

Social Intelligence

The new science of human relationships

By Daniel Goleman, Hutchinson, 2006

In this book, Daniel Goleman, explores an emerging new science with major implications for our interpersonal world. Human beings are designed for sociability and are constantly engaged in a neural ballet that connects them brain-to-brain with those around. Goleman points out that human beings have a built in bias towards empathy, cooperation and altruism. Social intelligence can help them to nurture and develop these capacities.

Introduction

This book deals with the social aspects of intelligence, i.e. how our brains work when we are in groups. The social brain refers to the neural mechanisms that coordinate our interactions as well as thoughts and feelings about people and our relationships. The social brain is the only biological system in our bodies that continually influences and in turn becomes influenced by the internal state of the people we are with. All other biological systems mainly regulate their activity in response to signals emerging from within our body.

Emotional Hijacks

Goleman starts off by explaining why it is important to be in control of our emotions. Emotional hijacks can be traced to the amygdala, an almond shaped area in the mid brain. When the amygdala is aroused (especially by fear), we become more alert to emotional cues in others and more vulnerable to the emotions of others. The amygdala acts as a radar for the brain calling attention to whatever might be puzzling or important to learn about. Effectively, the amygdala operates the brain's early warning system.

The ability to control our emotions depends on the approach we use. In general, we can respond to emotions in two ways. One is the low road circuitry that operates beneath our awareness automatically, effortlessly and very fast. The low road can be seen as wet and dripping with emotion. It deals in raw feelings and lets us immediately feel with someone else. The low road uses neural circuitry that runs through the amygdala.

In contrast, the high road runs through neural systems that work more methodically, step by step with deliberate effort. The high road gives some control over our inner life, facilitating a considered understanding of what is going on, enabling us to think about what we feel. The high road sends inputs to the prefrontal cortex, the brain's executive centre.

The low road is faster and less accurate. The high road is slower and more accurate. By the time, the low road has reacted, sometimes all the high road can do is to contain the damage.

When we do not have control over our emotions, we tend to lose out. When we are anxious or preoccupied, we fail to register the sparkle in someone's eyes or the hint of a smile or of the warm tones of voice, all important channels for sending messages of friendliness. Self absorption kills empathy. When we are self focused, our world contracts. When we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind.

But the key point to note is that we have choices to exercise. Empathy can be easily cultivated. Though we have a biological bias towards anger, jealousy, selfishness and envy, we have an even stronger bias for kindness, cooperation, love and nurture. Indeed, as Goleman rightly mentions, the ratio of potential to actual meanness displayed by human beings is close to zero.

How our Brain Works

The eyes contain nerve projections that lead directly to the orbito frontal area of the prefrontal cortex. The OFC (orbitofrontal cortex) lies at the junction of the uppermost part of the emotional centres and the lower most parts of the thinking brain. The OFC directly connects up three major regions of the brain: the cortex or the thinking brain, amygdala and the brain stem. This facilitates instantaneous coordination of thought, feeling and action.

We tend to make many instantaneous judgments through the day. Here we depend on brain cells shaped like a spindle with a large bulb at one end and a long thick extension. Spindle cells form particularly thick connections between the OFC and the highest part of the limbic system, the anterior cingulate cortex(ACC). The ACC directs our attention, coordinates our thoughts, emotions and the body's response to our feelings. This linkage creates a neural command centre of sorts. From this critical junction, spindle cells spread to different parts of the brain.

It is spindle cells that probably make human beings unique. Spindle cells explain why some people are more socially aware or sensitive than others. There seems to be enhanced functioning of ACC in people who are more interpersonally aware.

We make judgments about people around a tenth of a second more quickly than we do about things. In any social encounter, this same circuitry springs into action. The OFC strikes a balance between a primal impulse and what works best. The OFC helps guide what we do once we know how we feel about someone. The OFC tries to inhibit raw impulse. It contains one of the array of neurons that can inhibit amygdala driven surges. The OFC tries to exert emotional brakes. When these brakes falter, we act inappropriately.

The first emotional response happens quickly and spontaneously. The cortical centres for thinking have not yet finished analysing the situation. We quickly form our first impression. Then we try to reappraise the situation involving the ACC. When we see a disturbing situation, the high road can manage the amygdala through any of the pre frontal circuits. Different circuits may be activated. For example, one helps us to see the situation in a clinical detached way. Another helps us to hope for the best. By changing the meaning of what we perceive, we also alter its emotional impact.

Components of Social Intelligence

Social intelligence has two components:

- A) Social awareness
- B) Social facility

Social awareness includes:

- 1) Primal empathy : Feeling with others, sensing emotional signals.
- 2) Attunement : Listening with full receptivity
- 3) Empathic accuracy : Understanding others' thoughts, feelings and intentions
- 4) Social cognition : Knowing how the social world works.

