

Social Intelligence:
The New Science of Human Relationships
By
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Excerpt: Chapter 6: *What Is Social Intelligence?*

Three twelve-year-olds are heading to a soccer field for gym class. Two athletic-looking boys are walking behind – and snickering at – the third, a somewhat chubby classmate.

“So you’re going to *try* to play soccer”, one of the two says sarcastically to the third, his voice dripping with contempt.

It’s a moment that, given the social code of these middle-school boys, can easily escalate into a fight.

The chubby boy closes his eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath, as though steeling himself for the confrontation that lies ahead.

Then he turns to the other two and replies, in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, “Yeah, I’m going to try – but I’m not very good at it”.

After a pause, he adds, “But I’m great at art – show me anything, and I can draw it real good”

Then, pointing to his antagonist, he says, “Now you – you’re great at soccer, really fantastic! I’d like to be that good someday, but I’m just not. Maybe I can get a little better at it if I keep trying.”

At that, the first boy, his disdain now utterly disarmed, says in a friendly tone, “Well, you’re not really *that* bad. Maybe I can show you a few things about how to play”.

That short interaction offers a masterly display of social intelligence in action. What could easily have led to a fight might now flower into a friendship. The chubby artist held his own – not just in the turbulent social currents of middle school but in a far more subtle struggle: in an invisible tug-of-war between the brains of the two boys.

By keeping cool, the aspiring artist resisted the pull to anger from the other’s sarcastic taunt and instead brought the other boy into his own more friendly emotional range. It’s a display of the highest order of neural jujitsu, transforming the boys’ shared emotional chemistry from a hostile range to a positive one – sheer relationship brilliance.

“Social intelligence shows itself abundantly in the nursery, on the playground, in barracks and factories and salesrooms, but it eludes the formal standardized conditions of the testing laboratory.” So observed Edward Thorndike, the Columbia University psychologist who first proposed the concept, in a 1920 article in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. Thorndike noted that such interpersonal effectiveness was of vital importance for success in many fields, particularly leadership. “The best mechanic in a factory,” he wrote, “may fail as a foreman for lack of social intelligence.”

But by the late 1950s David Wechsler, the influential psychologist who created what still remains one of the most widely used measures of IQ, had dismissed social intelligence, seeing it merely as “general intelligence applied to social situations.”

Now, a half-century later, “social intelligence” has become ripe for rethinking as neuroscience begins to map the brain areas that regulate interpersonal dynamics.

A fuller understanding of social intelligence requires us to include “noncognitive” aptitudes – the talent, for instance, that lets a sensitive nurse calm a crying toddler with just the right reassuring touch, without having to think for a moment about what to do.

Psychologists argue about which human abilities are social and which are emotional. Small wonder: the two domains intermingle, just as the brain’s social real estate overlaps with its emotional centers. “All emotions are social,” as Richard Davidson, director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, observes. “You can’t separate the cause of an emotion from the world of relationships – our social interactions are what drive our emotions.

My own model of emotional intelligence folded in social intelligence without making much of that fact, as do other theorists in the field. But as I’ve come to see, simply lumping social intelligence with the emotional sort stunts fresh thinking about the human aptitude for relationship, ignoring what transpires as we interact. This myopia leaves the “social” part out of intelligence.

The ingredients of social intelligence I propose here can be organized into two broad categories: social awareness, what we sense about others – and social facility, what we then do with that awareness.

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

Social Awareness

Social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another’s inner state, to understanding his/her feelings and thoughts, to “getting” complicated social situations. It includes:

- *Primal empathy*: Feeling with others; sensing non-verbal emotional signals.
- *Attunement*: Listening with full receptivity: attuning to a person.
- *Empathetic accuracy*: Understanding another person’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions.
- *Social cognition*: Knowing how the social world works.

Social Facility

Simply sensing how another feels, or knowing what they think or intend, does not guarantee fruitful interactions. Social facility builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions. The spectrum of social facility includes:

- *Synchrony*: Interacting smoothly at the nonverbal level.
- *Self-presentation*: presenting ourselves effectively.
- *Influence*: Shaping the outcome of social interactions.
- *Concern*: Caring about others’ needs and acting accordingly.

