'oneness' fantasies but not defenses
- **Results:** reduced pathology, improvements in adaptation
- Does not occur when presenting stimuli *supraliminally*

Evaluation?

- Literally unbelievable? (Psychoanalytic "magic")
- **However:** Hardaway (1990): meta-analysis: moderate & robust finding (ie. apparent genuine effect)
- MIO most effective
- **Problem:** MIO is linguistically sophisticated
- Evidence of *something* that is inaccessible & yet influential?

Unconscious processes in Social ψ

- Social processes influence our behaviour without our conscious awareness
- eg. obedience, conformity, non-verbal
- Bargh & Williams (2006): "The automaticity of social life" 
- **Social determinists:** behaviour primarily influenced by social factors that we are unaware of (*neo-behaviourism*)
- Kihlstrom (2004): "Is there a "People are Stupid" school in Social Psychology?"

Unconscious processes in Social ψ

- **Holland, Hendriks & Aarts (2005)**
- Ss instructed to eat a crumbly biscuits; secretly filmed
- Half Ss/citrus condition; half/control
- *Citrus cond.*: More cleaning behaviour
- **Williams & Bargh (2008)**
- Hot vs iced coffee conditions
- Ss in 'hot' grp more likely to rate another person favourably (eg. Generous/caring)

The descriptive view: Application

- *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* (CBT)
- Unconscious beliefs/schemas & psychotherapy
- CBT: Aaron Beck & Depression
- 'Automatic', dysfunctional beliefs & affective reactions
- "... processing generally proceeds out of awareness" (Beck, 1996, p. 5)



The descriptive view: Application

- **Core beliefs & self concept** (Beck, 1996)
- "I am friendless, unlovable"
- "I am useless, worthless"
- **Compensatory rules:**
- "If I avoid others, I can avoid rejection"
- "If I keep achieving, I am not worthless"
- **Cognitive Schema ↔ Affect & Behaviour**

CBT Methodology

- Note: Many different species of CBT
- 'Belief identification' (Wenzel et al, 2006)
- eg. drawing attention to thinking & dysfunctional beliefs
- ie. making descriptively unconscious beliefs conscious
- *Once conscious*: Cognitive restructuring & belief modification

(ii) The Systematic Unconscious

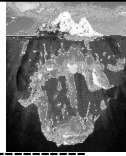
- Mental systems approach
- Topographical position
- Different 'parts' or areas of the mind
- Freud proposes that mental processes are either unconscious or conscious depending upon whether they belong to the system *Unconscious* (Ucs.), *Preconscious* (Pcs.) or *Conscious* (Cs.)

The system view & spatial metaphor

"The crudest idea of these systems is the most convenient for us—a spatial one. Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower room—a kind of drawing room—in which consciousness, too, resides... We are ... justified in calling the second room the system of the *preconscious*" (Freud, 1916-17, pp. 295-6)

Iceberg metaphor

Conscious (Cs.)
Presently in awareness



Preconscious (Pcs.)
Presently not conscious
Beliefs, desires, memories, knowledge

Unconscious (Ucs.)
Primary process
Source of urges; Repressed content
Not available to consciousness

Mental systems

- Cs. process: Presently in awareness
- Pcs. processes are *descriptively* unconscious (ie. not presently in awareness), but capable of becoming conscious
- Ucs. processes are *descriptively* unconscious & inaccessible to conscious thinking
- ie. the distinction here b/w Pcs. & Ucs. concerns whether a process can be known or not (*accessibility criterion*)

"Both of them [systems Ucs. & Pcs.] are unconscious in the sense used by psychology [ie. the descriptive view]; but in our sense one of them, which we term the Ucs. is also *inadmissible to consciousness*, while we term the other the Pcs. because its excitations ... are able to reach consciousness" (Freud, 1900, pp. 614-5)

The System Ucs.

- Ucs. processes differ qualitatively from Cs./Pcs. processes
- Primary vs secondary process
- *Primary process*: Irrational, illogic, timeless, non-realistic thinking; displacement; condensation
- Dreams as product of Ucs. processes
- *Secondary process*: Reality-oriented; organised; rational

"The governing rules of logic carry no weight in the unconscious; it might be called the realm of the Illogical. Urges with contrary aims exist side by side in the unconscious without any need arising for any adjustment between them. Either they have no influence whatever on each other, or if they have, no decision is reached, but a compromise comes about which is nonsensical since it embraces mutually incompatible details" (Freud, 1940, pp. 168-9)

Language & Consciousness

- Ucs.: non-verbal representations
 - Pcs./Cs.: verbal representations
 - Language necessary for consciousness
- "The question, 'How does a thing become conscious?' would thus be more advantageously stated: 'How does a thing become preconscious?' And the answer would be: "Through becoming connected with the word-presentations corresponding to it"" (Freud, 1923, p. 20)

The nonverbal unconscious

- “In infants and toddlers, before the development of language, experiences, feelings, and wishes are encoded in nonverbal form not henceforth accessible to verbal, that is, conscious recall” (Jones, 1993, p. 86)
- “If no one verbalised the experience for the child or helps the child to verbalise it, the experience may simply not be accessible later to verbal, or conscious, recall” (Jones, 1993, pp. 86-7)

A problem with Freud's system account

- Unconscious processes do not have exclusive rights to *irrationality*; (pre)conscious thought activity may also be illogical or irrational (Petocz, 1999)
- “... timelessness, reconciliation of incompatibles, carelessness of contradiction: these terms describe the world of dreams, & not the inaccessible and the unknowable” (MacIntyre, 1958, p. 74)

