



Neurobiological Analysis of Bushe's "Experience Cube": A Comprehensive Review of Neuroscientific Evidence

Executive Summary

Gervase Bushe's chapter on the "Experience Cube" (Bushe, 2001) presents a sophisticated model of human experience organized around four dimensions—observations, thoughts, feelings, and wants—with critical distinctions between conscious and unconscious elements. This analysis demonstrates that Bushe's framework aligns remarkably well with contemporary neuroscience and neuropsychology research, particularly regarding how the brain generates, integrates, and regulates these multiple dimensions of experience. The neurobiological evidence reveals that the apparent unity of human experience emerges from distributed neural systems that operate both consciously and unconsciously, validating Bushe's core insight that "experience is not what happens to you, it's what you do with what happens to you."

Contents

I. Percepts, Internal Generation, and Top-Down Processing.....	2
II. Observations: The Challenge of Separating Perception from Interpretation.....	2
III. The Element of Feeling: Somatic Markers and Emotional-Cognitive Integration	3
IV. Thoughts and Mental Operations: Top-Down Control and Executive Function.....	4
V. Wants: Motivation, Value Representation, and Goal-Directed Behavior	5
VI. The Unity of Experience: Self-Reference, Consciousness, and the Default Mode Network.....	6
VII. The Observer Function and Metacognitive Capacity	7
VIII. The Unconscious-Conscious Continuum	7
IX. Emotional Congruence in Experience Construction	8
X. Implications for Organizational Development and Leadership.....	9
Conclusion	10
Endnotes	10
References	13

I. Percepts, Internal Generation, and Top-Down Processing

Bushe's Central Claim: Percepts—images and urges generated internally—are the primary building blocks of experience, and experience is fundamentally "inside-out" rather than "outside-in."

Neurobiological Support:

Contemporary predictive coding frameworks demonstrate that Bushe's insight reflects actual neural organization. The brain does not passively receive sensory data; rather, it continuously generates predictions about incoming stimulation based on internal generative models. These models incorporate history, culture, beliefs, and biochemistry. When external sensory input arrives, it functions primarily to correct prediction errors, not to create experience ex nihilo.^{[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8]}

Research using fMRI and electrophysiology reveals that the brain's default operation involves top-down predictions flowing from higher cortical areas to lower sensory regions, while bottom-up sensory errors propagate upward. This hierarchical predictive system perfectly matches Bushe's description of percepts—internally generated representations that shape how external stimuli are experienced.^{[4][9][7][8]}

Critically, subliminal perception studies demonstrate that stimulus discrimination can occur without conscious awareness, and this unconscious processing is

predicted by pre-stimulus neural activity. The brain's own state—its percepts and expectations—determines what information enters conscious awareness and how it is interpreted, supporting Bushe's observation that identical external conditions produce different experiences depending on internal state.^{[10][11]}

II. Observations: The Challenge of Separating Perception from Interpretation

Bushe's Key Point: Observations are the closest element of experience to "objective" reality (what a video recorder would capture), yet most people confuse observations with interpretations and judgments.

Neurobiological Support:

The challenge Bushe identifies has deep neural roots. Attention is not a passive filter but an active, top-down process governed by the prefrontal and parietal cortex. What we "observe" depends critically on where our attention is directed, which is shaped by expectations, goals, emotional states, and learned associations.^{[12][13][14][15][16][17]}

Prefrontal cortex (particularly the dorsolateral PFC) generates bias signals that modulate activity throughout the sensory cortex, literally filtering which information reaches conscious awareness. Individual differences in metacognitive ability—the capacity to monitor and reflect on one's own mental processes—correlate with grey matter

volume in the anterior prefrontal cortex and the integrity of white matter tracts connecting to this region.^{[18][19][20]}

