



# **The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives**

*Shankar Vedantam*

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Most of us would agree that there's a clear and even obvious connection between the things we believe and the way we behave. But what if our actions are driven not by our conscious values and beliefs but by hidden motivations we're not even aware of?

The "hidden brain" is Shankar Vedantam's shorthand for a host of brain functions, emotional responses, and cognitive processes that happen outside our conscious awareness but have a decisive effect on how we behave. The hidden brain has its finger on the scale when we make all our most complex and important decisions: It decides whom we fall in love with, whether we should convict someone of murder, and which way to run when someone yells "Fire!" It explains why we can become riveted by the story of a single puppy adrift on the ocean but are quickly bored by a story of genocide. The hidden brain can also be deliberately manipulated to convince people to vote against their own interests, or even become suicide terrorists. But the most disturbing thing is that it does all this without our knowing.

Shankar Vedantam, author of *The Washington Post's* popular "Department of Human Behavior" column, takes us on a tour of this phenomenon and explores its consequences. Using original reporting that combines the latest scientific research with compulsively readable narratives that take readers from the American campaign trail to terrorist indoctrination camps, from the World Trade Center on 9/11 to, yes, a puppy adrift on the Pacific Ocean, Vedantam illuminates the dark recesses of our minds while making an original argument about how we can compensate for our blind spots and what happens when we don't.

## The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives Details

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## **Book Riot Community says**

I made an informal pledge to read more nonfiction this year, and I started off with this one. It's a good thing I really enjoyed the discussions in this book as it makes me more likely to stick to my goal!

–Sarah Nicolas

from The Best Books We Read In January 2017: <http://bookriot.com/2017/02/01/riot-r...>

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## **Feisty Harriet says**

A little bit "Blink" by Malcolm Gladwell, and a little bit "Thinking Fast and Slow" by Daniel Kahneman, this book explores our unconscious minds, our snap decisions, our "gut" feelings, and how we acquire and even overcome them. Really interesting.

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## **Virginia says**

"The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives," is a fascinating and well-documented expose of what goes on behind the "closed doors" of the human consciousness. Shankar Vedantam brings his journalistic story-telling and researching skills to bear on a fascinating topic, and makes his points powerfully. I found the relatively few instances of evolutionary explanation for our mammalian brain's grip on our biases to be cogent and convincing. However, Vedantam acknowledges his limitations in this area, pointing out that his theories are not conclusive. Nonetheless, he documents each instance of unconscious inclination with fascinating stories that turn our consciousnesses onto the track of a new possibility: Do we NOT know our own minds? A triumph of writing and reasoning, and a very important book in the context of the challenges humanity faces, including terrorism, genocide, public policy and sustainable economies and ecosystems.

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## **Jessica Zu says**

Tagore once said "who you are you do not see, what you see is your shadow." You'll understand the meaning of this verse when you finished reading this book.

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## **Mark says**

After the way Freud's theories have been discredited, you might think the notion of the unconscious has disappeared from psychology.

But Shankar Vedantam, a staff writer for the Washington Post, brilliantly resurrects the concept with modern-day experiments done by social psychologists and brain imaging experts to show how much of our lives is controlled by impulses and biases that we are completely unaware of.

For each type of influence exerted by the hidden brain, Vedantam gives gripping examples from real-world experiences, building from personal preferences to large societal trends.

Just a couple examples:

\* To show how hidden gender bias can be, he tells the story of two Stanford professors who were already well known in their fields and went through sex change operations, one to a man and the other to a woman. The woman began to notice how colleagues would interrupt her sentences and angrily challenge her research in ways that never happened when she was male. The man found that his research suddenly earned new respect.

\* In another chapter, he tells how much of the world became captivated by the story of a puppy left on a drifting oil tanker in the Pacific, sending money in from around the world for its rescue, and contrasted that with the well-known and distressing phenomenon of how the world ignores genocides that kill millions of people. In that case, he points to research which has shown that people not only exhibit more compassion for one individual in distress than for a large group, but will even demonstrate more compassion for one person in laboratory tests than for two or three people with the same problem.

I have seen some lukewarm reviews of this book, including a cryptic one in the New York Times (perhaps the hidden brain of the reviewer was influenced by the fact that Vedantam works for the rival Washington Post?), and I don't understand it. This book is built around a fascinating and compelling premise and is filled with good anecdotes and provocative research, all well written.

I highly recommend it.