Both the social awareness and social facility domains range from basic, low-road capacities, to more complex high-road articulations. For instance, synchrony and primal empathy are purely low-road capacities, while empathic accuracy and influence mingle

high and low. And as “soft” as some of these skills may seem, there are already a surprising number of tests and scales to assess them.

Primal Empathy

The man had come to an embassy for a visa. As they talked, the interviewer noticed something strange: when asked why he wanted the visa, a momentary look of disgust flitted across the man’s face.

Alerted, the interviewer asked the applicant to wait a few minutes and went to another room to consult an Interpol data bank. The man’s name popped up as a fugitive, wanted by police in several countries.

The interviewer’s detection of that fleeting expression shows a gift for primal empathy, the ready ability to sense the emotions of another. A low-road capacity, this variety of empathy occurs – or fails to – rapidly and automatically. Neuroscientists see this intuitive, gut-level empathy as largely activated by mirror neurons.

Even though we can stop talking, we cannot stop sending signals (our tone of voice, our fleeting expressions) about what we feel. Even when people try to suppress all signs of their emotions, feelings have a way of leaking anyway. In this sense, when it comes to emotions, we cannot *not* communicate.

An apt test of primal empathy would assess the low road’s rapid, spontaneous reading of these nonverbal clues. To do that well, such a test must have us react to a depiction of another person.

I first encountered one such test while struggling with my dissertation research. Two other graduate students just down the hall from my travails, I recall, seemed to be having far more fun. One was Judith Archer, who is now a professor at Northeastern University; the other was Dane Archer, now at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Back then they were students of Robert Rosenthal in social psychology. The two were in the midst of making a set of videotapes, starring Hall, that are now among the most widely used measures of interpersonal sensitivity.

Archer videotaped, while Hall re-created situations ranging from returning a faulty item to a store to talking about the death of a friend. The test, dubbed the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS), asks people to guess what is going on emotionally from seeing a two-second snippet showing only Hall’s face or only her body, or they might hear just her voice.

Those workers who do well on the PONS tend to be rated as more interpersonally sensitive by their peers or supervisors. Such clinicians and teachers get higher job performance ratings. If they are physicians, their patients are more satisfied with their medical care; if they are teachers, they are seen as more effective. Across the board, such people are liked more.

Women tend to do a bit better on this dimension of empathy than men, scoring about three percent higher on average. No matter what our ability may be now, empathy sees to improve with time, honed by the circumstances of life. For example, women with toddlers are better at nonverbal decoding than their age mates who are childless. But nearly everyone improves from early adolescence into their mid-twenties.

Another measure of primal empathy, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test, was designed by Simon Baron-Cohen, an expert on autism, and his research group at Cambridge University.

Those who score at the high end in reading messages from the eyes will be gifted at empathy – and in any role that demands it, from diplomacy and police work to nursing and psychotherapy. Those who do poorly in the extreme are likely to have autism.

Attunement

Attunement is attention that goes beyond momentary empathy to a full, sustained presence that facilitates rapport. We offer a person our total attention and listen fully. We seek to understand the other person rather than just making our own point.

Such deep listening seems to be a natural aptitude. Still, as with all social intelligence dimensions, people can improve their attunement skills. And we all can facilitate attunement simply by intentionally paying more attention.

A person's style of speaking offers clues to their underlying ability to listen deeply. During moments of genuine connection, what we say will be responsive to what the other feels, says, and does. When we are poorly connected, however, our communications become verbal bullets: our message does not change to fit the other person's state but simply reflects our own. Listening makes the difference. Talking *at* a person rather than listening *to* him reduces a conversation to a monologue.

When I hijack a conversation by talking at you, I'm fulfilling my needs without considering yours. Real listening, in contrast, requires me to attune to your feelings, let you have your say, and allow the conversation to follow a course we mutually determine. Two-way listening makes a dialogue reciprocal, with each person adjusting what they say in keeping with how the other responds and feels.

