

DIGIZINE  **PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

MIND OPEN

INSIGHTS IN
PSYCHOLOGY

Number 2 - Winter 2008

THE KEY TO CONSCIOUSNESS

EXTRA: VIDEO INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR LAMME

ARTICLES

AN OPERA SINGER PRACTICING SCIENCE
WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE DRINK TOO MUCH?
A PLAYFUL WAY TO PRACTICE ARITHMETIC
A SUITABLE MOOD FOR CREATIVITY
HOW INDELIBLE IS OUR EMOTIONAL MEMORY?

COLUMN

EVERYBODY WANTS TO GO TO HEAVEN, NOBODY WANTS TO DIE

Published by

 UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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Business card

Never has a novel exposed the vanity and emptiness of yuppie life more painfully than Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Its central figure, Patrick Bateman, is a serial killer who makes a fortune working at Wall Street. On the whole, he spends his money on extremely expensive fitness clubs, the most fashionable designer clothes, the trendiest restaurants, et cetera. In a scene that has become classic, Bateman gets into a complete internal panic when his colleague shows him a new business card. Its paper is just slightly more fancy than the kind Bateman's card is printed on, and even worse: it has a golden rim and a watermark.

I have to admit, exchanging business cards remains an odd ritual. Of course, it's convenient to have someone's details at hand. But although I do have a very elegant card to outdo anybody else's, I always feel a little bit uncomfortable handing it to someone, or receiving theirs. To be honest, I hardly ever examine other people's cards closely – after all, it doesn't have much to say about a person's skillfulness. Have you ever refused to accept a business card? Try it sometime, just to see what happens.

Actually, you may consider this second issue of *MindOpen*, just like our first issue, as a kind of business card of the Psychology Department of the University of Amsterdam. This one, however, does have a lot to say.

For instance, work and organizational psychologist Matthijs Baas immediately captured a first prize with his first publication, namely a review in *Psychological Bulletin*. The German psychologist Jens Förster made a deliberate choice to continue his research here in Amsterdam. He was recruited a year ago for the research group Social Psychology by Joop van der Pligt, who has become famous for his headhunting. Reinout Wiers recently accepted a position as professor of Developmental Psychology, for more than nostalgic reasons. Methodologist Han van der Maas, who in 1992 obtained his doctorate with “rigorously scientific” research into stages of cognitive development, has proven to be quite a splendid applied researcher as well. Furthermore, both Merel Kindt and Victor Lamme won a multimillion grant for their own line of research in Clinical Psychology and Psychonomics respectively. Besides, Lamme has provided us with a novelty: you can see a video of Mark Mieras' interview with him via our digizine.

In short, *MindOpen* is the kind of business card I am happy to present – unreservedly. Now try to refuse accepting it...



Vittorio Busato, editor
www.vittoriobusato.nl/

An opera singer practicing science

by Jorn Hövels

The German professor Jens Förster says he was pleasantly surprised when Joop van der Pligt, head of the Social Psychology research group, came to visit him at Jacobs University in Bremen in the summer of 2006. He wanted to offer Förster a position at the University of Amsterdam in person. ‘Such a thing is highly unusual, but Van der Pligt made a smart move. I gave in. Evidently, I couldn’t abandon the social-psychological principle of reciprocity: when you get something, you want to give something in return.’

Förster smiles. Of course, he had better reasons to accept the opportunity. In Amsterdam, the renowned researcher will concentrate on creativity studies. ‘We become more creative by letting go of our fear of the unknown – which is a fear we all tend to have,’ Förster instructs.

Why did you decide to accept the invitation to come to Amsterdam?

‘This university is more international in scope than the university of Bremen, which mainly competes with other German universities. The UvA compares itself to universities in Europe and the United States. Secondly, I like to cooperate with other researchers. You’ll find very few articles under my name only. Here in Amsterdam, there is a large Social Psychology research group and I have many competent colleagues to work with. Before I met them, I already knew their work from international publications. In Bremen, I felt more isolated. What’s more,

