


Claims by behavioural economists that our unconscious mind rules our behaviour lack sufficient scientific evidence

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*Psychologists and behavioural economists have been successfully arguing that the unconscious, intuitive part of the mind, as opposed to our more considered, analytical side, is what drives our behaviour. While the story sounds plausible, the evidence is worryingly unconvincing, writes **Magda Osman**. You can also listen [Wise Choices](#), a recent public lecture at the LSE featuring Magda.*



Recent popular science books and documentaries such as the BBC's Horizon programme '[How you really make decisions](#)' argue that our unconscious rules, by making our choices. Is this true?

Several influential thinkers; such as Daniel Kahneman, Dan Ariely, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, argue that the reason we fail to lose weight or to reduce our alcohol consumption, pay for a gym membership that we never use, or break laws such as driving while on the phone is because we have two minds; one intuitive (unconscious) and the other which is analytical (conscious). The one that rules the roost is the intuitive one, which often makes us fail to do the things we should do (eat less, exercise more) but in some instances can help us make wise choices (figuring out which is the right house to buy).

But why does our unconscious mind rules us most of the time? The reason given is that our day to day activities demands a lot from our memory, attention, perception and general thinking activities. We just don't have time to think about everything we need to do in great detail, which is what our analytic mind does. Instead, we default to our intuitive mind which offers up speedy decisions that we often feel are right because they are connected to our emotions.

It's a nice story and it sounds plausible, but the evidence to back it up is worryingly unconvincing. A case in point is a [study by Dijksterhuis and colleagues](#), published in 2006 in the prestigious journal *Science*. This study was taken as a shining example of the kinds of two-minds view that many researchers like to promote. The study is very neat. People were given a decision problem. They had to pick the best car from four options. They had to think about the options based on several criteria (e.g., cost, fuel consumption). Half the group considered the options based on only 4 criteria, and the others had to consider 12 criteria for each option. The researchers were able to show that, when it came to the complex case in which the options were evaluated according to 12 criteria, if people used their analytic thinking by concentrating for four minutes, fewer people picked the best option than if they didn't think about the options at all and let their intuitive mind do the work for them.

The study created a storm. It basically suggested that if you let your unconscious mind wander it would help you make a better decision for complicated problems than if you spent time thinking about the problem. The down side to this kind of finding is that scientists want to know how reliable it is. If it could be replicated then it would be very significant. To date, in twelve independent labs, none have been able to replicate the finding that Dijksterhuis and colleagues reported.

Big dramatic claims that our unconscious mind rules our behaviour attract headlines. The idea that there is a part of our mind that we don't know about that is pulling the strings is alarming, but intriguing to us. It's one of the most significant ideas to come out of psychology, but it is one of the hardest to actually demonstrate scientifically. As I discuss in my book, *Future-minded: The psychology of agency and control*, there still isn't reliable evidence for it, much as popular science books will tell you otherwise.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Homepage image credit: [Karl-](#)

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