This agendaless presence can be seen, surprisingly, in many top-performing sales people and client managers. Stars in these fields do not approach a customer or client with the determination to make a sale; rather they see themselves as consultants of sorts, whose task is first to listen and understand the client's needs – and only then match what they have to those needs. Should they not have what's best, they'll say so – or even take a client's side in making a justified complaint about their own company. They would rather cultivate a relationship where their advice is trusted than torpedo their reliability just to make a sale.

Listening well has been found to distinguish the best managers, teachers, and leaders. Among those who are in the helping professions, like physicians or social workers, such deep listening numbers among the top three abilities of those whose work has been rated as outstanding by their organizations. Not only do they take the time to listen and so attune to the other person's feelings: they also ask questions to better understand the person's background situation – not just the immediate problem or diagnosis at hand.

Full attention, so endangered in this age of multitasking, is blunted whenever we split our focus. Self-absorption and preoccupations shrink our focus, so that we are less able to notice other people's feelings and needs, let alone respond with empathy. Our capacity to attunement suffers, snuffing out rapport.

But full presence does not demand that much from us. “A five-minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment,” an article in the *Harvard Business Review* notes. “To make it work, you have to set aside what you are doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your day-dream, and focus on the person you’re with.

Full attention maximizes physiological synchrony, so that emotions align. Such synchrony was discovered during psychotherapy at moments when clients felt most understood by their therapists. Intentionally paying more attention to someone may be the best way to encourage the emergence of rapport. Listening carefully, with undivided attention, orients our neural circuits for connectivity, putting us on the same wavelength. That maximizes the likelihood that the other essential ingredients for rapport – synchrony and positive feelings – might bloom.

Empathetic Accuracy

Empathetic accuracy represents some argue, *the* essential expertise in social intelligence. As William Ickes, the University of Texas psychologist who has pioneered this line of research contends, this ability distinguishes “the most tactful advisors, the most diplomatic officials, the most effective negotiators, the most electable politicians, the most productive salespersons, the most successful teachers, and the most insightful therapists.

Empathetic accuracy builds on primal empathy but adds an explicit understanding of what someone else feels and thinks. These cognitive steps engage additional activity in the neocortex, particularly the prefrontal area – so bringing high-road circuitry to the primal empathy of the low.

We can measure empathetic accuracy through psychology’s equivalent of hidden-camera television. Two volunteers for an experiment come into a waiting room and are seated together on a couch. A research assistant asks them to wait a few minutes while he tries to find some missing bit of equipment.

To pass the time, the two chat a bit. After approximately six minutes the assistant comes back, and they expect to start. But the experiment has *already* begun: while they thought they were merely waiting, the two were secretly being videotaped from a camera concealed in a closet.

Then each participant is sent to a separate room, where they watch the six-minute video. There they write down a record of their thoughts and feelings at key points in the tape – and what they suspect the other person was thinking and feeling at those points. That sneaky form of research has been repeated in university psychology departments across the United States and around the world, to test one’s ability to infer another person’s unspoken thoughts and feelings.

For example, one participant reported that she had felt silly while conversing because she couldn’t remember the name of one of her teachers; her partner accurately guessed that “she was maybe feeling sort of odd” at the lapse. On the other hand, in a classic college-year gaffe, one woman was idly recalling a stage play, but her male partner guessed, “She was wondering if I would ask her out.”

Empathetic accuracy seems to be one key to a successful marriage, especially in the early years. Couples who during the first year or two of their marriage are more

accurate in their readings of each other have higher levels of satisfaction, and their marriage is more likely to last. A deficit in such accuracy bodes poorly; one sign of a rockier relationship can be read when a partner realizes the other feels bad but has no clue as to what exactly might be on their mind.

As the discovery of mirror neurons revealed, our brain attunes us to what someone intends to do, but it does so at a subliminal level. Conscious awareness of someone's intentions allows for more accurate empathy, so we can better predict what that person will do. A more explicit understanding of underlying motives can mean the difference between life and death if, for example, we are face to face with a mugger – or with an angry crowd, as was the case with those soldiers approaching the mosque described in the tale that begins this book.

Social Cognition

Social cognition, the fourth aspect of interpersonal awareness, is knowledge about how the social world actually works. People adept at this variety of cognition know what is expected in most any social situation, such as the manners appropriate in a five-star restaurant. And they are adept at semiotics, decoding the social signals that reveal, for example, who might be the most powerful person in the group.