The anterior insular cortex plays a critical role in sustaining attention to internal bodily signals while also modulating the strength of external sensory processing. This neural architecture explains why some individuals develop rich observational skills (becoming more aware of sensory details) while others remain relatively "numb" to the same environment. Training in attention—whether through meditation, professional observation, or disciplined practice—can rewire these prefrontal-sensory circuits, increasing the accuracy and richness of observations.^{[21][15][16][12]}

Nonverbal cues, which Bushe emphasizes as critical to accurate observation of others, are processed through a distributed network including face-selective regions (fusiform gyrus, posterior superior temporal sulcus), amygdala, and prefrontal cortex. The amygdala functions as a "relevance detector," flagging social cues with emotional significance starting as early as 123 milliseconds after stimulus presentation. This early amygdala response explains why our interpretations of others' internal states are so influenced by emotional congruence rather than objective observation.^{[22][23]}

III. The Element of Feeling: Somatic Markers and Emotional-Cognitive Integration

Bushe's Framework: Feelings consist of body sensations and emotions. Emotions are sensations with a message. Both profoundly influence experience but operate largely outside conscious awareness for most people.

Neurobiological Support:

Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis directly validates Bushe's model. Emotions generate bodily sensations (changes in heart rate, gut sensations, facial expressions) that become associated with particular outcomes. These somatic states then bias future decision-making both consciously and unconsciously. The neural substrates include ventromedial prefrontal cortex, orbitofrontal cortex, amygdala, and insula—regions that integrate bodily signals with cognitive and emotional processing.^{[24][25][26][27][28]}

Interoception—the sensing of internal bodily states—emerges as fundamental to all the elements of experience Bushe describes. The anterior insula cortex (AIC) serves as a critical hub for interoceptive awareness, integrating signals about heart rate, respiration, temperature, and pain. Individuals differ dramatically in interoceptive sensibility—their self-reported awareness of bodily sensations—and these differences correlate with activation in insula and somatosensory cortex.^{[29][30][21]}

Remarkably, the story Bushe tells about Milo demonstrates a fundamental principle: unconscious body sensations (the gut-

twisting sensation) were driving behavior (the critical feedback) without awareness. When Milo became conscious of the sensation through the walking exercise, he could regulate his behavior. This reflects the hierarchical nature of interoceptive processing: initial visceral sensations arise automatically, but conscious awareness requires activation of the anterior insular cortex and its connectivity to prefrontal regions.^{[30][29][21]}

The amygdala encodes both the valence (good/bad) and salience (how important/significant) of emotional stimuli. This encoding occurs in parallel neural pathways that can influence behavior unconsciously while remaining inaccessible to conscious reflection. Studies of decision-making reveal that emotional valence often determines choices before rational deliberation occurs—people feel their way to a decision, then construct rational justifications.^{[26][31][32][24]}

Critically, emotional processing is not opposed to rational thought but foundational to it. Damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex or to connections to the amygdala and insula produces profound deficits in decision-making despite intact logical abilities. Without somatic feedback, people cannot assign value to options or generate preferences—a condition called "myopia for the future" in clinical literature.^{[27][32][24]}

Body Sensations and Awareness Development: Research on proprioception

(sense of body position and movement) reveals that this "basic" sensory system contributes fundamentally to bodily self-awareness, including the senses of body ownership and agency. The parietal cortex integrates proprioceptive signals with other bodily inputs to construct a unified sense of self. Most people, as Bushe notes, have been trained from childhood to push body sensations out of awareness. This dissociation between felt sensation and conscious awareness has measurable neural correlates—reduced activity in the network linking insula, somatosensory cortex, and prefrontal regions.^{[33][29]}

IV. Thoughts and Mental Operations: Top-Down Control and Executive Function

Bushe's Insight: Thinking involves all cognitive processes (judgments, interpretations, beliefs, visual images, self-talk). Most people in Western culture are highly developed in this capacity but often unconscious of some of their thoughts.

