



book review

Social: why our brains are wired to connect.

review by **Suzanne Oosterwijk**

Humans have large brains. According to the social brain hypothesis, proposed by Robin Dunbar, the social environment played a large role in the evolution of the human brain's structure and function. Today, typing "the social brain" in google scholar results in more than 10.000 hits. More than half of those hits refer to papers or books published since 2010. Conclusion: the social brain is a "hot" term in psychology. In his book "Social: Why our brains are wired to connect" Matthew Lieberman outlines his view on why we have a social brain, and how our social brain processes the world around us. Applying his view more broadly, he also explains what having a social brain may mean in dealing with social issues such as education, work and building social connections.

With "Social" Lieberman has written an informative, well-structured and enjoyable book which gives a great overview of some of the most important findings in social neuroscience. He tells the story of the social brain with clear examples, covering topics such as the social sharing of pain, mirror neurons, and "mindreading" (i.e., how we infer what other people think, believe or feel). The neuroscientific findings come to life through clear descriptions of scientific paradigms, but also through stories of real life phenomena, including some stemming from Lieberman's personal life. We learn for example how a simple electronic game of catch can impact feelings of social exclusion and what Lieberman's child prefers when given the choice between an ice-cream (now) or Disney land (tomorrow). For people who are somewhat daunted by the prospect of reading about neuroscience, I assure you, Lieberman's book is quite accessible. He uses neuroanatomical terms only when necessary and the book holds clear, crisp pictures of different regions in the brain. Even more importantly, psychological experiments are first thoroughly explained before moving on to the brain data, so the book is also accessible to people who did not study psychology.

A big part of Lieberman's story is the function of the so-called mentalizing system, that supports reading the minds of others, and the workings of the mirror system that supports action understanding. For example, Lieberman covers how these systems contribute to different forms of empathy and how these systems may be disturbed in autism. When reading his interpretation of these and other neuroscientific findings I did often wonder about his preference for evolutionary explanations. We know that both nature and nurture contribute to brain organization and function and Lieberman often neglects the impact of the latter. Moreover, even though Lieberman's book is about social processes, and therefore it is understandable that he focuses on the social function of the brain, I did miss a proper discussion of other potential basic processes that could underlie certain findings. The brain is a dynamic system in which the same region can perform multiple psychological functions. Many authors have argued that domain-general processes, such as general meaning making, or a distinction between concrete and abstract levels of construal may explain findings from

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Suzanne Oosterwijk received her Ph.D. from the University of Amsterdam.

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book rating

*overall**novelty**readability*

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social neuroscience experiments. In other words, Lieberman's explanation may not be the only one that fits, and the book would have been more precise if it would have at least mentioned the other functional interpretations of, for instance, the mentalizing system.

Lieberman touches on some very interesting and important scientific and philosophical debates, however. Why do we have a sense of self? Does altruism exist? How do we understand what someone else is thinking? For me, this book was food for thought. I kept pondering certain findings after putting the book down and I had several discussions with other people about issues raised in the book. I may not agree with everything that Lieberman says, but he definitely made me think.

The book ends with three chapters about how insights about the social brain can inform a variety of social issues, varying from how to increase general well-being to how to solve educational problems. Although these essays are a bit different in tone and content than the experimental chapters, I do applaud Lieberman for forwarding his vision on broad societal issues. He has clearly thought a lot about how his science can inform general policy making, and some of the points that he makes are well-taken. Of course one can wonder whether his recommendations only follow from neuroscientific research, but it is definitely worth the effort to think and talk about what social neuroscience can contribute to the public debate.



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