Such social savvy can be seen in those who accurately read the political currents of an organization, as well as the five-year-old who can list the best friends of every child in her kindergarten class. The social lessons we learned about playground politics in school – like how to make friends and form alliances – are on a continuum with the unspoken rules we follow in building a winning work team or playing office politics.

One way social cognition can manifest is in the ability to find solutions to social dilemmas such as how to seat rivals at a diner party or how to make friends after moving to a new city. The best social solutions come most readily to those who can gather the relevant information and think through solutions most clearly. The chronic inability to solve social problems not only confounds relationships, but is a complicating factor in psychological difficulties ranging from depression to schizophrenia.

We mobilize social cognition to navigate the interpersonal world's subtle and shifting currents and to make sense of social events. It can make the difference in understanding why a remark that one person sees as witty banter may seem insulting sarcasm to another. With poor social cognition, we may fail to recognize why someone seems embarrassed or that someone's offhand comment will be taken as a slight by a third party. Understanding the unspoken norms that govern interaction is crucial for smooth interactions with someone from a different culture, where norms can differ markedly from those we learned in our own group.

This knack for interpersonal knowledge has been understood as a bedrock dimension of social intelligence for decades. Some theorists have even argued that social cognition, in the sense of general intelligence applied to the social world, is the only true component of social intelligence. But this view focusing solely in terms of what we know *about* the interpersonal world ignores what we actually *do* while interacting with people. The result has been measures of social intelligence that test our knowledge of social situations but ignore how we fare in them – a rather blatant failing. Someone bright at

social cognition, but who lacks the basics of social facility, will still be painfully awkward with people.

The social awareness abilities interact: empathetic accuracy builds on listening and primal empathy; all three enhance social cognition. And interpersonal awareness in all its guises provides the foundation for social facility, the second part of social intelligence.

Synchrony

Synchrony lets us glide gracefully through a nonverbal dance with another person. The foundation of social facility, it is the bedrock on which other aspects build. A failure in synchrony sabotages social competence, throwing interactions off-kilter.

The neural capacity for synchrony resides in low-road systems like oscillators and mirror neurons. Getting in synch demands that we both read nonverbal cues instantaneously and act on them smoothly – without having to think about it. The nonverbal signs of synchrony include the range of harmoniously orchestrated interactions, from smiling or nodding at just the right moment to simply orienting our body toward the other person. Those who fail to get in synch may, instead, fidget nervously, freeze, or simply be oblivious to their failure to keep step in the nonverbal duet.

When one person botches synchrony, the other feels uneasy – never mind getting anywhere near rapport. People who fare poorly at this social ability typically suffer from “dyssemia,” a deficit in reading – and so acting on – the nonverbal signs that guide smooth interactions. The outward indicators of this subtle social disability are all too obvious: dyssemic people are “off,” oblivious to cues that, for example, a conversation is ending. They unsettle those they interact with because they fail to observe the unspoken sighs that keep two-way traffic unsnarled.

Dyssemia has been studied most intensively in children, largely because it plagues so many who end up as social rejects in school. A child who has this problem may, for instance, fail to look at people who are speaking to them, stand too close while talking with someone, have facial expressions inappropriate for their emotional state, or seem tactless and insensitive to how others feel. While all these may seem simply signs of “being a kid,” most other children of the same age will not have these difficulties.

In adults, dyssemia shows up in similarly out-of-synch behavior. The social blind spots that plague dyssemic children make for troubled relations in the adult world, for the inability to follow nonverbal cues to difficulty in starting new relationships. Moreover, dyssemia can torpedo navigating the social expectations placed on an adult hired for a job. Dyssemic adults often end up socially isolated.

These social deficits are usually not caused by neurological conditions like Asperger’s syndrome or autism. An estimated 85 percent of those with dyssemia have the deficit because they failed to learn how to read nonverbal signals or how to respond to them, either because they did not interact enough with their peers or because their family did not display a given range of emotion or followed eccentric social norms. Another 10 percent or so have the deficit because an emotional trauma short-circuited the necessary learning. Only an estimated 5 percent have a diagnosable neurological disorder.

