

The Social Animal

by David Brooks - 2011

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Introduction

Our traditional assumptions, that what differentiates man from other organisms is our ability to reason, is being challenged through new knowledge by geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and anthropologists. We are finding that we are primarily the products of thinking that goes on below the level of awareness.

This inner realm is illuminated by science, but it is highlighted by the power of relationships and the bonds between people. These things don't control our lives, but they shape our interpretation of our world.

The author's goals are to show what this unconscious system looks like when it is flourishing, and how the conscious and unconscious minds interact. He is also trying to describe how research influences the way we understand human nature and to draw out the social, political, and moral implications of these findings. Finally, he attempts to counteract the bias in our culture to focus on the conscious mind. We have focused so much on the logical and the conscious that we have often failed at education and instruction because we didn't account for emotion and the unconscious.

Scientific jargon is often dry and difficult to read and, since the author is emphasizing the unconscious and its preference for storytelling, he uses a story about two people - from birth to death - to interest the reader and find natural places in their stories to bring out scientific findings that support his views.

Since this is a synopsis of points the book is making, there will be no detailed discussion of the actual story told, but summaries of the science the author is bringing up. The story does draw you in and it does make the book much easier to read and follow.

Chapter 01 - Decision Making

Meeting the opposite sex - what men look for vs. what women look for at an instinctual level.

- Men use their eyes and pick up on the many fertility cues that can be seen.
- Women value trustworthiness and are 60-70% better at remembering scene details. However, they are also attracted to men who have unlike DNA characteristics; apparently to reduce the likelihood of inbreeding.

People tend to pick others like themselves - geographically, culturally, and intellectually.

Human culture exists, in large measure, to restrain the natural desires of the species.

Decision making is an inherently emotional business. People who have lost the emotional part of their personality can analyze, but are unable to make decisions. Reason and emotion are not separate and opposed, but are required to work together to analyze and decide.

While 90% of emotional communication is nonverbal, humans do learn additional words so that they can more effectively impress and sort out potential mates. Our decisions are decidedly part of our values and emotions measure the value of things.

Chapter 02 - The Map Meld

Living together exposes all the little patterns of existence that are different between two people. Couples learn what each has to live with and how the edges can be softened. They each celebrate their own virtue in being able to put up with the other.

Female sexual preferences seem to differ by education, culture, and status level; while men's desires are relatively similar. There is something to the joke that women need to feel loved in order to have sex and men need to have sex in order to feel loved. Men's internal communication barriers dissolve during sex.

Chapter 03 - Mindsight

A baby's job, even in the womb, is to survive. A fetus will withdraw from pain at five months. Children cannot talk for 1-2 years and will be dependent on another person for many more years.

Babies react to and understand tones, rhythms, and patterns to such an extent that birth isn't as important an event as for the parents. However, it is with birth that the baby is able to start changing the mother's personality to better insure its survival. A baby is a non-speaking bonding machine with a repertoire of skills to connect with those he loves.

At birth babies are able to imitate. They also inherit a great river of knowledge, along with the flow of patterns from many ages and sources and are not a clean slate.

- The information from deep in the evolutionary past we call genetics.
- The information revealed thousands of years ago we call religion.
- The information passed along from hundreds of years ago we call culture.
- We call the information from decades ago family.
- Recent information from years, months, days, or hours ago we call education and advice.

Along with the understanding a baby has accumulated by birth, they also have their appearance (big eyes, large forehead, small mouth and chin), an ability to gaze (babies are extremely good at reading faces), the need to and for touch, and finally their smell. These are key assets in assuring their survival.

Mothers become mentally and physically exhausted by their baby's ability to dominate their world and change mother's personality. They also become so totally intertwined the baby can anticipate the mother's needs and connect with them.

Babies organize their internal states by seeing their own minds reflected back at them in the faces of others.

A complex human relationship has quickly been built between mother and baby without words.

Chapter 04 - Mapmaking

Young children don't seem to have a self conscious inner observer and do not indulge in self-directed thinking. While adults use search-light consciousness - we direct attention at specific locations - young children have lantern consciousness - they immerse themselves in everything around them.

- Conscious, directed learning is good for deep thinking.
- Lantern consciousness is good for figuring out the environment you are living in - unconscious immersion learning. Young children are trying to build a map of life for later use.

Children's brains have over 100 billion cells, or neurons, in them. These neurons make connections with other neurons when something new is learned. When the same situation occurs again that neuron path is used and paths that are most used become more permanently laid down. This becomes our habits and personality, explaining why each of us is unique.