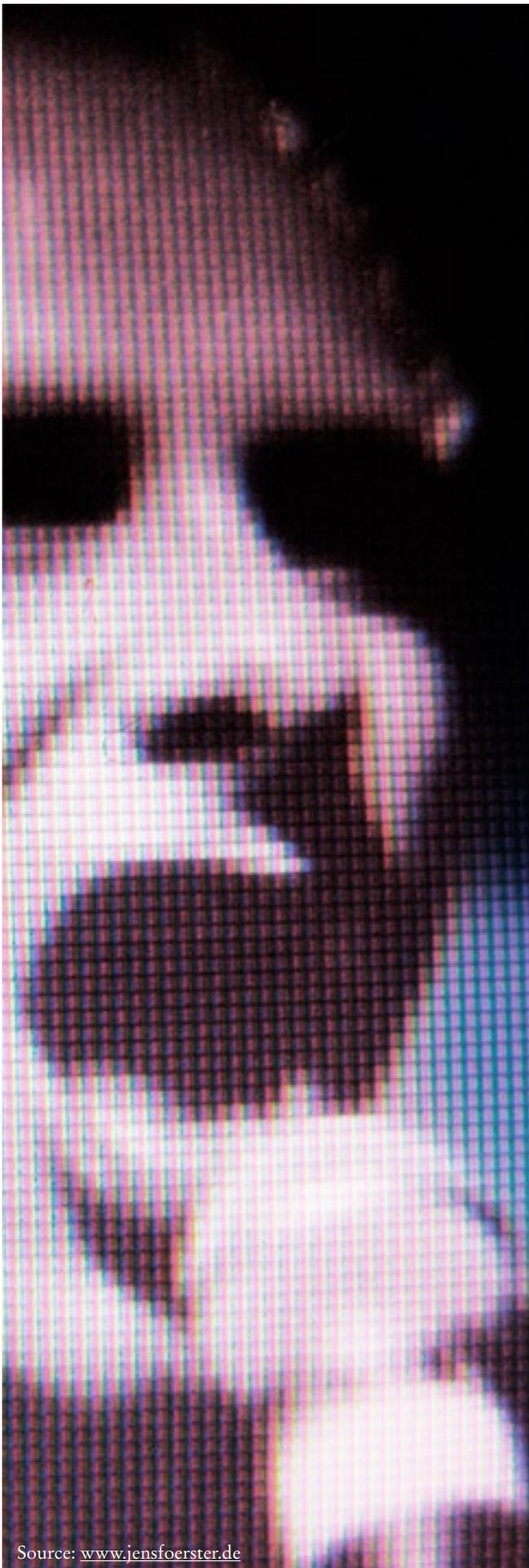
I liked the idea of moving here because of the cultural life. I love Amsterdam for its theater and opera. Besides, few people here know that I am a certified opera singer myself. In Germany, I am quite well-known as a cabaret artist. I mostly sing chansons there, on television shows for example. Here, however, I am a nobody. And I’m happy about that, because my privacy is very dear to me.’

What do you hope to achieve here?

‘My research interests are creativity and innovation, stereotyping, the influence of postures on behavior, and self regulation. For the time being, I will concentrate on teaching and on doing research into creativity. One of my ambitions is for the University of Amsterdam to become Europe’s centre of research excellence in this field. The classes should be of the highest level and our research group should continue to measure up to other top universities in Europe.’

What’s your latest publication?

‘An article in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. We tried to find out whether people tend to be less aggressive after having – symbolically – expressed their aggression. We asked participants to imagine their partner was cheating on them with their best friend. Then we asked them to stab a voodoo doll, symbolizing their partner. Afterwards, those who did this had less aggressive thoughts.’



Source: www.jensfoerster.de

According to the so-called script theory, aggressors are actually more likely to use violence again.

‘That’s right. The script theory states that after an act of violence, people will be faster to reactivate the cognitive script for violent behavior. In our research, we’ve only included the participants’ state of mind immediately after our experiment, so we don’t actually know how many aggressive thoughts they had after a longer amount of time.’

Do you think that unruly teenagers could curb their aggression by playing violent video games?

‘No, I don’t. As far as that is concerned, I follow the script theory: violent video games are more likely to cause a faster activation of their cognitive aggression scripts. As a result, they will have a greater chance to show violent behavior. However, it does make a difference whether they play in order to vent their aggression or in order to score points. If they go for a high score, they will be less aggressive in real life. By the way, research has shown that the more people watch violent television series, the more often they collide with the law.’

What is the impact of your findings on society?

‘Our latest study has shown that a symbolic act can reduce aggression. This isn’t just true for stabbing a voodoo doll, but also for more helpful acts such as discussing the problem. It would be a good idea to develop courses for aggressive teenagers to learn how to solve their problems in a more constructive way.’



home.medewerker.uva.nl/j.a.forster/

What makes young people drink too much?

by Dagmar van der Neut

After ten years at the universities of Maastricht and Nijmegen, Reinout Wiers is back where he once started his career in psychology. On the 1st of August, 2008, he was appointed by the University of Amsterdam as professor of Developmental Psychopathology. Wiers, who studied and took his doctorate here, says he's happy to be back on familiar ground. In Amsterdam, he will continue his research on the development of alcohol and other kinds of drug dependence among young people and adolescents.

Is there such a thing as an addiction gene?

'There are dozens of genes that play a part in addiction. We've just discovered that students who drink about forty glasses of alcohol a week and who have a particular version of a gene, get more of a buzz from drinking and demonstrate stronger automatic approach tendencies to alcohol than other heavy drinkers. One of the things I'd like to do at the UvA, together with Richard Ridderinkhof, is to look at the underlying brain processes.'

Which cognitive processes are involved in alcoholism?

'Mainly automatic, subconscious processes. First of all, people who drink a lot have an attentional bias: their attention is pulled towards alcohol more

rapidly than other people's attention. Besides, for them, alcohol triggers more positive associations than for others. They unconsciously relate drinking with excitement. What's more, they have a so-called approach bias: an automatic tendency to approach alcohol.'

Is there a remedy against this?

'My colleagues and I have found out that we can re-train such unconscious tendencies with variants of the tests we use to measure them. We train people to automatically redirect their behavioral tendencies. For example, we've trained attention biased alcoholics to focus their attention on a soft drink instead of a bottle of beer. This group was ready to leave the clinic before the others and they were less prone to regress.'

That sounds promising. Does it work for everyone?

