

SUMMARY

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

THE NEW SCIENCE
OF RELATIONSHIPS

DANIEL GOLEMAN



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Summary of «Social Intelligence» by Daniel Goleman

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Branding itself as a new form of science which can be applied to the study of human behavior, Social Intelligence examines the differences between the type of intelligence which can be measured by an IQ test and that which enables us to understand and relate to the emotions of others.



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Introduction

Were there any “nerds” in your high school? You know, kids who were great with homework and tests but always seemed a little awkward to talk to? If you weren’t a nerd, you know those kids probably didn’t get invited to too many parties or seem to have a lot of friends. Why? Because people often struggle to relate and get along with people who don’t seem to pick up on social cues. Likewise, if you were a nerd in high school, you know that awkward kids want to have friends just as much as anyone else, but sometimes, it’s just easier to figure out a math problem than to decipher social cues. Put simply, this is what *Social Intelligence* analyzes: the difference between the type of intelligence that makes us good at math and the type that enables us to work a room. It also examines why everyone needs social intelligence to successfully move through the world and what we can do to improve our understanding of social and emotional cues.

Developing Empathetic Accuracy

Social intelligence doesn't just improve your connections with others— it can actually save your life! That might sound surprising, but think for a moment about the tools you'd want at your disposal if you were about to be mugged. Would you want a weapon? A phone, so you could call the police? Or would you want emotional x-ray vision so you could see what was really going on in your attacker's head? While the latter might sound impossible, *Social Intelligence* argues that it's not far-fetched at all. Rather, a tool that Goleman calls “empathic accuracy” can help us to perceive our assailant's emotional range. If we're able to assess whether that person is aggressive or desperate, if they truly want to hurt us or if they just need money, we can appropriately measure the threat they present and act accordingly.

Put simply, empathic accuracy is the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. But it's not just about identifying what they feel, it's also important that we understand why they feel that way. Because the more accurately we can understand how someone else is feeling and why they're experiencing those emotions, the more equipped we are to understand their needs, wants, or— in more threatening situations— the risk they pose to us.

To support this point, Goleman offers an example of a study conducted by psychologist William Ickle at the University of Texas in 2001. In the context of the experiment, two participants were asked to attend a meeting, and their conversation in the waiting room would be filmed and studied by Ickle. At the end, each participant was asked to take a look at the recording and provide Ickle with their theories on what the other had been thinking during certain moments in their conversation. This experiment illustrated how much our perception of social cues can differ from person to person. For example, when one participant forgot someone's name in the course of conversation, her partner accurately surmised that she probably felt embarrassed. However, another suggested that his partner was wondering if he might ask her out on a date when, in fact, she had drifted away from their conversation entirely and was thinking about a play she had seen!

The variation in these examples can thus be used to show how important empathic accuracy is and why we need to develop ours in order to understand what's going on around us. Because as you can imagine, asking someone on a date can be quite embarrassing if you've misread the cues they're giving you!

Empathic Accuracy and Cultural Differences

Goleman notes that empathic accuracy— and the social perception of what we should understand—often varies depending on cultural norms. For example, he cites the case of Japanese psychologist Takeo Doi, who observed a number of differences on his visit to the United States. When he arrived at his host family's home, he was very quickly asked if he was hungry and if they could get him anything. This, Doi observed, was a significant cultural difference in empathic accuracy because although Japanese hosts would also be concerned about their guest's comfort, openly inquiring after their hunger would be considered impolite. Instead, it would be more appropriate to intuit their guest's needs and offer him food before he ever felt the need to mention it. However, his American hosts undoubtedly felt that they were being considerate and sensitive by inquiring about his needs.

And while these types of cultural differences can be interesting for a psychological study, significant gaps in empathic understanding can be detrimental to relationships. After all, how many times have we found ourselves sharing something personal with a friend, only to feel like they're not really listening to us? How often do we hear people say, "I just feel like they never really listened to me," when citing the reason for ending a relationship? Feeling that others are paying attention to us is vital in relationships and pain and confusion arise when we feel that those needs are not being met.

Failing to ask our friends or partners "you-centered" questions is one example of behavior that lacks empathic accuracy and which can negatively affect our relationships. So, the next time you're having a conversation with someone, play a game with yourself and see how long it takes you to ask about them. If it took you awhile, make it a goal to improve your time. Doing this consistently is a fool-proof way to ensure your relationships— and your empathic accuracy— will improve.