Imagination is the blending of two or more neural patterns into a new concept or neural pattern. It is an incredibly complex form of thinking and one children are particularly well equipped to take advantage of, due to their lack of permanently laid down paths.

Adults have trained their minds to excel at what is called "paradigmatic thinking", structured by logic and analysis. Children often think in "narrative mode", or a type of thinking that is like storytelling, requiring an additional dimension to convey emotion and with the ability to suspend some of the logical assumptions.

Chapter 05 - Attachment

Parents don't have to be perfect, just be good enough to provide stable and predictable rhythms, to fall in tune with their kids needs, and to provide secure enough emotional bonds to allow children to cope with the stress in the world. Children need to feel secure at home in order to adventure out into the world and take care of themselves. Children insecure at home also look for threats in the outside world.

- Securely attached children tend to cope with stressful situations well.
- Avoidantly attached children tend to have parents who are emotionally withdrawn and psychologically unavailable. Adults who are avoidantly attached tend not to remember much about their childhoods and are three times more likely to be solitary at age seventy.
- Children with ambivalent or disorganized attachment patterns tend to have parents who are inconstant. Later in life these children are more fearful than other children.

These attachment patterns do not determine a life course, but they do open up a pathway that fosters an unconscious working model of how the world works. The key factor is the finding that the causal arrows flow from parent to child, not the child's inherent personality, but the parent's sensitivity.

Early attachment patterns are coherent and very predictive of later childhood experiences. They also correlate well with school performance, much better than measures of IQ.

Self knowledge is limited because very few people can sense the way early experience has built models in the brain and we all tend to build fictions and theories to paper over the mysteries of what happened to us when the world was still vivid, fresh, and hits us with terrifying force.

Chapter 06 - Learning

School administrators believe that school exists to fulfill some socially productive process of information transmission, but in reality, high school is a machine for social sorting. The purpose is to give young people a sense of where they fit into the social structure.

Children who do well in school usually can connect with at least one teacher in high school. Students who can't imagine connection to a teacher are much more likely to drop out of school, regardless of the logic of increasing ones future earnings.

School asks students to be good at a range of subjects, but life asks people to find one passion that they will follow forever. Teachers can guide students in their passion and, in that way, allow them to learn to think and solve problems.

Chapter 07 - Norms

Educated-class families and lower-class families have completely different theories and models about how to raise their kids.

- Educated-class parents use concerted cultivation to push children and are involved in all aspects of their lives. Children raised this way know how to talk casually with adults, how to perform before large audiences, how to look people in the eye and make a good impression, and sometimes they even know how to connect actions to consequences.
- Lower-class parents are horrified by this pace and stress. They feel the cares of adulthood will come soon enough and kids should be let alone to organize their own playtime. Children raised this way seem more relaxed and vibrant, have more contact with extended families, play with kids of all ages, were less likely to complain about being bored or whining.

The lower-class mode does not prepare children as well for the modern economy; specifically it does not cultivate advanced verbal abilities. Students from the poorest quarter of the population have an 8.6% chance of getting into college, while the top quarter have a 75% chance of earning a college degree.

Children in the lower-class generally have to motivate themselves to change their environment if they want to change their lifestyle and this often means leaving old friends and family behind.

Chapter 08 - Self-Control

Children are born with a certain temperament and their behavior will evolve, but not likely radically change. Self-control is twice as important as IQ in predicting high-school performance, school attendance, and final grades.

Human decision making has three basic steps. First, we perceive a situation, then we use the power of reason to calculate which action is in our long-term interest, finally we use the power of will to execute our decision. In the nineteenth century most character-building models focused on willpower. The twentieth century the focus was on the use of reason. Both reason and will are important in making moral decisions, but neither has proven particularly effective. Our view has been that our first step - the act of perception - is a relatively simple matter of taking in a scene. Seeing and evaluating are linked and basically a simultaneous process and driven largely by culture. One of the most enduring lessons of social psychology is that behavior change often precedes changes in attitude and feelings - "fake it until you make it."

Chapter 09 - Culture

Extended family culture is often suspicious of outside influences and can be a hindrance to people wanting to succeed in the larger society. Westerners tend to focus narrowly on individuals taking actions, while Asians are more likely to focus on contexts and relationships.

Business school assumes people will react in predictable ways to incentives. However, cultural norms and personal experiences and situations have far more influence in how a person will react to an incentive.

Humans have succeeded in history because they have the ability to develop advanced cultures. Culture is a collection of habits, practices, beliefs, arguments, and tensions that regulates and guides human life. The human race is impressive because groups of people create mental scaffolds that guide future thought.

