

Your guide to 29 wildly different theories of consciousness

The many, many ways researchers hope to solve the toughest mystery in science

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Theorists have proposed many explanations for consciousness. They are startlingly diverse, with different goals, starting points and even definitions of consciousness. To compare them, researchers surveyed articles suggesting a theoretical model for consciousness that were published between 2007 and 2017 in English or Italian.

Some of these theories have many publications to their name, such as global workspace theories, higher-order theories and integrated information theory, three of the field's leading models. But having more publications does not mean a theory is supported by stronger evidence—this analysis didn't weigh the strength of study results. Instead the number of articles most likely reflects the amount of

interest each type of theory garnered. This may explain why quantum theories of consciousness, which are fascinating but not yet grounded in much evidence, have been proposed so many times. Predictive processing theories, which are also influential in the field, are notably absent, perhaps because they originated as theories of perception rather than consciousness.

THEORIES INCLUDED IN THE META-ANALYSIS

The researchers found 68 articles that analyzed theoretical aspects of consciousness and that were published between 2007 and 2017 in English or Italian. Together, they represent 29 different types of theories. More than half (18) were suggested only once, but others garnered more interest.

Jen Christiansen; Source: "Theoretical Models of Consciousness: A Scoping Review," by Davide Sattin et al., in *Brain Sciences*, Vol. 11; April 2021 (*data*)

THEORY CHARACTERISTICS

All of these proposals are wildly different, and only some are supported by evidence. The researchers analyzed how each tried to address six dimensions of consciousness: (A) what brain activity correlates with conscious experience, (B) how consciousness relates to other mental faculties such as memory and attention, (C) the clinical treatment of disorders

involving consciousness, (D) how levels of consciousness could be measured, (E) how consciousness relates to sensory information, and (F) where subjective experience comes from.

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