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Reading Minds at Work and Play

Games

By Richard Harth

Humans have a startling ability to extract meaning from words. For most, a facility with written and spoken language is second nature by adolescence. Reading *people* on the other hand—deciphering the non-verbal, often unconscious signals they send out—is a highly specialized talent, one that Andrew Rubin (Ph.D. PSYC '01) has honed to an uncanny degree.

In the course of his career in clinical psychology, Rubin has become keenly attuned to facial and bodily intimations in his patients, drawing on a silent storehouse of emotional data to help children and adults. Today, his thriving Florida practice assists those with infant and childhood development issues, couples facing relational problems, and those grappling with depression.

But don't expect much empathy should you encounter Rubin across a poker table. There, his people-reading prowess is likely to be used against you. Indeed, Dr. Drew, "The Poker Ph.D." (as ESPN announcers dubbed him), has a deadly knack for reading tells—subtle clues players give regarding the cards they hold. This ability has earned Rubin "casino cred" from seasoned pros, not to mention more than a quarter-million dollars in prize winnings.

Schools of Thought

Rubin's fascination with psychology lured him to IIT, where he earned his doctorate in clinical psychology. It was an experience Rubin recalls with deep fondness: "IIT was a wonderful learning environment, and Robert Schleser was one of the greatest mentors a person could ever have," he says, referring to his advisor at the Institute of Psychology.

An obsession with poker, however, didn't blossom until his post-grad days. Rubin found himself at Tulane University, where an old IIT buddy, Lorenzo Azzi (Ph.D. PSYC '01), was interning. Amid their academic studies, the two psychologist friends took up poker—first casually, soon with ferocious determination. "Drew and I are very

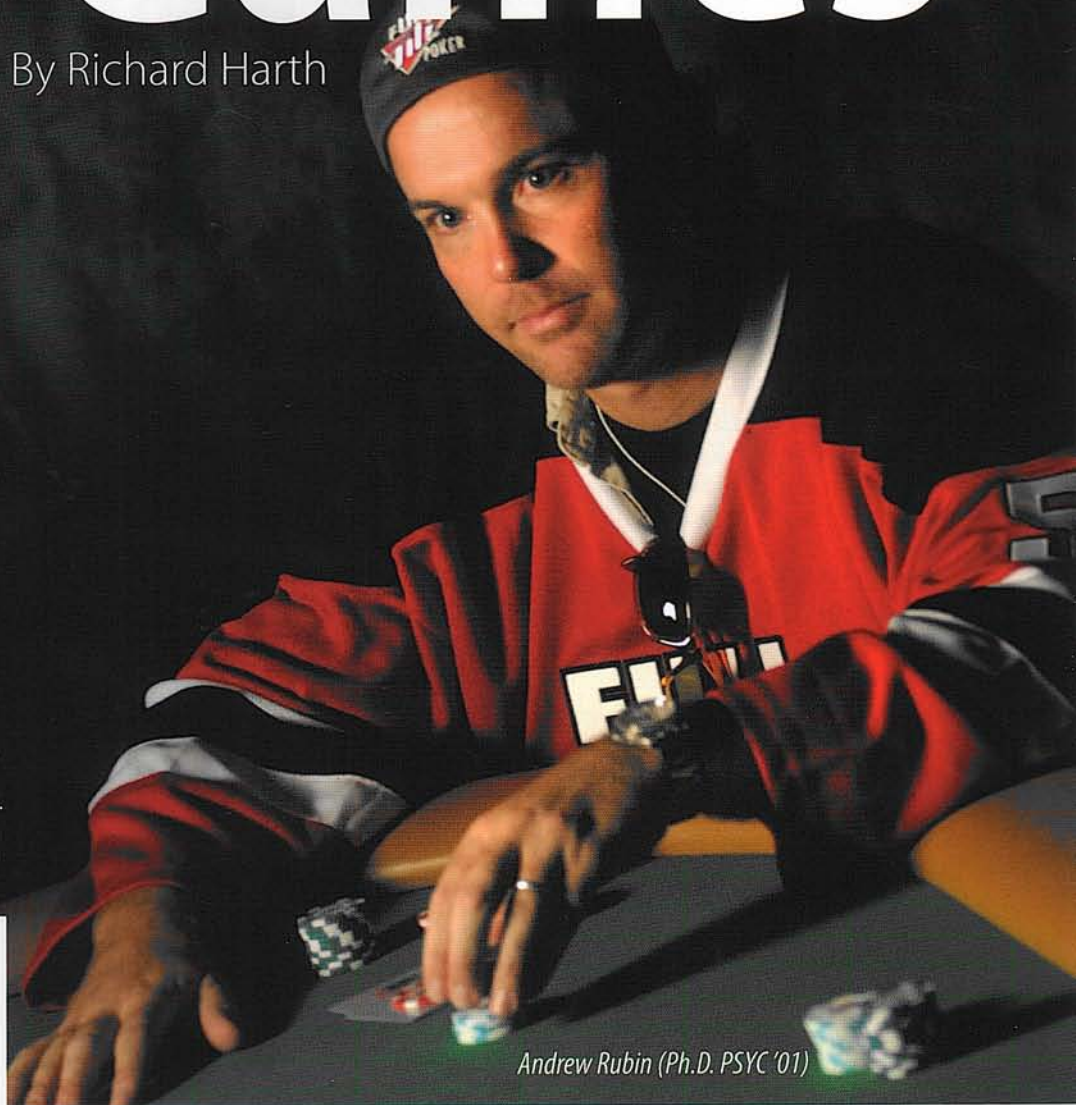
competitive," Azzi says, adding that both also were strong athletes. "As we got older, our bodies didn't allow us to compete at our previous levels. So we gravitated toward another area where we felt we had an edge on our opponents," he adds with a laugh.