Not all cultures are equal and they actively compete with each other. People in progress-prone cultures live to work, while people in progress-resistant cultures work to live. Cultural substructure shapes decisions and behavior more than most economists or business leaders realize.

Chapter 10 - Intelligence

Environmental factors can play a huge role in shaping IQ. One study of black children found that they lost an average of six IQ points for every missed year of school. Attention seems to matter as firstborns tend to have higher IQs than later children.

Work ethic seems to be a more reliable indicator of success than does IQ, particularly beyond the IQ threshold of 120. There is a big difference between mental force and mental character. Mental character is forged by experience and effort, carved into the hinterland of the mind.

One of the great temptations of modern research is that it tries to pretend that every phenomenon is a clock (it can be broken down into its component pieces, examined, and reassembled to increase understanding) when many things are like a cloud (irregular, dynamic, and idiosyncratic and best described through narrative).

Wisdom doesn't consist of knowing specific facts or possessing knowledge of a field. It consists of knowing how to treat knowledge: being confident but not too confident; adventurous but grounded. It is a willingness to confront counter evidence and to have a feel for the vast spaces beyond what's known.

Chapter 11 - Choice Architecture

Merchants have long known that the design of their store and the products within that store location was critical to selling merchandise to their customers. When selling to customers, whether you are a merchant or a consultant, the first thing you have to do is listen to the customer and determine what they want.

Classical economics gets human nature partially or largely wrong. The human being imagined is smooth, brilliant, calm, and perpetually unastonished by events. He seeks to maximize his utility and his relationships are all contingent, contractual, and ephemeral. He has self-control and makes his own decisions on the basis of incentives.

Behavioral economics recognizes that rationality is bounded by emotion, people have trouble exercising self-control, they are influenced by context and groupthink, and the future is discounted to allow for present satisfactions.

The problem with behavioral economists is they still argue that human errors are predictable, systemic, and expressible in mathematical formulas. If this is not true then it means they have no quantifiable way to make predictions and therefore, no science. The choice architecture used to frame the tests conducted actually helped determine the outcome; therefore, the results start off being biased.

Chapter 12 - Freedom and Commitment

You can only discover your vocation by doing it, and seeing if it feels right. The economy has become more complicated, with a broader array of career possibilities, so it takes awhile for people to find the right one. This search can be called the Odyssey years and is a relative new phenomenon, meaning groups and customs have not yet arisen to give it structure.

The relationship between money and happiness is complex. While richer tends to be happier than poor, the relationship is not that strong and the movement from poor to middle class is greater than from middle class to wealthy. People are also pretty bad at judging what will make them happy, as they vastly overvalue work, money, and real estate while undervaluing intimate bonds and the importance of arduous challenges.

The relationship between social bonds and happiness is very straightforward. The deeper the relationships a person has, the happier he or she will be.

Chapter 13 - Limerence

Human beings go through life with a fully operational status sonar. We send out continual waves of status measurements and receive a stream of positive or negative feedback signals that cumulatively define our place in society. The problem is nobody's status sonar is accurate. Some people are status exaggerators, and others are status minimizers. The most successful people are mildly delusional status inflators.

Being in love stimulates the reward system of the mind, producing powerful chemicals that can lead to focused attention, strong desire, exhilaration, energy, and loss of appetite.

The mental system is geared more toward predicting rewards than in the rewards themselves - we salivate at the thought of our favorite food, not the food itself. The brain is in the business of modeling little anticipatory patterns to help predict the future. When we grasp some situation, or master some task, there is a surge of pleasure. Our life is a recurring set of rhythms: difficulty to harmony, and propelled by desire for the moment when the inner and outer patterns mesh.

The desire for limerence drives us to seek perfection in our crafts. It is in the sublime moments when we are totally meshed with nature or our task and we notice neither time nor normal constraints that we are in a state of blissful happiness.

The drive to achieve limerence is a reason people within a group feel a strong pressure to conform to that group's norms. We don't teach the ability to harmonize patterns in school, but a happy life is defined by these sorts of connections and an unhappy life is defined by the lack of them.

Chapter 14 - The Grand Narrative

The human mind is an overconfidence machine. The conscious level gives itself credit for things it really didn't do and confabulates tales to create the illusion it controls things it really doesn't determine. People overestimate their ability to control their unconscious tendencies, how well they understand themselves, what they know, and what they can know. The telling thing is that self-confidence has very little to do with actual competence.

People today see human history as a contest between reason, the highest human faculty, and passion and instinct, our animal natures. While this rationalist tradition seems natural, it inevitably overreaches and ignores the importance of specific contexts, purges the influences of passions and unconscious biases, and discounts emotion and appetite. The rationalism method has yielded many great discoveries, but when it is used to explain or organize the human world, its one core limitation is it is blind to the influence of the unconscious. Rationalists have a tendency to lop off or diminish all information that is not calculable according to their methodologies.