'Heavily drinking young people can be classified into two different types, according to the command of their working memory. When they are drinking alcohol, those with a poor working memory act impulsively and are governed by associations of positive excitation. Those with a stronger working memory weigh up the pros and cons, and if they have something important to do the next morning, they can make a decision to stop drinking. Thus, we could try to improve the working memory of young alcoholics,

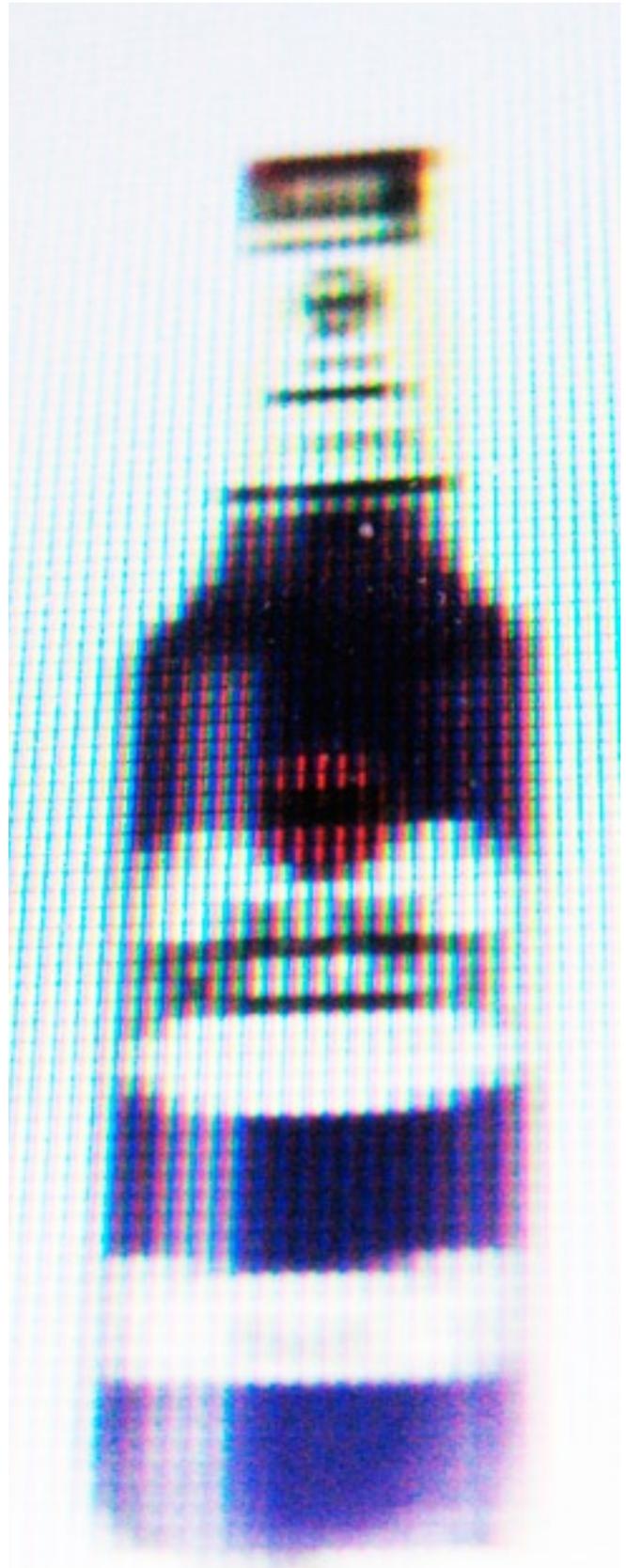
especially because impulsive behavioral problems are the most reliable predictors of alcohol abuse later on in life. The problem is, heavily drinking youngsters don't acknowledge the importance of other aspects of their life. We have tried talking to them in order to motivate them to see things differently, but these motivational strategies seem to have a limited effect.'

Is there any other way to prevent their alcohol abuse?

'As a rule, young people who drink a lot or smoke a lot of drugs, have many other problems besides their addiction. Very often, they drink to get rid of their fears or depressions. Also, a lot of them have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). And the younger they are when they start drinking, the harder it will be for them to stop later in life, exactly because alcohol alters the developing brain. That's why it's so important to stop drinking at an early age. But the trouble is, young people often don't realize that they have a problem. Actually, in my opinion, the Dutch legal drinking age should be altered to 18. And even more importantly: the law should be obeyed. In the Netherlands, alcohol is too readily available, and research clearly proves that this leads to alcohol abuse. Unfortunately, we are one of the top three European countries in terms of this problem. In any case, since it is likely that there will always be people with a drinking problem, it's important to focus on developing current methods for treatment. In the near future, I hope to learn a lot more about the development of alcohol dependence among youngsters. The more we know about what causes it, the more effectively we'll be able to prevent it.'



home.medewerker.uva.nl/r.w.h.j.wiers/



A playful way to practice arithmetic

by Dagmar van der Neut

In November 2007, the University of Amsterdam launched “De Rekenuin”, or “The Math Garden”, a new method to monitor and test arithmetic skills of primary school children. Children of all ages can do sums online in a playful way, scoring points and making their virtual garden grow: they start out with small cuttings, but the better they become at arithmetic, the more luxuriantly their plants and flowers grow. They can also trade points for awards to display in their virtual trophy-cabinet.

