

The Social Animal by David Brooks

REFERENCE AND RESEARCH

This book started in a very wonkish way. I was writing about social mobility and why the U.S. doesn't have more of it, even though we've spent trillions of dollars over the past few years trying to give people the tools to rise and succeed.

This research took me to the work of the Nobel Laureate James Heckman from the University of Chicago, who has written on the importance of what he calls non-cognitive traits, like persistence. Heckman says it is particularly important to focus on early childhood, when many of our working models for how the world works get formed.

That emphasis took me to several important books, such as "From Neurons to Neighborhoods," edited by Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips and "The Developing Mind" by Daniel J. Siegel. From there I plowed through a number of studies on childhood development. I'd especially recommend "The Scientist in the Crib," by Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl, "Unequal Childhoods" by Annette Lareau, "The Development of the Person" by L. Alan Sroufe, Byron Egeland, Elizabeth Carlson and Andrew Collins and "The Neuroscience of Human Relationships" by Louis Cozolino.

By this point I was deep into the world of brain science and psychology, so I widened out and read dozens of books on the state of those fields. Among the most accessible, I would highly, highly recommend, "The Blank Slate" by Steven Pinker, "Consilience" by Edward O. Wilson, "Strangers to Ourselves" by Timothy Wilson, "Descartes' Error" by Antonio Damasio, "The Happiness Hypothesis" by Jonathan Haidt, "Human" by Michael Gazzaniga and "I am a Strange Loop" by Douglas Hofstadter. These are all major figures in their fields, and all of their books are good, but these are the best entry points to their work.

By this point, I was devouring anything that seemed related. I ripped through the work of Daniel Goleman, who has done excellent reporting on this work. He's best known for "Emotional Intelligence" and "Social

Intelligence.” I also learned a lot from brain books like “The Brain that Changes Itself,” by Norman Doidge and “Making Up the Mind” by Chris Frith.

A number of great books combine brain work with larger humanistic concerns, including “Proust Was a Neuroscientist” by the extraordinary blogger, Jonah Lehrer, “Why We Love” by Helen Fisher, “The New Psychology of Love, edited by Robert Sternberg and Karin Weis, “Stumbling on Happiness” by Daniel Gilbert and “Social Cognition,” by Gordon Moskowitz.

By this time I was talking to neuroscientists and trying to wade through academic work, but I also tried to draw back and do some big picture reading. I found a large number of books that try to put what we are learning in a broader context, including “Brain and Culture” by Bruce Wexler, “Smart World” by Richard Ogle (which has special value for business readers), “Nudge” by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (which is justly famous among policy types), “Shop Class As Soulcraft” by Matthew Crawford, “The Romantic Economist by Richard Bronk, “Out of Our Heads” by Alva Noe, “Being There” by Andy Clark and “The Master and his Emissary” by Ian McGilchrist.

I could go on, and recommend other books that really helped, like “The Moral Sense” by James Q. Wilson and “What Intelligence Tests Miss” by Keith Stanovich, but I know by now you are sick of book recommendations, even for volumes as fine as, say, “The Curse of the Self” by Mark Leary and “The Cultural Animal” by Roy Baumeister.

OK. I’ll stop.

--David Brooks