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Lay psychology of the hidden mental life: Attribution patterns of unconscious processes



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ABSTRACT

In spite of extensive research on theory of mind, lay theories about the unconscious have scarcely been investigated. Three questionnaire studies totaling 689 participants, examined to what extent they thought that a range of psychological processes could be unconscious. It was found that people are less willing to countenance unconscious processes in themselves than in others, regardless of the time period considered – present, past or future. This is especially true when specific experience-like situations are envisioned, as opposed to considering the question in abstract or generic terms. In addition, the notion of unconscious psychological processes is resisted for certain domains in particular: intending, sensing, believing, and thinking. We interpret this pattern by positing the existence of two conceptions about the unconscious that are differentially applied according to circumstances: one originating in prevalent social representations about the unconscious, the other based on self-model of the person as an intentional actor.

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1. Introduction

People entertain theories about the mind. Those theories come naturally to people who develop normally, and people use them to understand others and themselves. Over the past decades, countless studies have been devoted to describing and analyzing theories of mind, its development, and its impairment in pathology (e.g. Dimaggio & Lysaker, 2010; Malle, 2004; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001; Ziv, Leiser, & Levine, 2011). Theory of mind (ToM) is a complex, interconnected set of concepts relating to mental activities, such as beliefs and desires, used to explain a person's behavior. It enables people to make sense of past and present behaviors and allows predictions about the future (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995). Strikingly, whereas many studies have explored theories of the mind in its conscious aspects (e.g. Wellman, 1990), everyday theories about the unconscious mind have been neglected.

The concept of the unconscious has changed much since Freud's time (1915/1957), but its importance has certainly not abated (for reviews from different perspectives see Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Ekstrom, 2004; Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2005). While Uleman (2005) claimed that the psychoanalytic unconscious is to most laypeople the only unconscious, little is actually known about how it is conceived by the general public today. Lay beliefs do not necessarily resemble theoretical-academic models, whose influence is slow and indirect (Keil, 2010; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). Theoretical-academic models about the unconscious could therefore not serve as a neutral starting point to our exploration. Further, while countless studies have also investigated people's awareness of their own mental functioning (e.g. Baumeister, Masicampo, & Vohs, 2011), these studies cannot enlighten us regarding naïve theories of unconscious processes. The present study is an initial attempt to fill this lacuna.

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We set out to investigate how the general public uses the concept of unconscious. Our first descriptive task was to map what aspects of mental life can be unconscious. To do this, we explored the psychological components (thought, emotions, memory, etc.) that may be unconscious, according to folkpsychology. We also delved deeper, and asked several questions about the unconscious that have been investigated in other studies about the way people understand the human mind: Does the unconscious dimension primarily apply to mental processes or to contents? Do naïve psychologists think more readily about unconscious mental life as abstract theoretical statements, or in terms of everyday concrete examples? Are unconscious processes equally attributed to everyone or is there a disparity between self and others? These interrelated questions helped us explicate how unconscious processes figure in contemporary folk psychology in the Western world.

Before we can review studies regarding psychological components and other important questions mentioned above, it will be helpful to briefly survey several relevant literatures about unconscious mental life and public perceptions.

1.1. Naïve psychological conceptions about the unconscious

In daily life, we often find it difficult to understand our acts, feelings or thoughts. Events that should cause happiness may trigger sadness or irritation instead; there are memories we cannot retrieve and that later pop up, without apparent explanation. Since commonsense and folk psychology is influenced by the scientific realm (e.g. Kelley, 1992; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983), we may expect people to know about unconscious processes and contents and to consider them as appropriate, or even compelling, explanations for certain everyday occurrences.

On the other hand, Wegner (2002) who studied consciousness and free will claimed that people understand minds around the concept of an agent. This idea, as he develops it, center around the *ideal of conscious agency*, which involves both intention and conscious will. The experience of consciously intending an action we then perform isn't a direct or reliable indication that our conscious thought caused the action (e.g. Gazzaniga, 2011; Mele, 2009; Wegner, 2002). There can be illusions of conscious will. According to Wegner, people hold onto the illusion of conscious will because knowing what you do and why you do it, particularly in pursuit of a goal, is highly valued. This suggests that people refrain from attributing their behavior and their mental life to an unconscious source. We should therefore also ask specifically to what extent there is room, within naïve psychology, for unconscious processes and contents, and how widely they are applied.

Few studies have examined people's stated perceptions and understandings of the unconscious mental world. Flavell, Green, Flavell, and Lin (1999) studied the development of children's knowledge of the unconscious, but their definition of unconsciousness referred to a state of deep dreamless sleep. Two other studies examined daily conception of the unconscious as part of Freudian and psychoanalytic theory. Moscovici (1961/2008) studied the social representation of psychoanalysis in France. He found a common conscious-unconscious model that was based on psychoanalytic conceptions, though rather simplified. In this model Moscovici found that the unconscious was a part of the human psyche, but also an autonomous agency, and a force that was in conflict with another force, consciousness. Moscovici argued that, for the public, the unconscious functions as a symbol of an unwanted force that can impose itself on our autonomous or independent personalities, interfering with the lives and free will of individuals. A second, more recent study was conducted by Schomerus, Matschinger, and Angermeyer (2008), and assessed the extent to which the public has incorporated Freudian theory in its understanding of mental illness. It asked narrowly about the meaning of unconscious conflicts. They found that while the term "unconscious" is used, people had difficulties to explain it and their understandings about unconscious had little in common with the psychoanalytic one (a finding typical for lay theories and conceptions, see Leiser, 2001). There are also some empirical studies about naïve understanding of concepts associated with unconscious mental life, such as dreams (e.g. Morewedge & Norton, 2009) and defense mechanisms (e.g. Cramer & Brilliant, 2001). However, these studies are too narrow to stand for the whole of unconscious mental activity and cannot serve as a starting point to our study.

To summarize, past research about the general public's understanding of unconscious mental life relied on a specific theoretical perspective (usually Freudian), or focused on limited mental activities that are associated with the unconscious. We will now turn to general models of naïve understanding about the human mind, as a different potential source of information.

1.2. Models of the mind and unconscious mental life

Three main models of healthy adult conceptions of mental life stand out: the D'Andrade (1987, 1995) *folk model of the mind*; Wellman (1990) *theory of mind*; and Malle (2004) *folk theory of mind*. Each model deals with naïve conceptions about unconscious mental life differently.

Relying on qualitative methodologies, D'Andrade (1987, 1995) described a folk model of the mind, used in Western cultures. This model includes five major parts: perceptions (senses), thoughts (e.g. beliefs, reason), feelings/ emotions (e.g. love, lust, feeling tired), wishes (e.g. desire, hope, need), and intentions (e.g. decide, plan). D'Andrade (1987) claimed that in the folk model of the mind there is an important differentiation between mental contents and mental processes, to which we return below. Comparing his folk model with psychoanalytic and academic models of the mind, D'Andrade (1987) concluded that according to the folk model people act primarily in light of their conscious feelings and thoughts. Some mental processes and contents may be unconscious, but these are considered atypical, would be treated as a problem, that can be resolved by turning one's full attention to the situation.

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