Neurobiological Support:

The prefrontal cortex, particularly dorso-lateral and medial PFC regions, orchestrates the conscious deliberation, planning, and self-reflection that characterize human thinking. Activity in medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) increases during self-referential thought and metacognitive judgment. The dorsolateral PFC generates bias signals that modulate sensory processing according to current goals and expectations.^{[34][17][19][35][36][20][37][12][18]}

When Bushe emphasizes the distinction between observation and interpretation, he is pointing to a critical neural distinction. Observation primarily engages the sensory cortex and attention networks in parietal and prefrontal regions. Interpretation additionally engages the orbitofrontal cortex, amygdala, medial prefrontal cortex, and medial temporal lobe memory regions, which bind current perception to accumulated knowledge and prior experience.^{[13][23][18]}

Emotion-congruent processing—where mood and emotion bias what we think about what we observe—reflects activity patterns in the medial orbitofrontal cortex that are associated with integration of emotional valence into judgment. Disturbingly, this bias operates largely unconsciously; people are rarely aware of the emotional coloring introduced into their interpretations.^{[38][20]}

Self-regulation of thought—stopping oneself from elaborating on negative interpretations or recognizing one's own biases—requires intact dorsolateral PFC function and top-down control over limbic regions. This capacity is not equally distributed; it develops across the lifespan, varies with stress and fatigue, and can be enhanced through training.^{[39][37][40]}

V. Wants: Motivation, Value Representation, and Goal-Directed Behavior

Bushe's Framework: Wants include desires, intentions, goals, and aspirations. Most people lose conscious awareness of their wants as they develop, becoming clearer about what they don't want than about what they do.

Neurobiological Support:

The neural architecture of motivation involves dopamine-based reward circuitry centered on the ventral striatum (nucleus accumbens) and ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC). These regions encode the "incentive salience" or "wanting" dimension of motivation—the drive to pursue or avoid stimuli. Critically, wanting is dissociable from liking (pleasure); dopamine mediates motivation, not pleasure.^{[41][42][43][44][45]}

The nucleus accumbens shell encodes affective value—the desirability or aversiveness of potential actions—and functionally communicates with the vmPFC to bias decision-making toward high-value actions. The anterior mid-cingulate cortex (amCC) performs cost-benefit computations necessary for tenacious goal-pursuit.^{[46][43][44][41]}

Notably, the vmPFC represents the subjective value of diverse types of actions—the "apples to oranges" comparison that allows choice among qualitatively different options. Individual differences in the strength of vmPFC representation of goal values predict both motivational strength and individual differences in the ability to delay

gratification or redirect behavior toward long-term goals.^[42]

As Bushe describes, people often become confused about their authentic wants because they have internalized external values or developed habitual avoidance of their own desires. Neuroscientifically, this reflects a shift in control from motivational regions (vmPFC, nucleus accumbens) toward habitual processing in dorsolateral striatum, mediated by chronic activation of subcortical fear and avoidance circuits. Recovering awareness of "what one really wants" requires reactivating ventral motivational systems and integrating their representations with self-referential processing in medial prefrontal cortex.^{[43][41][42]}

VI. The Unity of Experience: Self-Reference, Consciousness, and the Default Mode Network

Bushe's Meta-Principle: All four elements (observations, thoughts, feelings, wants) are present simultaneously in experience, though not all are in awareness. The goal is to expand conscious accessibility to all dimensions.

Neurobiological Support:

The default mode network (DMN)—comprising medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), and inferior parietal lobule—is active during rest and self-referential thinking. This network integrates internal mental states with external perception, allowing

the brain to maintain a coherent sense of self across time. Activity in the mPFC predicts freely made decisions up to 7 seconds before conscious awareness of having decided.^{[47][48][49][36][50][51]}

The distinction between phenomenal consciousness (having an experience) and access consciousness (being able to report or act on the experience) is fundamental. Research suggests that much sensory processing occurs phenomenally (we have the experience) without cognitive access (we cannot report it or use it deliberately). This maps perfectly onto Bushe's distinction between conscious and unconscious elements of the four dimensions of experience.^{[52][53][47]}

