**Subliminal Processing**

Can we be affected by stimuli that are below our absolute threshold? In a way, yes, because absolute threshold is the threshold that we can detect a stimulus 50% of the time. There will be times when we can detect stimuli below that threshold.

Research about subliminal processing:

1. One experiment subliminally flashed either emotionally positive scenes (kittens, a romantic couple) or negative scenes (werewolf, dead body) an instant before subjects viewed slides of people (Krosnick et al., 1992). Although the participants consciously perceived only a flash of light, they gave more positive ratings to people whose photos had been associated with positive scenes.
2. Another study: Ss primed with “rude” or “polite” words. DV was how many people would interrupt an experimenter to turn in a paper. 67% in the rude condition did; 38% in the control condition (no priming); 16% in the polite condition.
3. Word search primed achievement words like succeed and strive. Control Ss got no priming. Experimental group outperformed control group on verbal tasks, even though they weren’t aware of the priming.
4. Bargh & Chartrand—study shows how we can be in a certain mood and not know why. Four groups were in a reaction-time task. Group 1 was primed with a strongly positive attitude (music, friends). Group 2 got mildly positive attitude (clown, parade). Group 3 got mildly negative attitude (Monday, worm) and group 4 got strongly negative attitudes (cancer, cockroach). Then they did mood measures. Mood went up as a direct function of priming.

Mood may be controlled by automatic processes that we’re not aware of. These moods can then influence what we think about something (study 1 about rating people based on mood).

1. A final study looked at patients recovering from surgery. They found that if the doctor said, “How well you recover depends on you” or something positive, the patients recover a lot faster.

What about subliminal persuasion? Can marketers and advertisers manipulate us with “hidden persuasion?” Example: Playing Christmas music may make you buy more. Most people believe that we CAN be subliminally persuaded. Since the 1950s people have believed in subliminal persuasion (brainwashing and hypnotic suggestion captured the public’s imagination after the film *The Manchurian Candidate* came out). The truth is, though, that almost all research psychologists don’t believe in subliminal persuasion. The lab research is a *subtle, fleeting effect.* You can prime a thirsty person with an ad for a coke and thus make the ad more persuasive, but reports that subliminal messages have a powerful, enduring effect on behavior are false. Thus, it’s a waste of money to buy self-help subliminal CDs to help you stop smoking, lose weight, etc. Greenwald et al. (1991) randomly assigned college students to listen daily for 5 weeks to subliminal tapes claiming to improve either self-esteem or memory. On half the tapes, they switched the labels so that the self-esteem group actually got the memory tape and vice-versa. The tapes had NO EFFECT, but the subjects believed that they did. For instance, the group who got the self-esteem tape but thought they were getting the memory tape thought that their memory had improved and vice-versa.

Greenwald has conducted 16 double-blind experiments evaluating subliminal self-help tapes. His results were conclusive: Not one had any therapeutic effect. Any “effect” is due to the placebo effect.