



## Clear Thinking Issue 130

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In this issue:

- Why do they do that? How to understand people
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### Why do they do that? How to understand people

*Hypnosis Master Series: Why do they do that? How to understand people*  
– by **Mark Tyrrell**

This article focuses on the importance of developing the skill of super observation when looking directly at the people in your life and also when thinking about them and their behaviour.

Of course, I'm not recommending that you travel through life as a Mr Spock from Star Trek type character, coolly observing other people from a distance at the expense of spontaneous relaxed fun and warm interaction with them. Most of the time we don't need to be analysing other people, but just enjoy being with them.

But it's also true that other people *can* be baffling sometimes and getting better at observing others and reading their intentions can improve your personal and professional life - and also help you to help them sometimes.

If you're anything like me, you've sometimes found yourself in the position of asking yourself questions like:

*"What do they mean by what they said?"*

*"Why did they do that?"*

*"Why do I get the feeling they are not being straight with me - or haven't I got the whole picture here?"*

But once you really absorb what I'm saying here you'll have the key, or even - dare I say - a set of keys, for unlocking other people's mysterious behaviour.

Dr Milton Erickson, the most celebrated hypnotherapist of the 20th century, recommended we *look* more than *listen* when attempting to understand other people.

I think he meant that the *unconscious* messages people transmit often get masked by what they communicate *consciously*.

## **Conscious and unconscious**

*The first thing to remember when looking at other people is that everybody has an 'unconscious' mind as well as a 'conscious' one.*

Sometimes you'll hear the unconscious mind described as the subconscious mind, but they are the same thing.

This means that sometimes people *think* they are doing one thing while in fact they are really doing something else. We none of us have absolute total self knowledge all the time and *sometimes* other people can read our actions and true intentions better than we ourselves can.

So when you notice that there is a big difference between what someone is doing and what they say they are doing, they are not necessarily lying to you. But they may not actually know their own unconscious motivations - at least not all the time.

## **The lady doth protest too much**

I remember introducing a female friend of mine to one of my male friends at a dinner party some years ago.

He has quite a strong personality and she seemed to take an instant dislike to him. Or so she said. But *I* detected an attraction. To me there seemed to be a kind of disconnect between what she *said* she felt about him and what she *really* seemed to feel.

I couldn't help but notice how she looked when his name was mentioned and what she *said* she felt about him. I began to notice a pattern. Every time I mentioned him, a tiny smile would appear on her face, for the briefest of moments, before she would reiterate, perhaps more forcibly than strictly necessary, how objectionable she found him.

I didn't argue with her, partly because I think she really was *consciously* unaware of her attraction to him, even as her unconscious mind somehow always seemed to conspire to make her present at the same social events as him, and at the same time. She seemed genuinely surprised when, as she said, she 'suddenly' started to like him. But to me it was clear she had liked him without knowing it from the start. And, you guessed it, they've been happily married for ten years.

So what are we to make of this kind of thing?

## **The congruence of words and deeds**

Well it's not that we should *never* take people's words at face value. People are often quite straightforward and there's no need to look for complication when it's not there. I think too much psychological theory has done that quite enough.

I think it's more that we should just be attuned to the *other* ways people communicate, and be open to the occasional possibility that they might be communicating to us in more than one way, perhaps by leaking unconscious feelings in some way while consciously telling us something quite different.

We can thus look to see if someone's *unconscious* communication accords with their *conscious* communication. My friend's unconscious communication told me she was attracted to this man, while her *conscious* communication told me she didn't like him one bit or want him in her life. So her communication was 'incongruent'.

*So the second thing to remember is the importance of not just listening to what people say but watching what they do.*

Look for congruence - and also lack of it. Is there incongruence between the *behaviour* someone displays and what they actually say and tell you? If someone says they can't stand somebody, but always seem to turn up wherever that certain somebody happens to be, that, to me, shows incongruence in their communication.

## **Tuning in to incongruence**

Being a hypnotherapist and having had the privilege of observing hundreds of people one to one, I have learned to really look - and I mean really *observe* people, not just listen to them.