The System view in contemporary psychology

- The Freudian ‘hot’ unconscious vs the ‘new’ unconscious (‘cold’)
- Kihlstrom (1987/1997): much of cognitive processing is inaccessible to conscious awareness
- *Nonconscious*: cannot be experienced introspectively
- Computer metaphor; system processing
- Decision making processes
- ‘Automatic’ processes

(iii) The Dynamic view

- Psychodynamics: mental forces
- *Dynamic unconscious*: Anything actively prevented from becoming known
- Defense mechanisms broadly accepted today (eg. DSM-IV-TR; McKay, Langdon & Coltheart, 2005)
- Adaptations to stress (Cramer, 2000)
- Emotional regulation processes (Bowins, 2004)
- Targets: conflicting desires; traumatic memories, self-esteem threats

Types of defenses

Defense mechanisms



- Repression: Motivated ignorance
- “The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, & keeping it at a distance, from the conscious” (Freud, 1915, p. 147)
- “The essence of repression lies in its interference with one's ability to reflect on one's mental state” (Eagle, 2000, p. 173)
- Basis of all defenses (Gillett, 1988) or most basic of defenses (Willick, 1995)

Unconscious repression

- *Repression* remains highly controversial
- 'Recovered memory syndrome'
- Can traumatic memories be repressed?
- Evidence (partly) suggests otherwise (Rofé, 2008)
- Freud (1915): impulses not memories are repressed (see Boag, 2006)

Suppression

- Suppression & mental control
- 'Deliberate thought suppression'
- "Conscious attempts to remove thoughts from mind" (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994)
- *Suppression* universally accepted
- *Thought suppression paradigm*

Suppression studies

- Instructed thought suppression
- Participants instructed NOT to think about something
- eg. Do not think about 'white bears' (Wegner, 1994)
- Typically induces preoccupation with the thought (*suppression-induced obsession*)
- Rebound effect



Denial

- **Denial:** Denying reality of a situation
- "Individuals in denial have difficulty recognising and/or accepting the existence, nature, degree, and/or impact of their condition" (Kortte & Wegener, 2004, p. 187)
- V. common in health settings
- Protection against overwhelming information (Donaghy, 2003)

Denial

- Denial & minimisation
- Eating disorders
- Addictions
- Severe health threats
- eg. Cancer diagnosis
- Spinal cord injury
- "I don't have cancer... the doctors are wrong"



Denial: Adaptive/Maladaptive?

- **Adaptive:** Better emotional adjustment; lessens stress, anxiety, depression; more optimistic; fewer medical complications, better recovery
- **Maladaptive:** Delays in seeking treatment (*patient-delay*), poorer compliance with treatment

Types of defenses



- *Some more recent ones:*
- **Defensive pessimism** (Norem, 2001)
- 'Expecting the worst' as a coping mechanism/strategy
- Associated with high anxiety & low control (ie. automatic response)
- Strategic: Anticipating possible problems allows preparing for them (*mental rehearsal*)

Types of defenses

- *Some more recent ones:*
- **Self-handicapping/self-sabotage:** placing obstacles in the way of one's performance to protect one's self esteem (Berglas, 1980's)
- Externalising failure
- eg. I didn't do well on the exam because I was out partying all night
- Failure is expected/intentional rather than reflecting on the self

Dissociative defenses

- **Dissociation:** detachment
- eg emotional numbness, fantasy, depersonalisation, derealisation, amnesia & identity fragmentation
- *Extremely common forms:* eg. shifting attention from stressful source to more pleasing focus
- *Extreme forms:* eg. trauma & personality fragmentation

Dissociative defenses

- **Dissociation:** "... instead of attending to a boring speaker, your eyes glaze over & your mind shifts to a favourite activity, such as sailing, creating a fantasy about the given event" (Bowins, 2004, p. 3)
- Driving on auto-pilot
- Extremely common, everyday forms

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)

- Formerly known as *Multiple Personality Disorder* (MPD)
- "... the presence of two or more personality or identity states that recurrently take control over the body" (Pica, 1999, p. 404)
- Response to 'trauma'; Majority of cases report incest or brutal sexual abuse often by a psychotic adult (85%) (all report some form of abuse)
- Question mark about the legitimacy of DID

Cognitive distortions

- "This class of psychological defense in effect places a sugar coating on events, making an individual's experience of the world more palatable" (Bowins, 2004, p.7)
- *Distortion:* alteration, modification or transformation of cognitive content
- eg. Magical thinking, horoscopes, new-age beliefs, religious beliefs, self-enhancing spin
- Mental health & depressive realism

Self-illusions



- Self-illusions: inaccurate view of ourselves
- Sometimes others' judgements of ourselves correlates more with our behaviour than our own self-report (Wilson & Dunn, 2004)
- Most people view themselves as *above average* in intelligence, etc. (Gabriel et al, 1994)



Self-illusions: Positive or negative?

- Depressed people have more accurate evaluations of self & reality than the non-depressed (Alloy & Abrahamson, 1979)
- People respond better to difficult situations when they over-estimate their abilities (Armor & Taylor, 1998)
- Benefits from slight positive self-illusions
- Optimism bias & road accidents



Summary: How well do we know ourselves?

Why might we not know ourselves accurately?

- (i) Simply too much information (Wilson & Dunn, 2004) (eg. beliefs)
- (ii) Unconscious influences (eg. Social factors)
- (iii) The 'new unconscious' & *nonconscious* processes
- (iv) Motivated ignorance (eg. defense mechanisms)

Any question or comments?