The anterior prefrontal cortex appears to function as a domain-general hub integrating information about internal mental states, external reality, and the social world. The medial prefrontal cortex specializes in representing self-referential information, integrating internal visceral/emotional signals with external contextual cues. Robust self-awareness—metacognitive accuracy about one's own experiences—requires functional integrity of this network.^{[19][48][36][18]}

Interoceptive cortex (particularly anterior insula) is proposed to contribute to first-person perspective-taking and the unity of conscious experience by integrating organ signals into a singular subjective viewpoint. The brain's construction of a unified

self emerges from these integrative processes across distributed systems.^[54]

VII. The Observer Function and Metacognitive Capacity

Bushe's Practice: The ability to simultaneously participate fully in an interaction while observing it—watching oneself having thoughts, noticing one's own biases, observing nonverbal cues in others—is central to leadership and learning.

Neurobiological Support:

This "observer function" reflects the neural capacity for metacognition; thinking about one's own thinking. The rostral lateral prefrontal cortex (rlPFC) is crucial for retrospective judgments about one's own cognition, representing task uncertainty in a format suitable for communication. Medial prefrontal cortex represents self-generated information and attends to internal representations.

The right anterior insula also contributes to metacognitive accuracy by linking bodily states to cognitive judgments.^[18]

Sustained attention to both external and internal information simultaneously recruits a distributed network including superior parietal lobule, temporal-parietal junction, insula, dorsolateral PFC, and anterior cingulate—the attentional control network. Individuals with higher trait mindfulness show greater activity in this network, indicating that the capacity to be

both participant and observer can be trained and enhanced.^{[16][17]}

Mirror neurons in premotor and parietal cortex activate both when an individual performs an action and when they observe others performing similar actions. This system may underlie the empathetic observation Bushe advocates: understanding others' experiences by internally simulating them. Critically, mirror neuron activity is stronger when observing people with whom one has positive social connection, suggesting that relational safety enhances the capacity for genuine observation of others.^{[55][56]}

VIII. The Unconscious-Conscious Continuum

Bushe's Key Assertion: Experience exists on a continuum; elements can be pushed out of awareness or brought into awareness through attention and training. Consciousness is not binary.

Neurobiological Support:

Rather than a sharp distinction between conscious and unconscious processing, neuroscience reveals a continuum. Subliminal stimuli can be discriminated with above-chance accuracy despite lack of conscious awareness. Neural activity before stimulus presentation predicts whether subsequent unconscious processing will occur, indicating that the brain's prior state determines accessibility.^{[57][58][11][10]}

Conscious and unconscious visual processing appear to lie on the same continuum rather than involving qualitatively different mechanisms. The primary difference is that conscious representations are maintained in working memory circuits via persistent neural activity that outlasts stimulus presentation, whereas unconscious representations are transient. This architectural difference explains why conscious information can be flexibly deployed and reported while unconscious information cannot.^{[57][10]}

Training and attention can shift the boundary between conscious and unconscious processing. Studies of non-verbal emotion recognition show that explicit training increases brain activity in face-processing regions, including the fusiform gyrus, and in emotional evaluation areas, coupled with improved behavioral accuracy in reading emotional expressions. Learning literally rewires the neural systems supporting perception and cognition.^[22]

The executive attention network (prefrontal and parietal cortex) modulates the accessibility of representations in sensory and association cortex. By directing attention strategically (a skill Bushe advocates) individuals can bring previously unconscious experiences into awareness and conversely, can reduce mental elaboration on unwanted thoughts through downregulation of prefrontal activity during emotion regulation.^{[14][15][17][37][12][13][39][38]}

IX. Emotional Congruence in Experience Construction

Bushe's Example: The same external event (child dawdling at breakfast) produces anger in one context (grumpy percepts) and playfulness in another (happy percepts).

