

Subliminal Messages: Changes for the Better?

Some sentences that seem silly on the surface may have surprising effects when they are perceived unconsciously. Not surprisingly, the notion is controversial.

By BRUCE BOWER

There are five words that, if used properly, can tap into powerful unconscious wishes shared by many adults, provoke several types of improvement in behavior and possibly enhance the effects of psychotherapy, according to psychologist Lloyd H. Silverman of New York University. Which words? MOMMY AND I ARE ONE.

Before you say "Oh brother" and dismiss the contention as absurd, or excitedly incorporate the sentence into your mantra, consider this: Silverman points out in the December 1985 *AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST* that the positive impact of MOMMY AND I ARE ONE on behavior has been documented by a number of researchers for nearly 20 years, but only when the words are flashed on a screen so quickly that they are registered "subliminally," below the threshold of consciousness. The results of these studies have been encouraging enough to stimulate further investigations, although scientific methods and interpretations have, from the start, stoked heated debates.

In an attempt to generate light from this heat, a psychologist has done an unpublished statistical analysis and comparison of all such studies conducted to date and found reliable and significant behavioral changes occurring. In 68 studies (representing 2443 subjects) employing MOMMY AND I ARE ONE, Richard A. Hardaway of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles uncovered clear-cut but modest behavioral improvements for people exposed subliminally to the message.

Yet research on subliminal "activators" of behavior has attracted a number of criticisms, including charges that more diverse samples must be studied before the data can be interpreted, that subliminal sentences often are not shown in a critical segment of subjects' visual fields and that a brief message cannot possibly have the same unconscious effect on all individuals.

"Some people think this whole notion is flaky," says psychologist Albert L. Porterfield of Oberlin (Ohio) College. "This is an extraordinary and highly controversial area, and there is a lot of polarization among researchers."

Nevertheless, Silverman says that at least 40 groups of subjects in various laboratories have shown behavior improvements after exposure to selected subliminal messages, the most common being MOMMY AND I ARE ONE. This phrase is important, he says, because there is a consensus—at least among psychoanalysts—that many adults are motivated by unconscious wishes for a state of oneness or fusion with another person. These wishes have been termed "symbiotic" by some analysts and are believed to originate early in childhood when the mother is experienced as comforting, protective and nurturing. When oneness or merging fantasies are stirred up, he asserts, behavior can temporarily improve if at the same time a sense of self is preserved.

Silverman proposes that the patient-therapist relationship during psychotherapy, often cited as a major factor in the success of different forms of treatment, owes its effectiveness partly to the activation of oneness or merging fantasies. A therapist's manner or technique may inadvertently set off these fantasies, creating unconscious associations between the qualities of the "good mother" and the "good therapist."

Psychotherapy patients in controlled studies, suggests Silverman, should be exposed to the subliminal MOMMY AND I ARE ONE message over the course of their treatment and compared with patients receiving no message or other stimuli. Oneness and merging fantasies in these subjects could be measured after treatment ends, he says, possibly through reports of dream content and responses to psychological tests such as the Rorschach inkblots.

When Silverman began to study the effects of subliminally presented sentences in the late 1960s, his primary aim was to test various psychoanalytic theories in the laboratory. Schizophrenic patients, for example, who were thought to have unconscious conflicts related to aggressive drives, were subliminally presented with words such as LION DESTROYS MAN or shown provocative pictures—say, of a charging lion or a nude woman. Increases in schizophrenic symptoms, typically lasting several minutes, were then charted.

Other studies examined the psychoanalytic concept of the Oedipus complex. Most involved dart-throwing competitions among college men before and after subliminal exposure to messages thought to gratify or frustrate unconscious fantasies of triumphing over their fathers. The effects on performance of BEATING DAD IS OKAY, BEATING DAD IS WRONG and similar sentences were observed.

But the presumed positive effects of MOMMY AND I ARE ONE on schizophrenics and people undergoing various psychological treatments have undergone the most scrutiny. The technique employed by researchers is illustrated in a 1969 investigation by Silverman and his colleagues. Psychological tests were given to 24 schizophrenic men in order to measure "thought disorder" (illogical reasoning, confused recall and peculiar speech) and "nonverbal pathology" (inappropriate smiling or laughing, peculiar gestures and speech blocking). Each subject then looked into the eyepiece of a tachistoscope and received several 4-millisecond exposures to one of three stimuli: MOMMY AND I ARE ONE accompanied by a picture of a man and woman merged at the shoulders like Siamese twins; PEOPLE ARE THINKING accompanied by a picture of two men deep in contemplation; or DESTROY MOTHER accompanied by a picture of a man attacking a woman with a knife. More re-

cent studies have dispensed with the pictures and use words only.

Compared with the negligible effects of the control message (PEOPLE ARE THINKING), the aggressive stimulus (DESTROY MOTHER) markedly intensified thought disorder and nonverbal pathology for about 15 minutes. The "symbiotic" message, however, had more complicated results. It significantly eased symptoms, again for about 15 minutes, but only among "differentiated" schizophrenics who previously were able to report clear differences between their own personalities and that of an older woman (shown to them in a picture) intended as a mother figure. This indicates, says Silverman, that a relatively strong sense of personal identity—a sense of self—is needed if MOMMY AND I ARE ONE is to improve behavior.