Incongruence between what a client says and what they unconsciously communicate may reveal true motivation and possible areas that need to be focussed on during therapy.

For example, I recall a man who would, for a split second, wince when telling me how much he enjoyed his work. He was telling me one thing with his words, but another with his face! This wincing is what is known as a 'micro expression' and was literally quick as a blink. But it was undoubtedly there.

A client may, almost imperceptibly, shake their head and sigh every time they mention their partner, even while telling you their relationship is good, or a micro expression of fear might cross someone's face as they tell you how much they are looking forward to starting a new job.

## **Don't rush to judgement**

When you start to become more attuned to incongruence, remember the wise words of the psychologist Paul Ekman, who has probably done more research on tiny fleeting unconscious facial expressions than anyone else.

He rightly warns us not to assume we know with absolute certainty what someone is really thinking, but just to be aware of *patterns*. One fleeting expression of fear doesn't tell you anything very much. But if you *keep* noticing this 'micro-expression', then it *could* be that you have spotted something normally concealed even from the person themselves. But don't assume this.

And I think it's more respectful to others not to always directly say what you think someone else *really* means, or what you suspect they are *really* thinking. My friend who was attracted to her future husband but didn't know it at first would not have taken kindly to me telling her it was clear she liked him. She needed to come to that realisation in her own way and in her own time.

So people don't just 'speak' with their words but with their faces, by what they *don't* say, and even - as you are about to hear - by other behaviours that we don't normally think of as communication.

## **Metaphorical communication**

The unconscious mind can utilise just about any human response as a way of communicating genuine feeling.

Years ago I was running a workshop in solution focused hypnotherapy. Attending this training was a traditionally trained psychiatrist who was well versed in all the older style

Freudian approaches to psychotherapy. She had been trained to believe that the best way to treat her patients was to continually and exclusively dig into their pasts and focus on what had gone wrong, rather than amplifying their strengths, resources and positive goals. As she sat in my audience listening, I began to notice an odd pattern of behaviour.

While she would verbally agree with my points and *seemed* to be accepting my ideas about positive psychology, whenever I started to talk about newer methods of treating psychological problems she would start coughing, sometimes to the point that she momentarily disrupted the session or even had to leave the room. The weird thing was that she didn't seem to feel the need to cough at any other time and appeared in perfect health. This got me thinking what a 'cough' might mean, metaphorically. If you think about it, when we cough we are trying to eject something we don't want inside ourselves, are we not?

And indeed, after this woman had trained with us over the course of several months, she happened to mention over lunch one day how she had, at first, found our ideas on psychology 'hard to swallow'. As soon as she said this, I remembered her coughing fits during the earlier workshops, severe enough to make her choke at times.

Again this seemed to be incongruence between what this woman *said* she felt and what she *really* seemed to feel. If my guess about the real nature of her coughing was correct, then it could be that her unconscious mind was busy trying to communicate honestly to us - as well as to her - its real feelings about our new approaches.

The point here is that people communicate *metaphorically* as well as literally, and sometimes this can go as far as having an actual physical response.

Of course, if someone has a physical symptom it should be checked out medically, just in case, but consider this: I once worked with a man who would vomit every time his mother-in-law came to stay at weekends. And it seemed his wife's mother was round nearly *every* weekend.

He couldn't understand why he felt sick only on Saturdays and Sundays, but fine the rest of the week. He hadn't seen a connection. This was a side issue and not the main reason he had come for therapy, but at one point he finally admitted to me (and it seemed a revelation even to him!) that he was - and note the language - 'rather sick' of his mother-in-law always coming to stay at weekends. Paradoxically, sometimes the metaphorical mind can be rather literal.

These so-called 'organic' - or let's call them 'physical' - metaphors, like not being able to swallow something, or feeling sick of something, might seem extreme and rather

obvious, but I suspect people communicate with physical metaphors much more frequently than we commonly suppose.

