

LIVING IN YOUR PRIMITIVE BRAIN

**Trevor Eddolls takes a look at how people
behave without thinking!**

As hypnotherapists, we spend a lot of our time encouraging people to make use of the Mr Spock part of their brain – the cerebral cortex. This is where they can make logical decisions about their life and how they want to behave. The problem is that decisions made in the cortex can often be slow. Brains can make fast decisions using the more primitive parts associated with the limbic system – and it can be quite illuminating to see what those decisions are.

Leonard Mlodinow's book, *Subliminal*, takes a look at a host of psychology experiments that illustrate some surprising and quick decisions that subjects have made.

For example, Mlodinow says that the stronger the threat is to a person feeling good about themselves, the greater their tendency to view reality through a distorting lens. And he illustrates this with examples such as Dutch Schultz the mobster, who thought he was a public benefactor, and OJ Simpson, who continued to justify his behaviour in front of the sentencing judge. When asked how they get along with others, 100% of US high school seniors reckoned that they were average or above; 60% put themselves in the top 10, and 25% reckoned they were in the top 1%! Similarly, 94% of college professors reckon they do above-average work. Engineers, the military, doctors, have all proved to have equally over-inflated views of their performance. And, you'll not be surprised to learn, we even over-estimate our ability to resist over-estimating our own ability!

Motivated reasoning is the name given to finding evidence to fit our beliefs and to ignore evidence that doesn't. There's evidence to suggest that even scientists will still hold on to beliefs even when all the evidence is contradictory. And their opinion of the work of their colleagues depends on how well their colleague's conclusion fit their own beliefs.

Our illusion of reality – our belief in our own innate superiority – must maintain the illusion of objectivity. We can only be so good, and not any better or evidence might interfere with our belief. The same applies to politics and football teams, and much else.

Evidence shows when interviewing, that we will make a choice and then look for evidence to justify our choice. Worse, evidence shows that this bias affects our memory. When recalling school grades

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years afterwards, people are more likely to remember they got an 'A' (about 89% of the time) to about 64% for 'B's, 51% for 'C's, and only 29% remembering their 'D'.

It seems that every client we see, in fact everyone we meet, in fact even ourselves, is a living illusion. Every individual holds a positive illusion about themselves and their past.

We also have a bias towards traits similar to our own. In a study of marriages in three US states, people were more likely to marry people with the same surname. More Smiths married Smiths, more Johnsons married Johnsons, more Williams married Williams, more Jones married Jones, and more Browns married Browns than any other combination of surnames.

You're probably familiar with Orr's Law. Dr Leonard Orr, the founder of the American rebirthing movement, suggested that within everyone are two people – one is a thinker; the other a prover. The thinker, which roughly corresponds to your conscious mind, is that part of you that thinks up ideas and generates possibilities. The prover, which approximates to your unconscious mind, has the job of collecting just the right facts to support whatever it is. Orr's Law state that whatever the thinker thinks, the prover proves.

Research also shows that we're not very good at understanding our own feelings, but we do it with high confidence.

What about eating? What affects how much we eat? Is it taste? The answer is no – it's how big a container it comes in. An experiment with popcorn involved people being given either tasty or stale popcorn, and either large or small containers. People with large containers of stale popcorn ate lots of it. And menus that use 'flower modifiers' – you know, "slow roasted

x drizzled onto a bed of crispy y" sort of thing – help people to enjoy food more. Yes, people prefer food with adjectives! Using hard to read fonts in a recipe book makes people think the recipe is more complicated and so they are less likely to try it.

What about shopping? You surely make sensible and reasoned decisions about purchases? Seemingly not. Put identical German and French wines for sale next to each other and play French-sounding background music and 77% of the wine sold is French. Play German background music and the reverse happens. In another experiment, four pairs of identical silk stockings had a scent added to them. People then chose the 'best' one. And, of course, without realizing it, they chose the pair with the nicest smell – and without consciously noticing that there was a smell.

Even how clever you are depends on what others think! Rosenthal gave children IQ tests and told their teacher the results. Some children identified as 'gifted' were no better than average. Then eight months later the children were retested and 80 percent of those labelled as gifted had improved by over 10 points, and 20 percent had gained over 30 points.

So it seems, most of what we do is decided by our unconscious mind and then justified logically by the logical parts of the brain.

Nobel prize-winning Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow* also describes some surprising aspects of our and our clients' thinking. The book explains that we have two ways of thinking, a quick way that we use all the time (what we'd call the primitive emotional brain), and a slower, more reflective way that we're often too lazy to use! (What we'd call our intellectual brain.) Did you know that

being brave was tiring? According to Kahneman, stifling an emotional reaction reduces your physical strength. This he calls 'ego depletion'. Ego depleted people are more likely to give up tasks such as dieting. Priming is a way to get people thinking about something without ever mentioning it. In one experiment, students were asked to go through a number of words associated with being old. When they left the experiment room, they walked down the corridor more slowly. Or people who balanced a pencil on their top lip (causing a smile) rated cartoons as funnier than people holding a pencil in their teeth (causing a frown). Money-primed people are apparently more selfish than others.

Kahneman goes on to suggest that there is a confirmation bias – in that people look for evidence to confirm their ideas, rather than challenge them. And he comes up with a rule – What You See Is All There Is (WYSIATI) – that explains so many bad decisions. Basically, people only take into consideration what they know about a situation and ignore what they don't know. So even though they may know that there are things they don't know, they don't let that affect their choice.