Besides being a fun and instructive game for students, it's also a very helpful tool for teachers. At any moment, they can monitor which learning problems pupils might have and how well they perform compared to their peers. Moreover, The Math Garden provides researchers with a vast data base about the development of children's arithmetic skills.

The person who came up with the idea of this project is Han van der Maas, professor of Psychological Methods. He looks back on a successful year and tells us about his plans for the project in the future.

How did you get the idea to develop The Math Garden?

‘The idea occurred to me a long time ago, but the time wasn't yet ripe for it. There were practical limitations, such as the lack of computers at primary schools, or difficulties handling the software. It wasn't until a year and a half ago, that circumstances started to change. The use of the Internet in schools has become widespread, it turned out to be technically possible to implement the project, and I had found the right people to help me: Sharon Klinkenberg, with her knowledge of ICT, was able to construct the system, and Marthe Straatemeier assisted us with her arithmetic knowledge.’

What's innovative about your system?

‘Generally speaking, children are tested half-yearly and they practice arithmetic in their exercise books. Testing isn't combined with practicing. In The Math Garden, it is. Besides, tests are usually fixed: pupils have to do a set amount of sums of a certain level – and that's it. In The Math Garden, every child can work at their own level and pace. How fast and how well they do one sum, determines the sum that comes next. This way, the difference between good and very good arithmeticians is revealed, because first grade students can actually arrive at the level of sixth graders. Nevertheless, even poor arithmeticians will be motivated by the program,

because it is built in such a way, that everyone will have at least 75 per cent right. Children are not only rewarded for their performance, but also for how often they do sums. I think this will be a great success. Schools are very enthusiastic. Almost every day we get requests to participate in the program. So far, participation has been free of charge, because we are still in the testing stage. Next year, we will begin to charge money for it.'

What did you find out about the development of arithmetic skills?

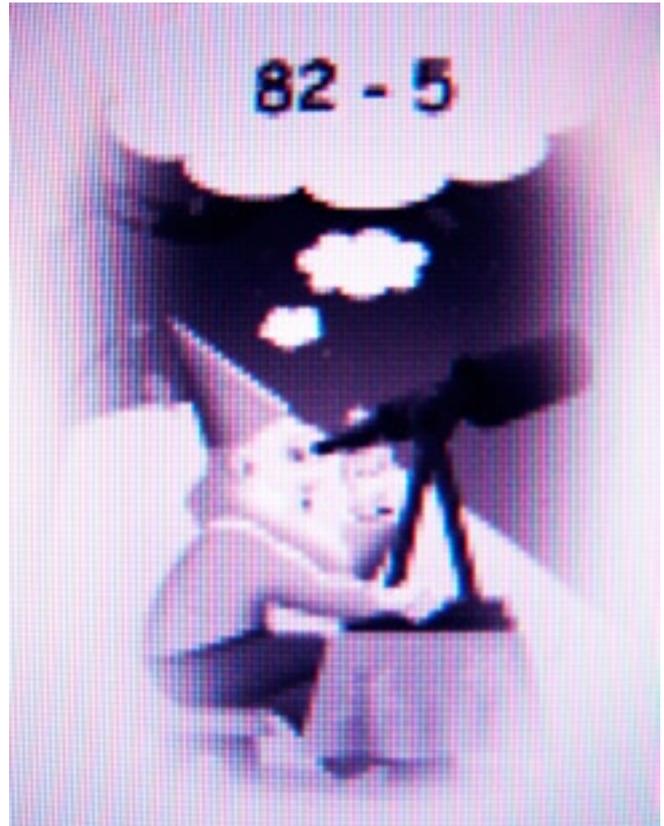
'Many young children prove to be able to do sums that are far beyond the level of what they have been taught. Also, we've found individual differences in the way children play. While one child may take too many chances, another may press the ?-button every time. A teacher can use our feedback by encouraging such a pupil to be more confident.'

And the children, what do they think of it?

'There's quite a large group that are hooked on it. They play every day and have already done thousands of sums. So at least part of them is particularly enthusiastic, even though in itself, there's nothing especially entertaining about it – it's just computerized mental arithmetic. It's cramming, but it's done in a playful and pleasant way. If it does catch on, that means our next projects are bound to be an even bigger success.'

Which future projects are you talking about?

'We would like to build a Linguistic Garden in the next few months. And we're thinking of a Topographical Garden as well. I think that within a few years, primary schools will be able to start using handheld computers. Every child will have a Nintendo or iPhone in their drawer to do the exercises whenever they want. And if they'll be connected to a wireless network, their data will be forwarded straight away.'



www.rekentuin.nl



home.medewerker.uva.nl/h.j.vandermaas/

The key to consciousness

by Mark Mieras

Victor Lamme, professor of cognitive neuroscience of the Psychonomics research group, has won a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant of 2.3 million euros. In the next five years, two postdoctoral researchers and three PhD students will help him tackle the hard relation between recurrent interaction and consciousness. Central to their research is the basic question: How is the image in our mind brought about when we look at something?

