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Black, White or Gray

Pen and marker on paper

Do you understand your own mind? This is the essential question of my research paper. I explored Sigmund Freud's theory of the mind and how it functions, which involves the conscious mind, unconscious mind, subconscious mind, id, superego, and ego. I got inspiration from this theory and expanded the concept into character designs. I created my piece of artwork, a book, and illustrated how people's minds react differently according to different circumstances. My art was inspired by the horror genre, especially "rules horror," which uses sets of rules to tell a suspenseful story. In the book, I developed a lot of paradoxes and contradictory points to correlate with how our mind plays, distorts, and deceives information. This pop-up/interactive book allows you to go through 3-D imagery and pieces of evidence that you can take out and rewind while reading. The three parts of the book give three points of view from very different groups of people and connect the book into one big plotline. Feel free to flip through and interact with the book!

Do you Understand your own Mind?



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This paper addresses the psychology of how our mind functions as well as psychoanalytic theories, effects, and laws. It includes several explanations and examples of the conscious mind, preconscious mind, unconscious mind, id, ego, and superego. It also explores how the mind creates feelings, how the mind reacts, and even—distorts information.

I. Introduction

We live inside our minds and bodies. We behave according to what the mind says. We speak when the mind tells us to, and we feel whatever the mind wants us to feel. It seems like our daily lives are controlled by our minds and we are all fine with it. Don't get me wrong, I am fine with it too; but I am curious about how the mind functions. Here is the question—our minds understand us so well that they know how to react and what to do every single second during our lifetime—but do we understand them? Do you understand your own mind?

Throughout my observation of my behaviors, I found that my mind connects with my body more than I thought. When I start to think about how to react to something, there is the “evil me” telling me to just say no or go do something that is not allowed, and there is the “good me” that is ordering me to act the nicest way possible— however, the action that I took at the end is neither good nor bad. My mind knows how to even things out, how to take care of me, and lead me to the best possible outcome.

The good news is that scientists and psychologists have found a lot of patterns that the human mind makes. These evidence-proved facts or phenomena are psychological theories that help people improve their understanding of the mind. Through experiments and studies, psychologists and philosophers can explore how the mind functions under different conditions.

II. How Does the Mind Function?

According to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of mind, our brains are governed by the id, ego, and superego, along with the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious minds. The human mind creates behavior using the id, ego, and superego. The id is completely unconscious, containing all the impulses of human instincts such as sex and aggression (Lapsley and Stey, 5). The superego, on the other hand, maintains morality and strives for perfection. (Lapsley and Stey, 6). With the two extreme parts of our mind, we need something to balance them out, and that's where the ego takes place. The article states that the "ego attempts to harness instinctual libidinal drives so that they submit to the reality principle. If the id is a cauldron of passions, the ego is the agent of reason, commonsense, and defense" (Lapsley and Stey, 6). The ego takes information from the id and superego so that thoughts, behavior, and reality are in balance. The three parts work together to create behaviors and reactions, allowing the mind to function.

In addition, these three parts also overlap with the categories of the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind. The conscious mind is filled with thoughts and perceptions that you are aware of (it is what you are currently thinking and feeling)The preconscious mind is the memories and stored knowledge that you are not currently thinking about, but can pull up in your head when you need them. The unconscious mind is something deep down in your mind that you are not aware of. It includes natural instincts, immoral thoughts, fears, selfishness, sexual desires, and aggression.

The id, ego, and superego fall into these categories as well. The id works on the unconscious level of the mind while the superego works at both the conscious and preconscious levels. The ego, however, works mostly at the conscious level of the mind. If someone, for example, were to have an unhealthy ego, things might work differently. As mentioned in the book

Ego, Hunger and Aggression, “..the healthy personality identification is an Ego-function, whereas the pathological ‘Ego’ is built up of introjections (substantial identifications) which determine the personality's actions and feelings, and limit their range” (Perls, 141). So in a healthy mind, the ego system is what keeps a person going— it decides how someone will react and how they behave. If someone has a pathological ego, then their mind may be different than a normal mind, and in turn, the id and superego will not be in balance.

III. How does your mind react?

Behavior is heavily connected to emotion. Have you ever wondered why horror is such a big genre? Horror movies, novels, comics, etc. have been popular since the 1920s or even earlier. Horror creates feelings of fear, disgust, tension, and sudden shock. This may sound like a bad experience, but the emotional stimulation can feel exciting. I personally love to read horror or suspense comics. It gives me two kinds of emotions— fear and excitement— as I mentioned above. I enjoy feeling the kind of tension that horror stories insight and the aftershock that stays with me after the story ends. So why am I reacting to horror with excitement? I wonder what my mind is doing to make me feel such strong emotions.

“Horror stories are a way of understanding and ultimately transcending the limits of mind, knowledge, and science through fear”(Colavito, 1087). One part of the mind that is very confusing is why we react the way we do. Logically thinking, horror, anxiety, and disgust give uncomfortable sensations, but instead, we enjoy it. This is called the reversal theory, it is a “distinctive way of understanding the enjoyment of bad emotions...which removes consequences from a situation. The hedonic value of arousal is inverted, so that bad emotions become enjoyable in the same degree as they would have been unpleasant in the absence of such a frame” (BPS, 5).

As you can see, people react to horror because our minds can remove the consequences or the results of the situation and make us think it is nothing but entertainment. That's how we gain pleasure from something that is not classified as pleasurable. The paradox of our mind is well known but we still have a lot more to discover.