How can you tell how successful a politician is going to be? Do you look at their voting record? No, apparently you look at how strong and trustworthy they look!

Kahneman suggests that our fast brain likes to see the world as a well-ordered place. He suggests the halo effect to explain how our fast brain will attribute attributes to someone just because they exhibit other attributes. For example, just because we think a baseball pitcher is handsome and athletic, we will rate him as being better at throwing a ball. Think about how that might apply to people or your clients! The suggestion is that your brain builds a coherent narrative about people and events from

very limited information. We think we understand past events and that the outcomes were never in doubt – and therefore, we should be able to predict what will happen in the future. Kahneman calls this the illusion of understanding.

Experiments show that you perceive people as friendlier when you're holding a hot drink than when you're holding a cold one. You're more likely to wash your hands after thinking about bad deeds than good ones. You'll perceive a heavy book as being more important than a lighter one.

The second illusion that Kahneman describes is the illusion of validity. He describes how he and a small group of others looked at recruits and decided who would make the best officers. They were confident that they were right, based on their observations. And even when evidence from future training of the soldiers showed that their decisions were wrong, they continued to make them. And he goes on to show that the same can be said of stockbrokers picking stocks. So why does the illusion continue? The answer seems to be that powerful professional cultures maintain the illusion. In fact, most research shows that experts are no better at predicting the future than anyone else would be. It seems that in an unpredictable environment, no one can predict the future. Remember that, the next time you really think you know what a client will do next.

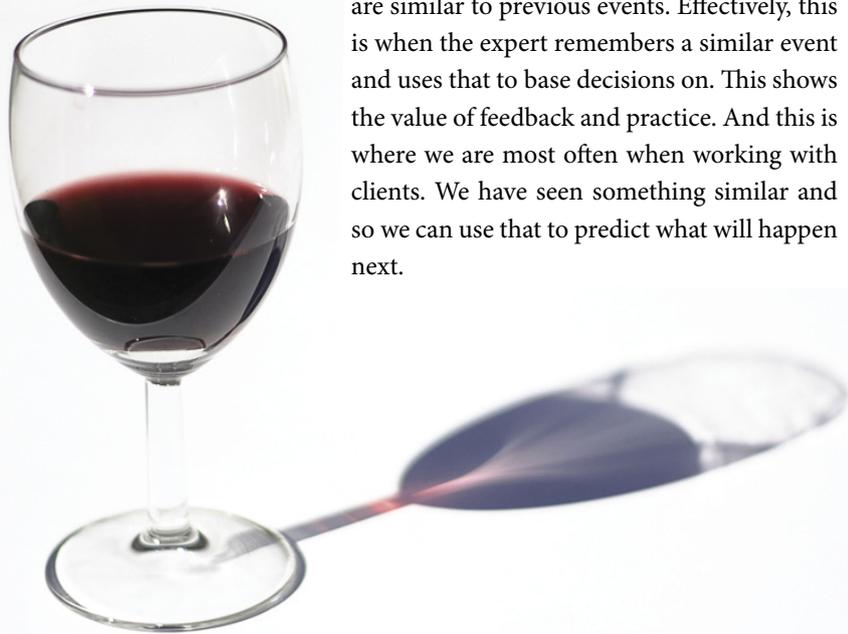
But you know there are times when you just have a feeling that something is right or that it will work. You just know what's going to happen and what your client needs to do to accommodate that. Kahneman has a chapter on intuition and formulas. His example is the future price of wine. Experts make a guess about the quality of Bordeaux wine and predict how much it will sell for. The accuracy was tested against an algorithm using weather features – average

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temperature during the summer growing season, the amount of rain at harvest time, and the total rainfall during the previous winter. And the algorithm was a better predictor of wine prices. Similarly, the Apgar test (an algorithm) is applied to newborn children to ensure they are not in distress. We learn that when choosing people to work with, perhaps in a new clinic you are setting up, you need to choose up to six characteristics that are important. Ask questions and score potential colleagues for each trait. That way you'll get the best team. Don't select people just because you like them.

There are times when you can accept expert judgements, and that seems to be when a system is fairly predictable and when circumstances are similar to previous events. Effectively, this is when the expert remembers a similar event and uses that to base decisions on. This shows the value of feedback and practice. And this is where we are most often when working with clients. We have seen something similar and so we can use that to predict what will happen next.



Another point that Kahneman makes is that people don't look at external evidence when making a decision. He highlights a time when he was leading a project team and asked everyone to write down how long they thought it would take for the project to conclude. The answers were around the two-year mark. He then asked an expert on the team how long similar projects had taken. The answer was seven to 10 years. In fact, his project took eight years. So, next time a client seems to be making marvellous progress after two sessions and appears ready to stop coming, remember that in your experience clients need perhaps eight sessions to not only make progress, but also to consolidate that progress. Take a look at what you know from all your clients, not just from this particular one.

Kahneman states that when we make a decision, we focus on what we know and neglect what we don't know, which makes us overly confident in our beliefs. Let's all take that as a warning ourselves, but also pass it on to our clients.

So it seems, from both books, that there are plenty of documented examples of how most people make the same mistakes and get themselves into difficulties. And they all seem to be a consequence of using our primitive brain too much and not engaging our intellectual brain enough ■

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