Review of Our Brains at War: The Neuroscience of Conflict and Peacebuilding

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Mari Fitzduff’s book, Our Brains at War: The Neuroscience of Conflict and Peacebuilding, is a highly interesting and thought-provoking read that prompts us to consider the underlying sources of conflict not only between nations, but also the cultural and political rifts that divide friends and neighbors from one another within nations. Throughout the book, Fitzduff emphasizes the biological predispositions that can contribute to these divisions and conflicts, prompting us to evaluate the potential effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies through the lens of biology, lest our efforts represent an academic exercise that ultimately fails to take human nature into account.

A central theme woven throughout the book is the brain’s interplay between the emotionally-charged amygdala and the more logical prefrontal cortex, which is tasked with controlling its impulses. The amygdala’s lightning-fast ability to detect threat and generate fear responses is relevant to an understanding of conflict because it can “hijack” our ability to think logically and rationally when we are overcome with emotion. In highly emotional exchanges, we sometimes react without thinking and then use logic only to justify our actions after the fact. Since the amygdala acts so quickly and automatically, we are often not even consciously aware that we are rationalizing an emotionally driven action or making a snap judgment about a person or situation. Fitzduff rightly argues that effective peacebuilding must address the role of emotion, as it a primary ingredient of conflict. While the neuroscience evidence presented in this book is sometimes based on secondary sources that may leave the critical reader with questions, Fitzduff does acknowledge that fMRI research has its limitations, and the core neuroscience concepts that she presents are backed by solid evidence. Enhancing social psychological research methods by incorporating biologically based measures unequivocally minimizes participants’ ability to use impression management and decreases their susceptibility to simply revert to socially desirable patterns of responding. Psychophysiological measures of heart rate, skin conductance, or brain activity have the advantage of being able to detect immediate and automatic changes that can sometimes fly under the radar of conscious awareness, yet have a significant impact on our feelings, actions, and decisions.

If one were to focus only on reasoning, it would be easy to assume that if two parties disagree, they must only examine the evidence objectively to resolve their dispute. However, Fitzduff explains that when our deeply held beliefs are challenged by scientific evidence, we tend to experience negative emotions, but we do not show corresponding increases in the activity of brain areas related to logical reasoning. In other words, we dislike that we are being challenged but we do not seek to better understand the competing perspective or data point. Instead, we instinctively assume that we are thinking objectively, certain that any others who disagree must be biased and
irrational, so we “double down” on our original stance and gravitate toward people and sources who share our beliefs, avoiding or disparaging those who do not. Many have learned through sometimes painful personal experiences that well-meaning arguments with friends on social media or pointed conversations with family over holiday dinners are fruitless in an era where political beliefs and attitudes are based more on emotion than logic, so that no amount of reasoning or evidence can dislodge a belief in a deeply-rooted conspiracy theory based on fear. Interestingly, Fitzduff convincingly argues that toxic leaders are fully aware of this, and they use that emotion to their advantage when attempting to obtain or retain positions of power and authority, channeling their constituents’ pre-existing negative attitudes toward other groups, and validating their feelings by publicly deriding those groups. Their ascent to power is also aided by our shifting priorities regarding the characteristics we value most in a leader: during relatively peaceful times, trustworthiness is highly valued, but during troubled times when people feel threatened and uncertain, strength becomes the most sought-after quality. Such leaders create an environment of fear with threatening rhetoric and then reap the benefits. As much as we would like to believe that we always choose our leaders based on a reasoned consideration of the issues, Fitzduff argues that fear is the greatest driving force in propelling leaders to power who often do not have the common good in mind, but instead focus solely on their group’s interests (or in some cases, their own interests). As such, one of the most compelling and urgent modern-day concerns raised by Fitzduff is the unprecedented power and weaponization of social media, which can make us vulnerable to emotional persuasion by bad actors who exploit our natural tendencies. Algorithms artificially bombard us with emotionally charged material, often involving disinformation, and the fear and anger spread quickly and contagiously throughout social networks. For those who are now incensed, group dynamics create a sense of belonging and purpose amongst the chaos, creating both a cohort to identify with and a shared enemy to combat. Fitzduff argues that awareness of these fear-based strategies is paramount in peacebuilding work—one cannot use counter-strategies that solely target reason; emotional engagement is of equal or greater importance, as fear often underlies anger and aggression. Once people are emotionally engaged in the peacebuilding process and their fears have been acknowledged, they become more open to moving forward with collaborative solutions.

In addition to Fitzduff’s examination of the causes of global and regional war and violence, her neuroscience-based perspective on the potential roots of conflict can also help us to better understand the behavior of our friends and neighbors on a personal and individual level. Have you ever wondered how a member of your community can be so helpful, generous and compassionate in one setting, for example, being highly involved and altruistic within his “church family,” but in other settings, such as social media, seems to abandon all decorum, displaying a hostile disregard for others’ feelings and opinions? Is the altruism all for show, or is there something else at work here? Fitzduff importantly reminds us that we may have very different responses to members of our perceived “in-group” than we do to anyone we consider an “out-group” member, arguing that we are biologically predisposed to identify and cooperate within an in-group, with benefits of
security and belonging, but that unfortunately this is only possible when we can also identify “out-group” enemies to band together against. Neuroimaging studies even show lower activity in brain areas believed to mediate empathy in response to the pain of “out-group” members, showing that we are instinctively reluctant to emotionally connect. And this problem is only growing, with a 2022 Pew survey showing that Americans increasingly dislike those who support the opposite political party and do not want their children to marry them, believing them to be immoral and unintelligent (Montanaro, 2022). Yet Fitzduff implores us to realize that this is precisely the pressure point that needs to be addressed if we are to move forward together, arguing that group membership, and more specifically, our views of the “out-group,” are the root cause of conflict and, as such, represent a major target for change when it comes to conflict resolution. Many of the concrete strategies for more successful peacebuilding presented in the final chapter draw not only on an understanding of the complex interplay between emotion and reason, but on intentionally blurring the lines between “us” and “them” through techniques such as perspective-shifting and structured positive interactions, rewiring the brain to create wider groups and promote cooperation. Whether you seek to understand conflict and promote peace on a global scale or simply in your own backyard, this book is worth a read.

References