Because dyssemia stems from a failure to learn, remedial programs have been developed – both for children and for adults – that are geared to teach these skills. The tutorials begin by making the person aware of the nonverbal ingredients of synchrony that usually flit by out of their awareness, like gestures and posture, the use of touch, eye contact, tone of voice, and pacing. Once the person learns the more effective ways to use these ingredients, they practice them until, say, they can maintain eye contact while talking to someone without having to make any special effort.

Getting into synch naturally gives rise to emotional resonance. But, since the low-road brain systems that create synchrony operate out of our awareness and spontaneously, self-conscious attempts to control them can impede their smooth operation. Thus people in remedial programs need to “overlearn” by practicing to the point where the new, more harmonious response comes spontaneously.

Self-Presentation

Professional actors are especially clever at self-presentation, or the ability to present oneself in ways that make a desired impression. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan was running for the Republican presidential nomination, he participated in a televised debate among the candidates. At one point the time-keeping moderator cut off Reagan’s microphone before he had finished making a point. Reagan reacted by leaping to his feet, grabbing another microphone, and declaring in angry tones, “I paid for this show. I’m paying for this microphone.”

The crowd cheered this display of raw assertiveness – especially in a man better known for his geniality – and the moment has been cited as a turning point in his campaign. Later, a campaign adviser confessed that the seemingly spontaneous outburst had actually been planned, should a likely moment arise.

Charisma is one aspect of self-presentation. The charisma of a powerful public speaker, or a great teacher or leader, comprises their ability to spark in us the emotions they exude, entraining us to that emotional spectrum. We witness such emotional contagion writ while watching a charismatic figure entrance a crowd. Charismatic people have a flair for expressivity that engages other to come into synchrony with their rhythm and catch their feelings.

Charisma appears at peak form in a speaker who can “play” an audience, making a conceptual point with just the right emotional mix for maximum impact. Entertainers use timing and rhythmic cadence – heightening and lowering the amplitude of their voice on just the right beat – to entrain their audience. They become senders of emotion, while their audience is the recipient of this contagion. But that takes skill.

A certain college student was well liked by her peers for her animated energy. She was remarkably open with her own feelings, and her expressivity let her make friends easily. But her professor had a different impression. In his large lecture class, she was noticeable for her outbursts: she would gasp with delight or make sounds of disgust, offering an ongoing commentary of pleasure or antipathy at the various points he made. A few times she was so overcome by her emotions that she had to leave the classroom.

Her professor’s assessment was that she had exuberant expressivity, but also gaps in self-control. Her animated energy served her well in many social settings but not where some degree of reserve was needed.

The ability to “control and mask” the expression of emotions is sometimes considered key to self-presentation. People adept in such control are self-confident in just about any social situation, possessed of *savoir faire*. Those for whom poised performances come easily will be naturals at any situation where a nuanced response is crucial, from sales and service to diplomacy and politics.

Women by and large are more expressive emotionally than men, but in some situations women may need to balance expressiveness with the constraints of self-presentation. To the extent that social norms devalue expressiveness, as is the case in most workplaces, women need to contain the urge in order to fit in. Our society has subtle norms for who “should” express what emotions, implicitly constraining both men and women. In private life, women are generally perceived as more appropriately expressing fear and sadness. And men anger – a norm that tacitly approves of a woman crying openly but frowns on men shedding tears when upset.

In professional situations, however, the taboo against crying extends to women. And when a woman holds a position of power, the prohibition on showing anger evaporates. On the contrary, a powerful leader is expected to display anger when a group’s goal has been frustrated. Alpha women, it seems, meet the entrance requirement. Regardless of whether anger is the most effective response in a given moment, it does not seem *socially* out of place when it comes from the boss.

Some people are all self-presentation, with no substance to back it up. The varieties of social intelligence are no substitute for the other kinds of expertise that a given role may call for. As I overheard one businessman say to another over lunch while we shared seats at a Manhattan sushi bar. “He’s got that ability to make people like him. But you couldn’t pick a worse person – he’s got no follow-up tech skills.”