Our behavior can differ significantly depending on the setting. For example, I am very confident to sing when I am with myself or drawing something good when I am alone, but if someone is with me when I am singing I would get nervous, or if someone is next to me to watch me draw I would panic. External pressure is a very significant factor that impacts our minds.

To observe social behavior, I did some research on rule-following and shame. I found one article called "Shame and Theory-of-Mind Predicts Rule-Following Behavior". In this paper, an experiment was conducted, observing how people act with rules when they know they are being watched. The results showed that "the stated rule significantly increases rule-following behavior. The time that subjects took to complete the task can be viewed as a measure of an individual's sensitivity to following rules or social norms" (Ridinger, 4).

Under others' watch, people tend to follow rules and do what is right in order to not feel shame. People tend not to disobey the rules because their minds will create guilty and shameful feelings. The results of the experiment show how rules work because they have a great correlation with shame, especially when subjects think that their actions are observed by the experimenter (Ridinger, 11). This explains why we act more honestly when we feel the judgment of others. For example, students are more likely to cheat on a test when their teacher isn't watching than when they are.

IV. Scientific theories, laws, and effect that helps us understand our mind

After learning so much about the mind, it is very important to summarize and condense the information. How psychologists and philosophers do it is that they use their observations and experiments to come up with theories, laws, and effects that can explain their results. Some examples that I will be mentioning to help us learn more about the mind are gaslighting, the Bandwagon effect, and the Pygmalion effect.

Gaslighting is the act of creating a false situation or scene that makes another question their judgment, belief, and reality. It can distort someone else's mind and make them doubt themselves about something that they are innocent of or something that they are not part of. Such as when someone tells you that you did something wrong, and they have all the evidence to prove that statement, you may start to doubt yourself if you actually did it, you just don't remember it. Gaslighting is considered an effect because it is extremely common and explains how other people's words and actions may persuade your mind to question itself.

The Bandwagon effect is a psychological phenomenon stating that if a majority of people are doing something, then even if someone does not think it is correct or it is against their beliefs, they will still follow the crowd (Schmitt-Beck). When I was in fifth grade, our math teacher assigned us a group assignment to do with three other people. We decided to work on the math problems independently and then share and compare our answers. For one problem I got a different answer than the three others. Although I re-checked my work multiple times and made sure it was correct, I still decided to change my answer to what the three other students got. We ended up getting that question wrong. This effect studies how people tend to disregard their own beliefs when they are outnumbered.

The Pygmalion effect is when a person's performance is impacted and influenced by other people's expectations of them (Rosenthal). Such as if in a company, a strict boss would end up

having better employees than a boss that does not have many expectations toward their employees. One will be more likely to succeed if people around them encourage them, and more likely to fail if they don't. For instance, if I want to get something done, I would go up to my mother, because she is a strict but very nice person. She would set me up with goals and expectations along with deadlines, at the same time encouraging me and telling me that she trusts me. Oppositely, if I tell my friends that I want something done, they do not have much trust in me because they do not have the same expectations. People are unconsciously influenced by other people's words.

V. Does your mind lie to you?

Even though I have complete trust in my mind, I still question what I think and how I think about things. I blame my mind for making mistakes and creating misleading allusions in my head. Such as when something embarrassing happens, even if I try to forget about it, I cannot. The embarrassing scene and the whole scenario would be playing and replaying in my head over and over again. On the other hand, if I try very hard to remember something, like where did my phone go or where did I put my homework, I am not able to remember. Or when I feel great after a test, confident that I am going to get an A, only to find out that I barely passed. My mind has its own intelligence. It sorts information in my conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind the way it wants, and not always the way I want.

The mind knows how to distort the truth and deceive you from knowing some information. There are many different parts of the brain, such as the vain brain. The vain brain aggrandizers and embellishes, to make you think you are invincible and omnipotent. It excuses or rewrites your mistakes and failures (Fine, 4). The vain brain thinks you are the strongest and so flawless, that it tells the mind to make you feel like that too. It rejects all the negative ideas that may affect you

and replace them with better things that could satisfy you instead. As the author of *A Mind of Its Own*, Cordelia Fine states, “the brain evades, twists, discounts, misinterprets, even makes up evidence-all so that we can retain that satisfying sense of being in the right” (Fine, 106).

It is an unconscious thing that the mind does. The brain wants the information and evidence to lean more heavily toward us on the scale of morals, so if anything is not strongly opposing us, then the mind will find a way to distort it so it can keep us self-assured and confident. In addition, there is also the immoral brain that does not even bother to distort information to fool us. It is the part of the mind that refuses to think morally. The immoral brain hides in the unconscious mind and convinces us to not take moral actions because there is no ethical dimension to the situation. Basically, it gives us moral superiority so we can feel better when taking immoral actions. (Fine, 64).

VI. Conclusion

There are so many resources that investigate our understanding of our own minds, such as Freud’s studies and other psychoanalysis, books, and articles. But we can never be sure what is happening in our minds. As *A Mind of Its Own* writes, “according to self-perception theory, the reasons behind our actual behavior are also something of a mystery to us” (Fine, 142). We objectively observe our own behaviors and thought processes, and we conclude what we think is the most reasonable result. However, what we are unclear about is the unconscious mind. It will always keep secrets from us, and maybe we’ll never find out all those secrets.

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