For example, if someone is disgusted by something they are talking about, you might see them making tiny brushing movements with their fingers, as if they are trying to wipe some repugnant substance away from themselves. Again this might be so minimal as to qualify as a micro-expression.

Or someone might raise their chin and literally 'look down their nose' when talking about someone they secretly feel superior to.

*So the third thing to keep in mind is that people communicate **metaphorically** and it might even be through a 'physical metaphor'.*

This is another indicator of why it's so important to pay attention not just to what people say but to really watch what they do as well.

Now the next point is extremely important.

## **You can't always get what you want - but you'll try darn hard**

We all have basic needs that are pretty obvious to ourselves. The needs to eat, rest, drink and sleep for instance. But it's also true that each and every one of us have what we call 'primal *emotional* needs' as well - and they can be a lot less obvious. For instance, we all have a need to:

- feel safe and secure
- get enough attention
- have purpose and goals in life
- feel understood and connected and indeed intimate with others
- feel connected to something bigger than ourselves such as an organisation or community
- have a sense of status and feel recognized and valued for who we are and what we do
- feel we have control over at least some things in life.

If these needs are not met, people become unhappy and may become ill.

When they are met adequately, we feel fulfilled and have space in our minds for projects that extend beyond the immediate gratification of instant emotional fulfilment.

This is one of the most important things you'll ever learn regarding psychology.

If people are not meeting their emotional needs - perhaps because they are not even really consciously aware of them - then much of their behaviour will be an unconscious drive toward fulfilling those emotional needs *regardless of what they think or say they are doing*.

Much strange or so-called 'difficult' behaviour becomes readily understandable once we consider what *need* that behaviour might be clumsily - and unconsciously - trying to meet.

For example, contrary or difficult behaviour might be a disguised and unconscious attempt to gain a sense of status, or feelings of control, which might be lacking in the overall context of a person's life.

Rather than getting upset when a client displays resistant or awkward behaviour, I try to be objective and look for the need the behaviour is blindly trying to meet. If I can somehow help my client feel that their need for status (or control, or security, or whatever) has been adequately met, *then we are freed up to work cooperatively with one another*. Part of this working together would include ensuring that they start meeting their emotional needs effectively *outside* of situations where they really want to be concentrating on something else.

We all know people who *seem* to be doing one thing - such as attending a class to learn something - but *really* are doing something quite different - such as constantly seeking attention rather than learning what there is to be learned. Clearly, such a person is not getting enough attention in the right place (for example, at home), and is desperately trying to compensate in the wrong place (the classroom).

When someone is behaving strangely or obnoxiously, rather than taking it personally, or getting into a spat, consider what primal emotional need the behaviour may be unconsciously trying to meet. This will allow you to operate in a much more sophisticated way when dealing with and understanding other people.

*So the fourth and last point here, one which is so important it underpins all the other points, is that we all have primal emotional needs and if we don't meet them healthily we will try to meet them in any way we can.*

But what's really interesting is that, for the most part, we are *unconscious* of what emotional needs our own behaviour is trying to fulfil.

Now this may all seem a bit complex but it's actually a lot simpler than it appears and once you truly understand these points then you'll find you won't have to think too hard about other people's baffling behaviour, because things will occur to you spontaneously.

People can be puzzles, but all puzzles can be solved and often much more easily than you may have thought once you know the method.

So, in summary, I have highlighted:

- The importance of remembering that people have conscious and *unconscious* minds.
- The fact that sometimes people don't know their own true motivations and feelings about things so the conscious mind comes up with a theory or story that is at odds with their real unconscious motivation. You can look for congruence between what people say and what they actually do and how they communicate non-verbally. Remember that leakage of true feelings from the unconscious mind may take the form of incredibly brief 'micro-expressions'. So stay alert.
- Peoples' true feelings are often communicated metaphorically - remember the coughing psychiatrist I mentioned.
- And, most important of all, how so much human behaviour is driven by unconscious attempts to meet the primal emotional needs which each and every human being shares, and how if these needs aren't met healthily they can cause people to act in all kinds of weird and not so wonderful ways.

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