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Book Review: The Influential Mind

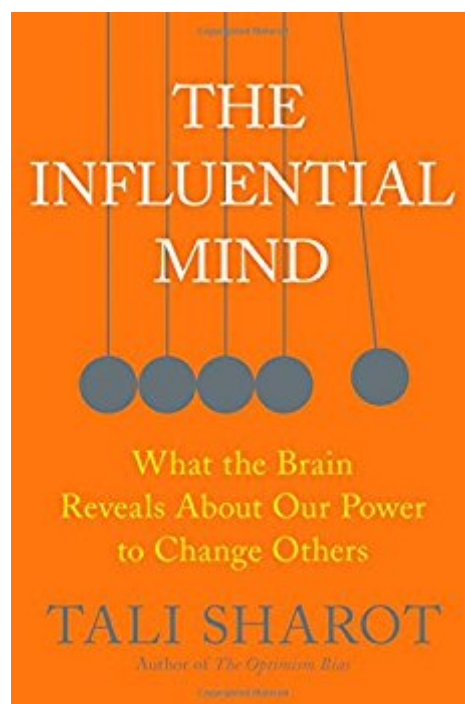
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“It seems to me that the people with the most important message, those who have the most useful advice, are not necessarily the ones who have the largest impact,” writes Tali Sharot.

In her new book, *The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others*, Tali Sharot, who is also the author of *The Optimism Bias*, explores the phenomenon of influence – what we so often get wrong about it, how we can learn to influence others, and how to understand when we are being influenced.

Every single day, four million new blogs are written, eighty million new Instagram photos are uploaded, and 616 million new tweets are released into cyberspace. People simply love propagating information and sharing opinions.

In fact, sharing of information is so rewarding that in one study conducted at Harvard, people were willing to forego money in order to have their opinions broadcast to others. The problem, however, is that we often approach the desire to make what Steve Jobs called a “dent in the universe” from inside our own heads.

“When attempting to create impact, we first and foremost consider ourselves. We reflect on what is persuasive to us, our state of mind, our desires, and our goals. But, of course, if we want to affect the behaviors and beliefs of the person in front of us, we need to understand what goes on inside their heads and go along with how their brain works,” writes Sharot.

Changing people minds, however, also has to align with core elements of how we all think, such as prior experiences, emotions, incentives, agency, curiosity, state of mind, and other people.

Consider data as an example. According to Sharot, while we seem to love data, and believe that our brains should use it to weigh decisions carefully, our emotions – motives, fears, hopes, and desires – actually have greater power over our decisions. More frequently, we look for data that confirms our already existing beliefs.

“When you provide someone with new data, they quickly accept evidence that confirms their preconceived notions (what are known as prior beliefs) and assess counter evidence with a critical eye,” writes Sharot.

A better approach, argues Sharot, is to find and build on common ground and shared beliefs. This is also why powerful speeches often result in a synchronization in the brains of the audience, an effect that helps us create associations, generate and process

emotions, and place ourselves in the shoes of others – a requirement for empathy.

While our intuition tells us that our emotions are private, Sharot says they are, in fact, absorbed instantly and unconsciously by those around us.

“When conducting experiments in the lab, I am often amazed by how similar people are in responding to questions and performing tasks, especially when those tasks involve emotional or social factors,” writes Sharot.

One fascinating example of the utility of social norms was found in a study in which the use of electronic boards monitored and gave positive feedback every time a staff member washed their hands. The result was an immediate 90 percent increase in hand washing.

Anticipating a reward is hardwired into our brains, helping us observe the law of approach and avoidance. But it also elicits action.

“We execute actions to bring us closer to a piece of cherry pie, a loved one, or a promotion, and we distance ourselves from an allergen, a bad relationship, or a failing project,” writes Sharot.

The feeling of control — while at times alluring us into otherwise irrational decisions — plays a major role in our health and happiness. In one study, a group of elderly patients who were told to take full responsibility for themselves and given a plant to care for, were happier and participated in more activities than another group given the same level of care but told that they wouldn’t need to lift a finger.

“Our instinct when trying to influence others’ actions is to give orders. This approach often fails, because when people feel their independence has been limited, they get anxious and demotivated and are likely to retaliate. In contrast, expanding people’s sense of agency makes them happier, healthier, more productive, and more compliant,” writes Sharot.

Understanding people’s need for independence is part of a larger ability, known as the “theory of mind” that allows us to think about what other people are thinking.

“You are influenced by others, but do not be fooled — others are also influenced by you. This is why your actions and choices matter not only for your own life but for the behavior of those around you,” writes Sharot.

Revealing not just the systematic mistakes we make when trying to persuade others, but brilliantly exposing the science of influence, Sharot's book is essential reading for anyone who wants to have their voice heard, which seems to be everyone.

The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others

Tali Sharot

Henry Holt and Company

September 2017

Hardcover, 256 Pages

Psych Central's Recommendation:

Worth your time! 

Your Recommendation: (if you've read this book)

★★★★★ (1 votes, average: **5.00** out of 5)

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