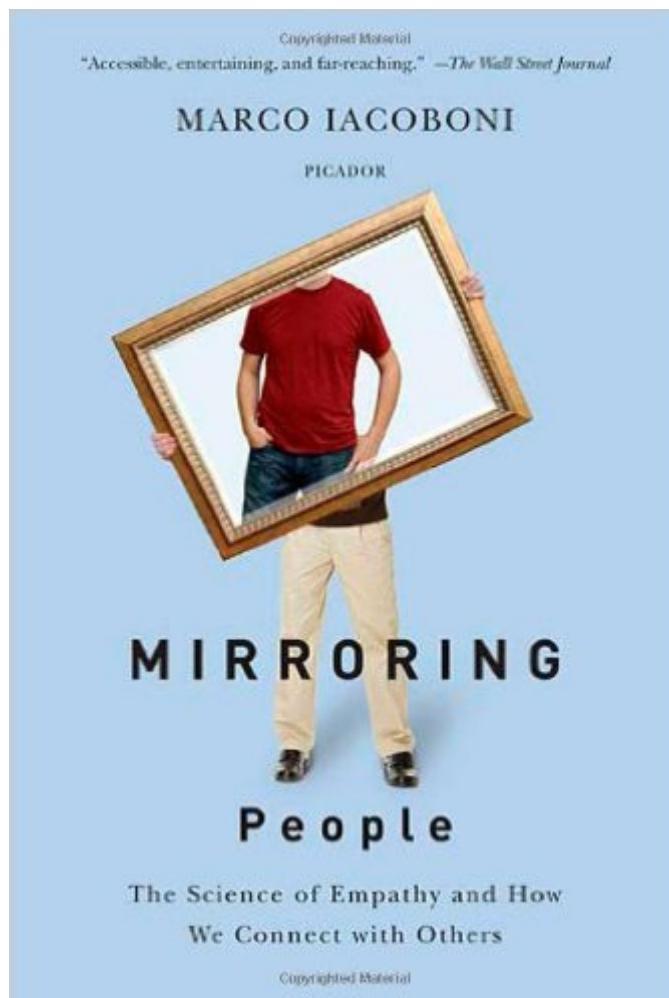


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Mirroring People: The Science Of Empathy And How We Connect With Others



Synopsis

Includes a new Afterword by the AuthorWhat accounts for our remarkable ability to get inside another person's head--to know what he or she is thinking and feeling? Marco Iacoboni, a leading neuroscientist, explains the groundbreaking research into mirror neurons, the "smart cells" in our brain that allow us to understand others. From imitation to morality, from political affiliations to consumer choices, mirror neurons are relevant to myriad aspects of social cognition. Mirroring People is the first book for the general reader on this revolutionary new science.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Mirroring People" is a must-read for anyone interested in up-and-coming topics in neuroscience, or just as a cursory pick for a brain book. It is an extremely easy read; any medical jargon or procedures mentioned are clearly explained even for those without any prior knowledge of the subject. A big attraction of this book is that it provides a biological basis for, as the subtitle suggests, "How We Connect with Others." Marco Iacoboni presents mirror neurons in the first chapter as the specialized brain cells in an area of the brain called the premotor cortex, which specializes in the planning and execution of actions. While conducting an experiment in which researchers were recording single neuron readings from monkeys, one researcher found that the neurons were firing (a term used when a neuron is being activated) when said researcher was performing an action the monkey was familiar with. One story has it that the researcher had ice cream and was in the physical act of bringing it to his mouth to take a bite when the neurons in the premotor cortex began

firing. While this particular story is eventually debunked, that these cells were activated not only when the monkey was anticipating the action but when it saw others performing provided neuroscientists with an entire new area to study. After describing what these mirror cells are, Iacoboni does a beautiful job of pinpointing experiments that naturally progress from this simple observation to the broad implications mirror cells have. The basis of mirror cells is imitation. One experiment Iacoboni cited involved two children that were placed in a room that was chock full of objects, two of each. What the experimenters found was that when one child but put on a cowboy hat, the other one would put the other cowboy hat on.

I would rate this book six stars if I could. I read about 100 serious books a year and this is my top book for the year so far. It tells the fascinating story of the discovery of mirror neurons in a well structured narrative that is highly memorable. As someone who had been following this research at a distance for its implications for my own field, I would say that the author weaves the story wonderfully well around the diverse research teams that make up this expanding field. Each step of the research road becomes comprehensibly built on the previous step. The technology of fMRI etc is well explained at just the right point, as is the research design of each experiment but not drily but memorably. The editing of this book (or its author's skill) is formidable: yet it is a good read: a non-fiction page turner! The fundamental findings described are that certain motor neurons called mirror neurons in our brains fire not only when we act, but when we watch others act. We simulate others actions. This establishes a connection at the most automatic visceral level between people and allows us to attribute intentionality to others. The connections between mirror neurons and the limbic system mean that we can actually simulate what others are feeling. So we can do far more than merely take their perspective; we can actually experience their feelings. This begins to break down the idea of the atomistic individual and shows ways in which community and shared culture can bond us as a profoundly social species. It also provides a clear neural basis for the sense of self versus others. The book shows how this is mediated by super mirror neurons that inhibit the working of mirror neurons differentially if actions are being taken or merely being imitated.

There are few people working on the science of Mirror Neurons today: Antonio Damasio (author of *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* and *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*), Giacomo Rizzolatti (author of *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language (Advances in Consciousness Research, 42)*) and Vitorrio Gallese (author of *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions, and Experience*)

being some of the most prominent in the field. The work being done by these four men is widely cited throughout the field of psychology. Iacoboni's book is useful for bringing the average reader up-to-speed on the research behind mirror neurons. My only complaint is that there is something off kilter about the writing style...I can't really articulate what it is other than to say that I felt as though I was frequently waiting for Iacoboni to get to the point. Perhaps it is because English is not his first language (I am not certain about this), but suffice it to say that I felt a certain kind of tension while reading this book.

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