Social facility includes:

- 1) Synchrony : Interacting smoothly at the verbal level
- 2) Self presentation : Presenting ourselves effectively
- 3) Influence : Shaping the outcome of social interactions
- 4) Concern : Caring about others' needs and acting accordingly.

Primal Empathy : We keep sending signals all the time about what we feel.

Attunement : Attunement means offering a person total attention and listening fully. It goes beyond momentary empathy to a full sustained presence that facilitates rapport. It means trying to understand the other person rather than just making our own point. We can facilitate attunement simply by intentionally paying more attention. Full listening maximises psychological synchrony so that emotions align.

Empathic accuracy: This probably represents the essential expertise in social intelligence. Empathic accuracy builds on primal empathy but adds an explicit understanding of what someone else feels and thinks. These cognitive steps engage additional activity in the neocortex thus bringing high road circuitry to the primal empathy of the low. Our brain attunes us to what someone intends to do but it does so at a subliminal level. Conscious awareness of someone's intentions allows a more explicit understanding of underlying motives. This can make a big difference and facilitate more accurate empathy.

Social cognition: This is knowledge about how the social world actually works. People who are good at this know what is expected in different social settings.

Synchrony: Synchrony lets us glide gracefully through a non verbal dance with another person. A failure in synchrony sabotages social competence. People who are weak here, typically suffer from dyssemia, a deficit in reading and acting on the non verbal signs that guide smooth interactions.

Self presentation: This is the ability to express oneself in ways that make a desired impression. Charismatic people know how to express themselves in such a way that enables others to synch up well with them and be tuned to their feelings. The ability to control our emotions and avoid an excessive display sometimes holds the key to self presentation.

Influence: We must express ourselves in a way that produces a desired social result. Those adept at deploying influence rely on social influence to guide their actions. For example, they may turn a blind eye to some situations to protect a relationship.

Concern: Concern goes beyond empathy. Concern reflects a person's capacity for compassion. Concerned people take out time to help a colleague. They understand the need for greater cooperation to meet larger objectives.

Narcissists, Machiavellians and Psychopaths

Conventional ideas about social intelligence have focused on social knowledge. But this cognitive approach has limitations. A purely cognitive perspective slights the social glue that builds the foundation for any interaction. It ignores the importance of getting in synch, attuned, listening and empathic concern.

Empathy is the prime inhibitor of human cruelty. A non empathic person may fall into one of three categories: Narcissist, Machiavellian and Psychopath. These people are characterised by malevolence, duplicity, self centredness, aggression and emotional coldness.

A **Narcissist** has a grandiose sense of self importance, harbours obsessive fantasies of unbounded glory, feels rage or intense shame when criticised, expects special favours and lacks empathy. So narcissists remain oblivious to the self centred abrasiveness that others see in them so clearly. Narcissists are driven by dreams of glory. They often lack a feeling of self worth. The result is an inner shakiness and a vulnerability that closes the ears to criticism. Such leaders interpret even constructive feedback as a personal attack. They selectively seize data that supports their views while ignoring disconfirming facts.

Machiavellians are characterised by a cynical, anything-goes attitude. Such people often display a glib charm, cunning and confidence. But such people also tend to be cynically calculating and arrogant, readily behaving in ways that undermine trust and cooperation. Machs have typically tunnel vision empathy. They can bring someone's ambitions into focus mainly when they wish to use that person for their own ends.

The psychopath's hallmarks are deceit and a reckless disregard for others. These people are indifferent to the emotional pain others may suffer. For psychopaths, other people are there to be duped, used and discarded. But unlike Machs and narcissists, psychopaths virtually feel no anxiety. They seem immune to stress, remaining calm in situations that would make many other people panic. So psychopaths are oblivious to the threat of punishment. When it comes to empathy, psychopaths have none. They find it difficult to recognise fear or sadness on people's faces or in their voices.

Social emotions act as an inner police and help us in keeping control of ourselves. Social emotions operate as a defacto moral compass. We feel shame when others became aware of a wrong we have done. We feel guilt when it stays private. Shame anticipates social rejection while guilt often leads to attunement.

Peering into the minds of people to sense their feelings and deduce their thoughts is important. It is the ability to read between the lines of what people say and do to draw accurate inferences. The less activation in the brain's face reading area when people look at someone, the greater their interpersonal difficulties.

Genes are more dynamic than we imagine. It is not just which genes we are born with, but their expression that matters. It is biologically impossible for a gene to operate independently of its environment. Genes are designed to be regulated by signals from their immediate surroundings including hormones from the endocrine system and neurotransmitters in the brain some of which are influenced by our social interactions. Family life can also alter the activity of genes.