Neural Circuitry Impacts Our Empathic Accuracy

Put simply, that means that “the way we’re wired” has an impact on how we interact with the world. And when put like that, it sounds a little more relatable, right? After all, we all know that some people are shy and some are more outgoing; everybody has different personalities and that affects how we understand and relate to others. However, Goleman observes that everything can’t be blamed on our “wiring” and these traits aren’t set in stone. They can be shaped by our environments and these environmental factors can impact us for better or for worse.

For example, Goleman cites a study conducted by Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan, who specialized in studying babies’ brains and their reactions to positive and negative stimuli. Kagan was especially interested in how the babies’ emotional responses in infancy would affect their development in later life. So, after conducting a study in which he introduced one toy, took it away, and then replaced it with a new toy, Kagan concluded that some babies were excited about seeing something new and some were confused and afraid. He also found that, in later life, the same babies who were apprehensive to new things in infancy continued to be shy and hesitant.

However, he also noted that parenting is one of the key factors in developing children’s reactions to new stimuli. If children who seem sensitive in early life are sheltered from experiencing anything new and potentially frightening, they often grow into timid adults. But when parents acknowledge their child’s sensitivities and support them while encouraging them to try new things, these children become bolder and more open to new experiences as they grow.

So, while some people may inherently have a more reserved approach to life that can make them hesitant to interact with others, these instincts— and thus, the ability to connect and grow—can be developed through supportive introductions to new experiences.

Fear Can Benefit Our Emotional Development

That might sound crazy, but it's true! As long as that fear is experienced in healthy doses, that is. For example, Goleman remarks that when his granddaughter was two years old, her favorite movie was *Chicken Run*. If you've never seen *Chicken Run*— and you absolutely should! — it's an animated British film about a flock of chickens who hatch an elaborate escape plot after they learn that the farmer plans to use them in chicken pies. And although it's a cute movie with fun accents and a lot of feathery shenanigans, ultimately, it's a pretty dark plot for a child. And because our instinct is to keep children away from content that might be too scary for them, we might wonder how fear can be beneficial for development.

But Goleman cites a 2004 study conducted by psychologist Karen Parker which explored fear responses in baby squirrel monkeys. Parker found that exposing the monkeys to new and potentially scary situations— and providing them treats for exploring their new surroundings— encouraged them to be adventurous and open to new experiences. This was in direct contrast to her control group of baby monkeys who, having never been exposed to anything new, were much more apprehensive.

So, we can conclude from Parker's results that when we expose people to reasonable doses of fear at a young age and teach them that taking risks can often bring positive new experiences, children will grow up to be more well-adjusted and socially aware. However, this should of course be taken with the caveat that not all scary experiences are healthy and we should be careful not to push children into situations that may be too traumatic.

Low Social Intelligence Can Lead to Sexual Violence

By this point in our reading, some readers might be thinking that social intelligence sounds pretty important, but why should we care so much? Why does it matter if some people are more adventurous or well-adjusted than others and how much does it really affect our daily lives? Well, perhaps one of the most vital reasons to invest in the development of social intelligence is the impact it can have on relationships. Because although we've already discussed the feelings of pain and anger that can arise when we feel our partners aren't listening to us, physical violence can also occur as a result of low social intelligence.

This is because a failure to connect with others— to empathize with someone else's feelings and accept the validity of their emotional experiences— can lead to narcissism or the belief that your feelings are the only ones which matter. To prove this point, Goleman cites the example of a young man who expected a woman he was seeing to drop her Christmas plans with family to spend time with him... after they had known each other for only two weeks. An empathetic and socially aware person would, of course, have acknowledged that this was a selfish and unreasonable expectation. But when people lack social intelligence, many such inconsiderate expectations seem reasonable.

So, when people lack the social intelligence to form genuine connections with others, they're far more likely to behave aggressively with partners. Goleman observes that a 2003 study published by psychologist Brad J. Bushman found that men who had high levels of narcissism and low social intelligence were more likely to believe that rape victims were "asking for it," that they had the right to coerce women into sex, and that women who said "no" really meant "yes." And while this study by no means attempted to excuse this behavior, it did aim to shed light on the correlation between sexual violence and low social intelligence. As such, the development of social intelligence— which in turn increases respect and empathy for others — is of critical importance.