This schism between the conscious and the unconscious parts of the mind has expressed itself most powerfully, over the last fifty years, in the field of economics. Over the course of the twentieth century the rationalist spirit has come to dominate economic thought, yielding a concentration on monetary motivations to the exclusion of others.

Chapter 15 - Métis

The French Enlightenment: Inspired by the scientific revolution, this movement had great faith in the power of individual reason to detect error and logically arrive at universal truth.

- Imagined a state of nature in which autonomous individuals formed social contracts for their mutual benefit.

The British Enlightenment: Acknowledged the importance of reason, but believed that individual reason is limited and of secondary importance to the passions.

- Stressed that people are born with a social sense, which plays out beneath the level of awareness. Morality flows from these semi-conscious sentiments, not from logical deductions derived from abstract laws.

Intellectual history has oscillated between rationalist and romantic periods. Both the logical conscious and the intuitive unconscious have a part to play in dealing with life. The twentieth century was decidedly rationalist; however recent scientific discoveries have illustrated how the unconscious drives much of our decision-making.

The unconscious is responsible for peak performance in that it is capable of performing incredibly complex tasks without any conscious assistance. After much practice, experts perform their tasks with minimal brain activity. Beliefs and stereotypes are essential to performing the normal activities of life with little or no conscious thought.

Conscious thought tends to march step by step and converge on a few core facts or principles, while unconscious thought tends to spread out through a process of associations, venturing into every nook and cranny of the mind. This results in the unconscious originating more creative links and unlikely parallels.

Intuition and logic exist in partnership and the challenge is to organize this partnership, knowing when to rely on the conscious, when to rely on the unconscious, and how to organize the interchange between the two.

Wisdom begins with an awareness of our own ignorance and a recognition that there is no one method for solving problems. The mind wants to make instant judgments; however, wisdom dictates that we must endure uncertainty, particularly in complex situations. During the waiting time the unconscious is busily examining patterns and associations and, at some point, there is a moment of calm, where disparate observations integrate into a coherent whole. Eventually, after much practice in this type of thought, a person will achieve what the Greeks called *métis* - an awareness of certain characteristics of human life and experience.

"Wisdom is not scientific knowledge, but a special sensitiveness to the contours of the circumstances in which we happen to be placed; it is a capacity for living without falling foul of some permanent condition or factor which cannot either be altered or fully described and calculated; an ability to be guided by rules of thumb — the 'immemorial wisdom' said to reside in peasants and other 'simple folk' — where rules of science do not, in principle apply. This inexpressible sense of cosmic orientation is the 'sense of reality,' the 'knowledge' of how to live." - Isaiah Berlin

Chapter 16 - The Insurgency

This chapter is entirely consumed with the thread of the story.

Chapter 17 - Getting Older

Over the course of their relationships, most married couples are compelled to navigate a transition between passionate love and companionate love - the calmer state that is filled with quiet satisfaction, friendship, and a gentler happiness. In a healthy relationship the partners make five positive comments to each other for every negative one.

The stereotype is that men initiate most of the middle-aged divorces. In fact, more than 60% of the divorces that strike couples after the age of fifty are initiated by women.

When people are tired of their routines and want to change the pattern of their life they need to find a group that exhibits patterns that they want to adopt. The group helps reinforce the new patterns, allowing the person to change and fit in.

Chapter 18 - Morality

The rationalist approach to morality is that the job of the conscious is to exercise reason and morality, while preventing the unconscious urges from rising to the top. However, if moral reasoning led to moral behavior, then we would expect people who are less emotional to also be more moral. Yet at the extreme end, this is the opposite of the truth - these are people we usually label psychopaths (unable to identify with another's suffering).

A century's worth of experiments suggests that people's actual behavior is not driven by permanent character traits, but are powerfully influenced by context - suggesting much more influence by the unconscious.

The intuitionist view of morality puts emotion and unconscious intuition at the center of moral life, not reason; it stresses moral reflexes, alongside individual choice; it emphasizes the role perception plays in moral decision making, before logical deduction. In the intuitionist view, the primary struggle is not between reason and the passions. Instead, the crucial contest is within the unconscious-mind sphere itself.

We are born with deep selfish drives, but our ancestors survived in families and groups, requiring successful cooperation. Bonding and commitment, so necessary for a baby's survival, is critical for the human social animal. Nobody has to teach a child to demand fair treatment, or to disdain someone who betrays a friend.

