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What is Reactance?

People disobey others to defend their sense of freedom

You may love your wife, but every wish of hers sounds like an unbearable behest. Your parents' wishes are already long ignored. Not to mention what you feel when an undesirable boss gives you some orders. In psychology, reactance is a person's tendency to resist social influences that they feel as threats to their autonomy. A new research proved that this behavior is not necessarily intentional, and can be completely outside of the reactant individual's conscious awareness. Instead, even the slightest exposure at an unconscious level to the name of a person with positive or negative symbolism in the life of the subjects proved to trigger reactance and disobedience. The team at Duke University has showed that some people will behave in ways that are not to their own benefit simply because they avoid doing what other people want them to. "Psychologists have known for some time that reactance can cause a person to work in opposition to another person's desires," said Tanya L. Chartrand, an associate professor of marketing and psychology at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. "We wanted to know whether reactance could occur even when exposure to a significant other, and their associated wishes for us, takes place at a nonconscious level." In a first approach, subjects were asked to name a significant person in their lives whom they regarded to be controlling and who expected them to work hard, and another significant and controlling individual whom they perceived as wanting them to have fun. After that, the subjects were asked to accomplish a computer-based work, during which the name of one or the other of the people from one of these categories was repeatedly, but subliminally, flashed on the screen. The name flashed too quickly for the subjects to consciously realize they had watched it, but it was enough to activate their nonconscious levels of the brain. After that, the subjects had to solve a series of anagrams, making words from jumbled letters. People who were exposed to the name of undesirable persons performed significantly worse on the anagram exercise than those exposed to the name of a pleasant person. "Our participants were not even aware that they had been exposed to someone else's name, yet that nonconscious exposure was enough to cause them to act in defiance of what their significant other would want them to do," said Gavan Fitzsimons, a professor of marketing and psychology at Duke and an expert in the field of consumer psychology. A second approach assessed each subject's level of reactance. The more reactant subjects were more sensitive to the subliminal cues and displayed higher variation in their performance than people with a lower degree of reactance. "The main finding of this research is that people with a tendency toward reactance may nonconsciously and quite unintentionally act in a counterproductive manner simply because they are trying to resist someone else's encroachment on their freedom," said Chartrand. The investigators believe that people with higher levels of reactance should stay alert to avoid situations and people who trigger their reactant tendencies or detrimental behaviors.