Social Intelligence in Action Can Lead to Increased Stress

If you've ever heard of or experienced caregiver stress, you know how true this is. Because the type of social intelligence that's required in caring for a loved one or supporting someone through a prolonged period of difficulty can take a serious toll on your physical and emotional health. That's because the constant practice of the selflessness, consideration, and sensitivity required of a caregiver can be draining.

In support of this point, Goleman cites a study by psychologist Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her immunologist husband Ronald Glaser, confirming that stress isn't just detrimental to your emotional well-being— it literally alters the genetic structure of cells responsible for maintaining your immune system as well. They investigated this through studying a focus group of women who were caring for partners with Alzheimer's. And after multiple tests confirmed that these women suffered significant declines in physical and emotional health after caring for their partners over a number of years, they concluded that stress can quite literally make you sick!

However, that doesn't mean that practicing social intelligence is bad or that caring for others has to be a negative thing. Although it may increase your stress, your loved ones can help you manage that stress by stepping in so that caregiver responsibilities don't rest solely on one person. Reaching out to friends and family and inviting them to support you through your experience can be a wonderful experience that prevents a caregiver from becoming overburdened, so don't be afraid to acknowledge your stress and turn to others for support.

Social Interaction Can Boost Recovery and Health

It sounds kind of like a no-brainer, right? Visits and support from loved ones while we're ill— whether we're struggling with mental or physical illness— are pretty much guaranteed to cheer us up! While our family and friends may not be able to single-handedly fix our problems, everyone wants to know they're not alone. So, given that, why do people sometimes withdraw from sick loved ones and hesitate to visit?

Goleman suggests that this is because people in Western societies are often uncomfortable with illness. Whether that's because it's hard to watch your loved ones suffer or simply because illness isn't pretty to look at, many people struggle when confronted with their loved ones' pain. As a result, they may grow distant and visit less often, which in turn leaves the sufferer feeling isolated and alone. The stigma associated with mental illness can also make people feel as though their struggles are their fault or that they are driving their loved ones away. Not only is that absolutely not true, it's also the last thing we want to do to a sick and struggling friend. That's why Goleman suggests that we focus on improving our social intelligence so that we're more inclusive of those who are ill.

He also supports this point by citing 18 studies which prove that patients who are surrounded by a positive support network live longer and experience faster recovery! Conversely, patients who lack strong support systems or are surrounded by others who reinforce fretful or negative experiences take longer to recover and experience more complications.

Social Intelligence Can Help Children with Learning Difficulties Thrive in School

We've all heard that you only get one shot at a first impression, and it's no different in the school system. For better or worse, teachers form opinions about students based on their behavior and performance in school, and these impressions often follow students throughout their entire school career. However, applying social intelligence to our interactions with others can help us break through pre-conceived notions and tear down stereotypes.

This was the case for one exceptional elementary school teacher Goleman mentions. When Pamela began teaching at a severely underfunded public school in New York, her fellow teachers quickly warned her about one student in particular: a little girl named Maeva. And although Maeva proved to be every bit as troublesome as her colleagues had said, Pamela wasn't content to write her off. So, after paying a little more attention, Pamela learned that Maeva wasn't disruptive because she hated school—rather, she didn't know how to read! Even if she tried her best to engage in class, she would lack the basic tools to keep up.

Practicing social intelligence allowed Pamela to get to know Maeva and created an opportunity for Pamela to help her. After just a bit of one-on-one attention and extra help in classes, Maeva was soon able to read and catch up with her classmates, which enabled her to be successful in school. Goleman points out that while a casual observer might look at this story and assume that the key take-away is Maeva's ultimate ability to read, this would be the wrong message. Because without social intelligence enabling Pamela to look beyond surface assumptions and offer help where it was needed, Maeva's story would have turned out very differently indeed. What really made the difference in her life was knowing that a teacher cared, and this is precisely why social intelligence is so vital in everyday life.

Final Summary

So, what we should ultimately take away from this text is that social intelligence is the ability to understand ourselves in relation to others and practice kindness and thoughtfulness in our everyday lives. Because of this, social intelligence is very different from the type of intelligence which enables us to solve math problems or be considered clever. However, both types of intelligence are absolutely critical for our development and our interactions with others. As such, improving our social intelligence and empathic accuracy can quite literally make the world a better place.



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