Neurobiological Support:

The phenomenon Bushe describes—emotional congruence effects on perception—has well-characterized neural mechanisms. When the brain is in a particular emotional state, activity in medial orbitofrontal cortex biases subsequent interpretation of ambiguous stimuli in emotion-congruent directions. This is not conscious distortion; it reflects automatic engagement of circuits that use emotional valence as a basis for sense-making.^{[20][59][38]}

The amygdala, which rapidly processes emotional salience, sends projections to visual cortex that amplify processing of emotionally relevant information. When in a grumpy emotional state, threat-related circuits in amygdala and dorsal anterior cingulate become more excitable, making negative interpretations more accessible. Conversely, activation of reward circuits (ventromedial prefrontal and ventral striatal regions) associated with happy affect increases the salience of positive information.^{[60][23][61][38]}

Importantly, prefrontal regions (particularly lateral PFC) can override these emotion-congruent biases, allowing more balanced interpretation. This represents the kind of metacognitive clarity Bushe advocates—recognizing one's emotional state and actively adjusting one's interpretation accordingly.^{[37][39][20]}

X. Implications for Organizational Development and Leadership

Bushe's framework, well supported by neuroscience, has significant implications for leadership development and organizational learning:

1. Expanding Consciousness: Developing leaders' capacity to access all four elements of experience—observations, thoughts, feelings, and wants—requires engaging neural systems that many people have trained themselves to suppress or dissociate from. This is not simply an intellectual exercise; it involves neuroplasticity and the rewiring of default neural patterns.^{[29][16][39][18][22]}

2. Self-Differentiation as Neural Integration: Self-differentiation—maintaining one's own perspective while remaining in relationship with others—requires functional integrity of networks linking prefrontal self-representation with limbic and reward systems while also engaging attention and metacognitive circuits. Leaders who can simultaneously track their internal states, accurately observe external reality, and maintain goal-directed

behavior exemplify complex neural integration.^{[48][36][39][37]}

3. Nonverbal Observation as Precision Science: Bushe's emphasis on accurate observation of nonverbal cues is not merely a soft skill; mirror neurons, face-processing networks, and amygdala-based social cognition systems are specialized for this. Training in nonverbal observation literally enhances activity in these systems and increases their functional connectivity.^{[23][55][22]}

4. Emotion as Essential Information: Organizations that attempt to banish discussion of feelings are not eliminating emotional influence; they are merely pushing it underground where it operates unconsciously, biasing decisions without correction. Neuroscience is unambiguous: emotional signals in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex are fundamental to all decision-making.^{[32][24][26][27]}

5. Wants as Motivational Foundation: Goals and wants are not luxuries to be suppressed in service of rational planning; they represent the motivational foundation for action. Leaders who cannot access or articulate their own and others' genuine wants are working with incomplete information and reduced motivational leverage.^{[45][42][43]}

Conclusion

Bushe's "Experience Cube" represents a sophisticated model of human consciousness that aligns remarkably well with contemporary neuroscience. The distinction between observations and thoughts reflects neural differences in sensory versus interpretive processing. The emphasis on feelings and body sensations maps onto interoceptive and somatic marker systems. The focus on wants reflects the neural substrates of motivation and value representation. The assertion that all elements exist simultaneously, though not all in awareness, reflects the neuroscientific distinction between phenomenal and access consciousness.

Most importantly, Bushe's core insight—that experience is constructed from the inside out, shaped by internal percepts and expectations as much as external stimuli—represents a genuine neurobiological principle. The predictive brain generates experience continuously; external sensory input merely corrects errors in that ongoing generation. This explains why the same external conditions produce different experiences in different people and even in the same person in different internal states.

The path to greater effectiveness in leadership and organizational learning involves expanding conscious accessibility to all dimensions of experience through attention, training, and a willingness to become aware of previously dissociated

bodily sensations, emotions, and desires. This is not mystical or merely psychological; it reflects the gradual expansion of neural networks that can represent and integrate information about one's internal states, external reality, and the mental states of others—the neurobiological foundation of wisdom and mature leadership.

Endnotes

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