According to Lamme, he owes his grant to the surprising angle of his research. So far, researchers have always tried to find out what happens in the brain the moment a test subject says to be conscious of something. This approach is inadequate, because people often don't realize that they're conscious of certain things. What's more, according to Lamme, it isn't very interesting, because it doesn't help us come to any new conclusions. 'Is a person in a coma conscious? Many physicians don't think so. That's because there is no perceivable behaviour, and when the patient awakens, he can't remember anything. To me, however, this interpretation is highly unsatisfactory. The only thing we know, is that comatose patients do not move and that their memory doesn't work. But if you really want to say something useful about consciousness, you can't start from what people say or do – you'll have to look into consciousness itself.'

The concept of recurrent interaction is central to your work.

'We've learned that consciousness cannot be established without recurrent interaction in the brain. Consciousness arises when stimuli from the higher regions of the brain return to the lower brain areas. If you prevent those stimuli from returning, for example by using magnetic pulses, conscious awareness does not occur. In this case, people don't see a certain image, even though information about the image has reached their higher brain areas. That's a very interesting fact.'

Does it mean that recurrent interaction is the key to consciousness?

'That's exactly what I'm trying to prove. It does make sense. When I am aware of someone's face, I'm not only aware that it's a face instead of a cookie jar, for example, but I'm also aware of its shape, its color, its expression and identity.'

Those characteristics are encoded in different areas of the brain. We can infer from this that consciousness requires global brain activity, which is brought about through recurrent interaction. Another interesting fact is that recurrent interaction establishes change in connections between brain cells, which means that it establishes a lasting impression of a certain experience.'

Is there a brain area which is particularly involved in recurrent interaction?

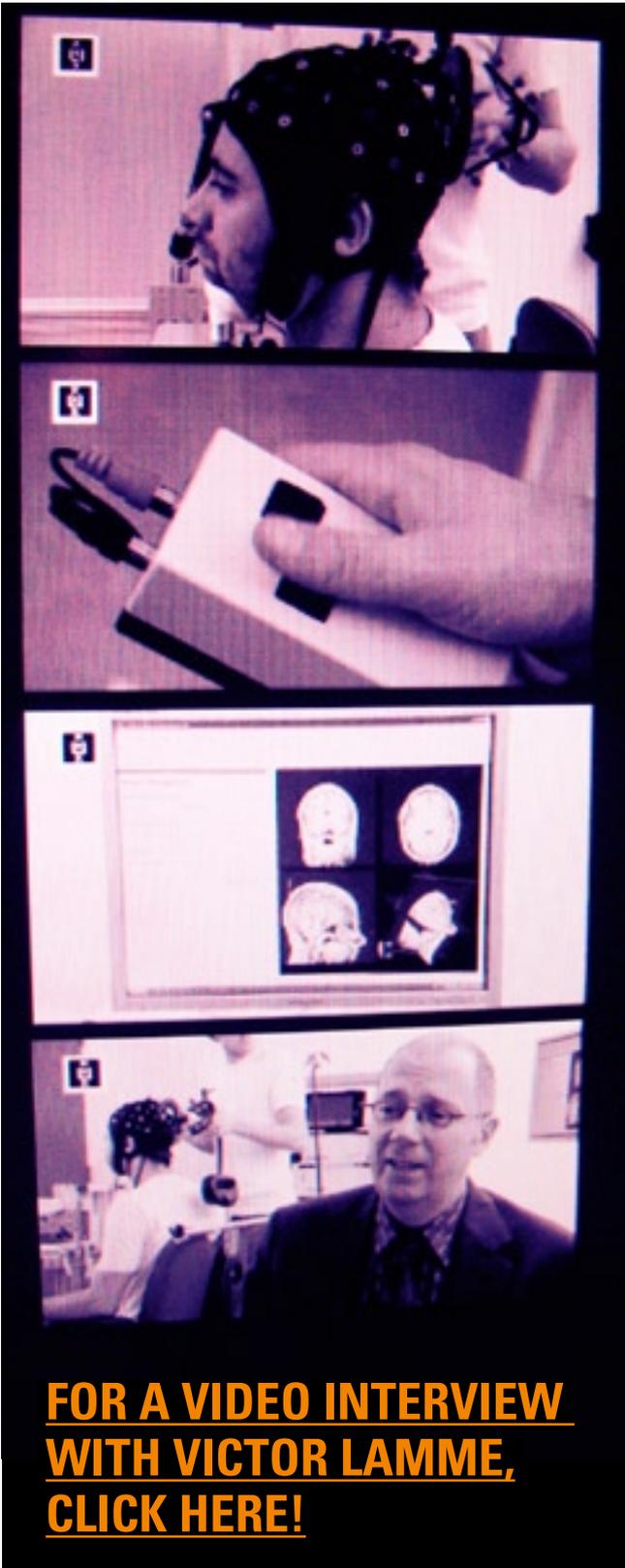
‘Awareness is an extensive phenomenon. Recurrent interaction can happen in any area of the brain, not just in the frontal lobe, which is usually seen as central in traditional consciousness research. Consciousness is spread throughout the brain, more widely than we realize. For example, it takes place in the right half of the brain, which is non-dominant. Suppose recurrent interactions happen only in the right half, as can occur in split brain patients: if you’d ask such a patient, he’ll deny to be aware of the stimulus that brought about these interactions. Which makes sense, because our language center is in the left half. He is unable to express it in words, because in this case, the awareness isn’t connected to the language center. Still, I’d say he is aware of it!’