Influence

The Cadillac was double-parked on a narrow, tree-lined street in one of Manhattan’s better neighborhood, blocking cars from exiting their parking spaces. A parking enforcement officer was in the midst of writing a ticket for the Caddy.

Suddenly came an anguished and angry yell: “Hey! What the hell do you think you are doing?” The Cadillac’s driver, a well-groomed middle-aged man in a business suit, was shouting as he emerged from a laundry with his dry cleaning.

“I’m just doing my job. You’re double-parked,” the ticket-writer responded, with measured calmness.

“You can’t do this to me! I know the mayor! I’m going to get you fired!” the Caddy driver threatened, furious.

“Why don’t you just take the ticket and get out of here before I call the tow truck?” the officer replied evenly.

The driver grabbed the ticket, got in his car, and drove away, still muttering.

The very best police officers are adept at exercising influence, in the sense of constructively shaping the outcome of an interaction, using tact and self-control. Paragons of law enforcement use the least force necessary, though they may make a strong show of force to back it up. They approach volatile people with a professional demeanor, calmly and attentively.

And as a result they have more success at getting people to comply. For example, certain New York traffic cops who use the least-force approach report the fewest incidents with angry motorists that escalate into violence. Such officers can simply note how their body reacts to a motorist's disrespect – an ominous sign of a shift in power between the two – and calmly but firmly assert their authority with a professional demeanor. The alternative, letting those gut reactions dictate their response, would lead to meltdown.

Strong force, if wisely applied, can be an efficient tactic for resolving – or better, avoiding – conflict. But the skillful use of an implicit threat of physical aggression lies not in the application of force itself but in neural mechanisms that fine-tune a response to best fit the circumstances. It combines self-control (modulating an aggressive impulse) with empathy (reading the other person to gauge what the least force necessary might be) and with social cognition (recognizing the operative norms in a situation). Educating the underlying neural circuitry has been an unrecognized task of those who train people in the artful use of force, whether civilian or military. As someone becomes increasingly adept in applying the means of violence, a parallel inhibition of aggressive urges becomes essential.

In everyday social encounters, we draw on much the same circuitry to mitigate aggression, but to more subtle effect. Achieving constructive influence involves expressing ourselves in a way that produces a desired social result, like putting someone at ease. Artfully expressive people are viewed by others as confident and likable and in general make favorable impressions.

Those adept at deploying influence rely on social awareness to guide their actions; for example, they recognize situations where turning a blind eye may benefit a relationship. It can be counterproductive to signal your empathic accuracy by saying “I don't turn you on” or “You don't love me!” In such moments simply absorbing such an insight and acting on it tacitly is more prudent.

Deciding on the optimal dose of expressivity depends, among other factors, on social cognition, knowing the governing cultural norms for what's appropriate in a given social context (another example of how social intelligence abilities work synergistically). The muted tones that are best for Beijing will seem too understated in Guadalajara. Tact balances expressivity. Social discretion lets us fit in wherever we are, leaving the fewest untoward emotional ripples in our wake.

Concern

Let's go back to those seminary students who were rushing to a building to give a practice sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan. There was a crucial moment for each one in turn, when they heard the moans of the man in the doorway they had to pass. Even those who rushed by him may have felt a bit of empathy. But empathy alone matters little if we fail to act. Those students who *did* stop to help were exhibiting another sign of social intelligence: concern.

As we saw in Chapter 4, feeling another's needs can be a prod to activity, thanks to the brain's wiring. For example, when women watched videotapes of a baby crying, those who most strongly “caught” the baby's sadness showed the biggest frowns, an

indicator of empathy. These women not only mirrored the baby's physiology but had the strongest desire to pick him up and hold him.

The more we both empathize with someone in need and feel concern, the greater will be our urge to help them – a link seen wherever people are moved to remedy human suffering. A study of charitable giving done in the Netherlands found that a person's sense of social concern predicted the likelihood that they would donate to the needy.

In the world of work, concern that propels us to take responsibility for what needs doing translates into good organizational citizenship. Concerned people are those most willing to take the time and make the effort to help out a colleague. Rather than just focusing on their own work, they understand the need for group cooperation to meet larger objectives.

