An essay on this year’s World Economic Forum\(^1\) that took place in Switzerland made me aware of Chater’s new book, The Mind is Flat\(^2\). Nick Chater is a sociology professor in London. He is quite a critic of psychologists, who still have not gotten any closer to examining subconsciousness than they were during Freud’s time. Despite ever better neuronal examination methods.

Chater’s book is particularly fascinating to me because it lists many neuro-logical examinations and behavioral experiments that suggest a different mechanism behind brain functions, rather than that of a subconsciousness playing a magician-like role. This fits in nicely with various BrainCandies that find new explanations for behavior. For example the fact that emotions can only be interpreted in context (BrainCandy 35/36).

If these subconscious programs and beliefs / principles existed, then we would have found them experimentally, because the idea is based on a causal relationship between subconsciousness and 'unconscious' behavior.

I am basically summarizing his key arguments. As a first warning, so to speak, when we again fully automatically ponder over the ‘deep unconscious’ within our target group.

His starting point is that we humans do not have any access to the work processes taking place in the brain, so we cannot examine ourselves while thinking. We do not know what's happening inside the brain, we just get the final result of the whole 'data processing'. Where we think we might have a secure sense of how our brain is working, we are shockingly far away from the truth.

An example is the "big optical illusion". According to our self-perception, our eyes work like cameras. Because we experience our environment like a beautiful, colorful and detailed picture. In fact, our optical performance is drastically weaker than we think. If you read this page now, you have the impression that you see many things at once. But wrong. In an experiment, participants were given eye-tracking cameras and instructed to read a text on a screen. However, the text was only real right around the word just read, the rest of the page was just repetitive letter like xsxsxs sdsdsd. Nobody noticed. Our focus is incredibly tiny, so banners can easily be overlooked, even on the mobile phone. The impression of an overall picture only arises through many, unconscious, eye movements.

Have you ever heard of the famous Gorilla Experiment\(^3\)? It is displaying a fairly static ball game, where you are instructed to count the ball movements of the white team. The participants get that very well. The cost of this attention is striking though.
Very few people see the black (!) Person wearing a gorilla costume walk through the middle of the scene. At high attention, other brain areas are actively suppressed. Why? Because we are not a computer and we can only work on one task at a time, because so many different brain areas are involved at the same time, that there cannot be a trouble-free parallel process. Yes, the brain is powerful - but only when focusing on one process at a time. There seem to be small exceptions when the necessary brain areas do not overlap strongly. For example, when combining motor skills with thinking. Ironing while watching TV is ok. Talking while driving a car? Seemingly great, until we drive to a large unfamiliar intersection. Then the conversation dies down until we can orient ourselves - but the risk of accidents increases dramatically.

It is essential to understand the implications of this illusion. We have no access to the processing in our brain. And despite the limited processing options, we never actually realize that something is missing. A macabre example. In trials, larger parts of the cerebral cortex were surgically removed in epilepsy patients. The brain was then significantly limited in its ability to perform - without the patient being able to determine this for themselves! Which was actually the only good news for the patients themselves.

Multitasking gives us hints as well: We like to compare the work processes in the brain with a computer. While we consciously work on one thing, the subconscious is already processing other tasks in the background. When we try to do several things at the same time, however, there are always clear performance losses. In fact, we either become slower, produce poorer quality, or are less creative when we listen to music. But haven’t we learned that the best creative solutions will arise if we do not think of a problem? That too is an illusion. In fact, in the concentrated search for a solution, the brain quickly ends up in a dead end if the same recollection clues (previous experiences) are activated in thinking the Problem over and over again. Then it helps to get distance.
With our ability to spot patterns in all kinds of things, we are able to see faces in clouds and recognize our brands in the supermarket. In our mind’s eye, the brand appears to be very clear. But when we ask people to draw their brand, it always ends up awkward. And not because we cannot draw. We simply have much less data points in our memory than we are aware of.

I could fill pages and pages with more examples. Let’s look at Chater’s explanation of how our brain works. And that, too, fits in well with the experiences we have made over many years in market research with the search for behavioural reasons:

Chater describes the brain as the big confabulator, a sort of stand-up storyteller who fills in the gaps of one’s own memory with spontaneous inventions that are themselves considered facts. Every market researcher is aware of that fact.

But the basis is not a mythical sub-consciousness, but the richness of our individual previous experiences. We do not come into the world with a finished subconscious, no, we spend a lifetime learning in contexts and adding more and more experiences.

Even three-year-olds recognize when the behaviour of others violates standards that have just learned. These norms are culturally different, which they certainly could not be in a subconsciousness environment.

The brain operates by precedents not principles. Each new cycle of thought makes sense of the information to which we are currently attending, by reworking and transforming remnants of past related thoughts. And the result of each cycle of thought becomes, itself, raw material for future thoughts.

This system of human intelligence can be inconsistent, highly flexible, and open-ended - especially in the context of situations for which there is no prior experience. It fits very well that the famous powerful gut feeling that only works reliably when it refers to known situations. In new situations, on the other hand, letting your gut decide is more like playing the lotto.