Once a brain circuit has been laid out, its connections become strengthened with repeated use. So a behavioural pattern, once established, becomes difficult to change. But with new opportunities, we can lay down and strengthen a new track. Parenting cannot change every gene. But the experiences to which children are exposed do shape their neural circuitry.

A Secure Base

A secure base is needed for people to interact socially in an effective manner. When mothers are more responsive to babies' cries, more affectionate and tender and more comfortable in close contact like cuddling, the babies feel more secure. Mothers who are anxious and self pre occupied will be out of tune with their child's needs. Children who have not been brought up well, will find it difficult to approach people with a positive attitude. They may withdraw into a protective shield, becoming seemingly cold and distant.

When children feel well loved and cared for, the resulting well being promotes a positive mindset. They take up the urge to explore a physical activity, meet new people, make friends or pursue an intellectual curiosity.

Overprotection is also a form of deprivation. Instead of telling children how to achieve some elusive perpetual happiness, parents should teach a child how to return on their own to a state of contentment even during adversities. Parents can help children reframe an upsetting moment when it happens and prepare children for the ups and downs of social life.

In the terrain of the heart, there are three interdependent but interrelated brain systems. These are the neural networks for attachment, care giving and sex. The three intermingle and strive to maintain an elegant balance. Sex merely begins the job. Attachment keeps the family together. Care giving provides the impulse to look after the offspring.

There are three distinct attachment styles – avoidant, anxious and secure.

Anxious types are vulnerable to obsessive preoccupation, self conscious anxiety and emotional dependence.

Avoidant people will not trust a partner or share their feelings and get nervous when their partner attempts to get emotionally more intimate. They suppress their emotions, especially their distressing feelings. Avoidant people expect a partner to be emotionally untrustworthy. So they find intimate relationships unpleasant.

Secure people enter a relationship assuming that their support will be emotionally available and attuned when needed. They are at ease when getting close to people. Securely attached people see themselves as worthy of concern, care and affection and others as accessible, reliable and having good intentions towards them. As a result, their relationships tend to be intimate and trusting.

How men and women handle emotions

The neural wiring for sex inhabits low-road subcortical regions that are beyond the reach of the thinking brain. These circuits drive us with greater and greater urgency making us care less and less about whatever advice the high road rational regions might offer us.

But men and women behave somewhat differently. While looking at women, for men in love, the centres for sexual arousal and visual processing light up. In contrast for women in love, looking at their beloved activates very different centres in the brain's social circuitry, cognitive centres for memory and attention. Women tend to be more pragmatic and tend to fall in love more slowly. They thoughtfully, weigh their feelings and assess a man as a prospective mate and provider. Men generally have higher levels of the chemicals that drive lust and lower levels of those that fuel attachment, than do women.

Another fundamental dilemma involved is the essential tension between the brain systems that underlie a secure sense of attachment and those that underlie caring and sex. Each of these networks has its own set of motives and needs which can

either be in conflict or compatible. If they are at odds, love will falter. If they are in harmony, love will flourish.

Care giving between romantic partners comes in two main forms: providing a secure base and offering a safe haven to encourage the partner to take on the world. Ideally, partners should be able to switch smoothly from providing solace/haven and receiving it. We provide a secure base whenever we come to our partner's emotional rescue by helping them solve a vexing problem, soothing them or simply being present and listening.

Our sense of security and our drive to explore are intertwined. The more our partner provides us with a haven and security, the more exploration we can take on. The more daunting the goal of our explorations, the more we may need to draw on the support of our base.

Anxious partners tend to cling and do not give themselves enough space for exploration. Anxious people tend to become upset at another person's suffering and get swamped by contagion. Their feelings may lead to empathy distress, i.e the level of anxiety may become so high that they become overwhelmed.

Avoidant partners are comfortable in letting their partner roam but are poor at offering a secure base of comfort. Avoidant people protect themselves against painful emotions by suppressing them. In self defence, they close themselves off to emotional contagion from others who are suffering. Because they empathise poorly, they rarely help. Their rare occasions of compassion are motivated by "what is in it for me?"

Love can have a major positive impact on our health. On the other hand, toxic relationships are a major risk factor for disease. People who respond to insults silently experience a significant rise in blood pressure. When accused wrongly, there are secretions of substances that clog arteries. On the other hand, vibrant social connections help us to remain in a good mood.

Threats and challenges are most stressful when we have an audience and we feel we are being judged. Being evaluated threatens the social self. Our very self worth comes from the cumulative message we get from others about how they perceive us. Threats to our standing in front of others can be remarkably potent biologically. Threats are perceived as all the worse, when they are beyond the person's ability to do anything about them. When a threat persists, no matter what effort we might make, the cortisol level rises significantly.

The effects of continual stress reach all the way down to the level of gene expression in the immune cells essential for fighting infections and healing wounds. The brain's daily manufacture of new neurons, continues into old age, though at a slower rate than in earlier decades. That slow down too is avoidable to a large extent. It is mainly due to monotony. Adding variations of complexity to a person's social environment primes new learning, enhancing the rate at which the brain adds new cells.

