

The Quest to Influence, Persuade, and Alter

What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others

Diane Cole (/author/bio/2257/diane-cole) • 9/11/2017 • 2 Comments



Review: *The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others.* By Tali Sharot. Henry Holt. 231 pages. 978-1627792653

Facts alone don't change people's minds or behavior. Emotions do. That's the basic takeaway from cognitive neuroscientist Tali Sharot's highly accessible exploration of why and how we succeed, or fail, in our quest to influence, persuade, or alter the opinions and actions of others.

Understand how the brain works, she argues in *The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others*, and you'll have a leg up in successfully formulating and delivering the messages you want to get across to others. Such insights can certainly be useful for therapists, who need to seek out the most effective ways to effect change in clients. But in these highly polarized times, the ability to persuade those who disagree with us can be a valuable skill in general, and Sharot's chief principle for doing so is one to always bear in mind. Begin by momentarily setting aside your own beliefs, she advises, so you can tune in to the concerns of those who may hold on as tightly to their assumptions as you do to yours.

That's easier said than done, especially as I watch what I perceive to be sure-fire arguments fizzle out in the courts of public opinion. But I found Sharot's explanation for why people dig in their heels against another's rational point of view to be oddly comforting. Their stubbornness has nothing to do with their IQs, and everything to do with their brains. As she writes, "Many of our instincts about influence—from insisting the other is wrong to attempting to exert control—are ineffective because they're incompatible with how the mind operates."

This goes for anyone who assumes that cold facts alone will win out over the heat of emotional rhetoric. Indeed, Sharot, who directs the Affective Brain Lab at University College London, begins her book with a confession, revealing how she, a PhD, armed with medical information galore about the benefits of the childhood measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccination, and certain in her rejection of the long-debunked connection between the vaccine and autism, nonetheless found herself overwhelmed with anxiety for her two young children when she heard then presidential candidate Donald Trump discuss the issue during a Republican party primary debate. He had no facts, just an anecdote about a "beautiful baby" who'd been stuck with a needle, "a pump" that looks "like it's meant for a horse, not a child," and who got "a tremendous fever" and became autistic.

In that moment, even though Sharot was hardly an easy dupe for unproven claims, Trump's story had managed to evade her rational mind and tap into her deepest irrational fears. How? As she was forced to remind herself, research shows it's easy to raise someone's anxiety level when the persuader is trying to

induce inaction (in this case, not getting the vaccine), and even easier when the audience is already under stress, as all new sleep-deprived parents tend to be. Bingo. Her youngest child was only seven weeks old at the time.

Chapter by chapter, Sharot describes seven different factors—emotion, incentives, agency, curiosity, state of mind, social learning, and the sway of crowds—that research studies (including many of her own) have identified as particularly affecting the way our brains work in leading us to take in, respond to, agree with, or reject new information. Equally important are our underlying “priors,” the beliefs or behaviors we already have, which may, or may not, be in tune with the new ideas being presented.

Central to the dance of influence is the amygdala, the brain’s emotion center, which controls stress, fear, and anxiety. It signals and alerts other brain regions, such as the hypothalamus, to pay attention and focus on the perceived danger at hand—a focus so urgent that reason, logic, and factual evidence are instinctively overthrown. In essence, the amygdala can be a superhighway for letting emotions influence (and sometimes hijack) how we perceive, process, and interpret our experience.

This in itself isn’t new information, but Sharot smartly pairs findings based in neuropsychology with those derived from behavioral psychology to illustrate how one field builds upon another. Case in point: in his now classic book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, the eminent behavioral economist and psychologist Daniel Kahneman described the amygdala’s processing as “fast” thinking. It’s the brain’s automatic-pilot default system, organized by survival-based instinctual thinking that enables us to act immediately in the face of imminent danger, as if *without* thinking. He contrasted this with the brain’s “slow,” deliberative thinking system, one that takes the time and energy to sift through information and logic before coming to a reasoned conclusion about how to make the best decision. It’s within this framework that Sharot views and explores how and why we so often get persuasion wrong—and how we can learn to do it better.

Her cardinal rule is that facts by themselves are seldom successful in countering emotion-driven beliefs. The reason lies in the principle of confirmation bias—the rule of thumb that we like our priors to be confirmed (no need to think further, we’re already right!), rather than undermined. Indeed, when faced with contradictory information, our aroused amygdala encourages us to defend against perceived counterfactuals as robustly as we would a physical attack, battering down even further on our familiar mindset.

Instead of changing an opposing point of view, such confrontations more often lead to ongoing battles of “my” information versus “your” information, in which each side seeks out ever more information to bolster his or her perspective, along with reasons to dismiss the other’s. Sharot uses as an example a married couple, both attorneys, squabbling over whether to live and raise their family in the United States (the husband’s homeland) or in France (the wife’s). Each time he presents a factual argument in favor of America (studies showing the cost of living is lower here), she counters with her own (statistics proving that lawyers make more money in France). Rather than serving to persuade each other, each round of his-and-her facts entrenches them more deeply in their own polarized camp.

Finding an end-run to such resistance in changing opinion can be elusive. But discovering a path of least resistance is possible, Sharot asserts, if we can identify and present common goals and motivations that both sides can rally around. Thus, the attorney who wants to live in France might tell her husband that

both the United States and France would be great places to live—a statement that confirms her husband's preexisting point of view and allows him to hear what else she has to say: that living in France would make her happier, because she'd be closer to her family.

Similarly, rather than try to persuade doubting parents that the MMR vaccine doesn't cause autism by using cold data to prove their fears wrong, highlight the common priority doctors and concerned parents both hold: keeping children safe from devastating illness. Such an emotional shift, reframing the interaction from confrontational to sharing a general goal, allows new information to get through.

Sharot's target audience is the general public, not specialized professionals, but her presentation of numerous interdisciplinary findings in psychology, behavioral economics, and neurobiology lends her book nuance and sophistication. Her points are less profound than practical, although she hints in the last chapter that further research into the complex circuitry of neurons in the human brain is leading to the possibility of direct transmission from one human to another. The suggestions are tantalizing. In fact, experiments have already shown that electrodes implanted in the brains of mice can allow individuals to communicate information to one another via electrical signals. Humans who've lost a limb have been taught to control their new robotic limb with the help of implanted brain electrodes hooked up to a computer interface. But that's in the future. For the time being, Sharot still has a lot to teach us about our power to change others.

This blog is excerpted from "How to Change Minds,"

(<https://www.psychologynetworker.org/magazine/article/1119/bookmarks>) by Diane Cole. The full version is available in the September/October 2017 issue, *The Future of Couplehood: Esther Perel Is Expanding the Conversation* (<https://www.psychologynetworker.org/magazine/current>).

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2 Comments

Sunday, September 17, 2017 2:02:09 PM | posted by Nancy J. Ross

Hi--As a co-founder of the Collaborative Divorce movement and a coach/trainer in the model, I am quite fascinated in how we create a context for change during crises periods. I think Diane is 'spot on' when talking about how the brain resists contrary information if it doesn't include an emotional component that resonates with the other person. I can't seem to find any article or book on "How to Change Minds" by her. The article noted in this excerpt is about a father's challenge with his two son's mental illness. How do I get more on her research/writings? Thanks!

Sunday, September 17, 2017 8:35:37 PM | posted by Kirky

Diane Coles article is in September/October issue, not as you state as in July/August.
