The Social Animal Summary
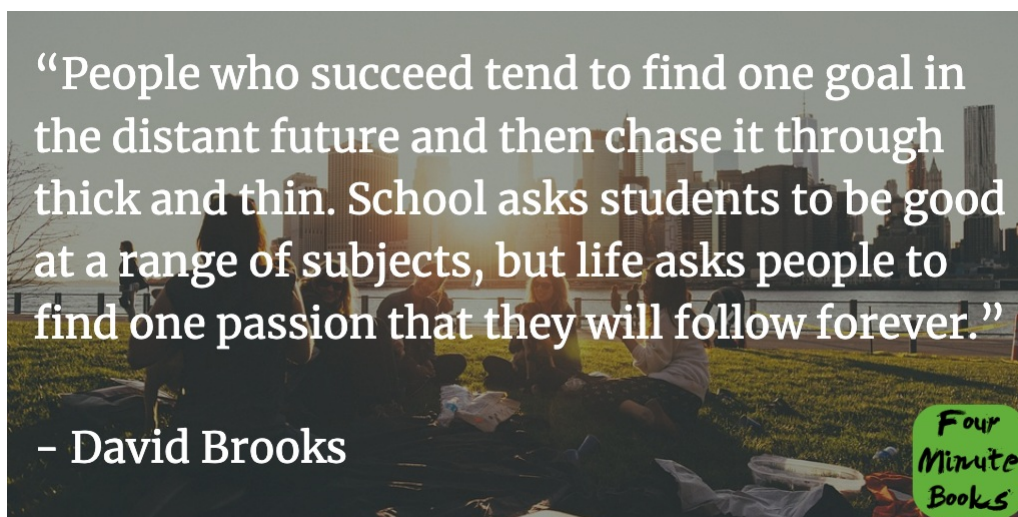
1-Sentence-Summary: *The Social Animal weaves social science research into the story of a fictional couple to shed light on the decision-making power of our unconscious minds.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:

> "People who succeed tend to find one goal in the distant future and then chase it through thick and thin. School asks students to be good at a range of subjects, but life asks people to find one passion that they will follow forever."
>
> – David Brooks

New York Times columnist David Brooks loves blending fiction and non-fiction. In this book, he does so by creating fulfilling lives for an imaginary couple, Harold and Erica. As the author explores his characters' life trajectories, he references scientific studies that relate to Harold and Erica's development and outcomes.

Harold and Erica are raised in different family structures. Their socio-economic and educational backgrounds differ, and yet, they share a number of character traits. Both are honest and dependable. Each overcomes life's inevitable hurdles by recognizing their weaknesses and persisting after setbacks. Harold and Erica are thoughtful, empathetic and possess wisdom we can't learn in any classroom. What shaped and led them to thrive?

Our unconscious mind guides much of our behavior. In *The Social Animal*, we learn how Harold and Erica shaped theirs to develop a powerful combination of healthy character traits and street smarts.

Here are 3 lessons I've learned from this book:

1. Learning is not linear, it is a process of forward, backward, and side steps.
2. Changing your environment is more effective than willpower when cultivating new habits and behaviors.
3. Humans follow seven unconscious structures, so-called *if/then* rules, when framing a decision.

Every action radiates and influences others. Let's take a peek inside our minds to better understand ourselves and the billions of people we share our planet with!

Lesson 1: Learning takes repetition, exploration, and connection.

Harold's high school English teacher Ms. Taylor pressed a copy of *The Greek Way* by Edith Hamilton into his hand. "This will lift you to greatness," she said. Harold read the slim book and felt connected to something ancient and profound. He was hooked by curiosity – the first step in the process of deep learning.

Ms. Taylor then encouraged Harold's quest for knowledge about ancient Greece even further. She instructed him to find and read five *more* books on the subject. Upon completion, she praised Harold for his hard work. Researcher Carol Dweck has found that when you acknowledge hard work over natural ability, people are encouraged to put in more effort.

To automatize his new knowledge, Ms. Taylor then told Harold to review everything he'd read so far. After passing the first time through new material, we must then think about every detail. With each next iteration, information becomes more familiar and automatic. Think about the first time you drove a car, and how little conscious thought you need to do it today.

Finally, Ms. Taylor asked Harold to journal about what he learned, a practice in which he'd mix his thoughts on Greek life his own. After a long period of looking at the material from different angles, Ms. Taylor believed Harold's mind was now ready to compose a well-crafted paper on the subject.

This is the ideal process of learning. You explore something and, as you repeatedly touch the subject, you connect it to other dots in life.

Lesson 2: Our environment influences our behavior, and we should use this to our advantage.

Erica's early education experiences were quite different from Harold's. She bounced from one school to another as her single mother fell in and out of employment. From month to month, the pair fluctuated between a middle-class suburban life and sleeping on the floors of relatives in the inner city.

When Erica was in eighth grade at a public school, she discovered an experimental education academy. The academy founder wanted to fight emerging poverty by introducing low-class children to an environment that fostered an achievement ethos. Young Erica did not understand the psychology or sociology behind this idea, but she recognized that **she couldn't improve herself without changing her daily influences.**

Admission was based on a lottery, but a determined Erica decided she was getting in either way. Every time she looked into the mirror, she repeated her motto, "I am strong."

Erica managed to get admitted by sneaking into the Academy and presenting her case to the board. By changing her environment for the better, Erica changed the big picture course of her life.

Lesson 3: Seven structures influence our decisions without us being aware of them.

Behavioral economists have identified seven unconscious structures that influence our decisions: priming, anchoring, framing, expectation, inertia, arousal, and loss aversion.

Priming is the use of leading words or phrases. For example, when test subjects read a list of words relating to the elderly, such as 'bingo,' 'Florida,' and 'ancient,' they walked slower when exiting the room. *Anchoring* is a second heuristic, we compare everything to a relative baseline we know. A $75 bottle of wine is an outlier on the Walmart shelf, but seems reasonable at an upscale restaurant.

Framing relates to how the presentation of something impacts our thinking about it. Would you be more likely to purchase a lottery ticket if you knew there was an 85% chance of losing, or if the sign read, "15 out of 100 tickets win?" *Expectation* leads us to anticipate a certain outcome. When a doctor tells a patient the medication will reduce their pain and gives them a sugar pill, many report an increased feeling of wellness. This is called the Placebo Effect.

Inertia keeps us on repeat. Do you know anybody who eats oatmeal for breakfast every day because that's what they've always done? Change takes energy, and when we're comfortable, we conserve it. *Arousal* sparks desire. There is a reason beautiful women market products to men. When in a state of arousal, we're more apt to pursue an action.

Finally, none of us like to lose. *Loss aversion* makes us sell declining stocks that earned money in the past. We fear coming out of the transaction with a net loss instead of a net gain.

Our unconscious minds run these heuristics while our conscious thought remains unaware of what's happening below the surface. Now that you know they exist, you can ask if they're influencing you for any decision!

The Social Animal Review

What an informative book for those who are interested in human behavior and creating environments that encourage flourishing! *The Social Animal* explores parenting, education, love, family, culture, achievement, marriage, politics, morality, aging, and death. There is something for everyone in this comprehensive study of life.

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Who would I recommend The Social Animal summary to?

The 21-year-old college student pursuing a degree in liberal arts, the 54-year-old politician looking for innovative methods to improve social relations, and anyone wanting to better understand human behavior.