Those who are most physiologically aroused by distress in others – that is, who are highly susceptible to emotional contagion in this range – are also those most moved to help. Conversely, those who are little moved by empathetic concern most easily disregard someone else's distress. One longitudinal study found that those five-to-seven-year-olds who were least upset on seeing their own mother's distress were most likely to be "antisocial" as adults. The researchers suggest that "fostering young children's attention to and concern for the needs of others" may be an effective strategy for preventing later misbehavior.

Simply feeling concern for others does not always suffice; we also need to act effectively. Too many leaders of organizations that have humanitarian goals flounder because they lack basic management skills; they need to be smarter about doing good. Concern takes on more potency when it draws on high-road abilities, harnessing expertise for its own ends. Bill and Melinda Gates exemplify such higher levels of concern: they have deployed the best practices of the business world to tackle the devastating health problems of the world's poor. And they also spend time meeting the people they are helping – mothers in Mozambique whose children are dying of malaria, victims of AIDS in India – which primes their empathy.

Concern is the impulse that lies at the root of the helping professions, such as medicine and social work. In a sense, these professions are the public embodiment of concern for those in need, be it the sick or the poor. Those who work in the helping professions thrive when this capacity waxes but burn out when it wanes.

Concern reflects a person's capacity for compassion. Manipulative people can be skilled in other abilities of social intelligence, but they fail here. Deficiencies in this aspect of social facility should most strongly identify antisocial types, who do not care about others' needs or suffering, let alone seek to help them.

Educating the Low Road

Now that we've surveyed the terrain of social intelligence, the question arises: can we improve such essential human talents? Particularly when it comes to low-road capacities, this challenge may seem daunting. But Paul Ekman, the authority on reading emotions from facial expressions, has devised a way to teach people how to improve primal empathy – despite its instantaneous, unconscious operation.

Ekman's training focuses on microexpressions, emotional signals that flit across the face in less than a third of a second, the snap of a finger. Because these emotional

signals are spontaneous and made unconsciously, they offer a clue as to how a person actually feels at that moment – despite whatever impression she may be trying to project.

While a single discrepant microexpression does not inevitably indicate that the person is lying, outright falsehoods usually involve this sort of emotional deceptiveness. The better people are at spotting microexpressions, the more likely they will detect an attempt to suppress an emotional truth. The embassy interviewer who spotted the look of disgust flitting across the face of the criminal wanting a visa had been trained in Ekman's methods.

This skill has special value for diplomats, judges, and police because microexpressions reveal how a person truly feels at that moment. Then again, lovers, business people, teachers – just about anyone – can benefit from reading these affective signals.

These automatic and fleeting emotional expressions operate via low-road circuitry, which is distinguished by its automaticity and its quickness. And we need to use the low road to catch the low road. But that requires fine-tuning our capacity for primal empathy.

Ekman had devised a CD, called the MicroExpression Training Tool, that he claims can help most anyone vastly improve this microdetective work. By now tens of thousands of people have gone through his training procedure, which takes less than an hour to complete.

I tried it this morning.

The first round presents a series of different people's faces, each at first frozen in a neutral look. Then for a startling wisp of a moment, they flash any of seven expressions: sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, or happiness.

After each flash I had to guess which expression I had just witnessed, though as far as I could tell all I had seen was a blur of movement. The smiles and frowns flash by at high speed, in just a fifteenth of a second. This whiz-bang rate fits the speed window of the low-road, leaving the high road befuddled.

Then I went through a series of three practice-and-review sessions that present sixty such tableaux in speeds up to a thirtieth of a second. After I made each guess, the format allowed me to study each expression in freeze-frame, the better to master the nuances that distinguish sadness from surprise, disgust from anger. Even better, it graded each guess I'd made right or wrong, providing crucial feedback (which we virtually never get in life) that allows eager neural circuits to improve at this slippery task.

As I made my guesses, I could occasionally articulate to myself what expression I had seen and why: the flash of teeth indicating a smile, the half-smirk of contempt, the widened eyes of fear. But more often than not my rational mind was baffled, genuinely surprised when what seemed a desperate guess was vindicated as accurate intuition.

