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Before You Know It: The Automaticity of Everyday Life

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Social psychology, as many have noted, has always been cognitive in nature. Social cognition, it can also be argued, has always had a strong automatic character. In a wide variety of research domains such as causal attribution, impression formation, stereotyping, and attitude formation and change, the early models have been couched in terms of conscious and deliberate processes. As research progresses, however, each of these phenomena has been shown to be have a substantial automatic component.

In the 20 years since the study of automatic processes in social psychology began, the known scope of such influences in daily life has increased about every five years. In 1980 automaticity in social perception had been established. Chronic individual differences in the accessibility of trait categories, as well as accessibility differences due to "priming" or recent use, were shown to exert an unintended influence over the categorization of social behavior, and consequently on impression formation. Chronic effects of stereotype accessibility were also established, so much so that by the mid-1980s there was great concern over whether stereotyping and prejudice were entirely nonconscious and unintentional phenomena.

Around 1985, attitudes, the historically central concept of social cognition -- indeed of social psychology -- was found to have automatic features as well. Defined in terms of a positive or negative evaluation of an environmental object or event, stored in memory as an associative tag to that concept, sequential priming studies found that an object's attitude becomes active almost immediately and unintentionally upon the presence of that object in the environment. Considerable research since then has shown this automatic evaluation effect to be quite pervasive, and to have important motivational and emotional consequences downstream.

Around 1990 it was hypothesized that perhaps goals and motivations could also become automatized, such that they became active and operated unintentionally and without conscious guidance given certain environmental cues. Research in this area has shown, for example, that one can reproduce effects of different task instructions on performance by nonconscious activation of the same processing goals. And motivated behavior, such as achievement and affiliation, can be produced experimentally

through nonconscious activation of the corresponding goal.

Given that demonstrations have now been made of automatic, environmentally-driven influences in social perception, evaluation, motivation, and behavior, the current and "next-wave" of research is focusing on how these various parallel processes interact with one another. For instance, experiments have shown that automatic evaluation has immediate consequences for approach and avoidance motivations, as measured by motor predispositions, and for subjective emotional experience as well. Automatic social perception has been shown to be linked directly to tendencies to behave oneself in line with the activated perceptual categories -- for instance, automatic activation of the elderly stereotype causes a participant to walk more slowly down the hall when leaving the experiment. And chronic interpersonal motivations -- such as to be fair and egalitarian -- appear to be able to inhibit an automatically activated stereotype. All of these effects seem to be put into motion and interact with each other preconsciously.

A final noteworthy aspect of social psychology's exploration of automatic phenomena is the legacy of the Posner-Snyder dual process model. In all domains mentioned here, research has focused on interplay between automatic and controlled components. In impression formation, attitude formation and change, and stereotyping, there has been a great deal of research on the controllability of the automatic effects, and under what conditions they are more versus less likely to occur. Information overload and time pressure are two of the naturalistic situations in which automatic processes have been found to predominate, and special motivational states such as being held accountable for one's judgments and decisions appear to be largely successful in moderating or eliminating automatic influences. There is currently a healthy debate as to how often these motivational conditions occur in everyday life, as control over automatic effects require that the individual be aware of (i.e., believe possible) the non-conscious influence, and moreover to believe oneself vulnerable to it (i.e., possibly biased).