But if there is a kind of consciousness about which we are unable to talk, wouldn’t we somehow know it exists?

‘That remains to be seen. We’d have to remember. Various research has shown that we immediately forget almost anything we see. It isn’t stored in our memory, so we think it doesn’t exist. Memory, however, is not the same as awareness.’

Your hypothesis is controversial.

‘It is. Actually, I was surprised to get this ERC grant. Some colleagues aren’t very keen on my research. Why? That’s because a lot of people find it hard to accept that there may be consciousness in the brain of which they don’t know anything. Also, my ideas have implications for human chauvinism, because for me, consciousness is a very common thing. Almost all animals have recurrent brain interactions. When I look at my dog, I think he is aware of me. But for many people, that is not something that goes without saying.’



FOR A VIDEO INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR LAMME, CLICK HERE!



V.A.F.Lamme@uva.nl

A suitable mood for creativity

by Jorn Hövels

Matthijs Baas (28) is in his fourth year as a PhD student in the Work and Organizational Psychology research program. Together with Bernard Nijstad and Carsten de Dreu, he performed a meta-analysis of 25 years of research into the effects of different mood states on creativity. This analysis confirms some of the conclusions of previous studies, namely that being in a positive mood makes people more creative. However, the researchers were the first to differentiate that this is merely true for happiness – other positive states of mind, such as relaxation, do not foster creativity. Secondly, they inferred that our mood should suit the appointed task: happiness promotes creativity, especially if we do something for pleasure. If instead it's serious business we're involved in, like solving the financial crisis, a bad mood makes us more creative.

The three researchers ambitiously sent their review to *Psychological Bulletin*, one of the most renowned professional journals in the field. Beyond their expectations, four of the five reviewers considered the article worthy of publication. 'It's really something, having work published in such a prominent journal, before even finishing my PhD. Many researchers spend their entire career trying to achieve something like this. In fact, we expected to be rejected. After we heard the good news, we drank champagne deep into the night!'

Why do you think your article was published?

'I think it's because we made a sound analysis, and because the subject matter is very popular nowadays. Innovation and creativity are considered to be the secret to success. A lot of organizations and companies think that everything will be fine, as long as they work creatively. Besides, *Psychological Bulletin* only publishes reviews. Which doesn't mean that it's easy to get published: there's a five to fifteen percent chance.'

What's the intrinsic relevance of your meta-analysis?

'A meta-analysis combines and compares statistic data of previous research in order to integrate, qualify or refine the conclusions that were made. Our analysis shows that some researchers made generalizations about the effect of positive mood states, and that they were wrong to do so. We discovered that happiness does encourage creativity, but relaxation does not. Whether a certain mood condition is a stimulus to creativity does not depend on its positive quality, but on its activating quality. Activation is crucial here, because it can stimulate or discourage the mind to be more creative. Happiness, for example, makes people more creative, because it triggers them to strive for positive results. Fear however, has an activating

quality as well, but it reduces creativity because it triggers people to avoid negative results. Conversely, we've found that mood conditions such as relaxation or sadness, deactivate. They don't affect creativity at all, neither in a positive nor in a negative way.'

How unanimous were the judgments of the Psychological Bulletin reviewers?

'One of the reviewers absolutely loved our work. Three of them said we'd have to make a few adaptations. The fifth reviewer, however, called our meta-analysis a peril for science! This reviewer claimed we didn't have a clear overview of the field. I think that's unlikely, since we've studied 25 years of research. "They do not even cite Mano," said the critic. Well, I've read Mano's work, but its relevance for our analysis escapes me. I think this criticism is nonsense and doesn't say much about the actual content of our article, which makes me wonder about the reviewer's motives. When the editor of *Psychological Bulletin* asked the reviewer to debate with us, he or she refused. I think that's cowardly, for someone who beats the drum the way he did. Nevertheless, the editor bravely decided to publish our article anyway. Maybe he hopes there'll be fireworks. For a prominent journal, that can be a good thing.'

How does this publication affect your career?

'It encourages me to pursue a career as a researcher. And it will probably help me to find a job at a university after I finish my PhD, which stimulates me. Then again, it won't be easy to surpass this publication.'

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* Baas, M., De Dreu, C. K. W., & Nijstad, B. A. (2008). A meta-analysis of 25 years of mood-creativity research: Hedonic tone, activation, or regulatory focus? *Psychological Bulletin*, 134, 779-806.

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The article can be found at:
home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.baas/



How indelible is our emotional memory?

by Vittorio Busato

If Ceasar's famous oneliner 'Veni, vidi, vici' applies to one of the psychologists at the University of Amsterdam, it's to Merel Kindt, professor of experimental clinical psychology. At the end of last year, she obtained a prestigious Vici grant of more than a million euros, from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. In the same year, two of her assistant professors won a Veni grant and two others a Top Talent grant. Thanks to these substantial funds, in the next five years, Kindt cum suis will be able to do fundamental research into the neurobiological mechanisms of anxiety. The results of this research should eventually lead to new methods of treatment. Kindt: 'Treatments of anxiety disorders are usually quite effective in the short term, but in the long run, most anxiety disorders return. We want to discover how to prevent this return of fear.'

Why do these symptoms generally return?

