Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect

Matthew D. Lieberman

Social neuroscience—how our brains respond to social engagement—is the book I’ve been waiting for: a brilliant and beautiful exploration of how we become who we are and why life is the way it is. As Dr. Lieberman argues, the key to our success as a species, and one of the reasons we evolved large brains in the first place, is our fundamentally social nature—and explains the origins, brain bases, and everyday applicability of our social superpowers.

At last, a book that really does put the social into social neuroscience, and, more remarkably, does it in a way that layman and scientist alike can read with pleasure.”

—Robin Dunbar, professor, University of Oxford

Based on over a decade of groundbreaking research in social neuroscience—how our brains respond to social engagement—Social reveals that our need to connect with other people is even more fundamental than our need for food and shelter. It is, Dr. Lieberman argues, the key to our success as a species, and one of the reasons we evolved large brains in the first place. Lieberman and others have discovered that when our brain is not focused on a specific task, it uses spare time—its default network—to learn about and master the social world. We’ve been told that we need to commit 10,000 hours to become a master at complex skills such as music, chess, and math. Lieberman argues that each and every one of us has 10,000 hours learning to make sense of people and groups and our place in them by the time we are ten.

So many of us believe that physical pain and pleasure guide our actions. Yet new research by Lieberman and his UCLA colleagues using fMRI (frontal magnetic resonance imaging) shows that our brains respond to social pain and pleasure just as powerfully as they do to physical plain and pleasure. When asked what the most painful experience in our lives has been, most of us do not recount an injury or a broken limb—we describe the death of a loved one or the end of a marriage or relationship.

Fortunately, the brain has evolved sophisticated mechanisms for securing our place in the social world. We have a unique ability among species to “read” other people’s minds to figure out their hopes, fears, and motivations, allowing us to effectively coordinate our lives with one another. This wiring allows us to restrain our selfish impulses for the greater social good. And it is the malfunctioning of this wiring that leads to the challenges in connecting with others that we see in autism.

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