

Motivational Seeker: Bargh Says the Pursuit of Goals Is Often Unconscious

June 23, 2004



Bargh

Have you ever noticed yourself driving slower on the freeway after spending time with your elderly parents? Or realized that you have been more productive at work ever since you put that picture of your spouse on your desk?

Chances are you haven't. But according to APS Fellow and Charter Member John Bargh, these very things happen, and his research into nonconscious goal pursuit can prove it.

Bargh, a professor of psychology at Yale University, discussed his findings on automatic social perception and nonconscious goal pursuit at the National Institutes of Health Neuroscience Center as part of NIH's continuing "Behavioral and Social Sciences Seminar Series."

The former New York University professor has recently focused his research on the automatic link between social perception and social behavior, as well as the automatic activation of interaction goals.

Bargh's talk centered on both areas, and introduced research conducted by himself and former students and colleagues at NYU, where he taught for 22 years prior to his move to New Haven.

Bargh took the podium and posed the question that shaped the scope of his research: "How much free will do we really exercise?" Bargh argued that we have less free will than we think.

In the first part of his talk, Bargh discussed the association of stereotypes and perception. "Social perception is not only about perceiving physical movements. It has a lot to do with understanding the behavior of people," Bargh said. "What you perceive is how you behave."

In order to probe that concept, Bargh and his collaborators used priming manipulations to activate single-trait perceptions in test subjects. The question being, when traits are activated in a nonconscious manner, will the content be carried on and influence behavior?

After discovering that this was true when single-trait behavior was activated, Bargh wanted to investigate if the same findings would hold up when multiple traits were primed. To do this, he used stereotypes to activate the multiple traits in test subjects.

“We knew that stereotypes are assemblages of multiple traits,” Bargh said. “This is how people go beyond the information given and assume things about members of a social group that they didn’t witness.”

The stereotype of the elderly as slow and weak was used in Bargh’s experiment that would attempt to confirm his earlier question about nonconscious behavior. In this test, subjects were primed by a language test that activated a stereotype of the elderly, without mentioning slowness or weakness. The researchers then timed subjects in their walk to the elevator following the test. Those primed with traits of the elderly walked slower than those in the control group. As Bargh had predicted, the test subjects activated the stereotype by unconsciously thinking about it, not witnessing it.

Relatedly, Bargh also discussed his research on nonconscious pursuit of interpersonal goals associated with relationship partners, which is the topic of a paper he recently co-authored with Gráinne Fitzsimons in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

“We tried to see whether you can produce the same kind of effects that classic goal pursuit research has shown with nonconscious goal pursuit, by triggering motives in people without knowing you have done so,” Bargh said.

He explained that the theory of nonconscious goal pursuit is linked to automatic association.

“What kind of goals do you have with individuals you know?” Bargh asked. “If you tend to have the same kind of goals whenever you’re with that person, the sight of that person is enough to trigger that goal. Once activated, motivation guides behavior towards the goal, without your realizing it.

“We are trying to look at the extent to which significant others in your life are triggers for motivation,” Bargh said. He cited a test conducted at NYU which showed that of the 55 percent of students who said they had a goal of making their mothers proud, most had the goal of achievement when primed with mom-related material. Those who did not have the goal of pleasing mom did not have a goal of achievement.

Bargh explained that this also works for co-workers (although he joked that instead of achievement, most people have the goal of competition in such instances) and spouses. “We have photographs and representations of them,” he said. “Just thinking about these people causes these goals to become more active.”

So if you always wanted to please Mom, break out that dusty, old picture in your basement and bring it into work. You just might see your productivity increase without even realizing it.