YOGA RESEARCH
The Yoga Research Society Newsletter Number 62 January-June, 2017

The Modular Mind

excerpted from the book,
"Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite"
by Robert Kurzban, Ph.D.

Modularity implies that there isn't one, unified "self" in your head, that there isn't a "real" "you" in there somewhere. The intuition that there is might be useful for various purposes, but if modularity is right, then this intuition is wrong.

So what?

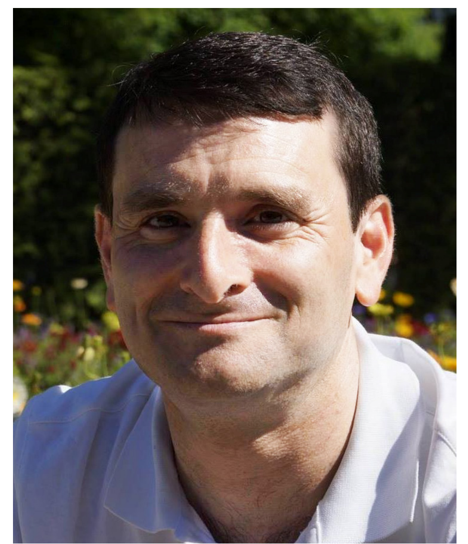
Well, modularity makes certain phenomena that are otherwise very puzzling easy to understand.

How *can* "a person" simultaneously know and not know something?

Without modularity, this question does seem to be quite a pickle. We all have the sense that people are sometimes "deceiving themselves," but what can this mean? The notion of deception seems to require something--usually, someone--doing some deceiving, and something being deceived. The problem in *self*-deception is to identify what is doing the deceiving and what is being deceived. Is the mind deceiving the mind? How can that be? A paradox.

It's going to turn out that "self-deception" is actually two different phenomena that get lumped together. We'll look at them one at a time. Let's start with an example about me.

I generally believe I'm a pretty good instructor, certainly no worse than average. Apparently, many of my colleagues have similar beliefs about their own skills in the classroom. In a widely quoted passage, K. Patricia Cross wrote that "faculty members reveal what may as well be starkly labeled self-satisfaction. An amazing 94% rate themselves as above-average teachers, and 68% rank themselves in the top quarter on teaching performance.



It is obviously impossible that 94% of college instructors are above average...

Because it is obviously impossible that 94% of college instructors are above average, many of us--including, quite possibly, me--must be wrong.

Similar effects have been found in other areas, such as traits, like fairness, and abilities, such as driving.

What about cases in which there's a genuinely correct answer? Consider a recent study in which participants were shown pictures of a number of faces, including one picture of themselves, along with a set of pictures of themselves morphed with highly attractive (and unattractive) features that made them look more (or less) attractive. Participants frequently identified one of the faces morphed with the highly attractive features--the better-looking face--as their own.

Cases like this are often called "self-deception"...We *really* know what we look like, but we're *telling ourselves* that we're more attractive than we really are.

Modularity clarifies things. What's happening is that a particular representation in a particular module is what I call *strategically wrong*.

Being strategically wrong can be an advantage, for example, because of the possibility of persuasion: *If everyone else had the same (overly positive) representation of you, your traits, abilities, and likely future--then you would be better off.* The idea here...is that having a positive representation in your head, because of the way that representation affects your own behavior, might persuade others that the strategically false thing in your head is actually true, making you better off.

Probably no one has done more to advance our understanding of the ways in which people are strategically wrong than Shelley Taylor and her colleagues in a body of research looking at "positive illusions." In a seminal paper in the late eighties, Taylor and Jonathan Brown argued that, in contrast to conventional

Yoga Research Society
341 Fitzwater Street
Philadelphia, PA 19147

phone: 215-592-9642
email: YRS@YogaResearchSociety.com
website: www.YogaResearchSociety.com

YOGA RESEARCH
back issues are $3 each.

wisdom, accuracy wasn't always such a good thing. They presented evidence that people (1) think they have more favorable traits than would be realistic, (2) think they have more control over what will occur than they do, and (3) are more optimistic about the future than facts justify.

We tend to be strategically wrong about the very effects that we have on the world. People are more likely to think that they caused an outcome if it was positive rather than negative.

Within the limits of credulity, it's advantageous to persuade others that you have more control over events than you really do. To take a literary example, recall Mark Twain's Hank Morgan in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, who persuades King Arthur that he caused an eclipse, leading the king to elevate him to great power and influence.

The third and final category of positive illusions is unjustifiable optimism. People think that good things (like success in their career) will happen to them, and bad things (like car accidents) will not, in comparison to the average. Statistically, this can't be right.

Optimism is, from the point of view of being an appealing social partner, a pretty good thing. If I can *persuade* you that I think good things will happen to me--then I'm a good bet as a friend, ally or mate. Being strategically optimistic seems like an eminently reasonable strategy.

To the extent that optimism guides effort and so on, creatures that are good at predicting what's going to happen and acting on those predictions appropriately are, everything else being equal, going to do better than overly optimistic people...the claim that being overly optimistic is necessary to motivate doing risky, high-payoff things doesn't make any sense--being correctly optimistic will do this as well and, in fact, even better.

Dr. Robert Kurzban
will present
"The Hypocritical Human Mind"
at MEDICAL YOGA 2017.

MEDICAL YOGA 2017

Sunday - May 7th

THE PRACTICAL YOGIC MIND

DR. ROBERT KURZBAN
THE HYPOCRITICAL HUMAN MIND

11 AM to 4 PM

at Thomas Jefferson University, Dorrance Hamilton Building
1001 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107

Vegetarian Buffet Lunch included
YRS Member Rates

REGISTER NOW!

in person: Garland of Letters Bookstore
by phone: 215-592-9642
or online: YogaResearchSociety.com