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Open Minded

Searching for Truth about the Unconscious Mind

By: Ben R. Newell, David R. Shanks

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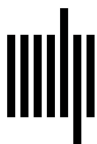
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Preface

This book brings together two compelling ideas. The first is that behavioral scientists as well as public discourse place far more emphasis on the unconscious mind than is warranted by the evidence. The second is that science is going through a turbulent period of crisis and reappraisal, brought on by the realization that many of its methods and practices are indefensible. We describe the acute connection between these ideas and examine the ways in which poor scientific practices have supported pervasive but ultimately erroneous claims about the unconscious mind. Contrary to popular beliefs in the powers of the unconscious, we show that overwhelmingly people are conscious—in the sense of being aware—of the reasons underlying their behavior. This perspective provides a counter to claims gaining ever stronger traction in public debate about the ubiquity of unconscious influences on people's behavior. We hope that the book prompts a wider discussion in society about how we understand the mind.

* * *

The ideas in this book have grown out of many conversations over the twenty years that we have known each other. We started working together when Ben began his postdoctoral fellowship in David's lab at University College London (UCL) in 2001. We shared a fascination with the idea that behavior could be influenced by information that was entirely outside people's awareness. This idea has gained in popularity over the intervening two decades, despite increasingly shaky scientific foundations. Our frustration with this state of affairs is what led us to write this book. It is impossible to acknowledge all of the people who have influenced our thinking about these issues, so we will not attempt to name them for fear of missing

some. Special thanks, however, are due to experts who generously gave up their time to read drafts of chapters: Jan De Houwer, Zoltan Dienes, Chris Donkin, Tom Hardwicke, Alice Mason, Simone Malejka, Craig McKenzie, Magda Osman, Aba Szollosi, Miguel Vadillo, and Eric-Jan Wagenmakers. Their comments were immensely helpful. Ben acknowledges the Australian Research Council for funding support, and the UNSW School of Psychology for providing a perfect working environment. David is grateful to the UK Economic and Social Research Council for grant support over many years, as well as to UCL for its extraordinary support for research in the behavioral and brain sciences. We also thank the editorial team at the MIT Press for their help throughout the publication process.

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