He adds that the psychologically harmful effects of many cults demonstrate what can happen when the experience of oneness is pumped up while the sense of self is deflated.

Another piece of qualifying evidence, he notes, indicates that the subliminal activation of oneness fantasies requires a person to have used the word "mommy" in early childhood. A recent study carried out in the southern United States, where the word "mama" is typically used by children, found no positive effects for MOMMY AND I ARE ONE on schizophrenic men. Likewise, the stimulus MOTHER AND I ARE ONE has been found to have no effect on subjects who respond to the "mommy" message.

Researchers have expanded the use of MOMMY AND I ARE ONE to groups of people attempting to change problem behaviors. Their reasoning is that larger "doses" of the stimulus will have longer-lived effects. A 1980 study, for example, examined smokers trying to kick the habit through behavior modification. Subjects were seen for 12 therapy sessions. For some, regular treatment was augmented by subliminal MOMMY AND I ARE ONE messages; the rest were exposed to a neutral stimulus. Experimenters did not know which message subjects were shown. One month after treatment ended, two-thirds of the MOMMY AND I ARE ONE group were still abstainers, compared with 13 percent of the controls.

The strength of this subliminal message also has been observed, says Silverman, among people in assertiveness training classes, adolescents receiving psychotherapy, college students in group therapy, alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous counseling and people undergoing behavior modification for insect phobias and overeating.

Women respond to MOMMY AND I ARE ONE less consistently than men do, explains Silverman, possibly because women have more difficulty "differen-

tiating" themselves from their mothers. Unconscious oneness fantasies involving people other than "mommy" may better promote adaptive behavior among women, he maintains. One study, for instance, has found that female schizophrenics respond positively to the subliminal presentation of DADDY AND I ARE ONE.

Silverman acknowledges, however, that for every three reports of positive effects for MOMMY AND I ARE ONE on behavior, one study comes up with no differences between experimental and control groups. For example, in the November 1985 JOURNAL OF ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY, Porterfield and Stephen L. Golding of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign describe a case in which subliminal messages had insignif-

icant effects. The researchers exposed 30 schizophrenic men to an aggressive (TIGER EATS PERSON), merging (MOMMY AND I ARE ONE) and control stimulus made up of nonsense words. None of the subliminal messages resulted in substantial changes in three broad measures of disordered thinking.

Although schizophrenic thought processes were not altered by subliminal messages in this study, there are enough positive findings by other investigators to indicate that "something is going on," says Porterfield. "I don't know what causes the observed effects, but I think it's premature to say it's a result of deep unconscious fantasies."

There is no way to X-ray the brain for fantasies stirred up by subliminal messages, admits Silverman, "but you have to capture the meaning of the data in

Mommy and I Are Gone

For almost two years, psychologist Thomas H. Budzynski of Behavioral Medicine Associates in Englewood, Colo., has conducted stress reduction seminars for managers at the federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM) branch in Denver. But because of his use of subliminal messages such as MOMMY AND I ARE ONE and a recent newspaper article highlighting his techniques, the feds have backed away from Budzynski.

"OPM officials told me [in early February] that they don't want me to run any seminars for them until the controversy caused by the newspaper article dies down," says Budzynski. "I don't know whether they'll eventually ask me to come back."

If Budzynski does return to the federal fold, his seminar will not be the same. "We have ordered that there be no further use of subliminal messages with federal employees," says James Lafferty, a spokesperson for OPM in Washington, D.C. "[OPM Director Constance] Horner felt this was an unorthodox approach and not appropriate." All OPM management training programs, he adds, are being reviewed.

The new orders were set in motion by a front-page article in the Jan. 24 Wall Street Journal titled "Uncle Sam Believes Message About Mom Helps Calm Nerves." The story opens with a description of Budzynski's subliminal technique as applied to OPM managers. A typical session begins with participants listening to the tape-recorded sound of a mountain stream and being told to breathe deeply and relax. Then a number of subliminal messages emanate from the tape, including MOMMY AND I ARE ONE, I AM CALM and I DESERVE TO FEEL GOOD. Sometimes the messages are subliminally flashed on a

television screen.

What the article did not make clear, says Budzynski, is that subliminal relaxation took up about five minutes of his two-hour seminars. The rest of the time was devoted to more traditional relaxation methods, such as breathing techniques and stretching exercises. "I gave people a sample of different approaches, and whatever they found useful they could use on their own," he notes. Those who wanted to could purchase a cassette with the subliminal messages.

Moreover, subliminal sessions were an optional part of the seminars and interested participants were told in advance what was going on and the theory behind it, says David Allen, an OPM program manager in Denver. "Budzynski gave me a script of the subliminal messages and I would show them beforehand to people who wanted to know what they were," he explains. Allen and four other program managers in Denver organize two-week management seminars for government workers. Several psychologists have been hired to demonstrate relaxation techniques as part of the seminars, says Allen, but Budzynski has been the only one to offer the subliminal approach.

