The Risks of 'Racy' Thinking

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I worked in the news business for many years, and sometimes the pace could get hectic. But the work day didn't really charge up until mid-morning. In the early morning hours, my routine was to leaf through several of the day's newspapers, including the sports section, usually with my feet up on my desk. Occasionally I would check the AP ticker or turn on the TV, but not until after I had spent some time with the papers and my morning coffee.

This was back in the 20th century, of course, and looking back that pace seems almost leisurely by today's standards. Technology has radically altered the way that many of us consume information. I still read a couple papers every morning, but I also sort through email at two different addresses, responding to urgent ones and marking others for later attention. I scan for several Google alerts. I check out my Facebook and Twitter accounts, and reply as needed, and I do all of this at a much faster pace than I did in the past.

Sometimes I wonder if this modern pace is having any psychological consequences, and not just for journalists. We're all bombarded by information these days, unless we take deliberate steps to avoid it. Do we feel and act differently as a result of all this rapid-fire stimulation? Is it detrimental?

Psychological scientists are very interested in this question, too, and have been exploring both the costs and the possible benefits of the 21st century's rapid onslaught of information. Princeton University scientists Jesse Chandler and Emily Pronin are among the pioneers who have been studying "thought speed." When we think of how our thoughts shape our emotions and behavior, we tend to focus on *what* we're thinking—thought content. But Chandler and Pronin believe that this other dimension of thinking—its pace—might be just as important.

They decided to study the effects of thought speed on risk taking attitudes and behavior. They chose risk taking, in part, because people with clinical mania exhibit both rapid pressurized thinking and risky behavior. They also tend to experience elevated mood, which has been linked to fast thinking in previous work. What's more, those who use amphetamines—"speed"—exhibit feelings of confidence and risk seeking in conjunction with their rapid thoughts. Starting with these clues, they designed two experiments to test this idea in the laboratory.

In the first, they manipulated volunteers' thought speed by having them read a series of sentences as they scrolled across a computer screen. They read them out loud, but some read the sentences rapidly, while others read at a more normal pace. All the sentences were about random trivia, deliberately chosen to lack emotional content. This well-tested procedure forces participants to process information—to think—either normally or fast.

Afterward, the scientists measured all the volunteers' mood, and then told them to inflate balloons. They were computer-simulated balloons, but anyone who has inflated real balloons knows the challenge: Will

this balloon take one more puff of air, or will it burst? A bigger, rounder balloon is a better balloon. The volunteers had additional incentive to push the limit some, but not too much: They were paid for each puff of air, and lost it all if a balloon burst. This was the laboratory measure of risk taking.

When they crunched all the data, the results were unambiguous. Those who were thinking faster took more risks, and they also felt more upbeat. It wasn't a huge amount of money on the line, but it was real money—and the laboratory version of a gambling hall.

Still, it was laboratory gambling. What about actual attitudes toward familiar risks, like unprotected sex and illegal drug use? Chandler and Pronin designed the second experiment to address this question, and to further refine the kind of risk taking linked to rapid thought. In this ingenious study, all the volunteers watched clips from the 1992 film *Baraka*. The scientists chose this film because it has no plot or story line, no actors or dialogue or narrative voice—just a kaleidoscopic collection of images from nature and various human cultures. The clips were edited so that some volunteers watched at the pace of a typical Hollywood movie, others slightly faster, and still others in a rapid series of shorter, quicker shots—speeding up their information processing.

After watching the film clips, all the volunteers filled out a risk taking questionnaire, which measured how likely they were to take part in various risky acts over the months ahead—smoking marijuana, playing drinking games, having unprotected sex, procrastinating, and so forth. The results, published on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*, were essentially the same as before. Those who had watched the fast-paced version of *Baraka* expected to take more risks in the near future. Those who watched a medium-paced version were more risk averse, and those who watch the slowest version were the least likely to do dangerous things. What's more, those who were thinking rapidly expected fewer negative consequences from their actions.

Why would this be? Well, one idea is that fast thinking signals a need for urgent action of some kind, and this in turn encourages boldness and discourages slow contemplation. In other words, there is no time for slowly weighing possible untoward consequences when what's really needed is action. Or so the mind sees it.

These studies suggest that thought speed is a fundamental shaper of human feelings and actions, and that this may have important practical implications. If the pace of modern life is indeed is getting faster and faster—or even if we just perceive it that way—such rapid stimulation could lead to increased risk taking, for better or worse, everywhere from the military to the workplace to the family. For example, the scientists note, parents and policymakers worry about the erotic and violent content of movies and video games, when perhaps they should worry more about the pace and tempo—a new kind of "raciness" for the 21st century.

Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought*, is available in bookstores. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *Scientific American Mind* and in *The Huffington Post.*