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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Young and the Neuro

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)
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When you go to an academic conference you expect to see some geeks, gravitas and graying professors giving lectures. But the people who showed up at the Social and Affective Neuroscience Society's conference in Lower Manhattan last weekend were so damned young, hip and attractive. The leading figures at this conference were in their 30s, and most of the work was done by people in their 20s. When you spoke with them, you felt yourself near the beginning of something long and important.



David Brooks

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In 2001, an Internet search of the phrase "social cognitive neuroscience" yielded 53 hits. Now you get more than a million on Google. Young scholars have been drawn to this field from psychology, economics, political science and beyond in the hopes that by looking into the brain they can help settle some old arguments about how people interact.

These people study the way biology, in the form of genes, influences behavior. But they're also trying to understand the complementary process of how social behavior changes biology. Matthew Lieberman of U.C.L.A. is doing research into what happens in the brain when people are persuaded by an argument.

Keely Muscatell, one of his doctoral students, and others presented a study in which they showed people from various social strata some images of menacing faces. People whose parents had low social status exhibited more activation in the amygdala (the busy little part of the brain involved in fear and emotion) than people from high-status families.

Reem Yahya and a team from the University of Haifa studied Arabs and Jews while showing them images of hands and feet in painful situations. The two cultures

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perceived pain differently. The Arabs perceived higher levels of pain over all while the Jews were more sensitive to pain suffered by members of a group other than their

own.

Mina Cikara of Princeton and others scanned the brains of Yankee and Red Sox fans as they watched baseball highlights. Neither reacted much to an Orioles-Blue Jays game, but when they saw their own team doing well, brain regions called the ventral striatum and nucleus accumbens were activated. This is a look at how tribal dominance struggles get processed inside.

Jonathan B. Freeman of Tufts and others peered into the reward centers of the brain such as the caudate nucleus. They found that among Americans, that region was likely to be activated by dominant behavior, whereas among Japanese, it was more likely to be activated by subordinate behavior — the same region rewarding different patterns of behavior depending on culture.

All of these studies are baby steps in a long conversation, and young academics are properly circumspect about drawing broad conclusions. But eventually their work could give us a clearer picture of what we mean by fuzzy words like ‘culture.’ It could also fill a hole in our understanding of ourselves. Economists, political scientists and policy makers treat humans as ultrarational creatures because they can’t define and systematize the emotions. This work is getting us closer to that.

The work demonstrates that we are awash in social signals, and any social science that treats individuals as discrete decision-making creatures is nonsense. But it also suggests that even though most of our reactions are fast and automatic, we still have free will and control.

Many of the studies presented here concerned the way we divide people by in-group and out-group categories in as little as 170 milliseconds. The anterior cingulate cortices in American and Chinese brains activate when people see members of their own group endure pain, but they do so at much lower levels when they see members of another group enduring it. These effects may form the basis of prejudice.

But a study by Saaid A. Mendoza and David M. Amodio of New York University showed that if you give people a strategy, such as reminding them to be racially fair, it is possible to counteract those perceptions. People feel disgust toward dehumanized groups, but a study by Claire Hoogendoorn, Elizabeth Phelps and others at N.Y.U. suggests it is possible to lower disgust and the accompanying insula activity through cognitive behavioral therapy.

In other words, consciousness is too slow to see what happens inside, but it is possible to change the lenses through which we unconsciously construe the world.

Since I’m not an academic, I’m free to speculate that this work will someday give us new categories, which will replace misleading categories like ‘emotion’ and ‘reason.’ I suspect that the work will take us beyond the obsession with I.Q. and other conscious capacities and give us a firmer understanding of motivation, equilibrium, sensitivity and other unconscious capacities.

The hard sciences are interpenetrating the social sciences. This isn’t dehumanizing. It shines attention on the things poets have traditionally cared about: the power of human attachments. It may even help policy wonks someday see people as they really are.

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