

Cognitive- versus Emotion-Based Involuntary Cognitions: An Informative Contrast for the Reflexive Imagery Task

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The Reflexive Imagery Task (RIT; Allen et al., 2013) reveals that, following the activation of certain action sets, conscious contents can arise in response to external stimuli in an involuntary, systematic, and nontrivial manner (Allen et al., 2013). In the original version of the task (based in part on Wegner, 1989), participants are presented with visual objects and instructed to not subvocalize the names of these objects. On a majority of trials, participants cannot suppress subvocalizations. In other variants, participants cannot suppress counting the number of letters comprising the object names (Merrick et al., 2015).

Perhaps some conscious contents are more likely to arise involuntarily than others. In our experiment, we contrasted cognitive- and emotion-based conscious contents. The latter tend to be less amenable to 'direct cognitive control' than the former. It has been proposed that mental processes that are amenable to direct cognitive control are, interestingly, more susceptible to ironic processing.

After being trained to perform a word-manipulation task similar to Pig Latin (e.g., "CAR" becomes "AR-CAY"), participants were instructed to not transform stimulus words in this way. In a comparison condition, participants were presented with emotion words (e.g., SAD) and instructed to not feel the corresponding emotion.