'Irrational fears, such as a fear of spiders or of flying, may be conceptualized as distorted ideas about aspects of reality. These ideas are represented in our brain, referred to as emotional memory. In people who have an anxiety disorder, this emotional memory consists of associations that do *not* reflect reality correctly. Often, cognitive behavioral therapy can help to make these ideas realistic again in ten or fifteen sessions. People pick up new behavior and in doing so, they temporarily suppress their old unrealistic associations. But after a while, for a relatively large percentage of these people, the earlier associations from their emotional memory regain the upper hand. Therefore, in order to accomplish a permanent change of behavior, we need to improve our methods of treatment. We know some of the types of therapy that can be effective, but we still know far too little about what exactly *happens* during therapy. I realized this also during my training as a psychotherapist. We have gained insight into what works and what doesn't work, but not in *how* it works.'

Is that question central to your approach?

'It is. Fundamental research into mechanisms of behavioral change is very rare. I will try to find out whether the emotional memory can be changed, and if so, how? So far, experimental clinical psychology has focused on understanding the way anxiety disorders develop and how they are sustained, not on the processes that are involved in eliminating them. It is assumed that the development and the discouragement of anxiety are based on the same mechanisms. But the acquisition processes of an anxiety disorder are very different from the processes of fear extinction. And that's what I hope to unravel.'

How do you go about it?

'In our laboratory, we provoke anxiety in subjects by having them associate a neutral stimulus, such as a face or a geometrical figure, with a pain stimulus, usually a small electric shock. This way, they acquire a fear response that eventually will occur on exposure to just the neutral stimulus: this is how the emotional memory works. If such an originally neutral stimulus is repeatedly presented without a pain stimulus, the fear will go away as a result. However, if you change an important aspect of the environment in which the subject is trained, for example the color of the room, their fear will suddenly return. In this way, we're trying to find out how we can permanently disrupt the fear memory.'

Where does your scientific interest in anxiety come from?

'I'm interested to know why people behave the way they do, what motivates them. In clinical psychology, fear is one of the most important emotions. It's an exciting emotion, and it can be functional but also extremely dysfunctional. Excessive anxiety can be related to many psychopathological disorders. But in case you were wondering, there aren't any autobiographical motives for my research.'

What do you hope to achieve? Please associate freely.

'The first thing I hope to achieve is knowledge. Suppose that in five years we know that it's really impossible to change emotional memory, that would be a step forward, scientifically speaking. However, I hope we will discover that we *can* change it. And that fundamental research on the mechanisms of change will provide guides for more effective treatments. If we manage to achieve that, I will be very happy.'



home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.kindt/

Suggestions? Please send an e-mail to: mindopen@uva.nl

PHD'S

SEPTEMBER 18 PEDRO DE ANDRADE RODRIGUEZ

Modeling category learning

DECEMBER 3 ANNEMIE PLOEGER

Towards an integration of evolutionary psychology and development science: New insights from evolutionary development biology

RESEARCH GRANTS

AUGUST 2008 SARA JAHFARI

Mosaic Grant

Individual differences in response inhibition: Linking models of cognitive control to brain function, region and structure

SEPTEMBER 2008 VICTOR LAMME

European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant of 2.3 million euros for his consciousness research

SEPTEMBER 2008 BIRTE FORSTMANN

Veni Grant

Is it wrong to move an old tree?

SEPTEMBER 2008 LUCIA TALAMINI

Vidi Grant

Sleep in order to learn?

INAUGURAL LECTURES

SEPTEMBER 5 GUNTER MARIS

How to score an exam

RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOKS

Adèr, H. J., Mellenberg, G. J., & Hand, D. (2008).

Advising on research methods: A consultant's companion. Johannes van Kesselring Publishing.

www.jvank.nl/ARMHome/

SCIENTIFIC MEETINGS 2009

JANUARY 28-30 LISBON, PORTUGAL

10th Congress of Environmental Psychology

www.xcongressopsiamb.com

FEBRUARY 11-14 ATLANTA, GEORGIA, USA

International Neuropsychological

Society (INS) Annual Conference

www.the-ins.org/meetings

MARCH 27-28 EGMOND AAN ZEE, NETHERLANDS

Inspiration in Rehabilitation, Spring Conference

www.psynip.nl

APRIL 1-5 DENVER, COLORADO, USA

Society for Research in Child Development

Biennial Meeting

www.srcd.org/biennial.html

MAY 13-16 SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, SPAIN

14th European Congress of Work and

Organizational Psychology

www.eawop2009.org

NEWS

On the 11th of June, Gerben van Kleef won the *Jos Jaspers Early Career Award* for his research into emotions and power in a social context

Jan-Henk Kamphuis has been appointed as professor of *Psychological Assessment and Personality* as of August 2008

Reinout Wiers has been appointed as professor of *Developmental Psychopathology* as of August 2008

EVERYBODY WANTS TO GO TO HEAVEN, NOBODY WANTS TO DIE

Everybody wants to go to heaven, nobody wants to die

by Frenk van Harreveld

A few weeks ago, a colleague enthusiastically invited me to come and check out a new fitness machine with him. His enthusiasm spawned from the fact that this machine offered a complete full-body workout in merely eight minutes. A revolutionary fitness regime, which takes no longer than boiling an egg, while the result is supposed to equal that of 45 minutes of running.

