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All in the back of your mind

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IN moments of quiet self-congratulation (perhaps gazing proudly on a newly completed article, chapter, or lecture) you may be forgiven for attributing your achievement mostly to yourself. With modesty briefly set aside, your explanation for your success probably centres on a winning combination of intellectual talent and solid endeavour.

Yet modern study of the unconscious suggests that you should give a nod of acknowledgment in an unexpected direction: towards the incidental objects and events around you. For research shows that these seemingly trivial stimuli have the power to rouse particular motives lying dormant within.

A room strewn with dieting magazines triggers the goal to restrain eating. Women offered a chocolate bar in such a setting are more likely to turn it down. The fresh, lemony smell of household cleaner turns minds in hygienic directions. When this citrus odour wafts through a room, unsuspecting volunteers plan to do more cleaning chores for the rest of the day, and eat a crumbly biscuit in a tidier fashion, than people in unscented surroundings. Being reminded of a friend fires up the motive to help and makes passers-by more likely to offer assistance to a stranger.

This is the unconscious at work. The volunteers in such experiments don't realise how the environment, artfully crafted by researchers, is affecting their actions (and these innocent dupes will often vehemently deny any influence). And subliminal stimuli are just as effective in bringing certain motives to the fore, showing that to have a conscious awareness of whatever it is that manipulates us is merely an optional extra. For example, people shown a very special episode of *The Simpsons* didn't realise that 24 subliminal flashes of Coca-Cola cans and the boxer Sugar Ray Leonard (gleaming with sweat and looking much in need of a long, cool drink) had been carefully inserted between the frames. Yet, afterwards they felt strangely thirsty.

What motives are likely to be fostered by institutions of higher education? In their natural habitat, academics are surrounded by reminders of scholarly pursuit. Here is the hallway adorned with portraits of previous centuries' great thinkers. Over there is the glass cabinet crowded with off-prints of departmental publications. And the unconscious (we hope) responds accordingly, calling on motives and behaviour that fit the studious environment.

Indeed there is evidence that education-related images can have exactly this stimulating effect, as Dutch psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis from the University of Amsterdam and his colleagues have found. Two groups of volunteers were asked to examine a picture of either a library or a railway station, which they were told they would later visit. For the first group, the helpful unconscious immediately tuned behaviour to suit a quiet, bookish setting. Surreptitiously measuring the intensity of the volunteers' voices shortly afterwards, the researchers found that the library viewers spoke in significantly more hushed tones.

Dijksterhuis also found that academic people, as well as places, can stir up the unconscious. When he asked people to contemplate the characteristics of the typical professor, then answer Trivial Pursuit questions, their performance far outstripped a control group whose members were not first unconsciously set in professorial mode. What is more, the longer people spent thinking about professors beforehand, the better they did. The pleasing implication of this research is that merely brushing shoulders with a professor in the corridor can enhance your smarts. (For even greater effect, why not try trailing him all the way back to his office?)

Nor is the unconscious necessarily led astray by the occasional cue in the academic

environment that suggests more frivolous pursuits: the sight of students lazing on the lawns, or colleagues gossiping in the tearoom. The well-trained unconscious sets up an emergency link between a temptation and the virtuous behaviour that it jeopardises. The unconscious responds to a tempting distraction with an instant pursing of the lips and shake of the head. Conscientious students exposed to subliminal flashes of procrastination words (such as television and internet) showed an instant engagement of the work-goals threatened by the short-term pleasures of channel-hopping and web-surfing. (In lax and undisciplined students, by contrast, there was little sign that the unconscious was taking the long-term view.)

In a way, it is not particularly flattering to learn that credit for academic achievement is due, in a small but significant way, to our casual glances at the hardback tomes lying scattered on the desk, or the lecture timetable pinned to the noticeboard. On the other hand, it is an easy advantage, so maybe we should just be grateful and exploit it where we can. As we consider how best to further our academic success, perhaps we should look to recruit unconscious reserves. The most ambitious among us can start by chasing professors through the book stacks of libraries.

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