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## **Tiffany says**

On the surface, this was about the same topic as *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman - the two ways our brain processes information. But this was considerably better. The Kahneman book presented the unconscious brain, responsible for fast thought and (often incorrect) instinctual responses and biases as pretty uniformly bad. This book acknowledged that the unconscious brain or "hidden" brain often makes incorrect decisions, but acknowledged that we cannot stop that from happening. We can be aware of it, but it's largely evolutionary thinking that has thousands upon thousands of years of natural selection behind it. Just as in his really interesting podcast, Vedantam presents anecdotes to describe the differing ways our hidden brain affects our thinking and responses, ranging from simple things to serious issues like race bias. It was definitely eye-opening and interesting.

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## **Anne says**

I can't really improve on Nikhil P. Freeman's Jul 26, 2011 review, so go read that.

I will just add that my disappointment with this book is probably due to a mismatch between what it is and what I had wanted it to be. What it is: a lightweight, heavily anecdotal introduction to the idea of implicit bias and unconscious decision-making. What I expected: a more in-depth, scientific exploration of the hows and whys. Vedantam cites many studies I've seen discussed elsewhere in more detail--which makes this a good book for someone who has literally never been exposed to the idea of implicit bias and its relevance in our private and public lives, and never taken the implicit association test--but he also cites himself, referring to his own reporting on these topics more than I care to see. This is more narrative than detached investigation--if you don't believe implicit bias exists, Vedantam won't persuade you; if you do, you already know this stuff and may, like me, be impatient with the storytelling approach. Too much anecdote, not enough science. But in browsing the Notes, you may find links to meatier sources.

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## **Mythili says**

What I liked about this book: Its storytelling. Vedantam rounds up all kinds of anecdotes and interviews all kinds of characters to look at how the unconscious mind shapes everything from how much a waitress is tipped to whether or not someone is sentenced to death. Particularly fascinating to me was the section on gender discrimination, in which Vedantam contrasts the experiences of two Stanford professors -- one who transitioned from male-to-female and the other who went female-to-male. Powerful stuff. What I didn't like about this book was the broader argument Vedantam wanted to hammer home. A lot of his examples of the "hidden brain" at work spring from many different kinds of psychological (and sociological) factors, some of which may be subtle but are well-documented, and in the end, not all that mysterious (I didn't get much out of his analysis of racism, for example, and had to agree with the black man in jail who tells him "wake up, you live in America"). Reading this book is like having a conversation with an interesting know-it-all. Not all of the book's arguments are completely accurate or convincing, but there is more than enough good tangential detail to make it worth your time.

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## **Gordon Stock says**

The book is full of interesting information, but the presentation is lacking. It is obvious that the author comes from a scientific background, he is often repetitive in relaying the information and not straightforward enough. Overall, interesting but not incredible.

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## **Feng Ouyang says**

1. Introduction

a. Unconscious bias: we do things that are not consistent with our rational intention.

b. Story of mis-identification, teaching us a few lessons

i. Even when a person who is deliberate in nature and want to be especially deliberate under the circumstance, she can still be tricked by subconscious

ii. We pay attention to the unusual and ignore the usual.

iii. Discomfort helps us to focus on rational cognitive tasks. Being comfortable means we let subconscious take control.

iv. Tragic results can happen when a sequence of wrong decisions are made. These decisions are not driven by bad motives or prejudice, but unconscious bias.

c. We know a lot about unconscious brain now, to the extent that a more appropriate question seems to be why we even have a conscious mind.

d. It is easy to understand that subconscious mind controls routine activities and conscious mind deals with novel and unexpected situations. However, subconscious mind often applies “experience”, or heuristic rules, to the wrong situations.

e. Even if we have full knowledge about subconscious mind, we still cannot be aware of the manipulation of our decisions and cognitive activities from the subconscious activities. It’s just human nature that we may be able to understand but can never change.

## 2. Subconscious Examples

a. Story of honor-payment and watching eyes: environmental cues affect your behavior even if you don’t consciously notice them.

b. Story of stock price and pronunciation of company names: ease of pronunciation induces sense of comfort and acceptance.

c. Story of mimicking each other during conversation: subconscious cues and responses play important role in interpersonal interactions.

d. Story of the scientist couple: jealousy is caused by subconscious selfish impulses. We can redirect such impulse by establishing a “we” mentality: link interests and achievements of the two together.

## 3. People with mental disorders

a. Frontal Lobe Dementia: people who cannot observe social norms. Social norm and even law-abiding are mostly subconscious functionalities.

b. A lot of social norms and social sensitivity functions depend on subconscious processing.

c. It would be helpful to design laws that appeal to people’s subconscious instinct of following social norm.

For example, the “eyes” picture in coffee room makes people more likely to pay, because they do not want to be viewed by others as cheaters.