Women put a greater emotional premium on their closest ties. For women, positive relationships can be a major source of satisfaction and well being throughout life. For men, on the other hand, positive relationships seem to rate lower in importance than a sense of personal growth or a feeling of independence.

Women's instinct for caregiving means they take more personal responsibility for the fate of those they care about, making them more prone than men to getting distressed at loved ones' troubles. Women are also more attuned to the ups and downs of their relationships and so are more susceptible to riding an emotional roller coaster.

Under stress, a woman's brain secretes more oxytocin than a man's. This has a calming effect. When women tend or befriend, their bodies release additional oxytocin which calms them even more. Estrogen, the female sex hormone enhances the calming benefits of oxytocin unlike androgen the male sex hormone which suppresses the calming benefits. So when facing a threat, women tend to seek out companionship unlike men who tend to face it alone. Even after experiencing an enormous blow, like the death of a spouse, women with a close friend and confidant tend to escape any new physical impairments or loss of vitality.

Learning

Inspired moments of learning share the same active ingredients full attention, enthusiastic interest and positive emotional intensity. The joy in learning comes during these moments. Such joyous moments signify optimal psychological coordination and smooth running of day-to-day operations. Joyous states allow us to flourish, live well and feel well being. When the mind runs with such internal harmony, ease, efficiency, rapidity and power are at a maximum. We experience such moments with a quiet thrill. During such exhilarating, upbeat states, the area of the brain that displays most activity is in the prefrontal cortex, the hub of the highway. Heightened prefrontal activity enhances mental abilities like creative thinking, cognitive flexibility and the processing of information. The height of cognitive performance occurs where motivation and focus peak, at the intersection of a task's difficulty and our ability to match its demand. At a point just past this peak of cognitive efficiency, challenges begin to exceed ability and the downside of the inverted U begins.

The inverted U reflects the impact of two different neural systems on learning and performance. Healthy levels of cortisol energise us for engagement. Positive moods elicit the mild-to-moderate range of cortisol associated with better learning. But if secretion continues to climb, beyond an optimal point, a second neural system starts secreting norepinephrine at the high levels found when we feel outright fear. From this point, the more the stress escalates, the worse mental efficiency and performance become.

The hippocampus, near the amygdala in the mid brain, is our central organ for learning. This structure helps convert the contents of working memory, new

information held briefly in the prefrontal cortex, into long term form for storage. This neural act is the heart of learning. Once our mind connects this information with what we already know, we will be able to bring the new understanding to mind weeks or years later. All the details that we will remember, depend on the hippocampus to stay with us. The continual retention of memories demands a frenzy of neuronal activity. The hippocampus is very vulnerable to ongoing emotional distress because of the damaging effects of cortisol. Under prolonged stress, cortisol attacks existing neurons and slows the rate at which new neurons are added. Cortisol stimulates the amygdala while it impairs the hippocampus, forcing our ability to take in new information.

Reducing Stress, Promoting Harmony

Distress kills learning. Since emotions affect performance, the emotional task of teachers or leaders is to help people. Leadership boils down to a series of social exchanges in which the leader can drive the other person's emotions into a better or worse state. A socially intelligent leader helps people contain and recover from their emotional distress.

People who feel their boss provides a secure base, explore, are playful, take risks, innovate and take on new challenges. If leaders establish such trust and safety, then when they give tough feedback, the person receiving it not only stays more open but sees benefit in getting even hard-to-take information. Leaders should create some amount of pressure to build resilience but not so much that people get overwhelmed.

The human mind depends on categories to give order and meaning to the world around us. By assuming that the next entity we encounter in a given category has the same main features as the last, we navigate our way through an over-changing environment.

But once a negative bias begins, we become prejudiced and tend to seize on whatever seems to confirm the bias and ignore what does not. Openly hostile stereotypes about a group are mental categories gone awry. Research shows that these stereotypes and prejudices are fluid and can change as we learn. Conditioning the mind suitably through visual and other triggers can help deal with the bias.

Forgiveness can play a crucial role in increasing social harmony. Forgiving someone against whom we have a grudge lowers the blood pressure, heart rate and levels of stress hormones. It also lessens our pain and depression. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean condoning the wrong act. What it implies is forgetting what happened and reconnecting with the perpetrator.

Conclusion

Life becomes truly worth living only when we have happiness and fulfilment. Good quality relationships are one of the strongest sources of such feelings. Resonant relationships are like emotional vitamins. Nourishing relationships are considered the single most universally agreed upon feature of the good life. By developing social intelligence we can interact with people around us more effectively. That calls for greater awareness about ourselves and control over our emotions.