It is not merely reason that separates us from the other animals, but the advanced nature of our emotions, especially our social and moral emotions. We do seem to have a strong impulse to be as moral as possible, or to justify ourselves when our morality is in question.

The intuitionist view starts with the optimistic belief that people have an innate drive to do good. It is balanced with the pessimistic belief that these moral sentiments are in conflict with one another and in competition with more selfish drives. However, moral sentiments are subject to conscious review and improvement.

Chapter 19 - The Leader

This chapter is entirely consumed with the thread of the story.

Chapter 20 - The Soft Side

Certain ideas in the wider scientific culture have scarcely penetrated the policy-making world. Both parties have individualistic world-views, tending to assume that society is a contract between autonomous individuals. Both promote policies designed to expand individual choice. Neither pays much attention to social and communal bonds, to local associations, or to invisible norms. Conservative activists embrace the individualism of the market and liberals embrace the individualism of the moral sphere. Politicians themselves are intensely social creatures, but when it comes to thinking about policy they ignore those faculties entirely. The result is the diminution of social capital - people become more loosely affiliated, while social self-restraint, respect for others, and social sympathy are all lessened.

Without a healthy social fabric, politics becomes polarized. Once politics becomes a contest pitting one identity group against another, it is no longer possible to compromise. In a densely connected society people can see the gradual chain of institutions that connect family to neighborhood, to town, to regional association, to the federal government. In a stripped-down society that chain has been broken and the sense of connection gets broken with it.

The ultimate focus of political activity should be the character of the society. By making freedom the ultimate end of politics, the society is sacrificed. Our last era has been economic-centric and our next one should be socio-centric - emphasizing the health of social networks.

Terrorists do not seem to come from primarily a background of poverty and lack of economic opportunity. The primary motivation seems to be a social alienation lacking any specific culture and their desire for some group that gives their existence shape and purpose. The solution seems to be to give them other causes to attach to, not just throw money at them.

The real change over the past few decades is that technological and social revolutions have put increasing demands on human cognition. People are now compelled to absorb and process a much more complicated array of information streams and to navigate much more complicated social environments.

- Women are able to compete equally in the area of mental skill.
- Marriage is now much more a partnership of equals. Highly educated people and less-educated people are increasingly marrying within their respective groups.
- There is a widening in social inequality as the nation divides into those who possess the unconscious skills to navigate this new terrain and those who have not had the opportunity to acquire those skills.

The problem is in the realm of conscious and unconscious development. Rich and poor families used to be demographically similar, but are increasingly segregated, leading to vast and increasing educational and cultural differences.

- Two-thirds of middle-class children are raised in two-parent families, while only one-third of poor children are raised in them.
- College-educated people are much more likely to trust the people around them and believe they can control their own destinies.
- All people tend to want the same things; however, more-educated people have more emotional resources to execute their visions.

Flourishing depends on unconscious skills that serve as a prerequisite for conscious accomplishments.

The biggest impact comes from focusing on the young. Learners learn and skill begets skill, so investments in children have much bigger payoffs than investments in people who are older. The most important thing about any classroom is the relationship between a teacher and a student.

Chapter 21 - The Other Education

Recognition and wealth do not produce happiness, but they do liberate you from the worries that plague people who lack but desire these things.

Recent research has shown that seniors are completely capable of learning and growth. The brain is capable of creating new connections, and even new neurons, all through life. While some mental processes — like working memory, the ability to ignore distractions, and the ability to quickly solve math problems — clearly deteriorate, others do not.

Most people report being happier as they get older; they've unconsciously learned the power of positive perception. Gender roles begin to merge as people age.

Neuroscientists have a profound respect for many meditative practices because there is an overlap between the findings of science and the practice of Buddhist monks. It is now clear that the visions and transcendent experiences that religious ecstasies have long described are not just fantasies.

The mind exists in a state of tension between familiarity and novelty. The brain has evolved to detect constant change, and delights in comprehending the unexpected. Life is change, and the happy life is a series of gentle, stimulating, melodic changes.

As they get older, some people need long periods of uninterrupted solitude for the conscious mind to slowly relax and surrender itself to the pulses generated inside. This helps their creativity flourish. Artists who succeed in their youth tend to be conceptual (start with a concept, then execute it), while those that thrive near the end of life tend to be exploratory (go through a process of trial and error that eventually leads to a destination).

Chapter 22 - Meaning

Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning...*

"Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life.

The meaning of one's life is only discernible within the specific circumstances of one's own specific life." In the concentration camp, he writes, "We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct."

People don't have a true understanding of themselves. Numerous studies have shown that there is low correlation between how people rate their own personality and how people around them rate it.