## 4. Racial and other prejudices

a. Humans have special ability of focusing on and recognizing faces

i. Infants seem to be born with such ability.

ii. Studies found special region in brain for face recognition.

iii. When we see something resembling child face we feel pleasant and comfortable. That’s why people like panda and Mickey Mouse.

b. Racial identity and prejudice

i. Our childhood experience makes us better in recognizing people with the same race, and feel more identified with those faces. This is a subconscious bias towards our own races.

ii. On the other hand, in white-dominant suburbs, children are exposed more to positive images of the white people. They tend to associate positive adjectives to whites, and negative ones to blacks. This is subconscious influence.

iii. We grow up with a subconscious idea of what is “normal”. This is the people or behavior we see most, not necessarily what we are. For example, a gay person may still think straight is the normal and positive.

iv. Such subconscious bias or prejudice is more apparent in children because they don’t suppress them with rational thinking. But they actually exist in all of us.

c. Subconscious segregation

- i. Segregation into racial groups usually happens in 7th grade. It is not that all of sudden people start to hate other races. It's due to small subconscious bias in choosing new friends. Since friendship turnover rate is very high at that age, over times your friend circle becomes more homogeneous, under a small bias.
- ii. Racial prejudice is connected with in-group mentality, which is another subconscious process, when people form strong bias for or against people based on their group identities. Therefore, one way to counter racial prejudice is forming inter-racial groups and let people frame their identity differently.
- iii. [Unfortunately, for immigrants, they will be "out" in many group settings.]
- d. Subconscious prejudice for adults
  - i. Various researches and observations show that adults have the same subconscious biases. They can suppress them with conscious considerations.
  - ii. However, when conscious control is weak (e.g. when they are tired or under pressure), their subconscious bias would show. This does not mean they are bad people, just people with weaker control.

## 5. Sex Prejudice

- a. People have stereotypes of leaders and women, and they are in conflict. So people have trouble accepting women leaders. They are either not feminine enough or leader-like enough.
- b. Experiences of transgender people before and after gender transition show clear evidences of sex prejudice: women are taken less seriously, bullied more, and denied opportunities for advancement.

## 6. Conformation in disaster time

- a. When facing crime, most people won't stand up and aid the victim.
- b. When facing disasters or emergency situations, people tend to follow consensus on what to do, instead of making their own decisions. They tend to follow the crowd to one of the few exists.
- c. Such conformation tendency stem from two unconscious desires: heroic (not to escape alone) and comfort (do what others do, although knowing full well that they don't know any better).
- d. We can imagine a person in emergency being tugged by other people's actions. Such tug depends on the current closeness between the people and their prior relationships.

## 7. Terrorists

- a. Terrorists are not motivated by ideology or religion, but small-group dynamics: we seek approval and respect from our peers.
- b. The "tunnel" process of recruiting: isolate the recruited from the outside world, tie his self-esteem to the "cause", etc. Very similar to the cultural revolution in China.

## 8. Bias in Criminal Justice System

- a. Statistics and case studies show jury bias against black suspects in both conviction and sentence.
- b. The bias extends to the whole justice systems including police, prosecutors, judges and lawyers.

## 9. Bias of Voters

- a. Hidden bias and implicit association: people (both black and white) tend to associate blacks with negative things such as crime.
- b. One can speculate that such bias affects election results.
- c. Association also color some of the seemingly racially-neutral topics such as crime and welfare, as people associate criminals and welfare recipients with certain race.
- d. Fascinating story about Obama teams trying to fight implicit bias against his race in 2008.

## 10. Telescope effect

- a. People don't have intuitive sense on Small probability events. They tend to think things they are familiar with are more likely to happen, and discount things they have some control over, believing they are better than average.
  - b. People don't have intuitive sense on large numbers. They feel more connected to situations of individuals than to a large group of people. This affects some moral choices and people's willingness to donate to humanity causes.
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## **Asenath says**

This would have received a 4, even a 4.5 up until the last two chapters. Vedantam does a great job with the writing--it's engaging and interesting. However, when I got to the "Defusing the Bomb" chapter, I couldn't help but feel that Vedantam had his own agenda and own point to get across--regardless of science. This chapter is the longest in the book (43 pages) and it is redundant and the actual evidence is weak. Even in the last chapter (about gun control) I felt the shift from presenting evidence to supporting Vedantam's own personal opinions, which frustrated me. It made me wonder how much of the rest of the book was simply his opinions.

An interesting read with interesting stories, but I wanted to know more about the *why* of it all, and that was never answered. Well, the answer was "because of our UNCONSCIOUS!"

Also, I found it interesting that evolutionary psychology wasn't introduced until the last chapter, when it related to ideas that had been brought up earlier.

