

# Mindlessness and Automaticity

*Kathy Kellermann*

*ComCon Kathy Kellermann Communication Consulting*

*Robert M. McCann*

*University of Southern California*

Mindlessness is the automatic (nonconscious) management of behavior. Mindless behavior is studied under many varied and related names: mindlessness, → automaticity, tacit knowledge, implicit learning, implicit cognition, nonconscious processing and, as one recent popular book puts it, “blink” (Langer 1978; Lewicki 1986; Reber 1993; Bargh & Ferguson 2000; Gladwell 2005; Litman & Reber 2005). Langer introduced mindlessness into social psychology nearly three decades ago (Langer 1978). As editor of *Communication Monographs*, Judee Burgoon devoted a five-article “Chautauqua” to the concept in 1992 (see, e.g., Kellermann 1992).

## MINDLESS AND TACITLY LEARNED BEHAVIOR

*Mindless behavior* is automated because it is familiar and overlearned; the behavior no longer needs conscious monitoring. Kellermann (1992) argued that communication is inherently strategic and mostly automatic due to familiar and overlearned → schemas and → scripts guiding → message production and comprehension. Such overlearned and mindless behavior can be beneficial or hurtful. For example, intimate partners may fall into mindless, habitual patterns of disagreement or withdrawal in which they fail to consider even the simplest alternative pathways toward resolving their interpersonal issues. These partners also might develop a morning greeting ritual that starts each day on a positive note (→ Marital Communication). Increasing mindfulness is studied as an antidote to communication problems arising from mindless behavior (Burgoon et al. 2000).

Unlike mindless behavior, which requires prior conscious monitoring, *tacitly learned behavior* is acquired without ever being consciously mediated. Such automatic behavior is acquired implicitly and used unconsciously (Lewicki 1986; Reber 1993). Natural language, interpersonal perceptions, and nonverbal behaviors are believed to be mostly acquired and used implicitly (→ Nonverbal Communication and Culture; Rhetoric, Nonverbal). Many aspects of complex language structures are unconscious and best learned implicitly rather than explicitly. The human ability to produce previously unheard-of lexical patterns such as sentences, or a child’s quick mastery and use of untaught or unlearned grammatical rules (without even the adult being able to explain these rules), are illustrations of tacit learning in human communication (see, for review, Lewicki 1986; Kellermann 1992; Reber 1993; → Linguistics; Language Acquisition in Childhood).

## RELEVANCE OF AUTOMATICITY FOR SOCIAL BEHAVIORS

Mindless and tacit links exist between → *social perceptions* and *social behaviors*. A definitive connection exists between → stereotype activation and subsequent behavior in accordance

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with the content of that stereotype (e.g., McCann et al. 2005). For example, Bargh and associates (1996) explored the hypothesis that “what you perceive is how you behave,” by using priming mechanisms (elderly stereotypes such as wrinkle, sentimental, Florida) to activate single and multiple trait perceptions in elderly test subjects. Participants primed with the elderly-related material walked more slowly down the hallway after leaving the experiment, thus activating the stereotype by unconsciously thinking about it. Initial automatic evaluations of an individual, which could be based on age, gender, or even choice in hairstyle or clothing, can have far-reaching implications for future interactions with that individual due to a positive or negative evaluation of their behavior (Hill et al. 1990; Ferguson & Bargh 2004). Studies have extended work on nonconscious activation to cultural ideologies, power differentials, and corruption.

*Situations* alone can even be enough to automatically activate group norms and subsequent group evaluations (including ingroup biases) and behaviors. Decades of → media effects studies explore how viewing a film with violence or aggression can automatically activate tendencies to behave in the same manner as represented on the screen, and automated nonverbal and verbal mimicry have been tied to outcomes as diverse as persuasibility, conflict resolution, and group harmony.

### **CONSEQUENCES FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

Considerations of mindlessness, tacitness, and automaticity can profoundly affect the way communication scholars approach areas of inquiry. Numerous interpersonal theories invoke various types of automatic mechanisms. Action assembly theory maintains that lower-level actions are automatically assembled, allowing a role for mindful behavior at higher levels (Greene 1997; → Action Assembly Theory). Research on memory organization packets (MOPs) argues that conversations between strangers are mostly mindless, while remaining flexible and adaptable (Kellermann 1995). Berger’s planning research places a fundamental role on the internal workings of individuals’ cognitive systems during social interaction (Berger 1997). Some persuasion theories assume automaticity (e.g., conditioning theories), some assume mindfulness (e.g., cognitive dissonance), and some allow for both (e.g., → Elaboration Likelihood Model).

Assumptions about tacit and/or mindful processing affect what phenomena are studied and the perspective taken on what is studied. For example, conscious efforts to try to interfere with implicit processes for the acquisition of linguistic rules have been found to decrease, rather than increase, the quantity of what is learned (Reber 1993). The implications of this finding are not only that complex structures such as languages are best learned implicitly rather than explicitly, but also that conscious regulation of the resultant highly regulated linguistic behavior is difficult. Implicitly learned linguistic rules unconsciously prime particular linguistic behaviors.

In recent years, some researchers have shifted focus from mindlessness to mindfulness, outlining health, business, education, and communication improvements due to mindful behavior (Burgoon et al. 2000; Langer & Moldoveanu 2000). By contrast, Gladwell (2005) argues for the power of thinking without thinking in everything from social perception to policing, discussing problems of mindful interference in automatic processes. Automatic

behavior can be powerful or problematic, and present-day researchers are teasing out the conditions driving each.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Action Assembly Theory ▶ Automaticity ▶ Elaboration Likelihood Model  
▶ Language Acquisition in Childhood ▶ Linguistics ▶ Marital Communication ▶ Media Effects  
▶ Message Production ▶ Nonverbal Communication and Culture ▶ Rhetoric, Nonverbal  
▶ Schemas ▶ Scripts ▶ Social Perception ▶ Stereotypes

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