The thought of this led to considerable feelings of discomfort. I rather stick sharpened pencils into my eyes than go running. Therefore, the idea of running more intensively seemed far from attractive.

More importantly, however, the efficiency claims seemed too good to be true. I used to believe that a person's achievements are mostly related to their degree of willingness to make sacrifices, and that shortcuts are illusions. Still, initially, other efficiency breakthroughs such as trains and computers have also been met with doubt and suspicion. Could it be that personal training had become more efficient as well? Was it perhaps time to let go of my Calvinistic viewpoints and acknowledge the existence of easy solutions to life's problems?

Many people nowadays have already abandoned the blood-sweat-and-tears view on how to achieve personal goals. At least, so it seems, considering the immense self-help market, which is supposed to be worth 8.5 billion euros a year. It includes self-help tapes which claim to help improve the listener's self-esteem, achieve weight-loss, or turn them into a money magnet – overnight. Other examples are Atkins' diet, which allows people to eat lots of fat while losing weight, and the Unconscious Thought Theory, which suggests we can improve the quality of our choices by "sleeping on them" instead of deliberating consciously.

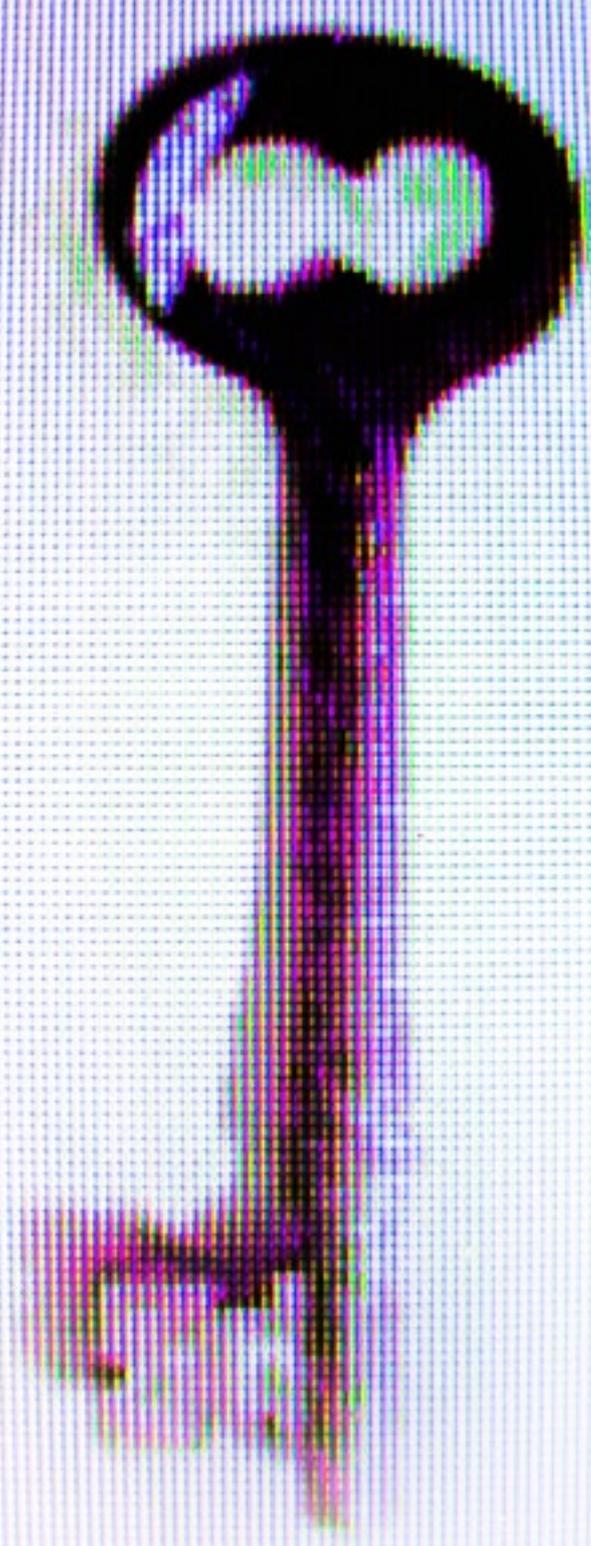
Of course, there are important differences between these examples, but what they have in common is that despite scientific criticism, they are wholeheartedly embraced by the general public. We can only speculate about the reasons why people are led to believe in such quick fixes. Religion used to be the overarching quick fix, but due to secularization, people experience more and more personal responsibility for their lives. The increased pressure to turn our lives into a success makes it tempting to look for shortcuts and to ignore their potential flaws.

As a social psychologist I am especially interested in situational factors that determine vulnerability to quick fixes. Research on superstition provides some relevant insights, for example that people are more inclined to knock on wood when they experience stress.

This could explain why I accepted my colleague's invitation to check out the new machine. After all, it was impossible to say I was too busy: who doesn't have time to boil an egg? The stress from not being able to use this excuse made me more susceptible to the fitness machine's unique selling points. Which leaves me with a 15000 euro machine in the garage, right where there used to be a car. Fortunately, I still have some subliminal tapes. In the time I took to write this column, they could have turned me into a money magnet.



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