

Our Most Ancient Perceptual Filters



By Henrie Lidiard

There are three patterns alive in each of us today that evolved millions of years ago. They form powerful, unconscious filters that determine what we focus on, how we feel and how we behave. They affect our relationships, where we find 'juice' in our life and how we thrive day to day. Also, if we are willing to look closely and to work with them in a particular way, they can even be a fast track to our personal growth and development.

They are our embodied animal intelligences, the **'self-preservation'**, **'sexual'** and **'social'** instincts; clusters of impulses or drives that have been studied extensively by biologists and are related to the survival and evolution of life here. Biologically speaking, the self-preservation instinct is an organism's urgent drive to stay alive and thrive, and we can see it in even the simplest of organisms: the ability to obtain adequate nutrition and hydration, to avoid danger and predation and to sense and respond intelligently to its environment.

The sexual instinct was the next to evolve. Sexual reproduction creatively 'rolled the genetic dice', ensuring the survival of species through time and across environments. In the animal kingdom we can see all manner of extravagant behaviours around sexual selection, including competition, risk, aggression, display and courtship.

Our embodied animal intelligences are related to the survival and evolution of life here on earth

Most recently, the social instinct evolved. In order to survive, individuals now needed to be able to read signals, communicate and survive together by fitting into social structures. In the animal kingdom we can see this most clearly in mammals that live in complex multi-generational hierarchies.

How our animal intelligences manifest today

These drives in humans encompass a wide range of behaviours. Self-preservation concerns more than just food, sexual instinct behaviour more than just sex, and the social instinct more than socialising. It is also worth understanding that we tend to experience these drives as sensations, appetites and intense visceral motivations. They are much more physical and emotional than they are cognitive. We have 'justifications' for why we behave as we do, but these usually come 'after the fact'.

The self-preservation instinct shows up in us as:

- **Self-care concerns:** around safety, security, health, nutrition, sleep, hygiene, comfort, ease and wellbeing
- **Practical wisdom concerns:** around managing resources, time, energy and money, and building strong, stable foundations
- **Nesting concerns:** around putting down roots, creating and maintaining a home that is a relaxing refuge, our immediate environment and connection to nature

The sexual instinct shows up in our:

- **Exploration concerns:** the desire for creative adventure, excitement, expansion, thrill and risk, and how aggressively we pursue these
- **Attraction concerns:** about our attractiveness, appearance and prowess, how to broadcast our qualities, get noticed, and act on the push/pull of attraction, chemistry and magnetism
- **Fusion concerns:** the drive to get below the surface, the intensity of our focus, and our ability to lose ourselves in whatever or whoever is the focus of our attention





The social instinct shows up in our:

- **Attuning and adjusting concerns:** reading people and situations, the currents of power and influence, and adapting our own behaviour to fit into the hierarchies present
- **Bonding and affiliating concerns:** building trust, relationships, alliances, interdependence and reciprocity
- **Participation and contribution concerns:** around belonging, having a place within the group, status, recognition, supporting and contributing

Our instincts as perceptual filters

Interestingly, whilst each of us has all three instincts, we tend to prioritise them. In general, we will have one **'dominant'** instinct that we attend to most of all, and we devote a LOT of time and energy to fulfilling it. The pitfall is that we tend to 'over-focus' on it in a way that can become compulsive and problematic for us. When we really look, we may notice how our over-focus on this instinct is actually causing issues for us in our life. These imbalances are often more easily noticed by others. However, when our dominant instinct behaviours are criticised by others (however well-intentioned their comment), we can react instantly and viscerally to that. It is almost as if our hackles go up and we can feel our 'not so distant fur and fangs' showing in our defences. Strangely, even though it may be a comment about a seemingly minor behaviour, our reactivity feels almost as if it is a matter of life and death, which of course, in instinctual terms, it is.

We all have a secondary instinct that

functions more smoothly. We are relaxed about it, skilful at it and it works in a balanced way; we might call this our **'free'** instinct. Our third instinct tends to be habitually neglected or repressed. We don't feel at ease in attending to it. We may have developed some ability to handle it, but largely we procrastinate about it, object to it and think it will be a drain on us. It may feel stressful, boring or even distasteful. We can think of this repressed instinct as our **'blind spot'**. Whilst our dominant and free instincts may switch position from time to time throughout the circumstances of our life, our blind spot remains constant and is usually easier for us to recognise.

Instincts and relationships

As we might expect, we tend to find an easy rapport with people who have the same dominant instinct as us. We enjoy, focus on and talk about the same things. The way we live our lives and the activities we participate in will overlap. We'll tend to understand and approve of each other's priorities. We can also connect with others via our free instinct if that is dominant for them, as we have enough focus there to share some experiences and interest. However, we can find ourselves feeling judgemental and irritated by someone whose preoccupations are focused around an instinct that is our blind spot. Their priorities and fixations will vex us, seeming unnecessary, ridiculous or misplaced. Of course, because of the over-focus of the dominant instinct, their behaviours around this are likely to be predictable and constant, which may add to our irritation. However, when we feel more deeply into our response, we

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might notice that their behaviours rankle because they remind us of the area in life that we feel most vulnerable about. Our reaction often overlays a longing for an aspect of our life that we know, deep down, could really benefit from our attention.

Bringing balance to our instincts

As we know in NLP, we cannot 'not' do something. So trying to 'focus less' on our dominant instinct is counterproductive. The good news, though, is that our blind spot, in addition to being easier to recognise, also holds the key for us. When we bring kindness and awareness to our blind spot and take small, practical steps every day to address it, we naturally bring our system back in to balance. The behaviours themselves can actually be very small, but it is the **conscious attention** and the **consistency of action** that make an almost miraculous difference. The task requires honesty and compassion for ourselves, but the rewards are huge. We begin to feel a deep inner relaxation and a deeper sense of being able to 'land' in ourselves and in our life. Our relationships deepen, and we feel fulfilled. At a deeper level still, it helps us to integrate our creativity and spiritual insights into our lived life. One of my teachers described the instincts work as deeply challenging but also giving us the "single biggest bang for our spiritual buck". Of all the practices I have learned, this is the one that continues to enrich my life the most.

If you'd like to find out more, you can explore the work of Russ Hudson and Don Riso or you can contact Henrie at NLP in the North. ■

Henrie Lidiard (BSc, PhD, INLPTA NLP Master Trainer and Riso-Hudson Accredited Enneagram Trainer, mBIT Master Coach and Trainer) Henrie works as a coach and consultant based in West Yorkshire. She began her career as a research scientist but since 1997 her professional focus has been the development of self-awareness and communication skills in the workplace. She delivers accredited NLP, mBIT and Enneagram trainings through NLP in the North, and she uses both the mind and body to increase resilience, wellbeing and effectiveness. Henrie has been involved in research studies applying these skills to palliative care, MRI radiography and mental health. Her passion is helping people to connect to their deeper nature and to the wisdom of the present moment.