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"A fascinating look at a new field by one of its principal geeks." — The Economist



# SOCIAL PHYSICS



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#### Review

#### The Economist:

"Social Physics is filled with rich findings about what makes people tick. Using millions of data points measured over a long period of time in real settings, which Pentland calls 'living laboratories,' the author has monitored human behavior on an unprecedented scale...Pentland's research also offers lessons for policymakers and business people. He advances a new way to protect privacy by creating something of a property right for personal information...Social Physics is a fascinating look at a new field by one of its principal geeks."

#### Kirkus Reviews

"A fascinating view of the future of social networks that offers intriguing possibilities."

#### John Abele, Co-Founder, Boston Scientific:

"Understanding, predicting and influencing human behavior has been the goal of social scientists (and leaders anywhere) since the beginning of time. Pentland's Social Physics is a major contribution to this field. By using communication tracking analysis and occasionally human sensors along with big data, he and his team are evolving a new discipline with a unique taxonomy and ontology that brings a higher level of quantification and rigor to a challenging and inherently complex field. Like Surowiecki's The Wisdom of Crowds it will spawn further work and research in a rapidly expanding new body of knowledge."

John Seely Brown, Former Chief Scientist, Xerox Corporation and director of Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC):

"Read this book and you will look at tomorrow differently. Reality mining is just the first step on an exciting new journey. Social Physics opens up the imagination to what might now be measurable and modifiable. It also hints at what may lie beyond Adam Smith's invisible hand in helping groups, organizations and societies reach new levels of meaning creation. This is not just social analytics. It also offers pragmatic ways forward."

Reed E. Hundt, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, CEO of the Coalition for

#### Green Capital:

"From his MIT aerie, eagle-eyed Alex Pentland has seen the future. His wise and stimulating book teaches us how ideas spring up, flow, and spread. Applying his lessons, we can act collectively to solve previously intractable social, economic and political problems. We can make organizations more productive. We can even have government achieve its proper purposes, with greater fairness and less cost. As challenges like widening inequality and runaway climate change seem to exceed our ability to design solutions, Pentland's data-driven, reality-based, yet sunny optimism about tomorrow should be eagerly welcomed by all readers."

Stephen M. Kosslyn, Former Dean of Social Science, Harvard University; Former Director, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University; Founding Dean, Minerva Schools at KGI: "Sandy Pentland lives in the future—and it shows. This book will not only whisk you up to speed on cutting-edge research at the interface of technology, behavioral science, and the social world, but it will also give you a good sense of what could be next. Professor Pentland brilliantly analyzes how new ideas flow and how, with the emergence of the 'data-driven society,' they will increasingly influence every aspect of our lives."

#### About the Author

Alex "Sandy" Pentland directs MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory and the MIT Media Lab Entrepreneurship Program and co-leads the World Economic Forum Big Data and Personal Data initiatives. He helped create and direct MIT's Media Laboratory, the Media Lab Asia laboratories at the Indian Institutes of Technology, and Strong Hospital's Center for Future Health. His research group and entrepreneurship program have spun off more than thirty companies to date. In 2012 Forbes named Pentland one of the seven most powerful data scientists in the world. His research has been featured in Nature, Science, and Harvard Business Review.

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From one of the world's leading data scientists, a landmark tour of the new science of idea flow, offering revolutionary insights into the mysteries of collective intelligence and social influence

If the Big Data revolution has a presiding genius, it is MIT's Alex "Sandy" Pentland. Over years of groundbreaking experiments, he has distilled remarkable discoveries significant enough to become the bedrock of a whole new scientific field: social physics. Humans have more in common with bees than we like to admit: We're social creatures first and foremost. Our most important habits of action—and most basic notions of common sense—are wired into us through our coordination in social groups. Social physics is about idea flow, the way human social networks spread ideas and transform those ideas into behaviors.

Thanks to the millions of digital bread crumbs people leave behind via smartphones, GPS devices, and the Internet, the amount of new information we have about human activity is truly profound. Until now, sociologists have depended on limited data sets and surveys that tell us how people say they think and behave, rather than what they actually do. As a result, we've been stuck with the same stale social structures—classes, markets—and a focus on individual actors, data snapshots, and steady states. Pentland shows that, in fact, humans respond much more powerfully to social incentives that involve rewarding others and strengthening the ties that bind than incentives that involve only their own economic self-interest.

Pentland and his teams have found that they can study patterns of information exchange in a social network without any knowledge of the actual content of the information and predict with stunning accuracy how productive and effective that network is, whether it's a business or an entire city. We can maximize a group's collective intelligence to improve performance and use social incentives to create new organizations and guide them through disruptive change in a way that maximizes the good. At every level of interaction, from small groups to large cities, social networks can be tuned to increase exploration and engagement, thus vastly improving idea flow.

Social Physics will change the way we think about how we learn and how our social groups work—and can be made to work better, at every level of society. Pentland leads readers to the edge of the most important revolution in the study of social behavior in a generation, an entirely new way to look at life itself.

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Most helpful customer reviews

26 of 27 people found the following review helpful.

good idea poor execution

By Ted Shaikewitz

The ideas behind this book seem good, but the author does not provide much hard evidence to back them up. Most evidence comes in the form of pointing out what esteemed journal published the data. The small area where I am knowledgeable contained inaccurate information. The book seems to be a paean to his isolated genius, and an advertisement for his many companies. I would have liked to see more use of the group wisdom that the book celebrates, and more real data.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

a paradox

By Santiago Ortiz

This very well written book contains great ideas that not only are interesting in theory, but very promising if applied to society, as the experiments the author and his team seem to demonstrate. However, this book has a huge problem: it reduces a big picture to the authors particular research, not giving credit nor connecting with multiple different approaches to the same problems. A naïve reader will get the impression that the author and his team are the pioneers or, at minimal, the leading researchers, of several fields such as cultural analytics, memetics, ideas spread, social networks, open data legislation, mathematics of cooperation and collective intelligence.

As another commentator put it, the book feels like an academic resumé, and I'd add it also feels like a brochure for the companies the author has found (along with his students). This academic nepotism is bluntly paradoxical, being a book about cooperation, ideas flow, social intelligence and the importance of diversity and exploration of external ideas.

It feels sad to give 3 stars to a book that has great contents, but it would be very easy for the author to have expanded the already interesting ideas, connecting them with the work of many other great thinkers and well stablished approaches; the book would gain so much.

32 of 34 people found the following review helpful.

Too much self centric

By Augustus

It appears a biographical journey of the author at MIT disguised in the apron of social physics, that hides the message of the narrative.

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