On surveys sent to participants four months after completion of the seminars, "we've had many positive comments about Budzynski and the other psychologists," says Allen. "This situation is like a tempest in a teapot."

Budzynski says he will continue to use subliminal relaxation methods as an option with his private clients. He cites Lloyd Silverman's research as a major influence on his approach, but acknowledges that studies of tape-recorded subliminal messages have yet to be performed.

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some way, and I haven't heard any alternative theories."

With or without a plausible theory, responds Hardaway, the data leave much room for improvement. Too few women have been tested to reliably demonstrate that they respond differently than men to MOMMY AND I ARE ONE, he says. "Differentiation from mother" has been tested in only three samples, he adds, not enough to conclude that this variable is important. And the effect of large doses of subliminal exposure has barely been explored. Most subjects, he notes, are exposed to MOMMY AND I ARE ONE for a total of only 16 to 32 milliseconds; in one study, individuals who saw the message 192 times over several weeks still received a combined exposure of less than eight-tenths of a second.

Another problem may lie in the way subliminal messages are presented. Donald Spence and his colleagues at Rutgers University Medical School in New Brunswick, N.J., recently found that stimuli presented outside a small area located at the center of a subject's visual field are not "seen" as well as stimuli flashed in the central area. The researchers subliminally exposed college students to real and nonsense words, then measured the time it took them to identify a new word as real or made up. When compared with the response times of students not shown subliminal words, the response times of those given subliminal exposures in the critical part of the visual field were markedly faster; messages presented outside the "critical window" slowed response times. The accuracy of responses was about the same for all students.

"In many subliminal studies," says Spence, "we believe stimuli have been presented outside the 'critical window.' I'd be interested in the outcome of testing MOMMY AND I ARE ONE with psychotherapy patients, but you can't assume that what is on a card or a screen gets into a subject's visual cortex." Even if it does, Spence notes that some people are frightened by the idea of merging and may not respond well to heightened feelings of closeness to a therapist.

Some critics go farther. "There is much evidence for the existence of subliminal perceptions outside of consciousness," says psychologist Howard Shevrin of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "But the application of subliminal methods to change people or to foster psychotherapy is entirely premature. Here the evidence is quite thin and controversial." The first priority of Silverman and other proponents of subliminal behavior change, he says, should be to fill in holes in the data, such as those noted by Hardaway.

According to Shevrin, subliminal tech-

niques offer a way to better understand behavior, not change it. He and his colleagues, for example, have identified, through interviews and psychological tests, words that are emotionally significant to individuals seeking treatment for grief reactions or phobias. Subliminal presentation of an appropriate word to a subject results in a distinctive brain wave pattern. Brain wave responses to the same word after treatment is completed may indicate whether a full recovery has occurred, says Shevrin.

But this is a far cry, he contends, from claims that unconscious fantasies can be tapped with the same techniques. Even worse, adds Shevrin, are the bold claims about subliminal manipulators of behavior that have been made without any attempt at scientific examination. An infamous example occurred in 1957: The words DRINK COKE and EAT POPCORN were allegedly superimposed on a movie screen so faintly that the audience was not consciously aware of their presence, resulting in what a public relations executive claimed were boom sales at the concession counter. Today, advertisements trumpet the power of tape-recorded subliminal messages to help purchasers achieve such aims as losing weight, reading faster, improving memory skills and even triggering the erotic desires of unwitting companions.

Silverman, on the other hand, is engaged in ethical but misguided research, says Shevrin, who maintains that the "symbiotic" explanation for the effects of MOMMY AND I ARE ONE is flawed. The early relationship and degree of closeness to one's mother is certainly important, he says, but the words and feelings attributed to that experience vary from person to person. "To assume a mass-produced phrase will mean the same thing unconsciously to all people does not fit with psychoanalytic theory," maintains Shevrin.

"Any phrase can have varying meanings, but a phrase can also have a core meaning," answers Silverman. "The word 'mommy' seems to capture for most people the 'good mother' of childhood. Positive associations are conjured up, whether a person actually had a good mother or not."

Psychologist David Wolitzky of New York University agrees. "Silverman and other researchers have gone to great lengths to check out which messages work [subliminally] and which don't," he says. "Of course, all the answers are never in. It's difficult to assess what happens from the time a stimulus is presented subliminally to the response of a subject [to the stimulus]."

Yet the accumulated studies of the past two decades cannot be dismissed, contends Hardaway. "According to my analysis," he says, "people who argue that this research is unreliable don't have a leg to stand on. Still, it's in its infancy." □

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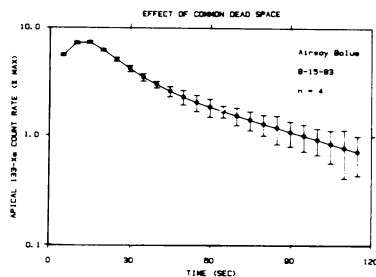
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