

Social Neuroscience: People thinking about thinking people

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According to the editors of this book, over the last decade we have witnessed the quiet birth of the field of social neuroscience. The phenomenon to understand is how the brain makes sense of other people's behaviour. To caricature, neuroscience began by studying how the brain processes sensory information (in fields of visual neuroscience or auditory neuroscience, for example), to how the brain recognizes higher-level information such as objects and words (in the field of cognitive neuroscience). Left out of this tradition, according to the proponents of social neuroscience, are classes of information such as emotions, beliefs, intentions, desires, actions, empathy, and self-awareness. Social neuroscientists claim that such information may not reduce to *general* processes in visual or auditory or cognitive neuroscience, because evolution has shaped neural circuits that uniquely respond to social information.

So, at the very least, there is a new debate. Do structures such as orbito and the medial-frontal cortex, the insula, the anterior cingulate, and the amygdala have *social* functions that are distinct from any of their non-social functions?

This book brings together leading lights in this new field to present reviews – mostly from fMRI and lesion studies – about the nature of social cognition. Whether this new field will survive and blossom hinges on how special such social information is. If it turns out that faces, for example, are just a particular instance of configural processing, then the case a social neuroscience may be weakened. In contrast, if representing mental states depends on a brain module distinct from any other, such as a theory of mind mechanisms (however distributed in the brain), then delineating and tracing this part of our neuranatomy will be an enterprise distinct from neuroscience more broadly.

This book coincides with the publication of the journal by the same name, and conferences dedicated to social neuroscience. This new focus is generating a lot of excitement and novel experiments, and I for one look forward to seeing where it all leads.