

The Influential Mind by Tali Sharot

5 stars

An in-depth investigation of the mechanisms of the brain, involved in influencing others.

The author is an associate professor of cognitive neuroscience and is the founder and director of the Affective Brain Lab at University College London.

It is part of being human that we strive to influence others, whether it is encouraging a love of reading in children, or inciting a population to rise up against oppression. As such this is a major area for study into how we shape those influences, both good and bad.

Sharot devotes a chapter to each of the factors by which we may influence others: Priors (using evidence to change beliefs), Emotion, Incentives, Agency, Curiosity and State and for each gives a clear and accessible description of how these factors shape our understanding and practice of influencing others.

It isn't a handbook which provides a set of instructions for the most effective form of influence, but rather a guide to the power, conscious or unconscious, we hold to shape other people's behaviour.

As a psychology graduate I found this both fascinating and compelling reading. Towards the end she moves on to more domestic influences, e.g. her baby loved the iPhone which she recognised her mother valued. She also looks back to the dawn of mankind before language where behaviour, facial expressions or non-verbal noises influenced others.

What will be the future of influence? Who knows; it depends on what science discovers. Perhaps we will find ourselves influenced by a controlling robot which can intercept our thoughts, or perhaps we may move away from our reliance on verbal communication and be able to both read someone else's mind or to intercept those electrical signals in their brains which shape their thoughts.

Whilst clearly a serious consideration of neuroscience I would class this book as 'popular' neuroscience, in the same vein as Beau Lotto's work on learning through deviation, and Todorov's study of the power of first impressions. I really enjoyed it and am sure I will refer to it regularly when putting together modules for my psychology groups.

*Pashtpaws*

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review.