Periodic Tables

New Orleans' thriving assortment of gambling dens and riverboat casinos provided an ideal second campus for the pair. After making the evening rounds, the

two would often stay up for hours playing one-on-one poker and honing their skills.

Rubin also was digesting poker books with a near-insatiable appetite, though he found the art and science of reading tells inadequately explored. This was particularly true with respect to his game of choice—Texas Hold 'Em, a lively poker variant that has recently become a national sensation. "If you look at all the successful players who make it to the final tables over and over again," Rubin insists, "their ability to read



Andrew Rubin (Ph.D. PSYC '01)

other players is a significant factor." Having mastered all fundamentals of the game, he undertook a comprehensive study of poker's often-elusive psychological aspects, in particular, the decryption of tells.

Learning to Read

The traditional poker face—a blank slate leeching of emotional affect—is for poker zealots like Rubin a treasure trove of information. As he explains, two broad species of tells exist: those the player emits subconsciously and those used deliberately to mislead the opponent, what in common parlance are known as bluffs. "What I study are the autonomic responses when people pick up a hand," Rubin says. Such signals include dilation of the pupils, increased breathing, perspiration, and other manifestations of anxiety.

The technique has correlates in other fields, notably law enforcement, where

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autonomic clues suggestive of deception are used in criminal interviews. In psychology, such non-verbal behavioral cues also may prove critical, as Rubin elaborates: "I use it every day in my clinical practice. You can tell if patients are distressed, if they're being disingenuous, if they're nervous," he says.

At the highest levels of play, relentless intelligence gathering is the order of the day. "Every single round I want to pick up something on the players," Rubin maintains. "The way they bet their chips, how they look at their cards—you never know when you're going to detect something that's going to come in handy."

Rubin's supreme attentiveness paid off in spades (or rather, in aces) at the 2006 World Series of Poker. "It was my very first World Series event. I was a little stressed going in there," he remembers. In one of the late rounds, with tension mounting, Rubin found himself seated at a table with Jennifer Harman, one of the world's top players.

Psychological Warfare

Rubin is animated in recounting the magical moment that turned the tables for him during that game: "I had one hand against Jennifer, with three tables left. It was a huge hand," he remembers. It was at this moment

his near-clairvoyant ability to read tells eased him into the winner's circle.

"I actually recognized Jennifer's tell from watching her on television," he says. Her tell revealed that Harman also had a very strong hand (ace, king, it turned out) and might be enticed to go all in, that is, to bet all of her chips. Having read Harman's unconscious tell, Rubin responded with a purposeful tell designed to imply that he was tentative about his next move.

The tactic worked. Confident of her superior strength, Harman pushed all her chips to the center of the table, only to see Dr. Drew uncover pocket aces, the strongest hand in poker. Having relieved Harman of all of her cash in one stunning hand, Rubin went on to the final table and a \$264,000 win.

Ron Rubens, poker shark and co-founder of World Poker Tour Boot Camp, a training ground for aspiring champs, remembers

Rubin's hand well. "Because he was able to pick up the tell, he was able to securely set a trap. One read like that in a tournament can make the difference between going home with nothing and going home with several hundred thousand dollars," he says. "In Drew's particular case, that's exactly what happened."

Not surprisingly, Rubens decided to tap Dr. Drew's powers of perception, inviting him to play and teach his skills during the championship round of the Spring World Poker Tour in Reno. For three days, The Poker Ph.D. acted as the Boot Camp's tell-reading guru-in-residence, wrapping up the exciting event with a third place finish in the WPT Championship.

Happily preoccupied with his clinical practice and busy family life these days, Rubin has no plans to hit the road hustling poker full-time, though his enthrallment with the game is undiminished: "I really like the intellectual challenges of poker. It's understanding the statistics of the hands that you play, understanding position, being able to read other players—everything in combination makes it fascinating for me." ■

Richard Harth is a writer based in New Orleans.

Game Faces

The autonomic nervous system has evolved to protect humans in hostile settings. As Andrew Rubin notes, "In a stressful or dangerous situation your blood pressure increases. Your heart rate increases. You get a burst of energy, and your eyes dilate to make you more aware of your environment. Without this delicate system," he observes, "humans might have failed to survive as a species."

For those properly attuned, such telltale signs of anxiety or stress may be used to an advantage, particularly in the game of poker.

Four poker tells

- **Trembling hands.** "It's very difficult to cover up when you hit a big hand," notes Ruben. "Your blood pressure goes up and the first thing that happens as you try to manipulate the chips is your hand starts trembling." He instructs novice poker players: "always watch people's hands!"
- **Betting pattern.** "Where your opponent places his chips can make a big difference. People do a lot of unconscious things," Rubin adds. "For instance, he may push those chips far away from him and put them in the middle of the table if he feels they may not be coming back. If he thinks he has a big hand he may not place them as far away."
- **Player glances at chips.** When a player casts a glance at his or her chips after looking at their hand, this is usually an inadvertent sign their hand is strong. "Even before I look at my cards, I'm watching everyone else look at their chips," Rubin says.
- **False tells.** The most general rule of thumb in reading tells deliberately designed to mislead is that players attempt to look strong when they are weak and weak when they hold a strong hand. These conscious gestures, which poker players refer to as acting, tend to be splashier and less subtle than tells emitted unconsciously. A player who sighs at his cards or speaks with exaggerated hesitancy or a tenor of resignation is often concealing a big hand.

(Richard Harth)