Chater: "The hoped-for inner principles, of which our thoughts and behaviours ought to come from, are illusory.

Instead, human intelligence is based on previous experience and the ability to extend, mix and reconnect such prior experiences. The secret of intelligence is the amazing flexibility and cleverness that transforms the old into the new. But how exactly – this is still to be clarified. We are tireless improvisers, with a mental machine that continuously brings meaning from sensory input. However, we only become aware of this meaning, not the process of how it came about."
Kahneman commented on automatic thinking: "What you see is all there is". Chater certainly agrees. He would say: what you think is all there is. There is no depth in which other things happen.

OK. That was fascinating and tough stuff at the same time. And with all readers certainly contradiction has sometimes stirred. That's what I had while reading his book. I want to divide the meaning of his findings into two parts. I consider his criticism of our underlying sub-consciousness true. Experienced marketers also know that links between human principles / attitudes and behavior are weak. For example, when it comes to purchasing, price and convenience go beyond proclaimed animal welfare, sustainability or fair trade.

On the other hand, if one predicts the decisions on the basis of the individual's previous experience, then we can see a close connection.

That's why at K&A, we focus on understanding the behavior of individuals in different contexts. Because behavior is context-specific. Example: We behave socially adequate in real life - and easily become a digital Rumpelstilzchen.

At K&A, for example, we are psychodramatically interested in the contexts in which the target group comes up with the brand as the solution and less so with what comes to mind about the brand (abstract knowledge). This brings us closer to actual drivers and barriers. The context drives decisions, not the deep unconscious. Ok, I do stop now.

If Chater himself fables how the brain processes could run, then he gets himself on thin ice - and that's to be expected due the complexity. It takes a lot more research. Let's leave it like that.

He helps us by criticizing our self-perception and the hitherto fruitless search for the manifest sub-conscious mind, focusing our attention more on how our brain juggles and continues to spin with pre-experience. The good news for all of us: we are actually evolving, not captivated by subconscious powers. Sorry, if you like to use this excuse.

He overlooks, like many others, another powerful driver of behavior. We are not only influenced by previous experience, but also by the current biochemical status of our brain. Has anything just led to a release of dopamine or oxytocin?

Some people prefer foods that give them extra dopamine. A biochemical driver of nutritional behavior, not a Freudian life of the Inner Child and no expression of flawed inner values.

I will add another thought to this already long article, but make it an epilogue. You can say bye here. Only one more thing: If you want to occupy yourself with Chaters theses, I will give away three of his books, a short email answer is enough to participate.
Epilogue: New Psycho-Therapy:
The subconscious is a powerful topic in psychotherapy. There are many different approaches to how therapists with patients try to improve the onset of illusions, depression, behavioral problems, etc. through reflection and conversational counseling. Sometimes accompanied by medication.

For decades, however, the so-called behavioral therapy has proven superior compared to other therapies. The patient collects new experiences, which help him classify the interpretation of new situations in a different way. Thus, this form of therapy relies exactly on Chaters hypotheses. Even more exciting for me, however, is a particularly promising development. No, actually it is a revival. The treatment of psychoactive substances, such as LSD and psilocybin, which had been strangled in the 70s, as the substances were socially outlawed.

Now, the first clinics worldwide dare to re-attempt therapy including LSD and other psychedelics. The successes should be striking. A one-time (!) treatment often leads to lasting (!) improvement of the symptoms - right up to healing. Behavioral therapy and permanent medication cannot compete. Not even close. How is this incredible effect explained? Does our subconscious need a joint to be quiet again for a while?

No, LSD seems to be the most intense form of behavioral therapy. Why? Similar to how one-time traumatic experiences can change people forever, the LSD Trip seems to be able to produce an equally memorable, lasting positive experience that changes the evaluation of trigger situations as a new relevant experience. Incidentally, addictions such as alcohol and drug addiction should be curable. And if someone of you is interested now - please do not get anything from the Darknet, the risk is too great when approaching this without a therapist (there is a risk of horror trips).

If you are more interested in the topic, you will find the new book by well-known science journalist Michael Pollan in the links, as well as a link to a podcast with Pollan by blogger Tim Ferriss9 to save time. Exciting times for patients, therapists and manufacturers.

I am getting myself in with the new book by the neurologist Antonio Damasio now. The table of contents promises some proximity to Chater's brain development model. Stay tuned.
Sources:

2. Chater, Nick: The Mind is Flat: The Illusion of Mental Depth and The Improvised Mind, März 2018
3. The Monkey Business Illusion https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQQmdoK_ZY
4. How attention helps the brain perceive an object https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/03/190319150033.htm
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8. Pollan, Michael: Veränderne dein Bewusstsein: Was uns die neue Psychedelik-Forschung über Sucht, Depression, Todesfurcht und Transzendenz lehrt, Januar 2019
9. https://tim.blog/2018/05/06/michael-pollan-how-to-change-your-mind/

Book recommendations

by Ralph Ohnemus:

Markenerleben. A strategy for hypercompetition and information overload >order here

Markenstaunen. Winning in information overload>order here

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