But when I tried to explain to myself why the blur I had just seen signaled one or another emotion – *surely that raised eyebrow means surprise* – I usually was wrong. When I trusted my gut, I was more often right. As cognitive science tells us, we know more than we can say. To put it differently, this low-road job goes best when the high road just shuts up.

After twenty or thirty minutes of practice sessions, I took the post-test, scoring a respectable 86 percent, up from 50 percent on the pretest. Ekman finds that, like me, most

people average around 40 to 50 percent right on the first try. But after just twenty minutes or so of training, virtually everyone gets 80 to 90 percent correct.

“The low road is eminently trainable. But why haven’t we learned this already? Because we’ve never gotten the right feedback before,” Ekman told me. The more people train, the better they get. “You want to overlearn this skill.” Ekman advised, by practicing to perfection.

People who have been trained this way, Ekman has found, are more adept at detecting real-life microexpressions, like the look of abject sadness that flitted across the face of British spy Kim Philby in his last public interview before he fled to the Soviet Union, or the hint of disgust zipping by as Kato Kaelin testified at the O.J. Simpson murder trial.

Understandably, police interrogators, business negotiators, and a host of others whose professions demand that they detect the disingenuous have flocked to Ekman’s training. More to the point here, this crash course for the low road reveals that these neural circuits are hungry to learn. They just need lessons in the language they understand – which has nothing to do with words.

For social intelligence, Ekman’s program is a model for training people in low-road aptitudes like primal empathy and decoding nonverbal signals. While in the past most psychologists would have assumed that such rapid, automatic, and spontaneous behavior was largely beyond our ability to improve, Ekman shows it is not. A new model of learning, it bypasses the high road and connects directly to the low.

Social Intelligence Reconsidered

In the early years of the twentieth century a neurologist did an experiment with a woman who had amnesia. Her case was so severe that she had to be reintroduced to the doctor every time they met, which was almost daily.

One day the doctor hid a tack in his hand. As usual, he introduced himself to the patient and shook her hand. The tack pricked her skin. He then left, walked back in, and asked the woman if they’d ever met before.

She said they had not. But when he again introduced himself and stuck out his hand to shake hers, she held her hand back.

Joseph LeDoux tells a tale to make a point about the high road and the low. The woman’s amnesia was caused by lesions in the temporal lobe, part of the high-road circuitry. Her amygdale, that central node for the low road, was intact. Though her temporal lobe could not remember what had just happened to her, the threat of the tack was imprinted in the circuitry of the amygdale. She did not recognize the doctor – but she knew not to trust him.

We can rethink social intelligence in light of neuroscience. The social architecture of the brain intertwines the high and low roads. In intact brains these two systems work in parallel, both necessary rudders in the social world.

Conventional ideas of social intelligence have too often focused on high-road talents like social knowledge, or the capacity for extracting the rules, protocols, and norms that guide appropriate behavior in a given social setting. The “social cognition” school reduces interpersonal talent to this sort of general intellect applied to interactions.

Although this cognitive approach has served well in linguistics and in artificial intelligence, it meets its limit when applied to human relationships.

A focus on cognition *about* relationships neglects essential noncognitive abilities like primal empathy and synchrony, and it ignores capacities like concern. A purely cognitive perspective slights the essential brain-to-brain social glue that builds the foundation for any interaction. The full spectrum of social intelligence abilities embraces both the high- and low-road aptitudes. Presently both the concept and its measures omit too many lanes of the low road – and so exclude social talents that have been key to human survival.

Back in the 1920s, when Thorndike originally proposed measuring social intelligence, next to nothing was known about the neural basis of IQ, let alone about interpersonal skill. Now social neuroscience challenges intelligence theorists to find a definition for our interpersonal abilities that encompasses the talents of the low road – including capacities for getting in synch, for attuned listening, and for empathetic concern.

These basic elements of nourishing relationships must be included in any full account of social intelligence. Without them the concept remains cold and dry, valuing a calculating intellect but ignoring the virtues of a warm heart.

On this point I stand with the late psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who argued that the attempt to eliminate human values from social intelligence impoverishes the concept. Then such intelligence devolves into the pragmatics of influence and control. In these anonymous and isolated times we need to be ever vigilant against the spread of just that impersonal stance.