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## **Nikhil P. Freeman says**

Just did not like the book. Covered a lot of ground--most of the things a person would learn in a social psychology class--but the presentation of different biases were lost to verbose anecdotes. The stories to explain the biases would get so long and cumbersome that I would forget his original point--and all of his points I already knew or heard before elsewhere. Every story was literally 50 words too long.

I was expecting a more neuroscience driven explanation for unconscious behavior/biases, but this was briefly mentioned if at all.

To his credit, racial biases and the "terrorist mind" were excellently executed.

Would recommend this only if you have never been exposed to any social psychology material (and like long anecdotes to prove points). Reading this in conjunction with *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* will round out the social psychological picture.

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## **Karmen says**

The author introduces an interesting idea - not a new concept but rather names something that has already been discussed.

He goes at great length to present the evidence for his claims and he does so mostly by using very detailed stories and forces the reader to take many off-road trips that often make you lose the sight of the point being proved.

What really bothers me though, that despite all the details put into stories (often unnecessary too) and despite author's obvious interest in topics of sexism and racism, he leave the reader hanging. Even though the authors represents several obvious examples of sexism, he goes on to claim that there's no scientific studies/evidence to prove it (which isn't true) and that it could be either way, so it is only an assumption.

For someone, who spent almost 50 pages describing the 11th September stories, way past already making his point, he seems very sloppy with looking for evidence for sexism, almost as if he didn't want to present it.

I don't feel sorry for reading the book, but wouldn't necessarily recommend it either, as it says little new to anyone with the basic knowledge of psychology.

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## **Ismail Elshareef says**

The author tries to accomplish two things throughout this book: Explain how the hidden brain works and how it influences human behavior. He doesn't, however, explain how the hidden brain has evolved or how it can be changed, which to me is a crucial and expected takeaway when reading about the subject of the hidden, or unconscious, brain.

We come to understand through the extensive psychological research put into this book the reasons behind racial biases, prejudices, sexism and suicide bombings in our collective societies. The author challenges our preconceptions about the "intent" behind these behaviors and explains the real reasons behind their occurrences. The fascinating research shows that our unconscious brain, which is fast and visceral, dictates what our conscious brain, which is rational, deliberate and analytical, does.

One of the things the book draws attention to is the spotlight focus (aka tunnel vision) of the conscious brain and how the unconscious brain compensates for that limitation. Our attention is always focused on what we "choose" to focus on. Our unconscious brain's job is to adjust our behavior based on its own processing of the feedback it receives from everything outside our spotlight focus. This explains the distance we keep between each other while perusing artwork at the museum, for example.

Another fascinating discovery about the hidden brain is that it is influenced by other hidden brains. Ever wonder why in some situations where someone is attacked the witnesses never intervene to help knowing very well that it's wrong to stand idle? Well, it's because no one took the initiative to intervene, so everyone else followed suit. Individual hidden brains relinquish control to the group's "collective" hidden brain. Same thing explains why some floors on the World Trade Center towers were evacuated on 9/11 and some weren't--not even a single person left those perished floors.

My favorite and I believe the most important learning I took away from this book is how the "Tunnel" theory works on the hidden brain. The author argues that suicide bombers, Nazis, Jonestown mass suicide and other violent ideologues out there are not influenced so much by religion or a specific ideology but rather by a "need to belong and to impress others." The "Tunnel" theory is about taking a normal person, isolating her from the outside world, sending her hidden brain consistent and focused messages (aka indoctrinating,) and praising her as a "special" and a "chosen" individual worthy of whatever it is that is promised.

The "Tunnel" theory explains how Hitler was able to control a relatively sophisticated and educated society to follow his barbaric ideas. It also explains how nonreligious young Muslims turn into suicide bombers given the right conditions.

The hidden brain and the "Tunnel" theory also make me understand the nasty political atmosphere here in America better; The religious fanaticism that exists even within neighborhoods of large and diverse cities.

I personally think homeschooling children is a way of using the "Tunnel" theory on their hidden brains, but

that's just me.

This book is full of great examples on how the hidden brain works. To a discerning reader, the information is vital in understanding human behavior and how to manipulate it. Read it.

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### **Katie says**

I've heard Hidden Brain on NPR a lot and I am always fascinated by the topics (and neurology in general) and this was no different. The hidden biases we all have are truly fascinating, and the fact that he didn't give solutions was actually okay with me. Because there really may not be any.

The big drawback here is that these biases are best explained with shorter anecdotes, and the stories here were anything but. I found my mind wandering often. There were lots of different topics, some done better than others. Or maybe they were just more interesting to my hidden brain??

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